

Sold Out Shade

by Katrina Dessavre

We begged him to sell us some shade. Just enough for half an hour, until our bus would pick us up and drive us to our next destination, continuing what was turning out to be a purgatory tour of forgotten Mediterranean towns. We imagined our driver, dozing with his feet on the wheel, newspapers draped over the windshield.

All sold out, the shade seller said.

We didn't know you had to pay for shade in this town, we told him. He opened his palms and shrugged, like there was nothing he could do about it.

We tried to sympathize. Each of the towns we had visited was rich in architectural relics but its inhabitants were poor and, we thought, dulled into laziness by the summer heat. They had to resort to trading coins, decorative plates, sachets of dried herbs, whatever they could push to tourists as must-have mementos. We didn't know that this town was so poor they had resorted to selling shade. And we would have bought it, like the expensive bottles of tap water you buy at sports stadiums because you forgot to bring your own.

The plaza was a vast expanse of white stone that reflected the sun and made it impossible to look at. We didn't know how far we would have to run, if we wanted to cross to the other side and try our luck with another shade seller. It would be like starting across a desert blind and hoping for the best.

Even with sunglasses, we were squinting, our heads down as we talked to him. He had a mane of silver hair that turned dark gray at the ends, as if he had moved his head carelessly outside the circumference of his parasol and singed them. Like a rugged, weathered geisha, he stood right at the border of where the castle cast a line of shadow. We glanced at it, catching the darkness in short glimpses because the contrast was so strong, like thirsty people watching someone gulp water. We imagined the castle's cavernous rooms, the rest of our group enjoying bottles of chilled wine in the dark cellars.

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We tried to move past the shade seller. Even dipping a toe into the dark would satisfy our thirst, our heat-addled brains told us. No, he said, and his features sharpened into two eyebrows cut from marble, as firm as the statues that stood sun-baked in the middle of the plaza. We had passed them on our tour, when the sun was still hiding behind the red clay castles and churches. Gods carved in stiff folds reclined on their marble pedestals, immune to the peaks of infernal light.

The shade seller blocked our path. We stumbled around, dazed like hunted animals, too weak to outsmart him. We clutched each other, our efforts concentrated into not falling into a melting heap. Would he collect our incinerated bones and sell them as the ashes of saints, we wondered.

Then turn us into one of those, we said, pointing to the plaza, but forgot about our concrete ambitions as soon as we felt relief at the tips of our fingers. It was the shade cast by the bus come to collect our singed bodies.

