

“The Author Meets His Muse”

(from *An Autobiographical Letter*)

by Norman Weeks

(The scene: At the university in Rome)

While I was having so many exciting and disorienting cultural encounters, I happened to experience a personal encounter that bowled me over and left me dizzy for months:

One evening, I had lingered long over my studies. When I got to the cafeteria, the meal service was almost finished, the cafeteria nearly empty of students. I took a trayful of leavings and looked for a table.

I saw a girl dining alone. I asked whether I might join her and socialize a little. She smiled at me, accepted me, and I sat down. I asked her who she was, and we began the tentative mutual self-revelation that precedes all acquaintance, friendship, love, and sex.

She was a skinny little thing, dark, of a Mexican aristocratic family.

As that girl spoke to me, she gradually became transfigured in my eyes, an angelic apparition of goodness. It was as if the ultimate ideal of all my romantic fantasies had incarnated right in front of me. My fantasy was reality, the word *love* made flesh.

After she finished her meal, excused herself, rose, and left me, I sat stunned, staring into the inert environment suddenly devoid of life itself at her departure. It was more than love at first sight. It was a miracle of epiphany.

I have called her *Luisa* in the few passages of my writing where she appears. I would have written more about her, had she had less deeply personal significance to me.

How an accidental encounter and seemingly little incident may determine the course and value of one's entire life! It was not only that I met Luisa and fell in love with an attractive girl. Rather, I had spent a lifetime, a mostly solitary lifetime, trying to perfect and ennoble myself, only to chance upon a naturally perfect noble one who radiated a natural wholesomeness; and then I realized how far short I was of my own nurtured ideal. My own ideal, realized at last, but incarnate in another. As for myself? By contrast, paltry, deformed, pitiful, bad, futile, a botch of self-disfigurement.

To my awestruck eyes, Luisa was Love-itself. Of course I became obsessed with her. Consciousness of her existence ousted my self-consciousness. Need of her, want of her, gnawed away at my insides, until I was all hollowed out. I became mere craving, but absolute craving, all-consuming desire, monomaniacal worship and devotion.

When we met again, I tried to intrude myself upon her. Luisa accepted me, but not my love. She accepted everybody,—that was her way. Inhibited as usual, and, as I said, awestruck, I was inept in my wooing. I fantasized that I was to be her fulfillment; but what did she really need that I had to offer?

I insinuated my way into whatever group Luisa was part of on the weekend excursions. One time, four of us drove down to the Bay of Naples in a rented car. After the long trip and the flowing Frascati with dinner, I drew near to Luisa, the two of us alone in a room in a *pensione* in Sorrento. As we stood facing each other, woozy with the wine, she linked her fingers behind my neck and looked up into my eyes. She asked me what I thought of her. Fool that I was, I told her. I should have kissed her and said nothing, but I told her, in sweet, loving whispers that now put her on her guard.

The next morning, I looked for personal glances that would tell me that she too cherished the memory of the previous night's intimacy; but she looked at me just as at the other two students in our traveling group. She showed no look-of-love toward me.

That day, at Pompeii, I asked her to climb upon a plinth in a niche, so that I could take her photo. My goddess upon a pedestal! She got up on the plinth, but struck a flippant pose more like an evanescent sprite than an eternal goddess. As if a bit of lightheartedness could dispel the concentrated seriousness of my deep love.

I was so invigorated by Luisa that I ran down the side of Mount Vesuvius. You might wonder how it is possible to run down a whole mountain. The volcanic cinders absorbed the shock of my footsteps and slowed my downward momentum, my heart beat without any strain, and I descended, descended, descended, I myself all molten.

The more obsessed I became with Luisa, the more intensely I wanted her love, the more indifferent kindness she showed toward me. And the more unstable I became.

It seemed that I was on my way to nervous exhaustion, what with the workload of studies, the overstimulation of travel and culture, and now the love-of-a-lifetime. I even used to write letters to her, one after another, in the solitude of my room, only to tear them up when I read how dire they sounded. Cold showers didn't avail—(at various times the hot water in the dorm would fail, meaning a cold shower, need it or not)—, nor did any other distraction. How trivial was an education! What did even Rome matter? I had met Luisa.

Finally, I resolved not to seek her out anymore. Forget the plot to sneak into the pew next to her at Mass, so that I would be the one to enjoy her liturgical *kiss of peace*. No, I would avoid all provocation to my own undoing and ruin. I don't know what I thought my separation from her would accomplish. Did I think that, unable to endure our estrangement, she would come to me?

Our estrangement went on for weeks, I all the while torturing myself, finding no surcease.

One evening, I encountered Luisa in the cafeteria line, and, recalling the occasion of our first meeting, I began to speak to her in a banter full of aggrieved mockery. We all want to tear down the one who tore us down, even if inadvertently and without malice, even if only by being the superior she was. For I had never really, really believed my unworthiness until I met Luisa.

Later, after dinner together, Luisa and I took a walk around the campus, re-establishing our relatedness, trying to come to a mutual understanding. She cared about me, even if she did not love me. In now being back with her, after the long strain of our separation, I felt a sudden healing, a cathartic release and liberation.

Maybe I could learn for myself the lesson that Luisa's being should teach me: Human satisfaction should be in the loving, rather than in the being-loved. And how could one ever be deprived of loving? The fulfillment was in the emptying of self.

Luisa had taught me what love is, even though she never demonstrated upon me personally. God did not create her just to come to my rescue.

I had seen Luisa only in terms of my need for her. She had to back off from my self-seeking pursuit of her; she didn't want to "fan the flames", as she put it. Luisa couldn't cure me or even help me, because, as she recognized, she herself was the inciter of my mania.

After our walk-and-talk, the air cleared, Luisa and I did reach a mutual understanding. It was up to me to heal myself after that.

Luisa, another young lady, and I took a trip to Rimini and Ravenna and Venice. I don't know whether further companionship with Luisa made everything better or worse, whether it was advance or relapse. Because of a shortage of rooms in the *pensione* in Venice, the three of us had to sleep in the same bedroom. I had insomniac fantasies of tossing the other girl out the window into the canal and leaping into bed with Luisa!

Ah, the passions of our youth, we do survive them, and, in retrospective old age, we wish to relive what at the time we found unbearable.

I took photos of Luisa in the Venetian setting. I cranked and shot and cranked and shot, but, due to a malfunction of my camera or to my hasty loading, the film never really advanced. None of the shots turned out. Luisa was not to be captured and possessed like a souvenir. She was, indeed, an evanescent sprite. Were we ever in Venice together, or in Sorrento, or in Rome, or in that cafeteria, or anywhere? Were we just illusions to each other?

Luisa was the love-of-my-life, but I never even kissed her. She would vanish, as she first appeared, into, as out of, a void. But she remains, too, in the substance of my enduring memory. That substance is love...