

Past Dawn

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»Madrugada Passada«

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29. February – 14. April 2024

Kunstraum Remise
Am Raiffeisenplatz 1
6700 Bludenz



My father drops me off at the crossroads and continues down the road, a familiar routine. Though I'm punctual, I find myself waiting at the closed car rental shop. Renting a car feels undeniably "grown up," even though I merely requested the contact from my father, and he handled the entire setup. It's one of those moments when you begin to assert control over your life. However, the senseless paranoia and anxiety accompanying this newfound responsibility persist, unaffected by the sense of coming of age. Not even the comprehensive insurance coverage manages to dismiss these uneasy feelings.

While waiting for the shop to open, I observe the approaching cars, contemplating which one will be our companion for the upcoming journey. A Fiat 500 carries this romantic allure, but I can't help but question whether rental shops actually offer them or if they might be more expensive. More often than not, you get the unattractive, spacious Citroëns. I question why I label them as "ugly," realizing that aesthetics extend far beyond my subjective perception of romanticism.

Signing here and there, passport and credit card, everything proceeds quickly and smoothly. I had taken the entire day off for a task that consumed only five minutes. Contemplating the endless possibilities, I decide to take the usual turn, heading back home. There's a list of things to take care for tomorrow.

I can't bring myself to tell my mother about the drive to the pilgrimage spot. In the past, I've responded with slight annoyance and consistently declined her invitations for a day trip. Now, for the first time, I'm making the journey by car. As a teenager, I walked the path twice, though the exact reason escapes me. Something triggered me back then to do it, but it wasn't to pray for a sick family member — fortunately, I never faced such situations in my youth. Nor was it an expression of gratitude to God or Jesus, as I was never particularly thankful to them.

For over 30 years, my parents undertook this pilgrimage almost every summer, departing at night and returning the next afternoon. My uncle was usually the one to pick them up. I always wondered why they subjected themselves to this annual ritual. Upon their return, they would collapse on the green grass, immersing their swollen and battered feet in cold water buckets. The expressions on their faces brought to mind Jacques-Louis David's painting, "The Death of Marat." They endured significant suffering. I suppose that was precisely what they sought — a successful completion. Check.

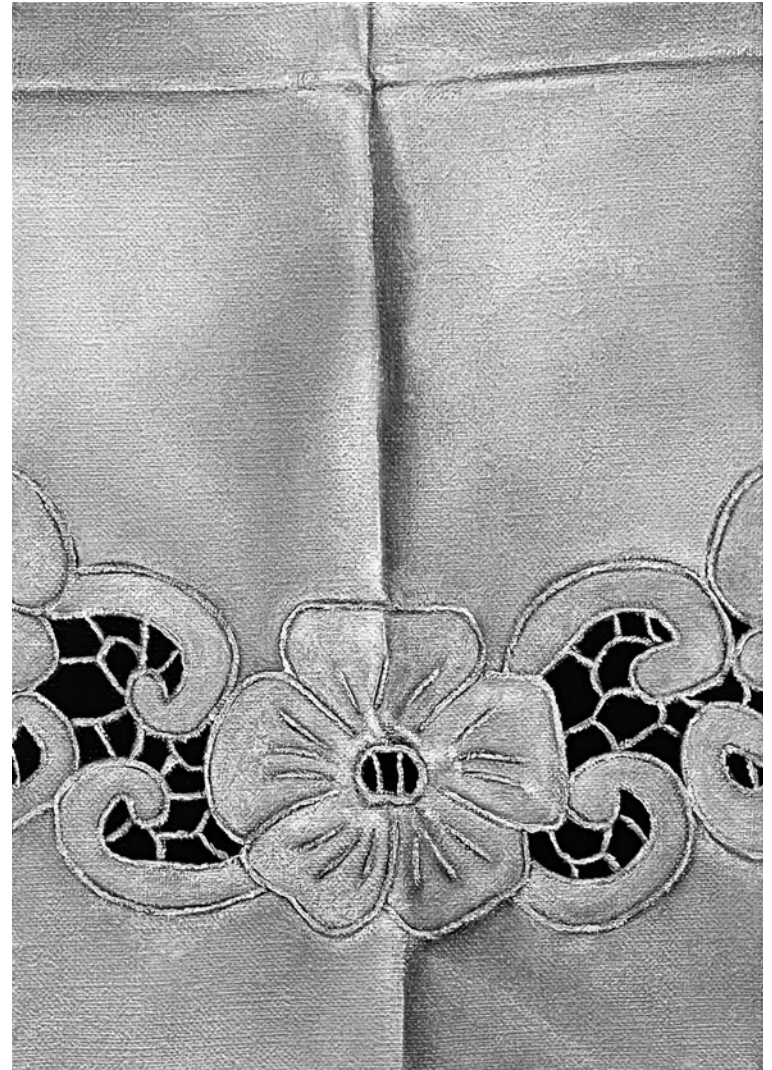
The next morning, I step into the car, gearing up for quite a long ride. The GPS optimistically claims it'll take only an hour and a half, but experience tells me it'll likely be longer. This time, I'm sharing the journey with Sarah, and I find myself oddly excited to introduce her to these familiar places. Yet, simultaneously, I feel like I'm there as a stranger. It's not even close to my "home" town; in fact, it's quite a distance away. The only thread connecting me to this pilgrimage spot is the local admiration for a saint, a former bishop known for miraculously curing diseases. Beyond that, my knowledge is limited, and the thought of "Googling it" crosses my mind but I won't do it.

