

The Clock Makers

It all started in San Gimignano, the medieval Manhattan in the province of Siena, with its stone skyscrapers dating back to the 12th Century. There used to be seventy-two of them. Only fifteen are left, visible above the tour buses and the flocks of tourists from America, France, and England that blind you with their pink hats and white skin unaccustomed to the Tuscan sun. We got to San Gimignano early, like the alternative guidebook told us to, in order to avoid the crowds. But so did the hundreds of other alternative travellers, walking around with the same alternative guidebook that was starting to seem quite mainstream. But the trailblazers seemed committed to catching the other five surrounding villages before the tour buses arrived as well, so after a bit of head nodding and pointing and stairs climbing and view taking, they were all gone, as quickly as they had arrived. And we found ourselves, by seven forty-two in the morning, the only tourists in sight. As we walked through the village, slowly coming to life as the sun began to spill across its stony surfaces, we came across a clock shop, with several of what must have been beautiful grandfather clocks all shattered on the floor and a dusty “closed” sign in the window. Two streets later, we saw another grandfather clock store; then another, and another, but with clocks all in the same condition as the first shop we came across. It seemed to have been a specialty of the village, and we asked the next local we saw about it. “Buongiorno.” “Buongiorno,” she smiled back at us. We continued, hoping she understood English, “We noticed a lot of grandfather clock shops as we were walking. Was this a traditional craft of the villagers here?” The old woman’s smile grew dark as if a cloud had passed over her mouth. Without another word, she walked away, half-turning her head once to look back at us out of the corner of her right eye as she hurried off in an unbroken stride.

“What a bitch,” my girlfriend snorted. “That was weird,” I added, “She looked freaked out by our question.” We noticed we were at the base of one of the town’s towers and that the door to the stairwell was open, so we decided to do a bit of our own stairs climbing and view taking. We finally arrived at the top, slowed down by unexercised limbs and the remains of smoked cigarettes, but we weren’t alone. There were perhaps up to twelve women there, draped in long, all-encompassing, black shawls, like chodars, their faces exposed, wet and twisted, by crying and quiet wailing, their hands clutching at their covered hair. “Oh my god,” loudly whispered my girlfriend. I looked at her standing there, barefoot, having left her shoes behind somewhere between the street and the roof, wearing a long-sleeved, burgundy, cotton blouse, loose, black, linen pants, and a sad, disturbed look of worry on her face. She was beautiful, bathed in a shiny, golden, early morning light. “Stay here,” I said, and moved towards the women gathered near the low wall along the ledge. As I neared them, I noticed they were rambling between what seemed like prayers in Arabic and more generalised lamentations in Italian. A couple of them grabbed at my hands, pleading, pointing beyond the roof’s edge. I peered over the ledge, fearing I didn’t know what, but not feeling safe to fully expose myself to whatever was below. It was a procession of sorts, like a caravan of men from the village, each

leading a horse-drawn cart, flat and made of wood. Sprawled across each of the carts were long, royal blue, cloth sacs like ones we had seen littered across the floors of the grandfather clock shops we passed. Except these sacs were moving. “What the...?” “What is it?” my girlfriend calls out. “Shhh!” I snap back. On the outside of each sac there appears to be a name written, Ahmad on one, Mohammad on another. I recognised two words being repeated over and over again by the women next to me, “figlio” and “marito,” “son” and “husband.” A sharp bristle scurried up my spine as it occurred to me that inside those sacs were the sons and husbands of the wailing women. “What happened?” I kept asking them, until one, younger than the rest and striking even if concealed behind her tears, spoke English, “They said they were going to attack us, attack the Muslims. But we’re from here too! We’re Italians! Our families go as far back as anyone else’s, and we have been the clockmakers of this village for generations.” “Italian Muslims?” I asked myself, though it must have been written more loudly in the expression on my face. She explained, “In the late 14th Century, a Moorish Sufi sheikh named Mustafa al Maghrebi, traveled through here from what was then Al-Andalus. He was a member of the last remaining resistance movement in Granada, the last remaining Muslim state in a re-conquered Christian land. But seeing nothing in Granada’s future but dust and disillusion, he left behind all of his possessions and began to walk. It was while he was on this pilgrimage to nowhere that he appeared here, in San Gimignano. Many of our ancestors, though of devoutly Catholic backgrounds, were sympathetic to the Moors, and saw the Christian re-conquest of its lands as being very un-Christian in its death and destruction. A scholar in the village, an intellectual respected by many, was the first to convert. We are still few, but we are here, and this is our home.”

