

Machiavelli and Brexit

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Two couples, enticed by love, swimming and dining, debate European unity.

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In Melbourne, Florida, the east wall of the Eau Gallie Public Library is sheer glass—facing the Intracoastal Waterway and the causeway soaring across it. And I remember how, on a September morning in 2017, this breathtaking view kept distracting me from Martin Andros’s voice as he read passages from Machiavelli.

Another view kept sidetracking me from this intellectual conversation: a tawny-haired young lady, seated with her notebook computer at a table south of us—obviously taking advantage of the library’s Wi-Fi hookup. Though I never saw her glance our way, I somehow felt that she was aware of our existence.

Anyhow, Martin was reading from Machiavelli’s Discourses on Livy that bright morning:

“When the same constitution combines a prince, a nobility, and the power of the people, then these three powers will keep each other in check.

“In a well-ordered republic, it should never be necessary to resort to extra-constitutional measures.

“Government by the people is better than under a prince.

“Jeffrey,” Martin said to me, “this proves that Machiavelli favored democracy, not monarchy. Yet he’s become mankind’s favorite Satan of evil politics. Some people believe that the English nickname for the devil, ‘Old Nick’, refers to Machiavelli’s first name.”

I seem to remember that Martin was Texan by birth—then a Harvard graduate and specialist in Italian history. He'd found a job, his first job, at Cape Canaveral, writing public relations releases for NASA.

"Central Florida's not the Deep South," he'd said. "The farther south you go in Florida, the farther you get from the South."

Now he checked his watch, jumped up, punched my shoulder and said, "Gotta go, Jeffrey. Till Saturday, right?"

And you may not believe this, but as I was leaving, the girl with amber hair closed her computer and took her leave too.

#

Outside on Pineapple Avenue, the balmy forenoon smiled. And I recall how we two vaguely smiled as we vaguely lingered, then vaguely did nothing at all till she vaguely spoke: "I was just, uh, wondering."

And I must have answered, "I was, uh, just wondering too."

She laughed. "How foreigners get drivers' licenses."

Yeah, I'd noticed her British accent. I said something like, "The Department of Motor Vehicles. There's an office here on the mainland—on Sarno Road. And one across that causeway—on the beach."

She sighed. "Oh, that causeway! You know, there was first a wooden bridge there—opened in 1926 on George Washington's Birthday, February 22nd.

"Then on February 22nd, 1955, a new concrete bridge was dedicated. The present causeway dates from 1988. I was just reading all that in the library."

"About the causeway—while admiring it?"

"Absolutely." She paused as if out of words, then said, "So how do I get to Motor Vehicles?"

I started fumbling: "I, uh, don't have anything to, ah, draw a map on. We can, um, go to a

restaurant—for a napkin.”

“A restaurant?”

“Sure. For lunch.”

“I haven’t really had breakfast yet.”

“We’ll throw in breakfast too.”

#

So, obviously I must be Jeffrey. And this story’s about what? About my liking this girl? She makes my emotions spin? She makes them crest like the long waves of the Indian Ocean crashing on the tropical reefs beyond Zanzibar?

That’s not me. I’m not romantic, am I?

Anyhow, during lunch, I learned that my new friend was Daphne Stuart, and that she abhorred Brexit. Apparently, her father had managed some scientific office in David Cameron’s administration when Cameron was British Prime Minister. Then Brexit killed Cameron’s career.

“So,” Daphne explained, “my father’s friends arranged this consulting job here with your NASA.”

I smiled. “So when the UK exited the EU, you exited the UK. Good for you. Listen, Daphne, the friend I was with in the library . . .”

“Yes, I noticed. He seemed very animated—very passionate.”

“History’s his passion. He and I and a lady friend are spending this weekend on the beach. Why not join us? The moon will be full.”

Daphne went sober. “I know no one in America. That’s a terrible temptation.”

“Then it’s a deal.”

#

On Saturday, we took Eau Gallie Boulevard across the causeway to the ocean. Then north on A1A

to a fine seaside café with its modest motel. Our foursome included Annette Wyland, an economist employed by NASA. Her petite stature and squeaky soprano intonation disguised her brilliant intellect.

