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I Don't Remember Antwerp, But I Do Rome

by michael vocino

It was years ago. I was sitting in a café in Antwerp. It was a memory I had forgotten, but for some reason, this morning it popped into my mind as if I were sitting in the dark and someone threw the light switch from off to on. I think I was with Dino, maybe not. All I really remember is that I had finished eating and I wanted a cigarette. I had the cigarette but no lighter. I guess I looked frustrated. I looked around me and saw that a group of young people was sitting nearby. I looked down at the table and put the unlit cigarette there. As I brought my head up there was this young man standing directly in front of me with a cigarette lighter in his hand. He beamed a very warm, genuinely open smile as he spoke something in Flemish that offered me a light. I smiled back and said “Ya, Ya,” in imitation of what someone who could speak Flemish would say. He pushed his thumb down against the lighter as he pushed it toward me. I cupped my hands around his to keep the flame alive as I brought my face close to his hands. His hands were warmer than mine.

I don't remember anything about this young man except the youthful glow of his skin, the curly, sparse hairs on his arm and how his skin appeared taut as only the skin of someone young and just finished growing into his body can be. He was hovering between twenty-five and thirty-years-old.

I remember his smile, but not his face. I don't remember his body, what clothes he was wearing, or even what he said or the sound of his voice. I don't remember smoking the cigarette; I don't remember thanking him. I don't remember whom I was with or what year it was, but what I do remember is that simple act of cupping my hands

around his and looking at his hands and his skin. Seconds, maybe even less than that and this memory is burned into my psyche eternally. It amazes me that the mind works this way, and that memory can be so clear, so permanent. It amazes me that the memories stored in the mind can be so detailed and yet anything tangential to this trivial act is utterly forgotten.

In that instant of time, I fully understood the phrase, *vuoi che vuoi* “you want what you want” as the Italians say to explain that desire and what we desire is innate and there is little we can do to change *vuoi che vuoi*.

As I sit on the balcony in Roma, remembering the lighting of a cigarette in Antwerp, I smile, shake my head and respond to a cousin who is calling me to another cup of espresso by getting up from my comfortable position in the morning sun hoping that today’s activities at the Farnese Palace will bring more inspiring and joyful remembrances.

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