

A Positano Epiphany

By Michael Molinelli

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The blue bus from Naples puffed diesel clouds as it wound around another hairpin turn. Brent put his mouth close to the window cracked open near his seat. The fumes, the creaking metal chassis and steep cliffs that the bus seemed to lean over contributed to his nausea. The window would not open further for more fresh air. So at stops Brent carefully placed his forehead on the cool metal bar that supported the old vinyl seat.

The few Italians and North American students on the bus looked at him. They all knew he was going to be sick and they wanted some early indication of which direction and how far so they could avoid him.

Brent wondered if he should explain himself. How he was a commercial artist reduced to computer photo montages and touch ups for a scandal magazine. He got downsized during the latest merger, replaced by the pimply-faced kid he trained. Should he explain that at thirty-four with no girlfriend and meager savings he decided to make one last attempt to be a real artist? Brent had decided he needed a glamorous locale to be his muse. A cable travel show put him on a quest to get to the beautiful Amalfi Coast. He would find his art in Positano, if he could just keep his lunch down.

The bus stopped on the road at the top of the hill. After grabbing his bags, Brent looked out over the landscape he could not see before because of the queasiness. Positano was a hollow in the mountains with many small white, pink, yellow and red buildings embracing the hill, half chiseled into the cliff and half terraced outward, with many arched windows like open eyes looking at the blue water below. The sun had finished its daily arc and was disappearing behind the mountains to his right. It shot yellow strands of light and color across the rooftops and walls. The only movement he saw were people walking on the few streets visible among the quiet homes and shops.



But if Brent came to discover Positano, he was too late. Everyone else had discovered it already. The village in May was filled with people from many corners of the world. And they all had the foresight to book a room in advance. Brent had walked down to the beach thinking he would want a stay there. He admired for a moment the small mosaic gold domed church sitting at

the end of the road near the beach. There were no hotels down there. He began walking up the hill, across a bridge over a small stream and through a patch of trees, the only arbor cover in the village proper. On the slow climb back up the hill he realized that the

rooms got less expensive the further up. Finally up the hill from the busstop, where he started, he found a single story *pension* with a room at a reasonable rate. The old man at the counter spoke little English but was very friendly as he showed Brent where room *dodici* was. The conventional concept of inside and outside, so definitively demarcated in American buildings, was ambiguous here. Did they go out of the building to get to his room or was he always inside? Brent was also used to a wheelchair accessible lifestyle in the USA so the constant steps up and down as they moved from one room to another seemed exciting and exotic.

Not far from his room he found a *hosteria* on the *Via Pasitea* with big and beautiful family that placed him at a comfortable table. As American, he ate supper far too early so the place was empty when he arrived. Brent grew up on processed foods. Consequently all he ever ordered in Italy was spaghetti with tomato sauce. He had learned the word for meatballs – *polpetti* – and wondered why they never put it on the plate with the spaghetti, but brought it afterwards. With the comfort of familiar food and the site of beautiful Italian girls serving the guests, Brent was assured he had found the place to discover his art.

It only took Brent a week to settle in to his life as an artist in Positano. He would walk from the top of the hill down the many steps and passages. Some days he would park himself on an innocuous stone platform with a good view down to the sea, but most days he would go directly to the beach with his kit and easel. He setup on the western curve of the bay. Each day he would see a cast of characters predictable in their routine. Each evening he would return to the *hosteria* and eat with his portfolio of canvases by his table. Eventually the owner, Giacomo, an older man of Napoleonic proportions, would ask to see the work. Giacomo gave surprisingly prescient advice on composition and how Brent should not let the reality of what he saw get in the way of the emotion of what was there. Brent asked him how he knew so much about art. Giacomo responded in labored English, “This is Italy, we all know about art.”

Each day from the *pension* where he had a morning café and bread smothered in apricot jam and butter, he saw the earliest risers, who were the few fishermen returning from a pre-dawn excursion. By the time he was on the beach with his easel to catch the morning sun, the businessmen in suits walked across the sand and stepped into a small boat that would row them into the bay to meet the morning hydrofoil to Naples. Before the sun reached its apex the beach would be filled with an assortment of characters essential to the landscape.

