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I think there are two things that make us who we are. First of all, the people we meet. The first person I really met was my dad on April 9th 1979 and the first thing he thought about me was that I looked like a little purple nasty monkey. Well, I think that the little nasty monkey is still inside me, like a birthmark, and even though he said soon after, once I

## the man who plunged his hands in the coins

I remember the nice carpets and the naked dolls and the little coffee pots, I remember the sandals and the smell of leather and the fried buns, I remember that day and the hot sun that drugged our thoughts and the shooting Acropolis showing up from time to time between the shop awnings to remind us it exists—I remember my first journey to Athens like this. I was only five years old then and my parents had brought me there on holiday. No, I should say that they had brought me with them, that it was their holiday and I was just a little detail.

It's incredible how the most insignificant things can brand our lives forever. My first visit to Athens began this way, full and dazzling like an unexpected falling star. It started at the Sunday morning flea market in Monastiraki.

First of all you must know that the air in Athens has a strange smell, different from every other big European city. I discovered the reason why much later when a stranger I met in a train station told me “Athens is already the Orient.” But when you're so young you possess the definite feeling of these things and not the idea. I couldn't have known it, but that breath of pistachios and incense and sweat and antiquity was the lost bloody smell of Athens, underneath its glittering Olympus, lost between us all. I couldn't have known, but everything was inside it. Inside the smell.

The Sunday morning market in Monastiraki is something filthy, putrid, bleak and wonderful. It's the absurd vision of an accepted and abnormal decadence. I become deranged every time I see it, but I didn't that time. I mean, I was five years old with a big predisposition (because of the age) to absorbing the words and gestures of other people. At the age of five, you live for others, in the gestures of others.

At age five you have no ego, you're just a thinking object that doesn't compare itself to the deeds of others, just examines and absorbs them, bringing them out for use in the future. It's a fabulous age. Plentiful and vivid. And short. So short.

The Man Who Plunged His Hands In The Coins remained a kind of fulguration in my brain. I still feel it like a Polaroid printed in my mind. The Man Who Plunged His Hands In The Coins was in a minor street, the kind of street where nobody goes, but we went, fortunately. My mother, I can still remember, had stopped to look at some leather sandals, which she adored and later wore for ages, until they finally died, tired from overuse. My father and I were walking around a few meters away from her when we began to move further ahead—"Just a little bit more, Dad, let's go"—until we reached as far as the street corner, the kind of a corner you wouldn't have thought to be so important—a place like anywhere else—but you'd say "be careful because places know why they're so important, they know why they're there and not somewhere else," and that place was there, exactly there, with some little stone stairs going underground to an unseen end—if there ever was an end—and that little wooden door, wide open, and just by the door, a man, before a big box full of coins, with his hand plunged in among them, touching them at first with his palms and then turning them over to enjoy the contact upon the backs of his hands; those old coins, old as a thousand years maybe, with a pattern of dirt and time and who knows how many wars, with the imprint of stories I'd sell my soul to know, I watched the man rubbing the coins, violently plunging his fingers in between them, then diving in with his arms, into the coin box, in up to his elbows, with an inconceivable slowness—really inconceivable—and staying there for a few

had been cleaned and calmed down, that I looked beautiful, it doesn't matter. I remain a purple monkey. Secondly, the place we grow up in. Italy is a pretty place to grow up, sunny and gentle, and where I live there's the sea. People born close to the sea are marked by it and cannot stay far from it for a long time. Ask others, they'll say the same. It's a sensation of loss that consumes you inside, and there's nothing you can do about it. The biggest wish I had when I was a child was to have a 'Barbie Peach Blossom' doll. She had a beautiful orange dress and I prayed my parents would get her for me but they never did. I think I still want it so if

someone has one and wants to sell it, I'm here. When I started primary school I forgot about the doll and I started to study hard. I kept on studying hard until I was fifteen, then I just stopped and I've never started again. I mean, I'm still studying, but it's different, you know. About that time I started working around here, boring things like in bars and hotels, working as a lifeguard, giving swimming lessons (oh, that was nice) until the swimming federation discovered I wasn't legal (that wasn't nice). I think one day I'll take the proper license cause I god-damn like it. After high school, at the nice age of nineteen and on a hot August day, I had the brilliant idea of taking

seconds, to enjoy that secular touch, as if in that moment all the time accumulated upon them over the years could pour out shamelessly upon his hands, and I'm sure that the coins with their power of attraction, had chosen those hands, had made the man come to the box...and I had no words to realize what was happening in front of me...a kind of black and white film I had already understood unconsciously, insisted upon by the wise all-knowing Memory, and I kept on watching hungrily, recording in my mind this immaculate and dirty picture unaware of the reason for it, not yet, but I knew I'd know it, even if it were not now, maybe this is the reason I didn't ask my father about it, he was there but I didn't ask him, as if I had already fixed the knowledge and meaning of such a thing as unalterable in my mind that, even if it wasn't known to me immediately, it would come. Because it must.

