

“The Road to Albiano”

By David Roth

Second Place

Sitting alone on the terrace watching the sun’s first rays brighten the mist-filled valley and the town’s terracotta roofs, Lawrence wondered how things might have turned out if they hadn’t run into the Japanese woman.

He and Anne had rented a villa in Sommocolonia, a fading Tuscan village overlooking the chestnut-brown and olive-green hills of the Serchio River Valley. Among the guidebooks and brochures left by the owners, they’d found a hand-drawn map of the area with annotations that included: *Old stone foot path to Barga – beautiful walk – 45 min. to 1 hr.* Their mutual agreement to start the first full day of their vacation with this walk had struck Lawrence as an auspicious beginning.

Ten minutes into their leisurely trek they crossed paths with a middle-aged Japanese woman—about their age, perhaps a bit older—who was on her way up to Sommocolonia. She had a walking pole in each hand and wore a broad-brimmed straw hat that obscured half her body as she approached. Lawrence judged her pace coming up the path as faster than what he would be capable of going down. It exhausted him just to watch her. The three of them met where the ancient stones crossed from terraced farmland into woodland. Anne greeted the woman and asked her impression of the Barga walk. She told them she’d started in Albiano, a town on the other side of the valley.

“It’s a good hike,” the woman said. “At the fork marked by a bronze Jesus to the left is Barga, to the right Albiano.” She wiped a bead of sweat from her nose and raised her well-traveled sunhat to run her handkerchief across her forehead. Binoculars and a camera dangled from her neck. A fanny pack and

water bottle accessorized her hips. “The road comes out at a trattoria, L’Alpino,” the woman said. “Their terrace overlooks the entire valley. I recommend it.”

“That sounds lovely, doesn’t it Lawrence?”

He was a few feet behind Anne surveying the hillside through pocket-sized binoculars, panning slowly down what he could make out of the winding Roman road. Nearly twenty years together had taught him that Anne’s question, though rhetorical, was posed in the hope of receiving a hint of shared interest in revising their itinerary.

“Lovely,” he said, without lowering his binoculars. He couldn’t pinpoint the fork in the path or the bronze Jesus.

“If you don’t mind a bit of up and down, go to Albiano,” the woman said, her booted feet peddling restlessly in place.

Lawrence lowered his binoculars. “A bit of up and down?” he said. He wanted more detail. Experience told him his interpretation would be different from Anne’s.

“Not too hard,” the woman reassured him. “Down the valley, up the other side. Very beautiful.”

“I see.”

“I’m sure it’s lovely,” Anne added. “Thank you.”

The woman nodded and shifted her peddling feet out of neutral. So purposeful, Lawrence noted as he watched the woman wage her two-pronged assault on the ancient stones. When it came to travel, he considered himself more flaneur than adventurer. He was certain he would not share this Vibram-soled woman’s idea of a bit of up and down.

“That sounds like a great idea,” Anne said. “A romantic walk through the wilds of Tuscany followed by lunch on a terrace overlooking the valley. How about it?”

Lawrence sat down on the stone wall bordering the path. He lifted his cap and wiped his brow. Through his binoculars the Apuan Alps, darting swifts, dense forest and seventeen hundred-year-old stone road were breathtaking. He was not sure he was prepared for the literal breathlessness that was likely to accompany walking off into the forbidding landscape. The goats grazing the mountainsides seemed best suited to the terrain. And then there was the warning they’d read in the tourist guide: watch out for vipers and scorpions. Down the valley and up the other side, he repeated to himself. Romantic was not the first word that came to mind.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Are you sure you’re up for that? I thought this was going to be a stroll down to Barga.”

“Oh come on. That woman has to be at least sixty. It can’t be that bad.”

That woman, Lawrence thought, was probably an Olympic race walker, but he said nothing. His attention had drifted to a lizard, over a foot long from tail to nostril, sunning itself on a rock. *Lacerta viridis*. The blue throat told him it was a male. As if sensing Lawrence’s eyes, the lizard darted into the brush. Lawrence felt what had become an increasingly familiar urge to resist Anne’s plans for him. He’d prepared for a walk to Barga. He was already picturing sitting in the piazza eating biscotti dipped in chocolate and sipping cappuccino. Albiano seemed quite another thing all together. But he knew an argument to ease into rather than seize the day would likely just make Anne more determined. How is it possible, he thought, to have so little control of the circumstances that conspire to influence one’s day?

“Do I have a choice?” was all he could manage.

“Oh stop moping. We’ve traveled all the way to this beautiful country; maybe we should see a bit of it. I’m going to Albiano. A chivalrous gentleman would accompany me to keep me safe from the scorpions and vipers. Vado, darling. Ciao.”