Most of the people were beach goers on vacation. There were few Italians there and no Positano natives. The locales were too busy working to afford the luxury of lounging on the beach. They would need to toil all day just to get a few moments to take in the scenery, as the sun would set. It was often long after the tourists had gone back to their hotels - bored by the hours of inactivity on the beach. Since the sunset was always there, the natives usually put off that small enjoyment to another day. It was too easy to put it off for weeks at a time.

On the shore, the tourists seemed to naturally group themselves by native language like flocks of birds. The loud gulls, the German speakers, gathered together on the crafted stone plateaus on far side of the beach. The Arab and Farsi speakers would move their beach chairs in and out with the tide like sand pipers. The English speakers occupied the center, rotating their chairs with the sun as terns rotate to face the wind. Just before the grounded boats, the Italians planted themselves in a close huddle like a flock of pelicans, close where Brent stood on a rock painting.

One standout among the Italians was more flamingo than pelican. Brent found out he was named Lucio. He would stand among all the reclined beach goers and preen endlessly. Brent imaged Lucio narrating his actions to himself: I will stand now and stretch each leg so the women can see the powerful muscles of my thigh that cradle my amply strong buttocks. My amazing thrusting abilities will entice and excite all these women. Perhaps, I should bend over to touch my toes and stand, so the amazing protuberance that is my phallus will shock the young women. “Lucio!” they will exclaim with delight. See now how I rub my neck with my bent arm and how the muscles of shoulders surge with vibrant twitches. Lucio would amuse himself with his own body for hours.

During these outings, Brent would paint the landscape trying to capture the light. He was working in oils since it was the most classical medium. He started with large glops of paint troweled high on the canvas with his palette knife, but thought the painting looked too much like cake icing. He recalled the painters of the masters that did not reveal any technique. So he scrapped off the canvas and tried to make each stroke disappear. It required patient labors to set down a tone and wait for it to dry. After two weeks, he had not finished one canvas.

During this time many of the passersby felt the need to comment on his painting. Most might give a polite *bene*, others would nod with a wrinkled chin. It irritated Brent because things were not going well. He was used to sketching in United States where people considered it an affront to talk to him while he was working. At home they would let him struggle with his presumed talent in private.

One of the days when it was not going particularly well, a woman walked up from the white sand in her bright red one-piece and bright yellow throw that cloaked her body. She wore a wide brim white hat with a thick yellow band that matched the throw and oversized red sunglasses. Brent had noticed her days earlier. She stood out because she was a large American. Europeans just did not come in that size. She was one of those women who gained weight and gained sex appeal. Their bodies don't become round but curvy and voluptuous. This American's face was smooth and pointed. Her hair painted a vibrant blonde...the kind only the best colorists could do. She was beautiful. Any why should she not be beautiful just because she was not fashionably thin?

“You a painter?” she asked stating the obvious. Brent nodded. “Can I see?” Brent gestured yes by opening the space between his hands holding the brush and palette. “Very good. You're American aren't. I could tell, you're not smoking.” Habitually

Brent glanced down at women's hands to see a ring. There were none. He guessed she was in her forties. Too beautiful to never have been married, probably divorced.

During the next half hour Brent learned that her name was Luann, she was divorced, from California but never really had aspirations to be an actress. She was content to be a kept woman. He confirmed that she was in her early forties based on pop-cultural references in her biography. Brent told him little about himself partially because he was not talkative but also he got very little chance to get a word in. She talked him into allowing her to sit for him that afternoon. He reluctantly agreed to meet her in her room which she said had good light after the midday siesta.



Later in her room, the charcoal sketch on the canvas was done easily. It didn't really look like her but it was for proportion only. He captured enough of the face and the shoulders. He was going to leave the drape of the sheet across her breasts and body for later. He was too interested in painting the face. The first smears of paint obliterated his sketch and he was forced to redraw with strokes of pink. The color was wrong. There was no warmth to the skin and the cheeks got too big like a caricature. He tried starting with the eyes. They looked like two blue dots on white dots on a fuzzy peach. This was not working.

