

FEAR AND SUNSHINE

by

Jeannette Dean

I could feel the hot liquid forcing through to the surface, uncontrollable. The barely perceptible cloud of smoke that marked each eruption darkened as the sun left us.

“Seems the Gods are getting angry,” I quipped.

“That would be assuming their anger is virtually perpetual and I won’t accept that,” Bernard countered. “No, we are just beginning to witness its truth, Earth’s real colors.” He stood up and stretched. Long and lean, skinny actually, he had lost so much weight. The jeans and sweatshirt just hung on his sparse frame.

We had been squatting at a turn in the path that zigzagged up the southeast slope while he regained energy for the climb. He had insisted we leave our watches behind so I timed our rests by eruptions that were about seven minutes apart. As I stood beside him my eyes were even with his shoulders and the grass on either side of the path equal to my height.

“Describe the color,” he ordered as the earth exhaled again.

Staring at Stromboli’s crest, I narrowed my eyes as he’d taught me, centering all attention on the cloud’s color. “It’s the black of a shadow at midday in the desert, not a true black. And, yes, there’s a touch of amber in streaks. Soon it’ll be glorious.”

“It is glorious now,” he mumbled and began walking. I had disappointed him. Yet again.

He set a steady pace striding slowly toward the top. I followed closely, acknowledging the

unease I felt as the light lessened. It wasn't a fear of the dark, honestly, but we really should have had a guide. June was not tourist season and so the locals were into day-to-day routines, not trudging up to view the infamous Red Light of the Mediterranean. Besides, my uncle had refused point blank to even consider the idea. So, it was just the two of us.

"A couple of hours to the top," one backpacker had assured us on board the ferry. It's an easy walk." Macho ass.

However, an active volcano Bernard wanted, so here we were. I mean, it was his gig.

Wrapped in my thoughts, I almost ran into him when he halted abruptly. He pointed. Seated upright in the center of the narrow path was the biggest, ugliest rat you could imagine. I bit hard on my lip and gripped Bernard's arm.

Checking us out disdainfully, the horrid creature was not in the least perturbed by our superior size, intellect and number. His distended belly spread on the ground between his rear haunches, the meager front paws were held together in the manner of grasping bony hands tipped by talons. His skeletal upper body was missing large sections of hair, the head completely naked and raw in color. But nothing, not even the red glassy beads that were eyes, disturbed as much as the mouth. From the sharply pointed face protruded vicious teeth edged with yellow foam.

I stood petrified. After a bit Bernard stamped his foot. I leapt, my heart nearly audible, but rat merely lowered to all fours and nosed around, seeming to look for food. By the time he had ambled off into the high grass I was convinced it was time to retreat.

Chuckling, my uncle began walking. I didn't release his arm until we had rounded the next curve. My heart was a lot longer re-establishing its rhythm.

I could no longer hear the sea or village noises, only the grind of gravel under our feet and movement in the walls of grass that housed rabid rats and. . .I wrestled my imagination into inactivity as the black night settled in with no moon in sight.

“Why did you want to come up here?” I asked when the set of his body told me he was in pain.

“Does there need to be a reason?” he asked, turning those intelligent blue eyes on me.

I took a deep breath, knowing I had to get the question right or he would just play word games with me. “Each place we’ve visited has signified a big step in human development. You’ve offered stories, lessons.”

“Why do you think?” he asked quietly.

“Well, Stromboli in particular because of easy access. You’re practical. After the Nguruman Escarpment in Kenya, where they reckon we humans started (but I’m not so sure), the pyramids in Egypt were a short flight. Then we went to Florence for a taste of the beginning of the Renaissance, then took a restful train ride down the coast to hop the ferry to here. Good planning.”

He nodded, the hint of a smile like a pat on the head for an obedient puppy.

I felt encouraged. “And I think you wanted to get closer to the heart of the earth. You can’t really get any closer than where she’s spewing out her juices.”

He turned toward her present display, more rust in hue as its background darkened. “Why do you ask questions you can answer yourself?”

“Because I’m not sure I’m right. Or that I see the whole picture.”

He downed a few pills and took a drink from the water canteen he always kept draped over one shoulder. He would discuss anything with me except the cancer that permeated his body. He had his doctor fill me in before we left and extracted a promise from me that I would never raise the subject again and that the family would not be told until afterwards.

I wanted to ask, “Do you think that living on this volcanic island under the perpetual eruptions is like living with cancer?” Their village had been wiped out before. The activity was watched, monitored, every change studied and analyzed. Though the punctual venting

lessened the threat, they did not know when it would blow.

I had dropped out of university just before my nineteenth birthday, fed up and frustrated. I put aside plans to go touring on my mountain bike when Uncle Bernard put forth a first-class itinerary if I would travel with him during his remaining six months. We would tour as long as he was able, the end he would spend alone, numbed to the pain, in a Swiss clinic. All had been arranged. The profits from the books he had written more than covered the costs. Excitement for our adventure had diminished the anguish of the coming loss of the uncle I adored.

