

# **What the Cactus Knew**

The Rewards of Not Getting What You Want

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*Psychotherapy Networker*

July/August 2013

As I packed my bags for a two-week getaway to Italy, I gave myself a brisk pep talk. “You’ll *love* Rome,” my inner cheerleader promised. “And you know Florence will be awesome.” But as I tossed jeans and *Fodor’s* guides into my suitcase, I dreamed only of Manarola, an out-of-the-way village perched on the cliffs of the northwestern coast.

In planning this vacation, a second honeymoon for my husband and me after 16 years of marriage, we’d cut a deal with each other. Dan—my bustle-loving, cosmopolitan spouse—would get his week of sightseeing in Italy’s megacities; in exchange, I’d get my week of serenity in the tiny town of Manarola.

When I’d first read the description in the Manarola hotel’s brochure—a small and quiet inn on the sea, in a village of multicolored bungalows and terraced vineyards—I’d actually sat down, nearly overcome by longing. I’ve always been something of a tranquility junkie—drawn to the kind of locales that might soothe, rather than stimulate, my easily overheated brain. This Mediterranean fishing village called to me.

During our first week in Italy visiting Rome and Florence, we took in some breathtaking art, but also contended with hordes of motorbiking locals who swerved without warning from the streets onto narrow, jam-packed

sidewalks. Crowds of chattering, photo-snapping tourists accompanied us wherever we went, from the Uffizi Palace to the corner café. “Breathe,” I instructed myself, but I didn’t, not really, until six days later, when we boarded a tiny, rickety train bound for the coast.

Arriving in Manarola three hours later, I felt my body expand, like bread rising in a warm oven. The town was as whimsical as a child’s picture book, crammed with ragtag stucco cottages tumbling down the hillside to the aqua sea. Fishing boats, painted in bright yellows, blues, and oranges, bobbed in the tiny harbor. I breathed deeply, letting the colors and rhythms wash over me. I felt as though I’d come home.

Because cars weren’t allowed on Manarola’s narrow, twisting lanes, Dan and I began to haul our suitcases to the hotel, which we discovered was halfway up a steep hill. “*Non importa*,” I assured my husband as we trudged forward with our four bulging bags. “Once we get to the hotel, we’ll go out onto the terrace, have a drink, and relax.”

At that moment, Dan let go of his suitcases and stopped in front of a squat, soot-colored box of a building. My heart seized as he pointed to a sign indicating that this was our hotel. I’d envisioned a quaint, whitewashed inn, dripping with red geraniums. This place was a dump.

We made our way through the front entrance and found ourselves in a cavernous, poorly lit room that appeared to be the lobby. In the far corner of this murky chamber, we could just make out the blue glow of a TV set and, in front of it, the outlines of two people: an overweight, elderly man asleep on a couch and an unshaven young man seated nearby, staring blankly at the tube. As we approached, neither of them stirred.

I planted myself in front of the younger man. “Can you help us?” I asked in my bad Italian. Sighing, he stole a furtive glance at the flickering

screen and shuffled over to the reception desk to check us in. The room was so dark that when he shoved some papers across the counter for us to sign, we couldn't read the words we were agreeing to. At Dan's third request, he switched on a light. Then he showed us to our room—minuscule, but mercifully clean—and disappeared.

After we'd revived our spirits with a dinner of fragrant pesto and a stroll around the fairy-tale town, we returned to the hotel and prepared for bed, trying hard not to bump into each other in our doll-sized room. Burrowing beneath the coverlets, I caught the faint *slupp, slupp* of waves against rocks and soon drifted off.

Two hours later, I sat bolt upright. Where was that loud, unspeakably bad music coming from? Squinting blearily out the window, I saw large numbers of cheerful men on the street directly below our room, crooning Italian love songs with woozy abandon. It seemed that our hotel's bar-restaurant was the hangout-of-choice for the entire adult male population of Manarola. The off-key harmonizing and celebratory bottle-smashing continued until 2 a.m., while I tossed sleeplessly to a mocking chant in my head: *a small and quiet inn on the sea*.

The next morning, Dan and I faced each other at the breakfast table, grim-faced. "We slept better in Rome," my husband said, attempting to lighten the mood with a little irony.

"Ha, ha," I replied.

Mustering our last reserves of can-do spirit, we paged through our *Fodor's* and decided to take a recommended hike. It looked like a good bet: we'd trek several miles into the next village via a hilltop trail flanked on one side by olive groves and on the other by the sunlit Mediterranean. Since we'd purposely taken this vacation well in advance of tourist season, we expected

the only companions we'd have on the trail would be the occasional stray dog or hawk overhead.

We'd covered about a hundred leisurely yards when suddenly a strange stomping sound began to echo behind us. Turning, we witnessed hundreds of Italians spilling out of the local train station and heading directly for the trail. There were elderly men in full hiking regalia, teenagers wearing cutoff jeans and little else, irritable parents shepherding children, youngish women with complicated haircuts and expensive tracksuits. It looked like an all-out, all-Italy fire drill.

"It's Sunday," Dan said quietly, but it took me a minute to comprehend. *Sunday was everybody's day off, and Italians wanted a day in the country every bit as much as we did. What had we been thinking?*

Grimly, we joined the horde of day-trippers and fought our way along the trail, dodging elbows and hip bones as chattering, three-abreast walkers jostled past. Dan seemed to be coping, but I was teetering on the edge of overload. Just how much noise, nudging, and general human tumult was a body supposed to absorb? How had this longed-for vacation with my husband devolved into such a series of disappointments? I tromped along the path in sullen silence.

Then, as we rounded a bend, I saw it. On the edge of the trail was a small cactus in full bloom, with masses of yellow flowers peeking up from its spiny leaves.

"Look!" I cried to Dan, and together we admired the miracle of tender, buttery petals emerging from this sharp, unwelcoming plant. Then I spied something equally arresting: on one of the cactus's broad leaves, jaggedly carved with a penknife, were the words *Mirna e Tino per sempre*.

“Mirna and Tino forever!” I sang out. Dan and I looked at each other. In the same instant, we began to laugh.

There was something bizarrely funny, and somehow humbling, about traveling 4,000 miles to sample the splendors of the northwest Mediterranean coast only to find a quintessential symbol of urban blight—graffiti—on a plant. All at once, my rose-strewn, tranquility-drenched fantasies of rural Italy seemed ridiculous. I saw that I’d defined myself as somehow special, entitled to a vacation swathed in layers of calm and unspoiled beauty. Suddenly, I saw Manarola for what it was: a tiny, struggling fishing village populated by ordinary people trying to make their own lives work, not mine. Manarola would offer me what it had—no more, no less.

As Dan and I continued up the trail, I felt something uncoil inside me. Meanwhile, my can-do husband was hatching a plan. “Why don’t we just chuck this hike from hell,” he proposed, “and then go out later, when everybody else is eating dinner?”

Ambling about town that evening after a luxurious nap, we found ourselves at the bottom of a skinny, zigzagging road, pitched so steeply up a hillside that not a single soul was on it. Without a word, we started up. Twenty minutes later, breathless, we found ourselves on the rooftop of Manarola itself.

Standing together at the cliff’s edge, Dan and I finally took in the wonders of this wild slice of seacoast: hillsides of purple veronica, rock formations that pitched forward like frozen waves, the muted, silvery cast of the sea. As we stood arm in arm, watching the sun sink into the Mediterranean, I felt a tug of gratitude mixed with something like awe—at

the strange magic of shedding expectations, of allowing a new land simply to unfold and reveal its messy, wondrous surprises.

Mirna and Tino, thanks, you two. Wherever you are, I hope you're still crazy in love.

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