Luann grew impatient. She did not expect this to take hours. She would clear her throat, grimace and re-paste the smile on her face. "I did some modeling in college," she said. "Not for artists or anything, a photographer. But he was too creepy. I suppose if there had been an Internet back then, they would have shown up on a website." Brent grunted acknowledgement. He was concentrating too much on his work to talk or complain that Luann was moving her mouth. "I tried out for cheerleader in high school, I was tiny back then." Luann felt obligated to talk of her peak of physical perfection. She felt fat by comparison with her teenage years and needed to justify to Brent that she was worthy of being painted.

Brent could not bother with conversation. "What am I? A hairdresser?" he thought as he tried to work on the shoulders and arms thinking fresh easy territory might bring inspiration.

Another hour passed and the sun light was changing. Brent was panicked. He had nothing to show for the day. The light was going. He moved to Luann still posed and now quiet having exhausted all her conversation. She too seemed distracted from the

task at hand. The romance of art had gone out of the experience for both of them. He put his hand on her chin and tilted her head. She looked at him a curious gaze. She wants to see the painting he realized. She wants to see what I have done. Nothing. The painted was trash; I can't let her see it. Not this, not now.

Brent kissed her impulsively. Not a gentle one, it was a fierce penetration of the mouth with the tongue. Her eyes opened wide and her mouth surrendered. Her arms dropped the sheet that veiled her naked body and clutched his shoulders like a sprung bar on a mousetrap. She pulled him down to the bed and they rolled in frantic fury. Brent was forceful and commanding. Luann was yielding and rapturous. Brent pushed away the rest of the bed covers and Luann stripped off his clothes like the peel on a banana.

Forty vigorous minutes of passion and rest and more passion and a respite and a little more passion and finally the two spent lovers were, sweaty, flush and motionless. Brent woke suddenly and felt a cold chill. What if she was up first? She was not. He slithered off the bed wondering what he could do next to distract her. She will want to look at the painting. As he stood there truly naked in the room she woke, exclaimed with breathy anticipation, "Darling are you okay? Is it the painting?"

Brent panicked even more and was too depleted romantically to further delay using the same method. Luann was wrapping the sheets around her and standing. Apparently, she was still too self-conscious to be naked in the light of the room when not entwined. Brent had seconds to think what he could say or do. He had to keep her from seeing the painting.

He pushed over the easel and took a tube of black paint and emptied it on the canvas. He mounted the painting on hands and knees and smeared the black goo all over. "I cannot capture your beauty. You are too stunning for art!" He stood over the obliterated painting with black smeared on his body and extremities. "Your life force, your passion your...fervor, your zeal, your passion and fervor." His internal thesaurus was spent too. "Are beyond what any painter can achieve."

Luann invigorated by his crazed artistic ardor. Unwrapped herself again and embraced the drained Brent dragging him down to the floor and the wet canvas. Brent's eyes looked resignedly upward as he sank to the floor with his voracious patroness.

It was past noon the next day when Brent carried his easel and his paint kit down to the beach. He was observably fatigued. He set himself up in his usual corner, not realizing that he had become one of the daily characters of the landscape, and began to paint.

Luann was up early the same day and on the beach drinking and indulging in food as a reward for excelled ecstasy the day before. She was thrilled to be sophisticated enough to know that their tête-à-tête (was that the Italian phrase?) was not an ongoing affair but simply a moment of delight created by her unendurable beauty. Classic beauty apparently, Rubenesque but without the cellulite. A continent of flesh perfected in the pilates classes of Beverly Hills.

“He is a very good artist.” She said out loud to the woman reclining next to her. “That painter over there, he is excellent.”

The bony woman under the umbrella barely heard her above the sound of the waves. Her bikini look bored hanging on her like a blue ribbon hastily tied around a pole. “Who him? That chap over there?” She slid her sunglasses off her nose. She was about the same age as Luann. They had become conversational friends during the week.

