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LEAVING TAORMINA

Eustacia Leone

The bus driver lounged behind the enormous steering wheel, tipping it this way and that, skirting ancient rock walls, lazily spinning it around hairpin turns and missing oncoming cars at the last breath. Sasha closed her eyes.

“Wow! Look at that vista!” Aaron said from across the aisle.

Sasha lifted her head at the same time the driver nearly pinned a passenger car against a cement wall. Even Emmy, who’d recently mastered a heart-stabbing cyeroll, looked afraid now. Sasha smiled at her daughter. Emmy frowned back.

“That’s the Ionian Sea, isn’t it?” Aaron said, gazing out the window.

“I don’t know what the sea is called!” Sasha snapped. “You know how I am with heights!” Unable to bear Aaron’s wounded look, she turned away and told herself to stop talking. “Why don’t you look it up in the great male canon of *everything*, right next to all the other things deemed worthy of naming by history’s landgrabbers! Tell me one body of water...continent... country on this planet that was named by a woman!” She realized too late that she was shouting in public.

Aaron slowly shook his head. Sasha was about to offer him a remorseful hand when another abrupt turn up the mountain snapped her backwards. The driver was reminiscent of her father. Dad, filling up the family car with his cruel humor, his silent, furious calm and cigarette smoke. No one dared crack a window. Much less utter a word. Dad, giving driving lessons on the Cross Bronx Expressway, coaching Sasha to “step on it,” so no one had room to pass. Her chest tightened at the thought of getting behind the wheel of a rental car in Sicily. *Maybe I’ll just let Aaron drive. Shit. Breathe. Focus on something else.*

The bus heaved and gasped up the mountain.

Sasha shoved her head between her elbows.

“Are you ok?” Aaron asked.

“Sorry— I’m sorry. I’m jetlagged and I feel stupid for getting us on this bus instead of straight to the beach,” she said.

“Yeah. Why do we always have to do what you guys want?” Emmy piped up, frowning again, folding her arms in front of her chest.

“I’m sorry, honey,” Sasha said.

Emmy’s arms went tighter.

“It’s ok,” Aaron said. Reaching across the aisle to put a hand on Sasha’s shoulder.

She had the impulse to push him away but held her breath instead.

“Mama, look!” Emmy said, turning around in her seat.

Sasha told herself not to look back. *But what if my fear of heights rubs off on Emmy? She finally looks happy.* Emmy, bouncing in her seat, clapping, begging Sasha to please look. Struggling against an invisible weight, Sasha forced herself to stand, trying not to flinch as the bus headed straight for a stone fortification, then made a sudden turn at the last second in which the ground seemed to disappear. Emmy and Aaron oohed and ahed at the panorama—a glimmering aquamarine sea. The town below appeared as shiny golden flecks, so unlike the grubby place they’d driven through earlier. Sasha imagined she saw the curvature of the earth from their momentary perch. A final glimpse of blue sky and turquoise sea— before she caught the bright green, unmoving eyes of the man from the train.

She faced forward, her throat turned thick and dry, like a cold coming on. Sasha was certain now. He was definitely following her, ever since they’d left Rome a day earlier. The stranger had tormented her the entire nine hour train ride to Sicily by sitting in the opposite aisle, just out of view of Aaron and Emmy, alternately staring her down, then pretending absentmindedness until she became convinced she was the crazy one. She hadn’t said anything to Aaron, afraid he wouldn’t believe her. Or, worse, that it was all in her head. Then Aaron would have good reason to leave. Steady, stable Aaron, a doctor whose biggest complaint about his childhood were his overly attentive parents. “Just breathe and remind yourself that your husband has never given any indication he wants to leave,” her energy healer had suggested. “If you’re not living in the present then you’re acting out of the past.” *But what if the present is just as terrifying? Like being stalked by a fucking psycho, what’s the mantra for that?* Sasha wondered.

When the bus made its final ascent into Taormina, the elation of finally reaching the summit and pulling into the parking lot surprised her so much that she missed her cue to exit. The woman sitting next to Sasha impatiently stepped on her feet to get out. Aaron tried holding back the crowd to let Sasha in but she was a moment too slow and before she could get a foothold, Aaron and Emmy were forced ahead, away from her.