Her eloquence startled me, and had me wonder whether this intellectual might have been in her direct line of ancestry. Chants from below brought us back to peering over the ledge, my girlfriend now squatting next me, gripping my right arm below the elbow with both her hands. When the men inside the sacs moved too much, the villager guiding his particular cart would hit the sac violently. They were armed with large sticks, gardening hoes, shovels, and iron pipes. Others were carrying heavy rope and more shovels, and it occurred to me that the ropes must be for hanging the men and the shovels for digging their graves. “We have to do something!” my girlfriend loudly whispered, and we poked our heads out a bit further over the ledge, wanting to get a better look at which way the procession was headed. Suddenly, one of the cart-leading villagers looked up and saw us, saw me, and the long, salt and pepper beard I wore, more out of aesthetic appreciation than any religious obligation, and he yelled, pointing up, “Guardi!” and the others all looked up before we could pull back our heads. We heard a mild mayhem from below, and the eloquent young woman peered over to see that men were rushing towards the tower. “You have to leave now!” she said, “They think you’re Muslim too, you must go! Hurry!” “I’m sorry,” was the only thing that came to my mind, and I said it with a heaviness that bore the full weight of its irrelevance. We ran towards the stairs, an atheist and an agnostic praying to every god and deity we could think of to ensure we got down the stairs and out of the tower before the lynch mob arrived.

We did, and continued as fast as we could through the labyrinthine, narrow alleys dissecting the village. We passed a couple of startled villagers as we ran, round old ladies walking laboriously through the alleys letting out surprised “Mamma mias!” as we went by. Unsure at this point whether we were going in circles or somewhere nearing ourselves to the posse, we began looking for doors to go through where we could get inside of somewhere undetected and hide until the posse went on with its business regarding the others and perhaps left us alone. It was our only hope, hope that they would tire from running and searching. We tried several doors of several homes and several shops, all locked, at times with faces peering through curtains in the windows. We turned down a particularly long, narrow, dark alley, tired from running the maze that made up this part of the village. Minutes later, as we neared the end of the straightaway, we realised, with extreme worry, that the alley was a dead end. No turns to the right or the left. The alley simply ended straight in front of us, into an oversized bright red door. Approaching the door, it seemed to be a sort of patchwork of heavy wood planks, somewhat freshly painted bright red. We stopped at the door, breathing heavily, and looked back down the alley we had just come through for any signs of life. We were alone. We gave each other looks that could only be described as the kind of looks that embody both desperation and hope, as we read each other’s minds, “This fucking door better open.”

The handle gave way, and after a couple of nudges with my shoulder, the door creaked open on rusty hinges. We rushed through, keeping our heads low, closed it behind us, and then quickly, reflexively, locked each of the three large, metallic bolts, one below and two above the handle. We turned to see just where we had actually locked ourselves in, and found in front of us an expansive landscape with low, rolling hills, greens and yellows filling in to the horizon. We took a couple of cautionary steps. Pools of red wildflowers were scattered throughout, their petals swimming in the breeze. To the distant left there was what appeared to be a villa surrounded by a crumbling, low wall. Behind us now was only the door and the village perimeter wall extending out from each side of it as far as we could see. There were no other doors or openings in the wall in either direction. It was as if we were at the very outer edge of the walled-in town and had passed through its only door. “What the hell is going on?!” I asked. We looked back toward the villa. “I don’t know, but shall we head over to check out that villa?” my girlfriend asked. “Can’t think of a better move at this point.” I said. The ground crunched softly beneath our feet, distant but unmistakable, like a moviegoer eating popcorn several rows away. We approached a gate at the villa entrance, a rusted gate with peeling and chipped green paint, hanging askew on its hinges. The lock appeared to have been broken long ago, the chain keeping the gate closed lying like a poorly coiled, metal link snake on the ground. We pushed open the creaking gate and entered the overgrown grounds.

The day was still bright, so we decided to check on the conditions inside the house before deciding whether we would stay and pass the night there. The door opened into a grand foyer, the wind entering from behind us scattered dry, brown leaves across its dusty, chipped, blue-green ceramic tile floor. The villa looked larger from the outside. Beyond

the foyer we found modest-sized rooms furnished with wood framed furniture ranging from the antique to the modern. The salon had hardwood floors with a polished dust coating, faded cobalt blue stone walls, and a Hi-Fi turntable stereo on the lower shelf of an overstuffed bookcase built into the opposite wall facing us when we entered. Sitting on the turntable, beneath its glass lid, was Miles Davis in Milano, Italy 1964, and the album sleeve slanting upright in the remaining shelf space on the right of the turntable. I switched on the Hi-Fi, lifted the cover, and set the needle. Davis' horn filled the room, with the kind of scratchy authenticity one can only find on vinyl. There were large windows, letting in copious waves of light. "We should definitely stay here for the night," I said. "It's amazing," she replied, "but do you think it's safe? I mean, we don't even know where the fuck we are. How far are we from San Gimignano? What if they find us here?"

