

happinez

Paradise on your doorstep

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I am hearing birds, strutting feet (a dog?) on a stone floor, a buzzing mowing machine from a far. This doesn't sound like the city.

Those wonderful seconds of waking up and not knowing exactly where you are. The moment between day and night, dreaming and reality, home and away.

And then I remember. Leaving from a busy airport, arriving in a muggy warm Naples, driving on a tortuous coastal road which is becoming greener with every curve, along trees full of lemons which are waiting to be picked.

And then Sebastiano, that charming Italian, with that silk little scarf around his neck and all the ingredients for a good meal in the back of his car, who - already years ago - knocked on a Sunday on my London front door and asked with a heavy Italian accent: 'Hello I 'm Sebastiano, are you ready for a nice day?'

A nice day. That's what it was. Ten years later he still remembers exactly which dish he had prepared for me that day, in his friends kitchen. A woodcock. Food - If I think of Sebastiano, I think of food. I just spent a summer in London, the city where he spent half of his life as a banker and an entrepreneur, alternating his days between the London inner crowd and the wild nature of Devon. There were parties, many many parties. He took me everywhere. From lunches at directors of museums to fish- and camping days in Hampshire.

But now Sebastiano is driving his tractor on the small country roads of San Fantino, the land of his ancestors, which is in the family form the 17th century, the land where he spent all his summers as a small boy, the land with the richest bio diversity of Europe, 30 hectares of land of which his father asked him on his death bed to care for. All that land....

Six years ago he responded to his fathers' wish and went back to San Fantino. All he did there was work. Work, work, work. The overgrown vineyards that weren't taken care for for more than 20 years, the weed that rooted everywhere, country roads which were not passable anymore. There had to be guest rooms, a swimming pool, a henhouse, a terrain where his pig could run free, donkeys, fruit trees, grain fields and above all there had to be planted a new vineyard.

A vineyard about which Sebastiano is now talking in the same way my girlfriends are talking about their babies. Meanwhile, somewhere on the road from eternal bachelor to landlord he suddenly had no difficulties getting up in the morning, he got used to the silence and his frustrations left him.

Stress made room for rest, questions for answers, or anyway... the amount of questions diminished.

Three years ago I arrived here for the first time. A lot had happened, but the chickens got to escape sometimes, the pig wasn't there yet and the guest rooms and the swimming pool where just drawings on a paper. And now it's all here.

From the terrace I am looking around. The sea, the mountains, the vineyard, the sloping hills, his loyal dog Baikal sniffing around, the church on top of the mountain which is

lighted so beautifully at night. Here we are, on top of the world.

Half past seven. The sun is burning in my room. On the other side of the window the sea is shimmering, mountains remain unmoved. A comforting picture.

No fast cars, no highways, no credit cards, no fashion boutiques, no crowded terraces. There are little Fiat cars in all colours, tortuous mountain paths and coastal roads, lemons that are smelling like lemons, tomatoes that are smelling like tomatoes, benches full of old men. Hobbling around the surroundings you get a sense of oblivion, as if this piece of earth has escaped from the greedy claws of the corrupt Italian politicians and mafia. They don't need each other, the residents of this area and the outside world, they have it all: land, animals, crop, a village street where you can find everything, a bench in the sun, the sea, the mountains. Rich, in the right way. Rich because you don't need the outside world anymore either. The wealth reaches as far as the view: between the terrace where I rub the sleep out of my eyes and the mountains at the horizon lay the sloping green fields in a bushy valley full of corn, barley, vegetables, fruit trees and nutritious herbs. There where the landscape takes a dive lays the first vineyard: the wine we drank yesterday. Somewhere down there runs Olivia, a pig, up and down, donkeys keep the grass short, run the chickens. But my eyes keep on being drawn by the sea, that shimmering pool at the foot of the mountains and only a short distance away from my own feet.

I can see Sebastiano walk up and down somewhere on that land, drive, being busy. I get ready quickly to go down there. There is still so much to do. I could walk towards the artichokes to see if I can already use them for the salad tonight, or I could pick wild herbs, perhaps discover new ones and freeze them, peel lemons for the limoncello, free the vineyards of the overgrown weeds, feed the pig, move the donkeys and as Sebastiano always says: 'And much more...'

Here I could keep myself busy all day with, well yes, what is it? Eat to live or live to eat? And then maybe, just like Sebastiano, I question myself less and less about the years that pass by, about those few events that are burned in my flesh and therefore I take with me everywhere I go and which determine the course of my thoughts.

