



WESTWARD, UNGUIDED

by Catalina Ouyang

*Say to yourself fifty times a day: I am not a connoisseur,
I am not a romantic wanderer, I am not a pilgrim.*

— Susan Sontag, *Unguided Tour*

THE legend from my childhood, my earliest understanding of adventure, goes like this: a monkey, a pig, a demon and a monk go west. The monkey is a pathological liar, the pig an alcoholic pervert, the demon a sadistic cannibal. The monk needs their protection because other demons want to eat him; as a reincarnation of the Golden Cicada, his flesh will grant immortality. The monkey, the pig and the demon are atoning for past sins. The monk is chasing enlightenment.



It is April 19, 2014 and I am chasing something, going west with a comely Italian. Passing from Ventimiglia to Menton, across the Italian-French border, the air changes visibly. The hard orange light of the Ligurian Sea softens abruptly into the muted swash of Menton's pinkish buildings, their curlicued iron balustrades spilling over with wisteria. Ah, I say to the Italian. I am relieved and self-conscious. His knuckles are white on the gearshift, four espressos in.

He is thin and taut and thirty. His eyes are brownly gentle.

In Florence, it came to this: leave the apartment to buy food and be subjected to leers and sneers, *ni hao ma's* and the occasional fist hauling for hair, or stay in and forage the roommates' leftover potato chips. I had stopped bleaching my roots, I had quit the pink dye. I wore dark clothing, black boots, sunglasses that shrouded half my face. I walked fast and paused for nothing. Still, I was lightheaded and losing weight.

And there was Anna from Seoul, getting spat on in the face at a bus stop. The swarthy men saying: *cagna cinese*, get out.

The case is straightforward. The *cinese* have in the past two decades outdone the Italians in their textile industry. The Italians are bitter about a

struggling economy but still want their siesta and lax hours. In Prato, the *cinese* spill their children's blood in the name of efficiency. My *cinese* face is, alternately, an economic threat and a target for unsolicited cum.



Before the journey, our intractable monkey was tricked into donning a magical headband. Once on, it could never be removed. With a special chant, the band would tighten and give the monkey an unbearable migraine. The monk used this to control the monkey, to make him behave.



In Menton, the Italian and I stand on the pebbles watching the waves come in. They spray our crossed arms. I loved swimming when I was a child; I did backflips off the diving board. I had been trained in the water by my uncle, the rakish husband of my mother's younger sister. I delighted in the pain of his callused palms digging into my ribs as he held me afloat. I desired that wet touch, our closeness, his dank breath and patinated teeth.

But I have not liked water ever since a taut, freckled boy tried to drown me in a backyard pool when we were nine. I will be generous: he did not know what he was doing. I pounded his shins until I came up wheezing, utterly invisible to the blonde mothers at the birthday party.

The Italian loves water. “I grew up by the sea,” he told me the first time we met. He is a Cancer. They are not appealing, men who cry. My rueful swimmer brother, for instance, born July 17. Yet I always turn up here, with another tearful Cancer, in this prepositional configuration: under, on, in front, beside, plunged into. The phantom feeling of a rake hauling through my untillable territories. *Plowing*. The permissive exchange. So we plow in a circular track, returning endlessly to a singular, sour plot.

Adele was the Italian’s first love, the one he speaks of incessantly. She was a Chinese-Canadian from Vancouver studying in Florence when they met. She was twenty years old then; I am twenty years old now. For two years after she went home, their love spanned the Sargasso. Then she left him for a French Canadian with blue eyes. The Italian told me this during our first two walks together along the River Mugnone, filling in detail during our subsequent liaisons. Adele became my spectral Oriental sister, a looming refraction that would never see me in turn.

Each time I told myself: leave, the next time he mentions her. I don't know what attaches me to people. These days I chalk it up to chemistry, as reason eludes me. *Leave, the next time he points out her favorite café, museum, piazza. Leave, the next time he compares her Florentine experience to mine, that she was harassed too, grabbed, assaulted. Leave, the next time he explains to me how thoroughly she broke him.* Leave, if that car passes the lamppost before the woman across the street receives her change. At a certain point, agency is necessarily relinquished, along with good sense.



Our lustful pig is serving penance for flirting drunkenly with the Moon Goddess. He was an immortal with a human form then, the Marshal of the Heavens. His punishment was two thousand strikes of the hammer and exile into the mortal world. Upon leaving Heaven in a drunken stupor, he took the wrong route and was reincarnated, mistakenly, in the womb of a sow.

Now our pig has ears like sails, which allow him to fly.



A good traveler requires proper traveling cause. The Italian gives us this: to see the Matisse Chapel in Vence.

He had originally suggested Berlin but could not pay for the flight, being an unemployed architect. In Florence, there is nothing to build, no space beyond the Renaissance, no buildings to design. So we rented a Fiat. After Menton, the Italian asks me, Would you like to drive through Monaco? I give him a halfhearted yes. I want to be a good traveler.