But my mother came running over with her leather sandals in a transparent shopping bag, drawing away my father's attention from our own private spectacle. Not mine though, no, not mine, she couldn't. She took my hand, yes, but she couldn't take away my gaze. My eyes were sliding over the coins, fixed upon the effort of those blackened dusty hands, threading through the people between me and the man as he himself threaded his hands among the coins, grazing his hands upon them, diving into them until I had finally understood everything, yes, simply everything. And with this everything I mean everything you need to understand, every question you ask yourself and every answer you give. And it's hard to explain but the answers were inside the questions, as everything this time was within the smell, within the dusty coins, in the fried sweeties and in the smell of incense, in the smell of awnings covering the sun and in the foreign voices, and all the reasons for the smell

of this bulky, dirty, wonderful Athens were written on that old man's hands, lost completely in the warm alcove of old coins.

Thirteen years later I returned to Athens on a school trip. The teachers didn't want to let us go to the Sunday morning Turkish market thinking it was too dangerous and that we were sure to get in trouble. Left stranded on the platform from the others in our group by a full to bursting train, two friends and I turned on our heels and left for Monastiraki by foot. I had in my mind the picture of the man, his hands and the coins, but I couldn't remember the street. In my memory the market was like a labyrinth as big as the whole city. I realized it was nearly impossible to ever find the street again, but I was sure the man would still be there, even after thirteen years. The market was smaller and less hostile than I remembered, yet it still contained the same noise and the same incredible smell. I remember we went around with our eyes wide open like children, I remember we touched everything, I remember my hands were blackened by the dust and heat, and I remember a CD shop too, and the clerk with a long beard who sold me a CD even though I hadn't enough money. A Joy Division CD, the greatest hits from '77 to '80. Great CD that one.

I never saw the man again. That day I lost all hope of finding him after a couple of hours, and perhaps without realizing it I just forgot about him. But I don't mind. Even now I console myself to the fact that I didn't find him with the knowledge that I cannot have hoped to have been so lucky to look Perfection in the eyes twice in one lifetime. I should be happy to have seen it once, which is more than enough. The strongest memory from both trips, which I can still feel now, was my dusty

up college (I'm still trying to understand what was on my mind that day) and ever since I've been filling up my time studying Italian Literature and Ancient History. Right now I'm starting to like it, really. During the first year I smoked and drank too much to be interested in studying and time just flew away without noticing it. I don't regret it since I had a lot of fun and I wouldn't change that fun for anything else. It was about that time that I wrote a sad story which an editor (that maybe was on drugs) published as a novella. He doesn't know it yet that he's just published a useless and guilty story of some silly partners in crime, my friends and I in that crazy time. I hope he won't get too

angry when he realizes it. So, right now and as ever, I'm studying. My 'New Passion Of The Year' is cinema and my friends are probably beginning to get worried because last term all I spoke about was film. 'Maybe she just needs a good drink,' one of them would answer if asked. Anyway, maybe for the first time in my life I HAVE SOME PLANS: for the future, I mean. Survive at college, first and foremost. Secondly, do everything I can to meet Michelangelo Antonioni, the film director, before he dies (I have to do it as soon as I can because I have a bad feeling about him). And thirdly, buy a gift for my friend Benedetta. Her birthday was three months ago and she's getting pissed off.

dirty hands. I know that incredible smell will never disappear from my skin, and because of it I think I'm so lucky.

Two years ago I visited Athens once more. I spent three days there, no Sunday and I didn't go to Monastiraki. On the last day, during the metro journey to the port town of Pireos where I had to catch a boat to the islands, there was the usual faded and guilty sun blessing my departure. As always, because by now I have come to learn I can't leave a place without something unusual occurring at the end, something happened. At a metro stop a child came in, a little gypsy selling paper handkerchiefs at 10 drachmas a box, singing with a sparkling voice a Greek rigmarole. She had long dirty hair with the biggest most tired eyes I've ever seen in all my life. She came close to me and I bought a box of handkerchiefs. She smiled at me, one of those clever and innocent smiles, all the while playing with something bright on her neck. I looked at it. And you'll say I'm obsessed, I know. But it was a coin. An old coin.

*translated from the italian by kmz*