Stuck in her seat alone now, hemmed in by exiting passengers, Sasha glanced around. She didn’t see the man. *Maybe it was my imagination. Maybe it wasn’t the guy from the train. But how many men have those green eyes, freckles, and oddly bleached hair?*

Sasha let her head fall back onto the seat rest, overcome by resentment over how much time and effort she expended in a state of second-guessing and worry and apologizing for it. There was the ordinary mental energy devoted to keeping her guard up while trying not to appear to be on the defensive: clothing choices, avoiding eye contact, being friendly to strangers but not too, taking well-lit streets, keeping car keys in hand and her phone within reach, etc. Then there was the irrational mental energy that seemed to suck the life force from her and throw her off balance by transmitting a constant stream of shame and nebulous fears of punishment.

Sasha had never confided to anyone how afraid she was simply to exist. In coherent moments she knew it had little to do with the outside world. That’s when it seemed ludicrous, shameful even. She lived in relative safety and privilege. Was it fair to resent Aaron because he would never completely inhabit the world she lived in? Would never fully understand what it felt like to be chronically, psychologically terrorized by the mere fact of one’s physique—breasts, buttocks, lips, hair, eyes—and to carry a chronic sense of shame for being the arbiter of that terror?

From the front of the bus, Aaron caught Sasha’s eye and gave her an apologetic shrug. She blew him a kiss and hoped he couldn’t read her anxiety. She was the last one left. Walking towards the exit, she told herself to focus on the good: sunshine; Italian food; the smile on Emmy’s face as soon as we find some gelato. Maybe at this altitude there’s even a decent restaurant with something green on the menu. *At least there’ll be ripe tomatoes*, she thought, before remembering the news she’d read that morning about underpaid tomato pickers: “Italy’s Slave Labor Problem.” But before Sasha could fully recall what the article had said about Europe’s policy on refugee boats from Africa, and European restaurateurs, supermarket chains, and their customers being to blame for slave-like conditions because they demanded ridiculously low prices, and before realizing how difficult it would be to fulfill her resolution to protest all of it by never eating another tomato in Sicily ever again, Sasha was distracted by an abrupt change in the atmosphere.

A spot of heat blossomed on the nape of her neck. Sasha had assumed she was the last one off. But someone stood behind her. A fellow straggler? He’d appeared out of nowhere, and now stood impatiently waiting for her to get out of his way. Sasha tried hurrying forward but something stopped her. A tug at her sleeve, a sharp pinch on the back of her bare arm.

“Ow!” she said, turning to find the man glaring down. He cleared his throat as if impatient for her to move out of his way already. Faint with fright she stumbled off the bus.

“Mama! You almost lost your sunglasses!” Emmy leapt out and shoved the sunglasses onto Sasha’s nose, obscuring her sight of the man.

“Ouch!” Sasha cried.

“Oh, no! I’m sorry, Mama.”

“No, it’s ok,” Sasha said, her nose pulsing with pain. She’d read a parenting book whose author boasted of having had his nose broken seven times while playing with his child. Emmy had only fractured Sasha’s twice so far.

Emmy threw her arms around her mother’s neck. “I’m sorry for whining on the bus!”

“It’s ok, sweetie,” Sasha said, glancing around. He was gone. *Was it him? Did he pinch my arm? What the hell?*

Aaron kissed her on the lips. Her daughter grabbed her hand and Sasha let them usher her into town. Aaron, walking behind Emmy and Sasha, created a force field of safety with his sheer presence, something he wasn’t even aware of, Sasha realized. Overwhelmed with gratitude she squeezed her husband’s hand.

“Your arm! Sash, you’re bleeding!” Aaron said.

“Mama! Are you ok?” Emmy said.

Sasha stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and lifted her right elbow, holding up a throng of sightseers. A thin line of blood sprouted from a shallow cut along her bicep. Feeling dizzy, she stepped aside.

“Did you cut yourself on something?” Aaron asked, inspecting her arm.

Sasha recalled the moment she’d felt a clip of pain, it was while getting off the bus, before she realized the man was behind her.

“I must have cut it on some sharp thingy or something,” Sasha stammered, her lip quivering.

Aaron handed her a wad of napkins. Trying to disguise her shaking hands, she dabbed at the drops of blood and held a water bottle to her mouth to choke back tears. Tilting her head up to drink, she thought she saw the man on the other side of the street. She swallowed wrong and had a coughing fit, as if expelling her anger over all the hours she’d ever wasted on worrying about being pursued in some fashion, and more hours on how to navigate relationships with the people she loved, constantly bolstering herself against the old voice that told her she was worthless, not good enough for real love.

