

# In the nude

by Marcus Speh

We lived in Trieste then, my wife and I physicists both, on the High Street across from one of the places where James Joyce had lived, who'd moved all over town so that it must've been difficult for the city to follow him but follow him they did, leaving bronze plates wherever Joyce had as much as sat down, all beginning with "*Il grande scrittore...*".

Stop. I have to admit that I made that last thing up: the truth is, I don't recall how the plates looked like or what they said but I'm sure they were everywhere because the city seemed desperately competitive with other places around the Adriatic Sea, such as Venice, but without much hope. *Grandezza* had left Trieste when the Austro-Hungarian empire fell apart. However, the Austrians had left their specific brand of impenetrable bureaucracy behind, which was even worse than anything the Italians might have thought up and which appealed to Northern visitors, who could feel a little at home, at least with respect to the difficulties to obtain permits or get any affairs involving the state done quickly.

I'm likely to misremember that time of my life, because, ultimately, I crashed and got badly burnt, metaphorically speaking.

My wife was from the South of Italy, she was dark skinned and when in her country, she slept in the nude. It was warm. Though the Mediterranean sky was blue and seemed to be blue always, I remember the city of Trieste as rather dark, too, and the water as darkly blue. The physicists at the international institute, many of whom came from India and Africa, were dark also. The ruling party's colors were black, I think. My future seemed dark then but that seemed to matter less, because the town spoke to me in a whisper: stay, soften, let go, supporting its plea with scents from Greece and the Levant. Stories came with spices from places as far and exotic as Egypt, as they'd done for the last two thousand years. The stones themselves seemed to talk with Austrian accents, haltingly, as if

hauling some unspeakable burden with their tongues. Had Freud not walked where I walked now?

It was in Trieste where I learnt to park and drive in small spaces. We owned a bright red Citroën 2CV, the car that defined post-war cool and that made me aware how intimate driving could be because whoever sat next to the driver seemed to sit on my lap. It was a car to get lucky in, a car to rejuvenate any marriage during long trips up and down the Alpine valleys. On one of those trips we got stuck in a tunnel in a fire, still on the Italian side where they hadn't bothered with emergency exits. I had to carry my mother-in-law across car wrecks. She was surprisingly light. The escape seemed narrow and smacked of a second chance at everything.

Once a friend visited me from the North and couldn't stay for long because he hated the midday sun, even though we, like everyone else, lived behind closed shades during the day, reading Camus, drinking, smoking and feeling estranged from our own race. Those summers were hot. We drove down the Yugoslavian coastline to get to waters that were clearer than any sea water I've seen before or since.

When in Italy, my Italian wife and I slept in the nude. She made my coffee and put a cookie on the plate whenever she served it. We had no TV. Our flat looked like the set of a movie by Ettore Scola. My wife had thick, black curls and small, brown feet. She told me that she used to scrub them thinking she could get them clean until she realized that this was their color. I never figured out if she made this up. My own skin seemed unspectacularly pink at first and then, after a while, bronze, so that I began to like to look at myself not knowing what to do with that. I wasn't used to thinking much about looks.

I was mute then, didn't write except in my head. I listened to sad songs that wafted up town from the harbor. I breathed flatly.

Everybody thinks Italy leads a life of passion but the Italians are just trying to get by, like everyone else. They live on top of more ruins than most of us, old, smelly and musty ruins of Roman cities and medieval settlements, of the towns and villages of the Visigoths

and the Vandals, gesticulating, fornicating, craving poems, just like all of us.

On the hour, a love-sick man sang a song below the window. He cried every time at the end of the song.

My wife and I slept in the nude then, darkly conscious of our non-catholic ways but the shades of the flat were drawn against the church, against everyone peeking into our lives from the outside.

Later we lived in the North. We kept the windows open and the curtains drawn and we slept in pajamas. This is where we lived before we split up. Which is when one thing ended and another began.