“Yes. An American too. Great artist. I’ve posed for him.” Luann was glowing with the implications of her sentence.

“Really, what are his paintings like?”

“Oh how dull you are. You think just because he is a great painter that he must have made great paintings?” Luann sat up and explained the depth of Brent’s artistic drive without ever using definitive words might reference an actual painting or a carnal act. Her colleague on the beach was absorbed. She was an English Tourist whose husband was playing golf. For holidays they had an agreement. They go to some foreign milieu for her and he plays golf. Since there was no golf course at Positano, he was further down the Amalfi coast in Picciola leaving Georgina was alone for a few days. It worked for them.

As the siesta period ended, Brent was walking across the beach with his gear when Luann got his attention. “Come, Brent, come here.” He obliged hesitantly. Luann handed him a fold of Euros discreetly as she thanked him for the sitting yesterday and asked if she could sit for him later today, in about an hour. Brent, still thinking the conversation was about painting, reluctantly agreed. Georgina missed the exchange because she was trying to chart the young artist. This morning he looked the part. He wore torn American jeans, was sweaty and red from a day in the sun. He was unshaved and his hair was bushy and brown.

A couple more days of “sitting” with Luann had drained Brent’s energy but enlivened his finances. Luann grew bored and went on to other things, not necessarily sexual. Brent was another passing fancy like dancing aerobics or tiramisu. Georgina cornered Brent at the bar near the beach where he went for lunch. As she hooked a lock of her short black hair behind an ear, she introduced herself as Luann’s friend as asked if she could sit for him. Brent was reticent until she said she would pay for a portrait. She figured as an American he would put everything in terms of money. He did. He asked about the light in her room. She seemed oblivious to it, so he decided to invite her to his place in the morning to paint her.

Brent had hoped that a second try would motivate the talent latent in him. Georgina sat outside on her terrace in a shoulder-less sundress letting the warm light brighten the brown strands in her otherwise red hair (a less experienced colorist.) Brent tried to capture the light in the oils but found himself moving too slowly. Perhaps he should do a study in color first. Color is light, light is color he repeated as his mantra trying to stir some inspiration. No good. This time his anger was real and he cursed, kicked the easel

picked up the painting and thrashed it to the ground splitting the wood staves that frame the canvas. As he poured the brush water over the remnants, Georgina, who had gotten a running start, jumped into an embrace with him, her legs entwined around his waist. She kissed his face repeatedly like a hungry woodpecker. They slid to the floor; she continued to control the motion and timing. A few hours later, Georgina delightedly dressed to go, leaving the money for the portrait on the nightstand, but not expecting to take anything with her.

It did not take long for Luann and Georgina to drop hints about their artist to the others in Positano. Brent found many dark and bright pairs of eyes following him as he tried to continue painting the landscapes. Errant blown kisses confused him. Even the daughters at the *hosteria* began to give him extra attention. Without even trying, women would approach him and ask to have their portrait done. More times than not, Brent would genuinely try to paint it but inevitably turned his dissatisfaction into playacting the tortured artist, marring the painting and then making love to distract the subject. No one seemed bothered by the arrangement. He became known throughout Positano as *il pittore americano*, that American Painter.

One evening in the *hosteria*, as Brent ate his spaghetti without the meatballs, still, Giacomo sat next to him. “Brento,” Giacomo could not address him without making his name multi-syllabic “there are no more landscapes?”

“I think I have moved on.” Brent answered. He knew that he would learn more about art from this restaurateur in the next five minutes than he did in four years of art school. “Art is a very confusing thing.”



Giacomo signaled for more bread. “That is because over a hundred years ago, the artists stopped making art for the parlors of people’s homes or the churches and started making it for the *musei*. “ Concetta, the second youngest daughter, brought the basket of bread to the table. She smiled demurely at Brent, and let her curly dark hair cover her face as it flushed. Her father took a healthy slice of the bread and bit off a piece. “Art for the *musei*, the museums, is not made for pleasure, to seek the perfect or the good. It is made to shock, or to explain to us some defect with the artist.”