Throughout her monologue, Anne sidled down the path. Already having put some distance between herself and Lawrence, she turned and walked away signaling for him to follow by pinwheeling her arm like an officer ordering her troops to advance. The gesture reminded him of the day they’d met. She’d led him and his summer class of travel study biology students on a tour of Scotland’s Iona Abbey. Whenever she moved from one location to the next, she would do exactly that—turn her back and beckon the group with a grand sweep of her arm. He’d been impressed by the way she’d controlled his easily distracted group with the admiralty of her movements and her flair for storytelling. He’d been particularly enthralled by her presentation of Saint Columba’s legendary attempt to build the abbey’s chapel.

“Every night the walls would crumble,” she explained. “Finally a voice told Saint Columba that the abbey could never be finished until a living man was buried below it. One of Columba’s followers, Odhrán, suggested that he be thrown into the footers of the building to appease the ancient energies of the island. Columba took Odhrán up on his offer and the walls stood.” Here Anne had lowered her voice slightly as one might when approaching the chilling part of a ghost story. “Three days later Columba had Odhrán dug up. He was alive and said that he had traveled to the Other World. *There is*, Odhrán reported, *no hell and no heaven*. He ended his report from the netherworld with a bit of cautionary advice for Columba. Leaning over to his friend”—and here Anne had leaned toward her audience—“Odhrán whispered, *The way you think it is may not be the way it is at all*. Unsettled by his friend’s blasphemy, Saint Columba had him hastily reburied.”

Lawrence had been smitten and she'd taken pleasure in smiting him. But that was then. Sitting on the wall watching Anne march away gave his Iona memory a bittersweet aftertaste. He pocketed his binoculars, pressed himself up with his palms, leaned forward and allowed the slight downhill grade to propel him apathetically forward.

For most of the time that they'd been together he'd taken comfort in the simplicity of their relationship. Anne knew what she wanted and he wanted to be one of those things. Being with her eliminated most of the wearying ambiguities of life—which movie or play, the appropriate shirt, dinner options, which friends to have over, vacation itineraries. Even when she asked for his preference or opinion, the ask was a formality that served as a sort of test to see if he'd divine what she'd already decided. Rather than fail the test, more often than not he responded that whatever she wanted was fine with him. It was generally true and she seemed to like that answer best. They were, their friends would say, an agreeable couple.

Nothing she had done or said directly to him gave any indication that she felt differently toward him now. They still got along well enough. But there were little clues. More frequent girls-only nights out. A second cocktail or an extra glass of wine that ensured an early, sleepy end to their evening. The recent phenomenon of being phubbed in favor of Facebook or Instagram; he was encouraged that there was a word for it, that it wasn't just him. But what he could not help taking personally was when, during foreplay, she would now sometimes finish herself. She would lose patience with his teasing and slip her fingers under his tongue or hand. He became a spectator. Her eyes shut, her mouth slightly open, her fingers flicking feverishly; whatever scene was playing out on the screen of her eyelids, he knew it didn't include him. He would watch without insinuating himself. And after she came, she would smile as if it was something she had done for him. What, he would ask himself, am I doing here?

They walked for several minutes in silent procession and then Anne called over her shoulder, “Look where we are.” Bronze Jesus of the crossroads was ten yards ahead of them.

“Which way did she say?” Anne asked.

“I don’t remember. I thought you were getting the directions.”

“I only remember her describing two options. There are three here. She said Barga is to the left and Albiano to the right. This path is just to the right of the Barga path, so I guess she meant the middle right.”

“She said we had to go down into the valley,” Lawrence noted. “The far right fork descends.”

“Straight right feels right,” Anne said. “It looks like the path turns down again at the break in the trees.”

“The way you think it is may not be the way it is at all.”

“Excuse me?”

“The ruins inspired me,” Lawrence said and pointed to a crumbling stone structure about fifty yards further down the path Anne had chosen.

“Well, there you have it,” Anne said. “Odhrán calls. It’s only fitting we have a look.”

“I think she would have mentioned ruins.”

“And yet there they are. Let’s go.”

He tried again. “The way you think...”

She spun and stepped toward him as if to strike. He stiffened.

“What are you afraid of?” she hissed.

Her look was a grotesque mingling of anger and confusion. “Afraid?” he repeated. “What are you talking about?”

“Not just now. Always.”

Her look settled on pure anger. Lawrence could smell it, too; the odor of spoiled fruit coming from the sweat at her hairline. “What’s wrong with you?” he said.

“I asked you first.”

He tried to shrug off the question, but her eyes narrowed and she mirrored his evasive movements so she could maintain eye contact. She studied him as if assessing the color of an aging wine, as if there was something about the gradients at his edges she couldn’t characterize. He broke from her gaze by looking over her head into the forest. His focus traveled deep into the trees, into the dark crevices between the stones of the ruin.