If I tell Aaron about the man now and try to explain how he may have cut me, he’ll either think I’m crazy or insist on calling the police. Either way, Emmy will be scared.

She placed a hand over her heart, and pulled her energy back in. Nothing worked. Deep breathing made her chest feel more constricted until she couldn’t get any air at all. So she gave in to a familiar sensation of floating slightly above her own body. Sicily’s heat was a welcome distraction. Sweat poured down her back and Sasha let her mind go fuzzy.

A cloud of cigarette smoke wafted over from a café, waking Sasha’s senses, transporting her back to the family dinner table, her father’s tirades, his intense eyes, the same dark brown as hers, his cursing and name calling drowning out her mother’s brittle, accented pleas. “As if she were still trapped behind the fucking Iron Curtain,” Sasha had confided in her energy healer. “She never once stood up to him when he called me names. Not once acknowledged that maybe, just maybe, it was a big deal for me too. But maybe it was worse for her? I mean, being called names probably isn’t as bad as getting smacked across the room, right?”

Inhaling the stranger’s second hand smoke, letting it fill her lungs, Sasha longed for a cigarette, nicotine’s momentary reprieve from the constant knot in her chest. She was so lost in rumination that when Emmy snuck up from behind, poked her in the back, and shouted “Boo!”, she whirled around and in a flash of anger, nearly struck her child.

“Don’t do that! Fuck!” Sasha shouted.

Seeing her daughter on the verge of tears made her angrier. Remorse, regret, the desire to stop and the simultaneous impulse to keep raging and do something more explosive seized her all at once. Then came the dread that she was just like her father. The only way to stop herself from escalating and doing or saying something she’d really regret was to freeze, cut off all emotion. Aaron put a tentative arm around Sasha.

“I don’t need help,” she said, throwing off his arm, regretting her tone, feeling incompetent as a spouse and a mother.

“I’m sorry, honey, it’s not your fault. Can we do rewind?” she said, turning to Emmy and summoning all her strength to wrest her mind out of the past. Hearing herself talking, but remaining helpless against her numb, frozen state, and the absence of feeling behind her own words.

“I’m sorry I scared you, Mama,” Emmy said, pressing her forehead into her mother’s chest, leaning in with her full weight.

“No, honey. I’m sorry,” Sasha stumbled, embracing her child, feeling the thaw of forgiveness like a dull stab to the chest.

Emmy brightened and began chattering about gelato flavors, “sfogliatella or Nutella,” playfully repeating the words, grabbing her mother’s wrist, urging her down the sidewalk.

She’s resilient, Sasha thought. *If nothing else, I raised a healthy child.*

“You ok?” Aaron asked. “How’s the cut on your arm?”

“I’m fine,” Sasha said, allowing her daughter to lead her through Taormina’s crowded pedestrian market. She wrestled with whether or not to come clean to Aaron. *What if he insists we take the next plane home. Is it worth ruining our vacation? How did that guy get away with cutting me in daylight anyway? How did I let him and not say anything? God, I’m so stupid. Stupid fucking broad. No. Fuck. Dad’s words. Not mine. Stop.* It didn’t matter that at present Dad was 5,000 miles away, diminished by illness, living out his days in a run down nursing home, dependent on Sasha’s weekly visits, and her gifts of Ritz crackers and supermarket flowers. “It takes a near miracle, a rebirth of sorts, to shed a violent past and see the world as it truly is.” Sasha recalled reading in some self-help book or other. Still, in that moment, she resolved not to tell her husband about the man. Ever. She’d rather look over her shoulder every few paces and deal with a churning stomach for their remaining ten days in Sicily.

Walking behind Aaron and Emmy, she saw them as innocents, untouched by the storm seething in her mind and body. She felt envious, their only concern was avoiding pushy shopkeepers and trying to find a gelato stand. *Everything would be so much easier if I could be so blissfully unaware.*

“Here’s a place!” Emmy said, pulling Sasha towards a café table. “You have to have one, Mama!”

Sasha was allergic to dairy and sugar. But eating something that might make her sick seemed a small penance for having yelled at her child.

“Chokolata, por favore,” Sasha said, telling herself that maybe European sugar was purer than USDA stamped corn syrup.

The three of them took turns sitting under the only patch of shade, their gelatos melting before it reached their mouths. Sasha smiled at her daughter, who’d ordered strawberry in a cone, and was covered in pink drippings from wrist to elbow. Emmy dipped her head sideways to catch it with her tongue.