"They won't find you here," came a tired voice from the shadows behind us. We turned, startled, both of us emitting short, loud gasps bordering on quiet shrieks, to find an old woman in the doorway, back lit with now disappearing daylight coming in through windows from the room behind her, leaning on a carved, wooden cane, its head an enlarged, clenched fist gripped securely in her right hand. "Jesus fucking Christ!" yelled my girlfriend. "Fuck!" I succumbed, and quietly shrieked. "You're 700 kilometres away from San Gimignano and 60 years away from when you were there," she continued, "I'm sorry for having scared you." "700 kilometres?" my girlfriend replied, "60 years? What are you talking about? That's crazy!" "But you can see the village wall from here," I said, rushing over towards the window where nothing but open landscape greeted me. "It's gone," I muttered, as my girlfriend slipped beside me at the window, taking my hand in hers and squeezing it for every drop of reassurance it could give her. "You should rest," said the old woman. "Rest?!" I yelled back, are you fucking kidding me?!" "What the hell is going on?!" "Calm down son," the old woman calmly replied, "Let's have a drink." She poured us two-fingers of brandy each in old, second-hand store coffee mugs; "Dear God save me from your followers" written in gold on a lavender background across the side of mine. "You were in town weren't you, in San Gimignano" the old woman asked, "and came upon a red door?" "How did you...?" started my girlfriend but she was cut off by the old woman, "It's the only thing that explains you being here. You see, "here" is a place outside of time and space. You won't find it on any map, and once you leave, you will not be able to get back unless you once again pas through that red door; it's the only way to get here. But the door only appears for those who truly need it, and then, just as quickly as it appears, it disappears." "What do you mean it appears and then disappears?" I said, "How can a door do that?" The old woman continued, "You've seen it for yourself. The door and the wall it was in are gone aren't they? Not where you thought they should be.

I used to live in San Gimignano. I am one of the village Muslims. In fact, we have met before. It's only because I recognised you that I didn't greet you with my shotgun. I am the young woman you spoke with on the roof of the tower and who told you to run after

the mob realised you were there with us. “Wait, that was you?! But how the fuck...” “Shut up and let her finish” my girlfriend said. “Thank you dear. I am a direct descendent of Mustafa al Maghrebi and in the last several decades, as the world’s hate came to be turned towards Muslims, the town followed suit. Suddenly, our Catholic neighbors who we had lived side by side with for generations became cold and distant. They stopped buying from our shops and beyond just not buying our clocks, they destroyed what clocks they had previously purchased. Next they started destroying clocks in the stores themselves. My husband and I were the Master Clockmakers, and all the others had studied under us at some point in their lives. I escaped that day we were all on the roof together and met up with my husband, who was in hiding. We barricaded ourselves into one of the workshops day and night, working on a way to no longer simply gauge time, but to manipulate time and space.

We knew the villagers were plotting their way to get to us. I think the fact that it didn’t happen sooner was only thanks to the handful of sympathisers we still had among the Catholic community; a few people who were not swept up by the violent xenophobia of their compatriots. So we hardly slept at all, and spent every waking moment creating what we called The Door; a way for us to escape the village without any chance that the villagers could find us. It first appeared inside the shop where we were working, almost by accident as we still didn’t fully understand what it was we were building. But once it appeared, we grabbed the few belongings we had previously packed for our escape, turned the handle, and walked through; not knowing what awaited us on the other side. It brought us here, to this house. It took us a very long time to understand exactly what had happened. When we ventured into other villages around here to get supplies we realised that we were in an entirely different region of Italy. And when we looked at the local newspaper, we saw that it was not at all the same year as when we walked through that door; we had traveled 10 years into the future. We could never figure it out, and I still can’t tell you how it works. My husband passed away a few years ago, and so since then I live here alone. But every now and then someone shows up on my property, like yourselves, scared and confused. That’s how I know the door is still there, manipulating time and space, and still helping people who need it.

“Wait a second, so we have literally just jumped 60 years into the future, without ageing?” I asked. “Yes,” the old woman replied. My girlfriend and I both just stared at each other, and I saw a sadness fall across my girlfriend’s face. “But how do we get home? And what year will it be when we do?” she asked. “Again, I can’t explain it, but others who have come through here and returned home have sent me letters or postcards saying that as soon as they left the immediate region, it was as if they were back in their original “time zone” so to speak. If that’s any indication, I imagine it should be the same for you.” “I’m not really sure how we can thank you. You literally saved our lives.” I said. The old woman smiled, “I still wish I knew how.” We said our goodbyes and walked into the nearest village. From there we caught a ride in the back of a truck loaded with sheep to the closest town with a train station, eventually getting to the largest town with

an airport. By the time we reached that town, the date was the day we fled the mob in San Gimignano and went through the red door. Two days later we were back in Brooklyn.

“I think the pizza here at our slice shop is better,” I said, searching the piece of pizza in my hand to ensure my next bite included both caper and anchovy. “You’re telling me that this hole in the wall place in Brooklyn is better than the pizza we had in Italy, hot out of an authentic Italian brick oven?” My girlfriend replied. “Yep, that’s exactly what I’m saying,” I continued, still searching, “I mean why not? These guys are Italian too.” “No they’re not! They’re, like, Polish or something.” “Hmm,” I answered, chewing with salty satisfaction. “C’mon,” she said, nudging me with her elbow and an affectionate grin, “the movie’s going to start.”