“Afraid,” he spoke to the stones. “I suppose you could say afraid, although that might be too harsh a word.” He returned his attention to her serpentine eyes. “I’m afraid of being unnecessary.”

“Unnecessary?” She blinked and seemed to stand down. She reflected on his word choice and then broke into what started as a snort and built to a chuckle. “Is that all? Well of course you are,” she said through her laughter. “Like all men, you are self-indulgently, ponderously, gloriously superfluous.”

“This amuses you?”

“Oh for chrissake, do we have to do this now? Here?”

He shrugged. “You asked.”

“Okay, fine.” As abruptly as she’d spun toward him, she now retreated. “Let’s fight about it over lunch on the terrace.” She marched into the trees, her shoulders square and with a slight, determined forward lean.

That’s it? he thought. He had anticipated this moment would be bigger; that his confession would produce a response of either sympathy or disdain. He hadn’t considered mere derision an option. Perhaps she would have found his vulnerability attractive in a younger man but, he thought, at his age it probably came off as tiresome, maybe even – heaven forbid – needy. That would explain why she ran from him. She never even glanced back to see if he was following when her route turned deeper into the woods and began to fade into the scattered, overgrown stones. Lawrence let her go. The remnants of a path would soon end. She would be back once she decided the road to Albiano was the far right fork. He took out his handkerchief and mopped his neck, mouth and brow. He bent down and tightened his shoelaces. He raised his eyes just in time to see her fall.

The suddenness of her collapse sent a searing flush to his thighs. Weightless, without thought, he sprinted into the woods. He heard nothing but his own breathing. In just seconds she was in view. She had fallen only a few feet. She was sitting up. She was holding her ankle. There was no blood. His relief severed the marionette strings of adrenalin and dropped him back to earth. He grabbed his knees and sucked in an overdue breath.

“Are you all right?”

She didn’t reply. Her eyes were closed and she was lightly biting her lower lip. He knelt beside her.

“What did you do?”

Her eyelids lifted to a look that told him the answer was obvious.

He straightened her left leg and supported the ankle in two hands. He gently pressed.

“Tell me where it hurts.”

“Ouch!”

“How about here?”

“Ok.”

“Probably an anterior sprain.”

“It hurts a lot.”

“Try to stand. We need to get you back and ice it.”

“Just let me sit here a second. Rub it, gently.”

“If you’ve sprained it we really should get back and treat it. The longer you wait—“

“Give me a second.” After two, shallow preparatory breaths, she placed one hand on the stone ledge she’d tripped over, inhaled deeply, exhaled as she attempted to lift herself and slumped back down. The ankle wouldn’t support any weight.

While Lawrence waited dutifully for Anne to decide how she wanted to proceed, he noticed something shift in the stones of the ruin. He could just make out the slate-brown coloring and darker diamond markings. *Vipera ammodytes*. Where there was one, there were many, maybe dozens of these communal rock dwellers.

“Well, Mr. Unnecessary,” Anne said, “I need you now. Make yourself useful. Help me up.”

When he didn’t respond, she followed his eyes. “What is it?”

“Snakes,” he said. “Horned vipers.”

She saw nothing. She looked back at him suspiciously. “Stop it. You’re scaring me. It’s not funny.”

“I only see one but they’re social.”

“Let’s go then,” she said reaching out her hand.

Lawrence stood. He did a slow panoramic scan. He saw one more viper about five yards closer to the ruins. He turned and walked into the forest.

“Lawrence?”

“Just a minute,” he said

It took several minutes for him to find a sturdy Y-shaped branch. He extended his hand and helped Anne up. She balanced on one leg as he marked on the branch the distance from the ground to her armpit. He stuck the branch between two stones and snapped off the extra length. He used his hat to pad the crutch. Then he paused and looked back up the way they’d come to gauge the effort required for the return trip. Above the treeline on the switch back near the top of the trail, he could just make out a small figure rapidly descending, walking poles pumping like pistons. He imagined handing Anne the crutch and explaining to her that these snakes, while dangerous, are not particularly deadly. It’s warm so they won’t be very active, and they aren’t aggressive by nature. So, take your time and stick to the main path. The Japanese woman is on her way back down and I’m sure she’ll help you if you need it. I’m going to follow the road down to Barga and have a cappuccino and a biscotto—

“Lawrence,” Anne interrupted, “what are you doing? Can we please get going? This is creepy.”

Lawrence handed her the crutch. Once she had it comfortably tucked in, they wrapped arms around one another’s waists. Her right hip pressed against his left thigh. As they took their first step, he savored the feeling of his leg guiding hers. It was an awkward but serviceable coupling. He moved his hand from her waist to her ribs and pulled her closer. She didn’t seem to notice. Her attention was

focused on how to manage the crutch. He could sense her working out the rhythm and it occurred to him that before they reached the bronze Jesus, she would no longer require his assistance.