

May 1979. Stefan and Hani had just had a lucky escape from the arts college. Let's get out of here, out into the world, relishing the new-found freedom. Greece for half a year. Painting, drawing, living. No teachers to look over their shoulders and wrinkling their noses at their works.

Stefan and Hani were as different as chalk and cheese. Stefan was tall and slim, blond, reliable, precise, a popular student. He left nothing to chance. Hani was stocky, with black hair. While his fellow students worked all day and night, he didn't get anywhere. He would wear a sullen look and it seemed as if a storm was brewing inside him. He would not go to school for days, and came within an inch of being thrown out. This went on until the end of term, when he would suddenly appear and, to everyone's surprise, would hand in a work of an archaic power that put all the other works to shame.

It was assumed that their plan to travel to Greece together was based on their mutual desire to balance each other's shortcomings. Yet things turned out differently. On the day before their departure, Hani broke his left leg. Stefan felt amputated. He suddenly found himself without his wild, daring opposite.

Otranto. In for a penny, in for a pound. Stefan drove to Otranto, where he would take the ferry to Greece. But he was in no rush to reach the boat. He, who speaks hardly 50 words of Italian and not a single word of Greek, took his time to get used to this place far away from home that was quite different from what he had expected. He thus took a room in the Pensione Bellavista, where several families who also stayed at the guest house invited the young and friendly man to eat at their table.

Otranto turned out to be love at first sight. He was taken not only with the beautiful, white town, but also with its cathedral and its wonderfully archaic floor mosaic and the small trading, fishing and ferry ports.

The Cava di bauxite. On the third day he made a further discovery, the pit. When he rambled through the fields with his straw hat on his head and his painting equipment in the rucksack, he noticed a thick layer of red dust that sloshed from his feet in heavy waves. A little later he saw a great cloud of pink dust forming over the dry plain and watched how it was driven inland by the wind. An old lorry covered in rust-coloured dust and loaded with a red material jolted past. Suddenly he found himself in front of a fenced site. Hidden beneath the dust he eventually saw the pit. There was a rattling and clattering noise coming from the quarry. Interesting.

Stefan could hardly wait for the day when the work in the quarry would be finished. He was determined to unravel the secret of the pit. There was not a single cloud in the sky when Stefan went out a second time. Where normally there was nothing but the infinite sea, he now saw the Albanian mountains. There wasn't a soul in sight. He climbed over the fence that was meant to protect the building site from intruders. Behind the fence he could see the pit, a hundred metres in diameter, twenty metres deep. At the bottom of the pit there was a little lake. The walls were a firework of colours. An access ramp spiralled into the depth. There were various installations, conveyor belts, mining machines, everything covered in a red powder. The machines seemed to serve the mining of the red rock that constituted a large part of the slopes of the pit. It seemed to be a hard, solid material, but it crumbled at mining. At the top, behind the edge of the pit, there was machinery. What happened there during working days was still a mystery. Behind the site and the shacks sat a red mine dump, like a huge camel. The entire ground was covered with big red lumps of 5 to 40 millimetres. Even the solid material in the pit that hadn't been touched yet was interspersed with this stuff. Was that the harvest brought in?

What at first glance looked like a monochrome mass due to the heavy layer of dust turned out to be more nuanced. Different shades of red predominated. There was a reddish brown and orange, along with yellow and brown shades of ochre, dark and light shades of grey, also green and bluish ones. There was a chalk-white and white, some of it sat in the steep walls of the pit, other bits in thin horizontal layers.

Stefan was fascinated by this blaze of colour. This fullness, this power! His friend Hani came to his mind. Something like this would be very much his thing. He also thought of Heidi, a beautiful ceramicist from school. She would be delighted at this colour miracle. How about some stone greetings to Hani and Heidi, he asked himself. To Hani in order to spark his interest and to get him back on his legs. To Heidi because it would be nice to be in her good books.

