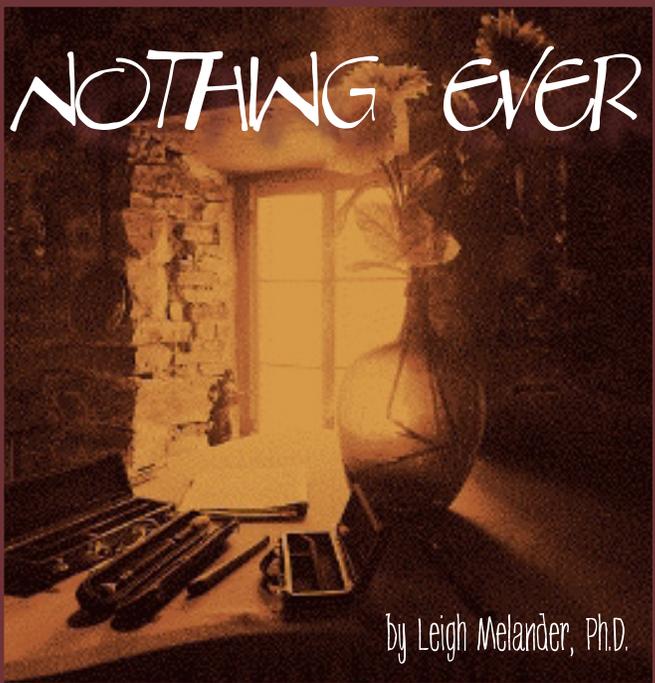


NOTHING EVER



by Leigh Melander, Ph.D.

HAPPENS

Bonefro is the sort of place where nothing happens. Tucked into folds of sunflowered fields, it crouches on top of a hill only slightly taller than the hills around it, tightly packed into itself as if the Romans still might crest the ridge opposite it, looking to conquer.

But it is the sort of place that forces you to gaze inside yourself and shake out your own worth and values.

You don't realize it at first, for it just seems like and is a sleepy little village where the enormous events of the day are the arrival of the potato gestapo man and the re-opening of the cafés on the piazza after siesta. It is a forgotten place, even by the Italians; little changed in any real way since before the Romans arrived.

If forgotten, it is a place that is ultimately about remembering.

Bonefro breathes memories in its narrow streets and soft stone walls: of monks singing the hours at the *conventi*, of generations of crows that wheel around the tower of the castle and church, and of shepherds leading passive bell-bedecked sheep on the track that runs from the mountains to the sea since before anyone can remember.

It sings of the young war dead immortalized in a preposterous pink sandstone pillar engraved with their names and last battles in the second war to end all wars. It mutters with the grandmothers, dead husbands still clutched to bony breasts swathed in black as they make their way to church each evening.

And it lives landed in the memories of those Romans, always spoken of with the adjective "damn" hovering closely under the tongue. They only won the third time around in battles on the hill across the way, still called La Difesa, since it, covered with fierce

Samniti warriors with their shields stacked unequivocally abreast, successfully kept the legions out twice. This is recounted two thousand plus years later as if it were yesterday. "And did you know that two Roman consuls were killed humiliated there? We were the last to fall." Bonefrani are not conquered easily.

My journey there that summer started, really, in Rome, where I asked an airport attendant where to catch the train to Molise, the sun baked region bordering the Adriatic where Bonefro sits and muses. "Molise!" he said in utter disbelief. "Why would you want to go there?" It was a good question. I was heading there with only half a purpose, as the attending wife catching something of a free ride with my husband as he designed scenery for a chamber music festival's opera. I had no official role, and I didn't really know why I wanted to land there, except that it seemed like it might be more of an adventure than watching my garden wither in the building heat of a California summer.

We would stay at the *conventi* huddled on the very top of the hill, metamorphosed into a place where young violinists and violists stroked life into old stone. Post convent, it had been a prison, then a police station, and then a museum filled with a superb collection of flotsam from Bonefrani lives from ancient amphoræ to packets

of 1950's bobby pins. These treasures lay crowded into corners, pushed back along the walls to make room for cheap plastic chairs and quartet rehearsals and laughter echoing from sixteen-year old musicians.

We arrived in Bonefro exhausted from planes and trains and busses, covered in the grime of travel and lugging luggage in disbelief as we stared up vertical hills with streets that no car could fit on. At least I was lugging; my husband in his own swirling memories of travels not taken, had outfitted his forty-something year-old self with a backpack worthy of any European youth hostel and marched triumphantly up hill, secure in his fantasies.