Florence rains year-round but in Monaco, the sun shines on palm fronds. I wave my fingers out the window as we drive past the Casino Square, the Opera, and in the distance, the Monte Carlo Harbor. The water is so blue and the yachts so white. We want to go to the harbor but the roads are sinuous and then they are blocked halfway down the hillside, so the water remains a faraway aspiration. *Merda*, says the Italian. I feign disappointment to match his, but I could just as well admire the cacti.

The Italian's knuckles, white on the gearshift. I cannot stop looking at them. They are the most unforgiving part of him.



Before becoming the monk's protector, our vicious demon faced this punishment: every day, seven flying swords sent from heaven would stab him in the chest before flying away. His crime—*not* the death of nine monks whom he had devoured and turned into a necklace of skulls—was that he had smashed a crystal goblet belonging to the Queen Mother of the West. So our demon lived in the river, hiding, until he was found by our pilgrims.



In Nice, the Italian asks me, Would you like to park the car and sit by the water? I give him a halfhearted yes. I want to be a good traveler. On the beach we sit against the lifeguard tower and eat miniature strawberries from a paper bag. I fall asleep drifting into the horizon, a distant blue haze.

The good traveler knows this: Menton, first inhabited in Paleolithic times, was founded officially by pirates in the 11th century. In Victorian times, it became a popular destination for British consumptives. The

infamous Dr. James Bennet said to his expiring wards: see Menton, and live!

The good traveler knows this: Hercules passed westward through Monaco, banished the previous gods, and forged the path that connects Italy to Spain.

The good traveler knows this: there is nothing like the women of Nice, or the fish.

The Italian knows of my overseas lover.

Decades ago, my *chinese* parents had made a journey to the west, too. They were good travelers—starry-eyed and grateful. Their journey was longer. They had courage. But they were not seeking enlightenment, and they did not find it.

Centuries before that, a Venetian merchant had gone east. He was a good traveler; he mastered four languages and stayed for seventeen years. On his journey home, the daughter of the Great Khan came west with him. He claimed her as wife. She loathed his sinking city, and the merchant's jealous sisters loathed her. After the merchant was captured in battle by the Genoese, the sisters told the Chinese princess that her

husband was dead. So the girl set fire to her clothes and jumped from the window of the merchant's house into the canal below.

They say that sometimes at night, in the Milion courtyard, one can see a white figure floating in the air, singing a sweet song of the Orient. They say that she killed herself out of grief. I am skeptical. The most saccharine chord is often brimmed with rage.

The Italian is homeless. As in, he was living with his girlfriend—not Adele—at the time he met me, and then two weeks later he was living in a hostel in the Oltrarno. The girlfriend remains nameless and faceless to me. There had been some other girlfriends in the past, with other men; but I outgrew self-blame some years ago.

Do I see myself, this Easter weekend, as journeying toward enlightenment?



Remember: Lisbon, 2007. My parents had structured the day's itinerary to include the Santa Justa Lift and the Torre de Belem. The day before, we had visited the Jeronimos Monastery and St. George's Castle. I was a

compliant but absent drifter. One street that we passed was lined with orange trees and comely dark waiters. The trees bowed under the weight of their fruit, so many that the orbs were dropping into the gutters, exploding sweetly. I wanted to stay on that street. I wanted to touch the oranges.



During their pilgrimage, our westward quartet are beset by eighty-one obstacles. Among them: impassable rivers, flaming mountains, a nine-tailed fox disguised as a maiden, a massive she-scorpion, a kingdom of only women, a lair of seductive spider spirits.

Witches, at every turn.



In Vence finally, at our rented cottage in the flowering hills, the Italian and I collapse starving into bed. There is a white cat in the room that paws, mewling, at the soles of our feet. We spend the rest of the evening plowing. Our host has left us a coupon to her friend's restaurant in the

town center: an opportunity to wander the cobbled city under a gas lamp glow. But I cannot bring myself to be clothed and go. We settle for a baguette and salami, bought hours earlier at a rest stop.

The Italian is boyish and yielding. The skin around his hips is just beginning to sag, but his legs are twiggy, stringy muscle jumping with each thrust. He delights in this *figa cinese*, and I delight in providing for him. The trade is fair: he is my Marco, I will be his Adele.

I am a good traveler. I travel the length of him.

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Remember: Costa Rica, 2001. Scorched by sun and blimped with coconut juice, I had no interest in shadowing my family to the Arenal Volcano or Tortuguero National Park. I wanted to stay at the resort pool and indulge in the sight of topless sunbathers, their browning areolas sliding wayward down unharnessed breasts. And *him*: the comely American with solar flares tattooed around his left nipple, glistening with coconut oil, T-shirt slung through a denim belt loop. A pool's length from me, light-years away, he

pulsed with the crushing pull of a rogue planet. I was nine and irate with desire: to become, possess, belong.