As we drove, Daphne explained her situation. “My father lost his government position. My friends were very consoling—in a rather mocking way. They hugged and comforted me, saying, ‘Poor Daphne! Poor dear! She’s having such a horrid Brexit!’”

It was Annette, though, who became immediately philosophic, stating that as trade expands, a society must expand too. Economics determines politics.

“Our civilization began as a Medieval rural society with very little trade. Every village was self-sufficient and independent. There was no real central government. Every home was fortified. Every county had dozens of castles and strongholds.

“As commerce and industry developed, small trading posts evolved into commercial city-states. There was a time in the early Renaissance when tiny Amalfi on the Italian coast waged war as a sovereign power.”

By now we’d reached the motel where we’d be staying. And as I parked next to a toenail-red Corvette, I wondered if it was a cherry ’77 or ’78? The muscle L-82? Looked like it. But meanwhile Annette was offering more information:

“As civilization advances, the political powers become fewer in number and bigger in size. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries the classical states were our nation-states of today: Spain, Portugal, England, France, Germany and others. They had empires covering half the globe. But now in the twenty-first century, in this age of the superpowers, are those European nations large enough to remain independent, economically or politically?”

#

After we’d unpacked, the four of us ran into the ocean. And we walked and ran and swam for miles. It was a fine day, the air clear and dry under solid blue sky. And from the shore the land breeze blew the hot scent of sun-drenched pines.

Far away up the beach where the shore faded out into the horizon, there appeared some faint outline of buildings—possibly a mall or development. Its distance and uncertain nature lent it some glamor, but it was too far away for us to reach it. I thought, though, that someday I might go there, maybe with a girl like Daphne—doing nothing in particular.

Then we walked back and went swimming again.

As we rested later by the dunes, our scholars Martin and Annette proposed an historical parallel. “Today,” Annette said, “Europe faces the same question that Italy faced about 1500—whether to remain many states or become one state. Tell us about that, Martin. It’s your field.”

Martin blushed, smiled and bowed. “You’ve twisted my arm. It deals with my favorite subject, Machiavelli, who witnessed great worldwide changes in his youth. In 1492, when he was twenty-three, Spain discovered America and and slightly later Portugal found the sea route to India. More importantly, both those countries had now become unified nation-states.

“In June, 1498, a few days after Savonarola was executed, the Great Council of Florence confirmed Machiavelli as second chancellor of the Republic. The next month he was elected to one of Florence’s highest military posts. And that November he was sent on a diplomatic mission to Piombino. The next year he went on a mission to Caterina Sforza-Riario.”

“Who?” Annette asked.

“The ruler of Imola and Forli.”

“And who were Emily and Farley?”

Martin laughed. “All right, Annette. We all know you’re illiterate.

“Anyhow,” Martin went on, “Italy was already on the highway to historical hell. In 1494, a couple of years after Columbus bumped into the Bahamas, the king of France, Charles VIII, invaded northern Italy with an army of 25,000—including 8000 Swiss.

“By November, Charles had reached Pisa—and Florence later that month. Rome in December, and finally Naples, sacked in February, 1495. This was a clear warning that the Italians needed to unite.”

“If they’d heeded the warning,” Daphne suggested.

“Absolutely, Daphne. And at first it seemed that they did. That March, the city-states of northern Italy formed the League of Venice to resist the French. And active warfare in Italy continued for a number of years.

“Then, In July 1499, after Charles's death, his successor, Louis XII, invaded Italy with 27,000 men (including 10,000 cavalry troops and 5,000 Swiss). But Florence, instead of uniting Italy against

France, persuaded the French to help Florence reconquer Pisa. And in fact, about this time—in July, 1500—Machiavelli was sent on a six-month mission to the French king.”

Martin leaned back and shrugged. “Why go on? When Machiavelli died in 1527, Italy had for thirty-three years been a battleground for France, Spain, the Holy Roman Empire and the warring Italian city-states. And this general situation would continue for the next four centuries until Italy finally united.”