I, on the other hand, was going to Italy. I was going in style. The elegant brass-clasped black leather suitcase I had purchased with which to make my entrance was a disaster, and I carried it in front of me, arms locked around what had become a hideously heavy sack of self-consciousness illustrating my American inability to compete with Italian élan. My fantasies were a dusty bust; Sophia Loren eluded me.

It was an auspicious beginning, underscored by the young student who with silently expressive reluctance and irritation cleared himself out of the room where we were to stay, punctuating his disapproval by heisting our pillows and nightstand. We dropped our bags and marched back down the hill to the piazza, to a café run by a couple and their young son, who worked harder than anyone else I saw in Italy, carrying beers and coffees as effortlessly as his conversations about his twin obsessions: soccer and AC/DC. We were to meet the festival's artistic director there, and as we sat in wait for him,

*it became our first act of a perversely Italian Beckett play,
waiting, waiting, waiting, for the person to arrive,
the bus to come, the temperature to drop,
the earth to spin slowly towards evening.*

In the waiting, the first layer of flesh gradually peeled off of me. Humming with the intensity of a 21st Century American, the buzzing swirl of my life was loud and insistent when I arrived. Self-congratulatory and confident in our competencies, we were ready to take Bonefro by storm, whipping the festival into shape and the village along with it.

But the Bonefrani are conquered by Americans no more easily than Romans. The metaphoric shields still stand, impervious and impenetrable, shined metal having been replaced with a vague courtesy, a charmingly quick agreement, and an absolute disinterest in changing their pace or goals to fit some crazed outsider who can't tell the difference between hot and cold in Italian. (*Caldo is hot? Sounds like cold. But is it backwards in a moment of ineffable Italian logic? Do I want my latte caldo? Or fredda? Si! No!*) I watch myself turning into a "Who's on First" Abbott and Costello routine as I argue with myself before gales of belated laughter pop from amused villagers behind glass bead curtains.

I live in Southern California, a world that that these days commutes rather than communes. I rail at that world, bending and breaking brittle rules when I can, sweeping in with pennons flying as I battle to save myself and everyone around me from the toneless buzz of busyness.

My house sits in a little cluster of houses perched in a high valley, nominally a village, but in reality, a string of bedrooms and driveways and strip commercial businesses. I have spent the last year grinding in an attempt to make it into a village, working with neighbors and government officials and social servants to create a place that could be a center, where Oak View learns to love itself from the inside out, rather than gazing longingly at the Wal-Mart down the road for fulfillment.

Before I left I spun, toplike and breathless, writing grant applications to fund this fantasy until, literally, the moments before I ran to catch a plane.

When I reached Bonafro, that spin was still in full force. At the café that first day, I met attorney, farmer, and town mayor Luigi, himself a whirl of conversation and ideas, but with bombast tempered by an intense delight in his anachronistic village. Enchanted by old farmers and Norman arches, I told him I wanted to move there, and he laughed. “You Americans,” he said, “are somewhere for a half an hour and are ready to claim it as your own. You are in such a hurry!”

And I am turned inside out, tender flesh exposed
to the August Italian sun and somehow cleansed by the wind
that arrives on schedule (the only thing that arrives on
schedule) every day around noon.

I sit without Godot, watching the shadows change on the piazza as the old men meld into flocks like their sheep and then trickle out into independence, their caps jaunty and sun-blasted smiles open over missing teeth.

My days dissolve into their own rhythm, spinning in slowing circles as the impatience is squeezed out of me. The piazza, to lunch, to dinner, to the piazza, punctuated by the sounds of Fauré and Verdi ringing off convent walls and old men’s voices lifted in even older folk songs as I try to sleep, melting the moon and ultimately my resistance with wine-blunted sorrow. The Bonefrani conquer me, and slowly their memories become mine.

I smell the thousand year-old scent of sweetly burning wheat fields as smoke smudges the horizon, and it is somehow familiar. Somewhere in my ancestral memory, there were fields cleared like this, and it is right, quieting the tugging environmentalist modern me that generally sits just under the surface. Flames sweep across the dull gold of wheat stubble and reach up towards an enormous orange of an August moon as the

sky gathers itself towards night, first aquamarine, then azure, then blackening around pinpoint stars. The piazza begins to fill up again, and I am content.

It is only after she has expanded me, smoothing out the rough edges and over-eager energies, that Bonafro begins to open herself to me. I abandon my usual momentums of a do-gooder, last vestiges of pre-trip grant-writing frenzy fading into the foam of a latte, learning fulfillment is possible when floating like a sea slug atop the salty bath water of the Adriatic.