“Careful, it’s getting in your hair,” Sasha laughed.

“You have a chocolate mustache!” Emmy giggled.

Sasha soaked up the sound of her daughter’s laughter. She excused herself to go to the restroom where she splashed cool water on her face. Staring into the mirror, she was shocked by the normal-looking woman staring back. Good even—tan, fit, healthy. It was hard to say which came first, the negative thought or the bad feeling, but it was probably the thought. The energy Sasha expended trying to project a happy image left her feeling exhausted to the bone. How do other people have so much energy? She often had the notion that her bedraggled insides would never catch up to the beautiful life she’d created on the outside.

But now, seeing herself in the mirror, she saw them as innocents, stood up straighter. *On the outside I can pass for a relatively together person. A mother. A wife. A journalist.* Staring at her own reflection cheered her up so much that she entertained the possibility she’d imagined the man on the bus after all. Perhaps it had been the scary bus ride, which had triggered much older fears, the way that one allergen can trigger the whole immune system to overreact. But doubt ate at her and made her mildly nauseous. Was he or wasn’t he after her? Had he cut her? She thought of her husband, who applied reason to everything, and liked quoting Occam’s Razor: “the correct answer is usually the simplest one.” *But there’s nothing simple about being a woman*, Sasha thought, lifting her elbow again to examine the cut in the mirror. It had turned pink, barely visible now. Dabbing at it with a wet paper towel, she allowed herself to change her mind, something her energy healer encouraged. “A flexible mind is a woman’s gift, and yet they will call you wishy-washy. Do it anyway.” With that, Sasha allowed the possibility that she had imagined the strange man, and that perhaps the cut was from a piece of broken metal. She told herself nothing bad actually happened, a fear chasing mantra she’d taught Emmy as a toddler, as much to calm herself as her daughter. Sasha focused on the soles of her feet and put a hand on her heart. It was possible, even probable, that the man on the bus had been a figment, which sounded so similar to remnant, as in a remnant from an earlier time. Sasha closed her eyes, put two fingers on her pulse and decided to believe that. Her breath became even and her heart beat slowed as she imagined herself bathed in pink and golden light. *Just for today, or the next few minutes.* Yet, underneath the momentary stillness she felt the urge to get the hell out of Taormina as quickly as possible.

“You guys ready to hit the beach?” She asked, returning to the table, spooning the last few bites of molten gelato into her mouth.

Emmy shrieked with excitement and pulled on her mother’s arm, insisting she hurry. But not as loud or persistently as usual, Sasha thought. *Shit. She’s still afraid because of my blowup.*

“I’m sorry, again, for earlier,” Sasha said, giving her daughter a squeeze.

“It’s ok!” Emmy said, skipping ahead.

As they made their way to the car rental office in central Taormina, a welcome thought occurred to Sasha—*once we get in our car there’s little chance of him following us. No. Stop, he’s fictional.* But walking among crowds of tourists, Sasha felt nervous, while everyone else appeared to stroll down Taormina’s pedestrian street as if they didn’t have a care in the world. It was one thing to feel safe in a locked bathroom, but being in public was another. They passed a stone cathedral with a breast of Saint Agatha of Sicily, whose punishments for defiance, Sasha recalled, included rape, torture and having her breasts torn off. Sasha sighed, slipping her perspiring hand into her husband’s. Peering over her shoulder every few steps, she pulled her daughter closer.

“Stop touching my arm!” Emmy said.

“Ok, honey. I just need you to stay nearby,” Sasha said.

Huffing, Emmy marched ahead.

Sasha pulled Aaron along, urging him to keep up with their daughter.

“Please. Don’t run away like that,” Sasha called after Emmy, feeling fear and annoyance rising and pulsing in her throat. *Stay calm, don’t escalate.*

On a more rational day, she might take Aaron’s passivity as a show of deference, he knew better than to get involved in their mother-daughter tiffs. She eyed her husband warily, while he seemed to feign preoccupation with the tourist map. Was he judging her for being too harsh on their child? How could she explain her fear to Aaron if she couldn’t even tell him about the man who had cut her on the bus or, worse, that it was all in her head? She felt their crumbling to the inside. *Keep it together. Smile just for today, just for this hour.*

When they reached the rental office, a storefront in the center of town, Sasha handed Aaron the reservation ticket and asked him to take care of it. She opened the maps app to see if there was any way to get from Taormina to the beach without having to drive back down the same jagged mountainside.