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Somehow the sea held us that day. Sun and sand held us. And it was late afternoon when we finally had lunch in the café: almost twilight, almost dinnertime.

This restaurant had been a house once, built a century ago for a sea captain—built solid like a ship. And we were told that every splinter of wood in it was hardwood—mostly structural white oak with mahogany finishing. The mahogany was dark now with age: dark and varnished and shining. And yellow highlights from the fading light outside glistened along the time-darkened surfaces.

We were seated at a table with a tablecloth, and Daphne and Martin were squeezed close to each other. They obviously shared a passion for European unity. “I just want to finish what I was rapping about,” Martin said. “Machiavelli loved his country. And he foresaw the disaster if it stayed divided.

“He saw also that Italy would not unite democratically. Like quarreling sisters, the city-states preferred to be ruled by a foreign suitor than by one of their own number.

“Over the water to the west he could see Ferdinand and Isabella welding Castile and Aragon into one state called Spain. Italy desperately needed such unification—one head, a single sovereign government. The only solution was a prince cunning and determined enough to force a unified government on Italy. But the alternative, a divided, helpless country raped by alien conquerors—that was unthinkable

“Machiavelli was right, but he expressed his ideas too frankly. So, the world believes he advocated political ruthlessness in principle.”

Now we were being served a hot fish soup, followed by oysters and shrimp and crab cakes and trout—with salad also and hush-puppies and cold beans like a second salad. We drank a chilly white wine which Mr. Mondavi’s ghost may have grown on some Western hillside.

“This is outrageous,” Annette cried. “How can we pig out like this while skinny Manhattan fashion

models are starving?”

“We have to gorge,” Daphne suggested, “or we’ll catch anorexia.”

#

When we left the café, it was dark night and the full moon was well above the horizon. I went swimming alone far out, beyond the bar where the waves were breaking in the moonlight. And I could see the slow lights of freighters or tankers out at sea.

As far as I swam I never saw a person on the beach behind me. And the only shore lights were so distant they might have been that development I thought I’d seen earlier, far away. Except for the swishing wash of rushing waves crashing ashore, the only sounds I heard were faint and faraway hoots—like the distant call of some staring starry owl.

When I rejoined the group, it was near dawn and we hadn’t slept for almost a full day. But our discussion of political unity wouldn’t let up. “Machiavelli,” Annette was saying, “had analyzed the rough and ugly struggles for power. And his analysis was brilliant. He envisioned a Renaissance prince like a Borgia—ruthless and strong enough to unite Italy.

“But Machiavelli missed the larger, deeper picture—the people’s abiding love for their native soil. Machiavelli was the genius who saw how politics works, but not how love works. No one could unite Italy until the people themselves transferred their patriotic love from just their city to their nation as a whole. And Italy did not achieve unity until four centuries after Machiavelli’s day.”

“That’s now the question for Europe,” Daphne said. “How big must your country be to swing its weight in international power politics? Will you fight to defend just your back yard? Or your home town? Or all of England? Or all of Great Britain? Or all of Europe?”

Annette nodded. “But Brexit is understandable, as nostalgia patriotism.”

I’d noticed how close Daphne and Martin had become. And now Daphne said quietly, “Jeffrey, as you know, Martin and I feel strongly that we must work for European unity. I’m afraid that finding each other now has made us frightfully unsociable. We’ve decided to rent a car and spend tomorrow together. We hope that you and Annette will understand. Jeffrey, whatever happens, we’ll always be friends.”

As she and Martin stood and left, she pecked me on the cheek. So, we’d always be friends. Why not? It’s always good to have friends.

#

So Annette and myself, all alone: standing together like the last pair of humans on an abandoned planet. And I remember how she smiled in the night, turning to face the moon's glimmering swath over the churning water.

"The café's closed, of course," she said.

"You're hungry, Annette?"

"Maybe. You think girls as small as I am never need to eat?"

"You're beautiful, Annette. See those faint lights far away up the beach? You think there's a restaurant still open there?"

"I don't know."

"Let's drive there and find out."

"And if there's not one?"

"We'll find one somewhere, Annette—somewhere in this world."

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