I begin to recognize faces and the quick burst of syllables that constitute greetings, and become the grateful recipient of superbly told Italian stories. Glances of sweeping quick appraisal begin to slide into smiles of welcome, and the half-wild street cats no longer shy from my hand.

As I learn to sit, I start the tenuous dance of friendship with the opera singers brought from different parts of Europe to sing life into Pergolesi’s three hundred year-old comic opera, *La Serva Padrona*. They are discovering the same Bonefrani dance: rehearsals have been put off for the third time as the director has pushed back his arrival in an archetypally endless sequence of a domani’s.

I commiserate, and diffidently suggest to the elegant Danish baritone that I perhaps could help them get started with some blocking and thoughts about character, since I had little else to do. He lights up. We agree that ten o’clock the next morning will be our rehearsal, nodding our heads in Teutonic agreement that we, at least, know how to tell time and will arrive as church bells ring.

By lunchtime, I have somehow been transposed into *La Directora*, and I find myself staging the entire opera with reckless abandon and none of the worries that generally accompany a creative endeavor.

. There are no expectations, no risks, no potential failures in Molisan sunlight, and this group of superb professionals gaze at me with open and ready confidence. We play, we laugh, we make up the rules as we go along. Hours stretch into sweaty days as we collapse onto rehearsal versions of furniture, convulsed with our own silly wit as we defy conventions of a courtly art form. I feel as if every pore is open, spitting light and ideas, and I move more freely in my body than I have since I left dancing behind fifteen years ago.

La Serva Padrona, or *The Servant Mistress*, is essentially a musical comedy Molière. Serpina, the saucy maid, wishes to be the mistress of the house and cajoles, intimidates, and ultimately outsmarts the Master Uberto into proposing to her with the help of his manservant Vespone. The first aria is beautiful and tragic: Uberto lying on his couch lamenting his inevitable lonely death. (It's only in the recitative that follows that we learn that his despair has grown out of the three hour wait for his morning hot chocolate.) As I search for ways to pull the subtle Thomas from realism into commedia, I hear Luigi thundering in my head.

“All the villages are different around here, you know,” he says to me in the café, ubiquitous bummed cigarette hanging from broad fingers. His English is erudite, flowing, and gleaned from the study of American films and literature: from Steinbeck and Spielberg, Hemingway and Brando. He is Bonefro's Napoleon: stocky, manic and ruthlessly charming, often surrounded by impossibly tall, gorgeous Dutch flight attendants all hanging on his every word. “Until recently, villagers never traveled from one town to the next.” And he is off.

“Campo Basso oh, that was the worst. It's the region center, and once in a lifetime a farmer would have to go there. Three months before the trip, the wailing would begin. ‘Oh, I must go to Campo Basso.’ Followed by the women, tearing at their breasts, ‘Oh, he must go to Campo Basso. Hush child, don't make a sound, don't you know he must go to Campo Basso?’

Family members would gather, (*Oh, you must go to Campo Basso!*) and his black suit, his one suit, the suit he would be buried in, would be dusted off to wear for the trip. ‘Ooh, I must go to Campo Basso!’ Novenas would be said, the priest called in, and at two in the morning, he would go down to the piazza to wait for the bus that came at noon. He would sit, alone in the dark and the tragedy of going to Campo Basso, certain he would never return. When he did come back, he would need weeks for recovery.”

Luigi's hands rip through air as he tosses his head back in laughter. “Oooh, I must go to Campo Basso!” I tell Thomas as he sings of *La Morire*, and he is transformed.

I tell stories to teach an actor to tell a story. I am struck by the circle even as I raise my fists at death (and Campo Basso) in rehearsal. And then I am struck by how I am already shaping the story of my Italian (and operatic) directorial debut. Even as it is happening, I am imagining the friends I will tell, the expressions on their faces as they hear of my transformation from little wife to queen quite by accident. The experience is becoming story almost before it unfolds, and I have the dreamy sensation of being a character in my own novel, with the actions on the next page predetermined.

I am on the plane home, jotting down impressions of the trip before they fade into sepia, when I realize the lesson that Bonefro has proffered. I have left early, missing the performances of the opera all together so they flow into a story without end in my mind. I have not been cured of my American hurry. No Italian in his right mind would have left before the dénouement, but I must return for classes and am condemned to see *La Serva Padrona* complete only in my imagination. I people it with enormous audiences, roaring with laughter and bravos and endless curtain calls. It is my greatest triumph.

In Bonefro, nothing ever happens. And in Bonefro, I remembered that I could do anything.