Equipped with some plastic bags from the super market and with some cutlery he had temporarily purloined from the guest house to use as tools, Stefan climbed over the fence again the following Sunday. He worked all day long like one possessed. In the evening, he had 30 different shades in the form of dust and stones in his plastic bags. Heavily laden he went back to town. In his room he divided his yield into two times 30 portions, a handful each, all the same size, and tipped them into new, transparent plastic bags, which he sealed with adhesive tape. It was way past midnight when he finished his work.

The next day, he placed the bags in a nice shoe box, gave everything a proud look and imagined the joy the two recipients would feel at seeing this blaze of colours. He wrapped the boxes with thick paper, tied them up and in his neat handwriting, he put down the addresses and the sender. The parcels alone were a feast for the eyes.

It was around then o'clock when Stefan entered the post office. Twenty minutes later he was served.

«Che cosa é?», he was asked.

«Terra», Stefan stammered.

The post office official stared at him and shook his head. He gave the skinny young man in front of him a critical look. His blond hair reached his shoulders, and he wore Jesus sandals and a headband. He repeated his question with deliberate clarity.

«Terra, pietre», Stefan specified.

«Aprire!», the official decided. Stefan realised that this would result in a customs declaration. He opened one of the parcels and pushed it over the counter.

«Anche l'altro!», the official ordered when he saw what was inside.

The second parcel opened, its contents lay there in a most perfect harmony. That at least was Stefan's view on things. All the official saw was the powder. Pale powder! His eyes reflected his alert. Drug trafficking? That's how the land lies!

«Un attimo», he said and vanished behind one of the doors behind the counter to return again accompanied by a colleague, apparently his boss.

«Aprire!», the boss said and pointed at the contents of the parcel.

«Quello?», Stefan dared to ask, in the hope that he only had to open one or two of the plastic bags.

«Tutti», he received as an answer.

«Le due scatole?»

«Sì, le due», the postmaster growled.

«Sh...», Stefan thought to himself, «I could have saved the trouble».

Stefan took a deep breath and wondered whether he should explode. He imagined how Hani would react in this situation, saw how his friend would take the whole lot of them into their office to shout the whole house down. That was definitely not Stefan's way. He lacked the adequate words anyway. He kept his temper, stayed polite, pointed at the table behind him and asked if he could spread himself out.

«Sicuro».

Stefan opened bag after bag – or rather tried to open them. The adhesive tape could not be removed without damaging the transparent bags. If he wanted the bags to look exactly like what he had in mind, he would have to start from scratch. Stefan tore the packaging open, rolled the ends up like sleeves and arranged the bags on the table, in two parallel rows according to their colour hue. When he had finished after half an hour he went back to the counter. The two gentlemen were quite impressed by the complete parade that was waiting for inspection. They examined every-

thing, threw up the terra here and there, sniffed here and there, but they failed to find anything suspicious.

The older of the two slapped on Stefan's back in an encouraging gesture and said:

«Tutto bene! Impacciare!»

Little did he know about Stefan's high aesthetic standards. He needed new plastic bags. He begged to be excused to get new bags and adhesive tape. After a quarter of an hour, he put the 60 portions into new bags, sealed them and stowed them in the two boxes. In the end, everything looked as neat as before. He wrapped up the boxes in brown paper, which had survived the procedure without any harm. Just when he was about to mail the parcels, something came into his mind that made his heart stand still. This was merely the post office. What if the whole procedure started all over again at customs? He couldn't see himself making the same effort of unwrapping and rewrapping everything again.

With his 50, by then maybe 80 words of Italian, Stefan expressed his concern. Would there be anyone, an authority, possibly the town council, who could attest that the parcels were harmless, maybe with a stamp or a signature? Finally, Stefan's politeness and persistence paid off. The postmaster got on the phone. In many words he described the strange situation. The phone call took five minutes. Some fifteen minutes later, a man arrived to label the two parcels:

GOODS CONTROLLED / STAMP / COMMUNE DI OTRANTO / DATE / SIGNATURE.

It was 13.05 p.m. and the post office closed for lunch. Stefan had just paid the postage, gave thanks to the post office officials and they shook hands.

Postscript: The two parcels never reached their destinations.