Possibly, a part of me is now looking westward for clarity. Or a verdict beyond my control. I told my overseas lover a story about how I am going to the Cote d'Azur with friends, or alone. Something implausible. As my overseas lover knows, I dislike driving long distances and traveling in groups. But he is too much under the influence to question. He recedes from me, a drunken Midwestern blemish. I am a good traveler. I allow the void of him to fill with something warm and viscous, spilling over my dainty *chine* fingers.

The good traveler does not allow for shame, and certainly not self-loathing.

The good traveler knows this: Henri Matisse designed the Chappelle du Rosaire to honor Sister Jacques-Marie, formerly Monique Bourgeois, who had nursed him through a protracted illness, spending nights at his bedside.

The good traveler knows this: they were not in love.



Our westward quartet nearly meets their match in the especially cunning White Bone Demon. She disguises herself three times as family members—first, a village girl who offers our quartet poisonous fruit. Our monkey sees through the disguise and kills her. The demon then returns disguised as the girl’s elderly mother, whom our monkey kills again, and then as the woman’s elderly father, whom our monkey also kills. Our unsuspecting monk, convinced our monkey has murdered three innocents, decides not even the headband is punishment enough. He banishes our monkey from the group.



On our third and last morning in Vence, the Italian says, Would you like to walk around the town? He is sheepish; I have not been convincing. I try now to give him a wholehearted yes:

Yes!

I am a good traveler.

Vence is this: Roman walls, bleached stone, olive trees, winding alleys, crawling ivy, moss everywhere. Today we will see the Chappelle du Rosaire. I buy strawberries for four euros—too expensive, but sweeter than anything I am used to—and we eat them while walking past patisseries and artisan shops. In the center of a narrow courtyard ringed with olive trees is a stone fountain with a plaque: *EAU POTABLE*. I open my mouth beneath the trickling spout, gracelessly. The Italian follows: his pale lips forming a carnal O, water dewing on the ends of his moustache hairs.

The Chapel, what we have journeyed all this way to see, a single-story building, whitewashed with a blue and yellow tiled roof on top of which stands a thin wrought-iron cross thirty or forty feet tall, decorated with crescent moons and tiny gold flames—is closed when we arrive.



Our three remaining pilgrims carry on into the Black Pine Forest, which is infested with hungry demons. The pig and demon, outnumbered and overpowered, watch in dismay as our monk is captured and turned into a tiger. Our pig must seek out our monkey, far away in the Water Curtain

Cave, to entreat him to rescue their leader. The monkey has, throughout their journeys, learned some humility. He re-enters the group's good graces.



Though the lavender fields beyond the city walls are not yet in bloom, the tiniest of nosegays sprout from gaps in the cobbles. They are white, happy-faced. I realize I do not trust them. An unsettling thing has been sliding over me. I came west to flee aggression, and yet... On this last morning in the cottage, the Italian, enthralled beyond restraint, released himself in me. In that release something changed in his face, a widening of both the eyes and something inward. I recoiled from this. In this city, where I have traveled three hundred miles to chase or lose something I can neither see nor articulate, I wear the Italian's skin as a shroud, one which renders my *cinese* face either immaterial or impenetrable. He is my Marco, my white shield. I cannot see past him to my own reflection.

The good traveler knows this: the *figa cinese* recognizes its own dispensability. It capitalizes on this. It must know how.

The good traveler does not derail a holiday on its last leg.

The Italian wants me to know that he knows of my overseas lover. I feel love for you, the Italian says to me. But—do you love him? How can you, and be with me here, in this way?

I don't respond. The sun in St. Paul de Vence, where we are now, is too pleasant, the mountains too green and vast. There is a cat, a different one, striped and tan, peering down at us from a rock overhang. It watches my head in the Italian's lap, my skirt blowing obscenely in the breeze. I feign slumber.

Another lover—a Cancer, eyes bluely jagged—will ask me at a later time: Is it a crime to want somebody happy?

How marvelously simple it must be for them, my weeping Cancers, to love.



At this point, the story of our westward quartet terminates. They arrive at Vulture Peak, where Buddha is waiting with the scriptures. Our monkey is relieved of his headband. They receive spiritual promotions, obtain Buddhahood and honorable titles. Is it success? It is a legend, so they find

what they are looking for. My quest has no tangible grail. The position I seek does not exist. The monk, the monkey, the pig, the demon—triumphant, they dissipate eastward, as far as I am concerned.

And the Italian and I, our leftover parts will haul back east. So to speak. For this *cinese* face, *cinese* lover, *figa cinese*, there is only such a thing as westward.

To drive back east with the Italian lover is to drive yet westward.

Or to walk, westward.

Desire, westward.

Plow, westward.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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