

BEHIND THE BOOK - REVERE BEACH BOULEVARD

In January of 1995, Amanda and I - married sixteen years and childless at that point - flew to Venice for an Italian vacation. My mother, who'd never been to Italy, joined us for the first week and then returned home. For the next two weeks Amanda and I developed a new travel strategy: we'd walk down to the local train station, look at the partenza (departures) board, choose a train destined for a city we'd never seen, buy a ticket, and get on board. There was a beautiful spontaneity and simplicity to that strategy - we had only one piece of luggage each - and it led us to magnificent places in the far north of Italy: Merano, Trento, Verona, and Vipiteno.

Amanda was working as the photographer at the Historic Deerfield Museum then, and had a limited amount of vacation time. I was teaching at Bennington, but only half the year, and there were no classes in January and February in any case. So after three weeks she flew back to work, and I stayed another week, hoping to have a solitary European adventure.

After seeing Amanda off, I rolled my only suitcase down to the Venice train station and looked at the partenza board. There were plenty of destinations to choose from, but the most intriguing option was a midnight train to Zagreb. Jimmy Carter had brokered a Christmas ceasefire in the war there so I figured there wouldn't be much risk. I bought a ticket, killed a few hours, found a seat on that train and went to see what was left of Yugoslavia.

It was a strange decision and a murky ride, a slow trip through darkness and then into a gray Northern Italian winter morning. I had a short layover in Trieste, a pretty city with pastel-colored Austrian-style palazzi along the Adriatic shore. Once the connecting train left Italy and crossed into Slovenia, there were no other passengers in my car. The border agents there and, some hours later when we crossed into Croatia, were understandably suspicious. I told them I was going as a tourist. Sensibly enough they asked: Why would a tourist want to go to a country that, until a few weeks earlier, had been ravaged by war? I was curious, I said. I was a writer. I wanted to see things with my own eyes and I'd heard it wasn't dangerous just then. The fact that I carried a passport with an old photo that showed me with an enormous black beard and a scowling expression didn't help matters. In fact, after a mini-interrogation, the agent at the Croatian border told me, in a somewhat less than kind and friendly way, "You need to get this photo changed. You look like a terrorist."

I arrived in Zagreb in the early morning darkness and it turned out there was one other passenger on the train, an Italian man going to visit a friend or perhaps a lover. The station police took our passports and while they held them and did their research and paperwork, the Italian paced nervously back and forth on the platform, talking to himself and to me, worrying aloud that we might be put back on the next train to Venice....or worse. For whatever reason, I wasn't concerned. I'd spent a lot of time in the USSR in the Seventies and Eighties. I'd been through more passport checks than I could count; I'd seen a hundred stern-faced, suspicious guys in uniform, and nothing really bad had ever happened. From all accounts, the ceasefire was holding - in Croatia, at least - and, though there was horrible fighting, torture and genocide further south, I was fairly sure that Zagreb would be quiet and safe. I had no Croatian money, didn't speak a word of the language, and didn't know anyone there, but I figured that, somehow, it would all work out.

After an hour we were given back our passports. A cab driver took me to a hotel filled with UN peacekeepers and, on the way, told me about a woman he knew who rented a room in her house; it would cost me a third of what the hotel cost. I took his card, spent one night at the hotel, had an interesting conversation with a UN Peacekeeper at breakfast ("These people will hate each other for the next five hundred years," he said), then moved to the private house for another couple of nights. During the day I passed the time writing and walking around Zagreb, where the mood was somber but the stores open and moderately well stocked. I found food in the usual way-guesswork, sign language, people who spoke English. Two days of that and I decided to stretch my luck a bit: I took another train to the former tourist city of Opatia on the Dalmatian coast. It was a beautiful place, but there were bombed out buildings on route, and the Opatian hotels were full of refugees from the war. I interviewed one of them, a man who'd been kept in a one-room "camp" prison. Some of his teeth were missing. He told me that one day his jailers walked in, holding crowbars, and started beating the men at the front of the room. He survived; several of his fellow prisoners did not.

After a few days in Opatia I took the slow train back along the coast to Venice and flew home. The twelve-page memoir I wrote about that week remains in a drawer in my office. I look at it from time to time but I've never tried to publish it. I wasn't a war correspondent, after all. I wasn't anywhere near the fighting. I was just a curious American who wanted a glimpse - from a safe distance - of the horror that had been in the news for so many months.

But the point of telling this story here is that, on the month-long trip to Italy and points east, I decided to try a different way of writing a novel. I had brought with me four yellow legal pads, and, pondering one day in my school office, I'd imagined the voice of an old Italian American carpenter, and I'd come up with what I thought was a good first sentence ("It was a Revere night, the night the life I been holding together all these years started pulling apart."). I wrote that sentence on the first page of one of the legal pads, and then just kept writing, not planning, not analyzing, not thinking things over, not drawing any kind of outline at all, and never reading what I had written in the previous days and hours. Some days I'd write twenty or twenty-five pages, longhand. I just poured it out, unselfconsciously, working from a kind of blind intuition that was as innocent and hopeful, in its own way, as our new Italian travel strategy had been. By the time I boarded the plane for home I had 190 handwritten pages of the novel that would eventually become *Revere Beach Boulevard*. I read it over for the first time on the flight across the Atlantic. It was very rough, but it had a beginning and an end, some sort of plot, and I could hear the voices of most of the ten first-person narrators who would eventually tell the story.

At home, I spent half a year or so reworking those pages, and my agent then, Cynthia Cannel submitted the manuscript to a list of editors. Over the course of 1996 and 1997, they all said no. Our first daughter, Alexandra, was born that December, and Amanda left her job to be a full-time mother. I was overjoyed, of course, and, at the same time, given the new financial pressures and the string of rejections, I was starting to wonder if my writing career was over. I'd published two books in the previous six years - *Leaving Losapas* in 1991 and *A Russian Requiem* in 1993 - and had heard very little good writing news since then, a very hard five-year silence.

But on a Friday in January, 1998, three years after the Croatian trip, Cynthia submitted it to Michael Naumann, who was then the Editor in Chief at Henry Holt and Company. He devoured it over the weekend, loved the book, and made an offer on Monday. In a nicely ironic twist, I ended up, in March of that year, doing the final copyediting in a rented apartment in Lucca, Italy, with Amanda and Alexandra in the next room.

Though he left Holt before the book was published (to become Minister of Culture of Germany), Michael Naumann and I had a nice relationship, and Holt did a good job with the publication. Amanda took a wonderfully haunting photo at Revere Beach and everyone agreed it belonged on the cover. The novel went into paperback, and, a bit later, was optioned for film by the actor Tony Musante. Though it was not made into a film, the story lives on to this day, 17 years later, selling a few hundred copies a year purely by word of mouth.

I can't look at the photo on that cover without thinking of the trip to Croatia. It was an odd thing to do - careless, hopeful, naïve, maybe even a bit brave - and writing the novel that way was odd and hopeful, too. I just went forward on faith, figuring things would work out. Strangely enough, after *Boulevard*, I've written most of my books with that new technique, and I've never again had a five-year stretch without publishing something.