

Going Back by Anna Krauthamer

When I was studying in Prague, I planned a trip to Positano, Italy, because I believed I had to go back there while I was still living in Europe. That fall, Positano wasn't as far from me as it usually is. I had been to Positano many times before with my family, but this last time I went alone.

My parents went to Positano, a small town on Italy's Amalfi Coast, for the first time in the eighties, several years before my sister and I were born. Then they took us back the summer when we were five, again when we were six, seven, eight, eleven, fourteen, and eighteen. My mother never wanted to go anywhere else. I don't blame her. Positano, a fishing village built into mountainous coastal rock, leads down to the water; there's just one main road. The town itself, all its buildings painted some pastel color, is tucked into the mountain's folds. As you walk up the main road to get to the top of Positano, the higher you are, the better your view of what lies around and below you. You see haphazard rows of white and peach, from this distance, tiny structures that make use of their mountain's every square inch, and surrounding the buildings, ancient green and grey landscape. Beneath all that, you see the sea, separated from the town proper by a rocky gray beach dotted with what look like, from this height, little orange beads.

Positano has one main beach, with little grey stones and sea glass instead of sand. Everyday we were in Positano my family went to the beach, where we would rent orange lounge chairs from an old man we knew as Capitano. He was there every other time I had gone to Positano, starting when my sister and I were five, always coming by our chairs to give us slabs of frozen coconut or to remind my sister and me, then burgeoning swimmers, how to

say “someone help me please” in Italian, but when I went down to the beach last fall, another man who's now responsible for those orange chairs told me that he had died.

Just farther up into the town, barely off the beach, there's a restaurant called Le Tre Sorrelle that my family ate at almost every night for three summers in a row. We had prosciutto and cantaloupe and watched the beach at night, the orange umbrellas drawn and the water strewn with wooden fishing boats straggling toward the horizon, until everything else around us was quiet. After dinner we'd walk back up to the lovely small hotel, the Villa Rosa, that we'd stay at every summer, in the same set of rooms each time. Ours had a terrace that looked out at the ocean, and sitting there at night, high above sea level, the black sky blending in with the black water, you have a sense of being very small.

Positano was my favorite place in the world. Before I went back, on my own from Prague, memories of hiking up to Positano's peak with my parents and sister were part of a hazy impression of sunny days and late nights with my laughing family, of eating gelato and pizza and fresh fish caught that day, of the annual summer Fiesta with fireworks set off from those straggling wooden fishing boats and the rainbow reflections in the black ocean, of our parents buying us matching sundresses, of learning to swim in the ocean with my father and learning to paint from a leafy terrace with my mother.

My family isn't the only one to become less happy as the years go by. The summer when Lizzie and I were eleven, we flew out from New York with only my mother; my father had to stay behind a week so he could bury his father. Then we went the summer before I started high school, and my sister and I were both so excited about the next four years and everything beyond. Four years later, we came back. We were different; we had gotten

older and less hopeful in high school. They had been four hard years. Our family had gone to Positano that summer, in fact, to try and recuperate from something very sad that had just happened to us all, but we could not really afford the trip that time around, and when I sat on the beautiful terrace once more I could not banish from my mind the bills piling up at home while we were trying to make ourselves happy again in this beautiful place I suspect we all half-thought was magical. There were moments that last summer when I could look at the water I swam in with water-wings when I was five, or gaze up at the mountain and envision my eleven year old self climbing it, and in those moments I could believe everything was going to be alright again. But those moments came sparingly. Positano felt farther from me that summer than it ever had before.

I remember arriving back last October. It was my first time in Positano when it was not summer. I got in late on a Saturday night. It had been a hectic journey. I missed my flight from Prague to Rome the previous night, and almost didn't go at all, but then I found myself buying another ticket. So I flew there the next morning, took two trains to Naples, another train to Sorrento, and it should have been a simple bus ride from there to Positano, but I missed my stop and had to take a cab from a nearby town. It'll be worth it, I thought, as my trip became more and more complicated. I'll be back, I told myself. As the cab entered Positano and drove down the streets I had walked on countless times, I recognized the local grocery shop whose mozzarella my father swore by, the dessert place whose items looked so good but, to my sister's and my chagrin when we were finally allowed to try them, were really full of bitter rum, the salon where I'd get my hair cut every summer. There's no extra room to build anything new in Positano, which means that everything was still just the same as it'd always been before.

When I stepped out of the cab, in front of the hotel I'd stayed countless nights, I willed myself to feel the way I had before in Positano, but it didn't work. When I went to bed that night, in the same rooms my family had once occupied, I told myself it'd feel different in the morning, after I had slept, but still I felt nothing: it was like trying to summon a stranger's sense of being in this little town to which I had inexplicably decided to travel. The next morning, as I walked up and down the streets, went back down to the beach and back up to the mountain's peak, I kept on trying to access the joy I had felt there before, but it never came.

It rained that day, so the beach was empty. I had never seen it rain in Positano before. Next to the beach, there's a big stretch of concrete where ships arrive, and the gray stone blended with the gray water. I thought that it was beautiful. If you go a bit farther away from the beach, there's an empty trail whose cliffside drops into the ocean. I walked the trail down to a distant, totally empty, lagoon. I watched, from a distance, the quiet beach with its closed orange umbrellas, and realized everything that had changed outside of Positano's fossilized world since the very first time I had went. As I stood there waiting to feel like I had before, it struck me that what I was trying to find there in Positano was long gone. Too much was different, too many years had passed, for me to locate the pure happiness that I had once believed was inseparable from Positano. My trips to Positano, with my family, in the past, had condemned me now to grasp for something irretrievable.

I left the next morning on a bus to Sorrento. I had run around Positano all morning buying presents for my parents who were waiting back at home in New York, and barely made it to the bus stop on time. But I was in luck; the bus was late. Still, I could not shake my panic,

ten, twenty, thirty minutes after the bus was supposed to arrive. My heart beat rapidly, I kept swallowing and blinking furiously, and it was then that I began to realize I was saying goodbye. I saw the bus approaching from off in the distance, making its way around the curvy treacherous road, and so for the very last time I looked down at a town identical to the one I remember first arriving in when I was a little girl. Then the bus came, and it was time to go.

There's a propped up painting of Positano my parents must have bought one summer that stays next to our kitchen sink at home. That October weekend when I went back, I imagined my mother washing her hands and looking at the little picture, thinking of me there. If she thought hard enough, maybe it was almost like being back herself. A couple of days after I returned home to Prague, I Skyped with my parents. It's been a long time since they were last in Positano. "It must have been wonderful being there again," my mother said. I told her that it was just like she remembered it.