When she looked up from her phone she noticed Aaron walking out the door. *Without kissing me. He’s probably going to get in the car and leave us stranded here.* Sasha grabbed her daughter by the wrist. They were about to step off the curb and head for the rental car pick-up area, a narrow concrete island in the middle of a busy intersection, when an 18-wheeler came barreling around a steep bend. Seemingly headed straight for mother and daughter, the truck made a sharp turn less than a yard in front of them. So close Sasha felt the warm blast of the engine. Holding her breath against the exhaust, she caught a glimpse of the driver, who looked amused. Emmy, wide-eyed, held her breath, too. *Maybe it’s a sign from my ancestors who couldn’t say “Sicily” without spitting twice and making the mano cornuta under the table. Even Dad, a strictly practical man, succumbed to superstition. “What the hell you goin’ there for?”*

She spotted Aaron standing next to an old model Fiat, shielding his eyes, scanning the crowded street for them. Sasha squeezed Emmy’s hand, so small and light.

She kissed her husband and ran a hand over her own head in an attempt to clear herself of fear energy. *So what if Goethe and D.H. Lawrence and Nietzsche were inspired by Taormina? It’s too fucking far away from the sea.* She got in the car and rolled down the window.

“It’s hot!” Emmy cried from the back seat.

Sasha ignored her, feeling her impatience mounting as Aaron took his time programming the GPS.

“I know the way,” she said.

Aaron stared and continued fiddling with the map. Sasha tried deep breathing when her gaze was drawn back to the car rental storefront. There he was. Standing on the sidewalk, his eyes trained on Sasha. This time she was sure. Pretty sure. His expression steady and intense. Sasha gasped.

“What’s wrong?” Aaron asked, without looking up.

“Nothing,” Sasha said. “I thought I forgot my vitamins. But I didn’t. I took them already.”

Sasha locked eyes with the man, resolving to expel generations of shame and fear from her energy field and give it back to him with her eyes. But she knew it didn’t work that way. *Breathe, ground into the present*, she told herself. Instead, she allowed a childlike sensation to take over—of conjuring fear then laughing at it, of having wheels while the enemy has slow feet, of giving danger a final, thrilling, though imaginary, middle finger from a widening distance. There was the familiar tingle in her haunches, an inside trembling, while the surface that held her, and gravity itself, seemed to give way until she felt herself floating above the scene. Sasha would never commit to a religion, and it was too late to hope for a big, close-knit family. But this—this throat closing terror of being hunted, and therefore wanted—belonged to her.

Her senses went on overdrive. While Aaron stared at his phone, mumbling something about the best route from Taormina to the coast, Sasha discreetly unbuttoned her blouse. Cupping her naked breasts, luminous white, each one barely a handful, she recalled nursing Emmy well into toddlerhood, well beyond what her family or the pediatrician deemed necessary or acceptable.

As Aaron pressed the gas pedal and steered the rental car away from the curb, Sasha lifted her torso out the open window, arched her back and held her blouse wide open. Closing her eyes, she felt the swaying motion of the car and Sicily’s warm breeze on her bare breasts. Someone honked and whistled. Sasha laughed. How many Saturday nights had she and her high school friends driven downtown, drunk, daring each other to flash a stranger? Except Sasha, who was usually the designated driver.

“Yay! We’re finally going!” Emmy shouted from the backseat before noticing her mother hanging out the car window. “Mama? What are you doing?”

Lowering herself back into the passenger seat, Sasha quickly buttoned her blouse. “Yes, we’re going, Emmy!”

It felt good to say something benign and true.

Aaron hunched over the steering wheel, tight-lipped, squinting at the road ahead, as if holding his breath. *He will never ask me what that was about because he doesn’t want to know. Not really.*

“No! Go this way,” Sasha said, grabbing the wheel. “I looked it up on the map—”

“Sash! What the hell?” Aaron cried.

“Sorry.” She let go of the wheel. “This road goes down the other side of the mountain—it’s much straighter and wider.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eustacia Leone is a freelance writer and a novelist. She holds an MFA from The New School. Her writing has appeared in *Serpentine Zone*, *Literat Latte*, *Defunct*, *The Ithaca Times* and *The Guide Istanbul*. Leone lived and worked in Turkey as a journalist and editor and prior to that had a career in corporate marketing in New York City. She is a Kundalini Tantra yoga instructor and is studying energy medicine. She currently lives in the New York area.