“Aren’t all artists, aren’t all people, defective?” Brent asked not sure if he was still talking about art.

“Yes, in that, we are, *como-se-chiama*, not perfect, but artists used to seek *il perfetto*. As long as they tried, we could accept their personal flaws. But what is real in this life? Art?” Giacomo pointed out his humble restaurant. It had been in the family for generations. His great grandfather and his brothers fished while their mother and father cooked for the few weary travelers who stopped by. “While all may seek elevation of the soul, through study, or religion or art, the basic human necessities unite us all. Food and love and life.” Giacomo proposed a syllogism “Love is Life, Life is Food, and Food is Love. These are good things.” he said as he patted Brent on the back. “Maybe, the perfect tortellini is art. Understand?”

Giacomo continued, “Men are the least perfect beings. But we try. We try to please God in our own way. That is why there are so many churches in *Roma*, eh? *Per che* Italian men would rather build a church than go to one!”

“So you don’t like today’s art?” Brent asked.

“Mezza mezz” Giacomo signaled with a flat open palm he rocked over the table. His English getting better with each paragraph. “I like to see that my artist has been creative, making good, not just different. Understand? I think people like to discover new things and they confuse creativity with novelty. I ask, is it new, but is it good too? That is a harder question. Most people do not like hard questions.”

Suddenly a scolding howl was heard in the kitchen and a couple of American college girls came running out of the kitchen. Mama followed them to its doorway and was yelling at them. It was not uncommon for the Mama to invite those with poor Italian language skills into the kitchen to select their meal by pointing at what they wanted. “I must go.” Giacomo said, “Some one must have breathed too close to the food.” He stood and embraced the irritated Mama while Concetta and Raffaella soothed and protected the students.

Days later, Hilde, the most recent model, put on Brent’s shirt and hovered over the canvases tilted against the wall. Brent slept totally exhausted from the afternoon’s sitting. The landscapes were boring and not even as good as most routine Amalfi scenes. It took seconds to go through that pile. She pulled back her long German-blond hair and made a ponytail. Then she flipped through another stack closer to the door, the portraits. Each one showed the start of a face and body and then some sort of marring: paint smears, random splashes of black and red or handprints of violent color mixes. She began to fill a stirring inside her warmer and more vibrant than when Brent touched her. She picked up a painting for a closer look and the feeling in her rose, reverberated and climaxed. “Fantastic!” she exclaimed. Brent had been lucky. He bedded the daughter of one of Europe’s most influential gallery owners.

By mid July, Brent’s portraits hung in a gallery in Berlin, including the broken frame one hung so the pieces of wood and canvas draped like a wet towel on a hook. The critics cited them as a “passionate rapture captured in oils.” They noted the acerbic irony of a “seemingly spontaneous desecration of purposely mundane portraiture” and how it comment on society. They failed to illuminate what this commentary was or why society

should care. Nevertheless the paintings sold and money flowed back to Positano. Actually after the gallery deducted their commission THEN the expenses including the opening banquet, publicity, private dinners and gifts for the critics, and something called “hanging fees”, the money trickled in. Real money in art is made not by the artist but the marketers who, through speculation and caprice, reap the rewards on resale. Consider that the \$13,000,000 sales of Van Goghs included not a cent for Vincent or his family.

Brent moved into bigger quarters with three rooms one each for sleeping, sitting and painting. He suddenly was freed of the burden of having to paint, at least landscapes. He would sleep late, eat lazily, and stay up until closing with the tourists and locals at the disco built into the cliffs. He stopped eating at the *hosteria* and patronized the more chic places. A few times a week, a lonely woman who wanted her brush with greatness would approach him. A bit of painting, a bit of feigned fury, and a bit of sex. Pack the painting off to Berlin, and get some sleep.

Giacomo knocked on Brent’s door late in morning to wake him. Brent let him in and as he dressed Giacomo looked at the paintings scattered around his apartment, now more as props for Brent’s act. “Let’s talk.” Giacomo said without a trace of an accent.