As we neared the top I blurted out, "You know I really appreciate this trip and your confiding in me and, and everything." The sorrow was forcing its way up past my reserve like molten rock through the earth's surface.

"And so you should be," he barked, turning to continue the trek. Trembling, I reined in. He was counting on me, had always called me Sunshine.

We stopped about a hundred feet short of the crater amongst dark, rugged terrain that had been created by nature's awesome force. The path became a narrow ridge after that, much too hazardous for nighttime navigation. We had been warned at the hotel that one fellow had already fallen to his death from there earlier in the year.

Bernard stood laughing, grabbed me for a big hug. "Feel the pure power, feel the earth, Sunshine! It is marvelous, isn't it?!"

I gave an exaggerated curtsy to the planet's emanation, then commenced applauding and whistling.

With the aplomb of a tuxedoed conductor, he spread his arms in presentation and began, "We are just over three thousand feet above the sea, but this elegant magma now on display before you has risen from more than twenty five miles beneath the continental crust. Before achieving stardom here it was merely a part of the insulation around the earth's core. At forty three hundred degrees centigrade I think you'll agree, My Lady, that it needed insulation."

I began forming questions, wanted to keep him talking. If he had been teaching at my school I would probably still have been there. His love of sharing knowledge was infectious.

He sat down before I could begin interrogation. "Where is the wine for this magnificent occasion?"

As I began unpacking our feast his voice took on the tone of a yogi, his meditative mode to which I had learned to pay close attention. "You know your fear of the rat was illogical, exaggerated."

Embarrassed, I looked away. "It was wretched. My fear was real."

He sighed. "Think it out. Your imagination was what frightened you. Would you have descended at that point if I had not been with you?"

"Yes," I admitted timidly.

"And abandoned your goal. A weakness that would have haunted you." His voice lifted, "I am always amazed by the wealth you conceal in that backpack. Yet you wear it as if it weighs little."

I was off-balance, stammered, "Yes, well, you're right. About the rat. The wine is at the bottom." I handed him the opener. "Let's see, we have gorgonzola cheese, rich and fragrant; garden ripened tomatoes; King prawns that I'll peel for you with my experienced fingers; bread from the wood oven of Rosa; and some of the finest black olives in Italy."

The smile widened on his gaunt face as he opened the wine. "You are a fine wench," he toasted and we both drank the first tin cup down quickly. The second we sipped as I inflated our mattresses and unrolled the ultra-light sleep bags.

"I've done so much camping I've nearly perfected the art. It is one of the few things I do really well. We'll have a hot breakfast in the morning and if attacked by rats I can doctor the wounds," I brandished my first aid kit. "I've enough equipment and morphine for minor surgery, enough freeze-dried food for five days survival."

“You’d never have made it through customs so well equipped if we hadn’t been traveling first-class.”

I laughed, “I really felt like I was getting away with something. Do you ever need that feeling?”

“Of course, everyone needs that satisfaction. I feel like that now.” He gave a wry smile. “I stole a chocolate doughnut from the baker, a nasty prejudiced man, and am still beaming.”

“You were a naughty boy.”

“It was the day before we started this trip.”

I stared at him and we both dissolved into fits of laughter. We sat in silence for a while, enjoying the Chianti and fireworks and touchable clear stars and even the sulfur-tar-musty-burnt smell. Then Bernard began telling stories of volcanoes and constellations while I ate with relish and fell asleep with the first brandy.

The sun was well up when I awoke feeling light and happy. I stood and stretched, laughed as the eruption seemed to accompany my moves. My uncle, I thought with affection and a touch of guilt, must have been off exploring for hours. I got the Primas stove prepped, put on water to boil and called that breakfast was underway. When he had not replied or appeared after the next eruption I grabbed my shoes to go see what so occupied him. There was a note in my hiking boot.

“Well Sunshine, I got away with it, I’m smiling. There will be no problems. Letters explaining everything are with my lawyer, doctor, and the hotel. I thank you for the spark and positive energy you gave me. I have no regrets. I polished off the brandy and all the available pain preventatives because I have had enough pain, not for courage. I began planning my crater exit the moment I accepted my fate. You helped me achieve my goal. Though I have rejoined the earth, I will always be with you. Bernard.”

The initial shock gave way to tears, and a myriad of emotions. But not remorse. Listening to

the lava tumble down the far side of the volcano I could almost hear him chuckle. The family would not understand, but I did. I did search the area, but my uncle was gone.

The sea far below continued to consume Stromboli's offering with a barely discernible hiss. I packed and headed down with no fear of rats and no hesitation, just a real hunger for life. I talk with Bernard regularly, especially during the more interesting moments.

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