WOODS

Capri floated above the Mediterranean, a green beacon above a slate-grey-and-foam-white world of manic movement that was the Bay of Naples. Our traghetto slogged noisily and determinedly against the wind and waves, bearing its load of automobiles and plucky passengers through a Good Friday squall. Napoli itself had long since disappeared behind, along with the high, brooding bulk of steaming Vesuvius, patiently pondering the fate of all around.

Now Capri seemed to detach itself from the long Sorrentino peninsula as if fleeing our approach. The brisk spring winds, carrying a slash and sting of rain before them, had held this island refuge concealed within their steamy prodigy, wrapped tightly within the folds of their burdened cloak of clouds. Yet now our progress had thinned this veil, and all aboard our warm cocoon, save the most jaded, had turned to introduce their eyes to our destination, to caress her muscular flanks with their gazes, to glean a bit of her mood from a safe distance,

before she had an opportunity to appraise them in return. Somewhere upon her luxuriant, rocky folds she held the two idyllic towns of Capri and Anacapri, and we strained to make out the first signs of them through the mists. Life had been kind to me, and given me the opportunity to travel with a most-wonderful companion. I’d had the good fortune to be spotted "across a crowded room" by a charming and beautiful woman, who decided, however improbably, that I was worth an investment of her time.

Both divorced, and neither seeking new entanglements, we somehow began to see each other on a regular basis. Susan had been through a great deal of trouble. When we met in a Fort Lauderdale restaurant, she sported a crutch and fading facial bruises, evidence of a head-on collision with a drunk driver three months before that might have claimed her life. It was her first night out after her hospitalization and rehabilitation. The courses of our existence are full of unpredictable twists, and that near-tragedy somehow led us to the same place in time. Such is the stuff of dreams. She showed me a recent photograph of herself with the largest of her toy stuffed pandas, most gifts from friends who had learned of her delight in the antics of the improbable black-eyed bears. She and the bear made a close match, each with their eyes set in black rings, Susan smiling through her recovery, the three-foot bear clutched in her arms. I was enchanted by this determined woman.

We had come together to Italy, drawn to spend more time there after our brief but enchanting visit to the far northwest during some weeks in France the previous year. The glamour of Nice and Monaco had suddenly seemed pretentious when compared to the simple warmth and hospitality of the bustling, expressive commotion of San Remo. The sharper edges, warmth and volatility of the Italian tongue had touched me in a way that the smoother, demure syllables of French had not. Now we had come to dedicate some time to this romantic southern beauty we wished to know better. Italy has since come to mean much more to me than a place for adventures. For me, it was love at first sight, or at least at first visit. The light and colors of this ancient land drew me into a whirling love affair, and I felt myself immersed so deeply that I knew I would never escape her embrace.

She is a creature of grace and beauty, but also of mystery and danger. Her charms are many, and captivating to one who has left himself vulnerable. Yet the true magic of a special place flows not from geography, but from humanity. Individual lives pass quickly through the ticking meters of time, yet, like water upon stone, they leave their subtle marks, patiently shaping a place by the wearing generations in their passing. Italy is such a place, and the lives of those who have gone before still exist in the shapes and seasons of this land