I look at Sebastiano, busy working the land. He has changed. Slimmer, more tanned, and above all quieter. I ask myself where the Sebastiano from London has gone to. Maybe I'll find out when I follow his steps and step into his rhythm. That rhythm includes the whole day : get up early, see what needs to be done in the fields and above all: work.

There is the principle of using everything and there is the principle of wasting nothing. Here both principles are valid. As we arrive at Olivia, she runs enthusiastically along the fence. Sometimes he needs to look for her, that's how big the land is where she spends her days. She prefers to hang around the river, Olivia, a pink 3 month old piglet, comes from a farm where ten pigs shared ten square meters - now she's got 3000 all to herself. Olivia will be replaced by a new piglet next winter. Still I am not sorry for her.

Sebastiano loves his animals and makes sure they do not suffer. It is here that I discovered that one healthy pig can feed a whole family for a year.

Far from the financial world which had worn him out that much, Sebastiano is quietly creating his own self-sufficient world, a world where the meal on your plate, the wine in your glass and the wood on which you sit are all of your own land. The place where he can say: stocks, overconsumption, and injustice are there.... I am here.

When the day has passed, I realize that my thoughts weren't there during the whole

day. The land hasn't just left traces in his state of mind, his *etat d'esprit*. Ever since Sebastiano has changed his life he has dropped 10 kilograms. Of course, much more exercise and a different diet. But still, even after he had outsourced the heavy work and after he had started to work on the logistic tasks behind a desk, he was still loosing weight. With a knot in his stomach, and the memory of a father who had died at a young age of cancer, he got himself checked out from top till bottom. Nothing wrong, ergo: he had never been that healthy. It took a while before a plant expert gave him the answer: all those beneficial herbs which he put in his soup everyday since he had arrived. I'm more than curious to have a taste myself of this wonderful wonder soup. The herbs that we are gathering on the land are the same herbs Sebastiano fiercely tried to get rid of in the first years, because his corn and vegetables didn't get a chance to grow freely and to breath. Until that expert pointed out to him that some of these herbs are very nutritious. The plant of the alfalfa, which is being processed into pills by a French company for the underfed people in third world countries. Sebastiano recognizes them all now, tells me the English, Latin or Italian names. The basket is quickly filled with about fifteen different kind of herbs. Back in the kitchen he puts three different types of beans in a pan, white beans, brown beans, chickpeas which have soaked for a night. With that he puts the tougher herbs (thistle), the stalks and an onion. Seb brings it to a boiling point, mashes it, throws in barley and then the rest of the herbs. No stock cube, nothing. Yet the soup has a very strong intense flavour. The herbs are soft, sometimes crispy, salty.

The rattling of the pots, the smell of garlic, wine, music. Our last dinner is being prepared. The first thing you notice in the kitchen is the size of the stove, the fridge and the freezer. A freezer which is full Olivia's predecessors, the herbs we had gathered before and vegetables. Tonight Sebastiano is preparing an old Italian dish: pizzoccheri with cabbage, buckwheat and mountain cheese.

We eat outside under the stars. I have one last chance to interrogate my friend from London. What has this land given him? How did it change him? But if I look at him, in his own paradise I get it all. What should you look for in London if you have it all here? Sebastiano wanted to go back to how the world was meant to be, back to earth, to a life where you use what you need and nothing more. And also a world where you may and can think for yourself and where you are not restrained by rules which are imposed on you. A world where you don't have to leash your dog, nor yourself when driving up the mountain in your Fiat Panda 4x4.

And then after the last questions and answers a kind silence falls over us. The wine is finished, the plates are empty, Baikal is snoring at my feet. It's in this silence I notice the light on the local road has faded. I look at my friend who bends around and sees what I'm looking at. A big naughty smile takes over his face. And there he is, my friend from London. Always ready to fight the rules and get in trouble: in London it was parking tickets, here its painting the streetlights black when the village is fast asleep in a deep afternoon nap. He thought the light pollution too severe.

Happiness is very fragile, but in this world which Sebastiano has created himself, and which needs so little from the big outside world, it's presence is almost tangible. Luckily for its passengers the olive oil, the sausage and the wine are really tangible. Leaving paradise is less difficult now that I know I can have a sip of it every day in my Parisian home.