Giacomo explained that he was very concerned how his seventeen-year-old daughter, Concetta, was enamored with Brent and he wanted Brent to stay away. She had a boyfriend, a good hardworking young man. He, Pasquale, worked as an electrician and therefore was often out of town on a construction site. “Do not touch my daughter.”

Brent was at a loss for words as there was too much for him to process with the hangover and the loud sunlight searing on his forehead. Which one was Concetta? Did he sleep with her already? What happened to Giacomo’s accent? It was even American English not the usual British kind that you might normally hear from fluent Italians. Giacomo explained it all without Brent having to utter a question.

Giacomo used to be a metallurgical engineer in the auto industry. He left Positano to go to university, work in Milan and eventually Detroit. After almost 20 years there he returned to start a family and a better lifestyle running the family *hosteria*. The accent was for the benefit of the tourists.

He went on. Giacomo’s tone remained serious, direct and paternal without scolding. He explained how he saw that Brent was a well intentioned no talent so he was not surprised when Brent put his efforts to copulation. “You American’s always compensate for lack of talent with sex. It appears in your cinema, your television, your literature and your magazines. But sex is not love.” He told Brent he was free to practice his skill here, but leave to Giacomo’s family out of it. “My daughter is enamored with your reputation. You represent the mysterious outside world to her; in much the way our humble home represents something exotic to you. But you cannot build love and family on this false kind of infatuation. Caress the lonely, Brento, but leave alone the pure of heart.”

“Unfortunately Pasquale is good, stable and perhaps not a handsome as many other Italian or American boys like you. But the unattractive are worthy of love too. He is also

a much better artist than you, but cannot afford the daydream time it takes to make art. He must work too much, which is a sad thing for any Italian to admit. He needs time for Concetta to fall in love with him again.” Giacomo concluded, “I hope to be your friend but I do not want to be your father-in-law.” Giacomo left Brent in the room.

A few days later Brent received a package from Hilde which consisted of a few newspaper clippings, the exhibition program, two unsold paintings, and a final meager check. The letter from Hilde’s assistant explained that the gallery would no longer represent or exhibit Brent. He had committed the most heinous crime in an art business dominated more by concept than craft. The idea of mutilated prosaic portraiture? “It’s been done!”

He sat spent on the studio stool just as Eileen, an Irish lady on a singles holiday, came in for her sitting. She was about average in looks but younger than most of his models. Unlike the others, she did not lose or grow tired of an old love. She had never found one. But that detail would be unknown to an uninterested Brent. He sat her in the corner near the window and began to pretend painting. But it seemed less necessary than ever with no chance of a sale. He soon tired of that and languidly began the self-tortured discourse about the ethereal nature of her beauty. His words were unconvincing in addition to being insincere. He made an obligatory splatter of paint over the face of the painting and then moved over Eileen. He tilted her head back and kissed her forehead. He began to remove her clothes. But unlike the dozens of models before her, she began to cry. Her sobs grew more intense the more he kissed her. Brent had not rehearsed this and retreated. She turned away, began to gather her clothes and moaned, “I don’t matter her do I? This is all just habit to you, isn’t it?” She left.

Brent sank to the floor where he once stood and put his head in his hands. It was all about him for the last couple of months, but there was no him for it to be about anymore. It was bad enough that he was merely a fraud when it came to painting but he had become a sham as a charlatan.

Brent went to the *hosteria* to find Giacomo but the eatery was closed. If he could have read the orange square cardboard sticker on the glass he would have seen they were closed during the month of August. Leave it to the Italians to shut a tourist restaurant during the height of the vacation season. But that was their way. Where does a family that gets to live in Positano all year long go? He did not know, but he knew they were together, eating and drinking and talking and hugging and arguing and loving, which is what they did the other eleven months of the year. Food, Love, Life.

Two days later, Brent was on the bus back to Naples. He had packed his belongings, the clothes, the books, the painting materials and the landscapes. Everything except the portraits, which he left in his room.