As we drive, the radio provides a nice soundtrack with old new wave Portuguese songs, mixed with Latin music and random radio hosts engaging in telephone shows. Every summer, there's that one melancholic pop song that seems to play everywhere. When it begins, a moment of silence fills the car, and a shared affectionate glance passes between us. It's almost amusing how the Portuguese consistently produce these cheesy yet endearing songs that always seem to strike a chord. By now, I guess, I know where it comes from.

At a certain point, I find myself in unfamiliar territory, realizing we have driven too far to simply turn back. It's at this juncture that the road takes on a new allure. As we drive, I spot some of the larger intersections that trigger memories of my past pilgrimages. Eventually, we pass the small city that used to be the last stop—a place with open bars and a semblance of civilization before the left turn deeper into the more rural areas. This location falls almost precisely in the middle of the entire trip.

During the walks, reaching this point meant acknowledging the strain on your legs. It was customary to stop at a small terrace for a brief break, grabbing something to drink and eat. While we still had the entire night and morning ahead of us, and the intimidating thought of ascending into the woods with its steep hills, the other guest at the café were nicely dressed, having their final drinks before heading to the club. It always struck me as a humorous contrast. However, the locals paid us pilgrims no mind. I suppose they were accustomed to our presence. While some pilgrims hoped for a glance of pity from the locals, walking their own calvary, the reality was that we remained mostly invisible. I understand it now. Visit Fatima once, witness people walking on their knees around the chapel until they nearly collapse or damage their ligaments, and you're shocked for life—as I was. But if you live there, you become accustomed to it, and the weird magic wears off.

After being ignored by the local party crowd in the cafes, the intimidating part of the journey loomed ahead: entering the woods. Back then, we deliberately slowed our pace, anticipating the need to wait for dawn as we departed the last little town. On one occasion, we had to linger there, surrounded by a place that resembled something out of a Pasolini movie. The town had a white medieval chapel, with only half of the central houses occupied. The local bakery, cafes, and post office remained shuttered. Even the last drunk men from the previous night were nowhere to be seen. The only signs of life were the flickering lights, hinting that someone still inhabited this seemingly deserted place. We would recline in the middle of the old main square, lying on stone benches, surrounded by stone pavement, occasionally hearing the first bakers driving around to collect their dough. As the sky gradually took on the first shades of celestial blue, it was time to go on. The woods were consistently imbued with a sense of mystique—not the romanticized appreciation of nature, but an eerie apprehension. I could somehow understand why people used to see the devil lurking behind every tree. It wasn't just superstition; it was fear entwined with Catholicism in an uncanny setting. Walking through the woods, especially at that early hour, with limited sunlight and no electricity, was an unfamiliar experience. No paved paths, no flashlights. If it weren't for my reflective clothing and my worn-out Air Force Ones, one might easily believe we had stepped back in time by 50 years or more.



As the temperatures continue to rise and the sun starts to hit its zenith, we enter the natural reserve surrounding the chapel we're visiting. The numerous trees generously provide much-needed shade. The road becomes even more winding, and I find myself hoping there won't be a truck ahead of us, as overtaking here seems nearly impossible.

Sporadically, we pass by houses, relatively new and substantial in size. Despite their appearance, most of them seem abandoned. I know many people whose parents come from this area. I sense that these houses were built by a generation of emigrants who sought to construct their dream homes in their homeland, perhaps leaving it for their children, who could then afford to live there. Unfortunately, this scenario rarely unfolds. Many of the original emigrants never truly returned, and very few of their children even considered moving back to Portugal, especially not to such rural areas. Various factors contribute to this choice. The parents often endured years of unreported work to finally qualify for a pension, and even those who reach the eligible age after decades abroad develop an attachment to the places they built their new lives. While the older generation might not openly admit it, you can see it in their actions. Then there are the children, who question why they should move to a place they don't really know. Some never even learned Portuguese, and they are regarded as strangers. Even the cousins with whom they spent their childhood summers may have relocated to the capital. I'm happy my parents never built such a house. Passing one after another, it feels like you can sense the pressure building, the sadness lingering in the spacious living rooms that

haven't seen sunlight in months, and the gardens that, despite their charm, reveal the neglect they've endured, a far cry from the promised care and attention.

As the landscape becomes more and more picturesque, the houses gradually recede from the road. The demographic shifts, marking a transformation from a rural working class into a more posh and touristic area. The residences disappear deeper into the woods, descending toward the valleys, where little lakes and rivers glisten. These houses are not like the ones built for and by the working class. While crafted by the same hands, they are intended for a different clientele, more sizable, opulent and wealthy.

As the first jet-skis make their appearance on the water, it becomes evident that we've entered the bourgeois enclave. Rumor has it that numerous politicians and football players, including the national hero Cristiano Ronaldo, have second or third homes here. The exact location of Ronaldo's residence remains a mystery, sparking a guessing game among locals. The general assumption leans toward the largest and most luxuriously situated property with direct access to the water. However, it could just as well belong to someone like Pepe – distinguishing between these mansions becomes increasingly impossible. Reflecting on it now, these houses, though different from the preceding ones, seem destined for a similar fate. They serve a purpose for a brief period each year and fade into obscurity thereafter.

Arriving at the location, excitement begins to surge. Eventually, we reach the town nestled at the foot of the rivers. The streets are filled with cars, making it challenging to navigate the narrow lanes. Queues of people spill out from the grilled chicken restaurants, extending onto the streets. Amidst this chaos, an idyllic landscape surrounds us. The sun beats down, casting a warm glow on the trees, reflecting the most vibrant green hues. The crystal-clear water flowing from the natural fountain to be collected down the dam nearly blinds you as you pass. On the other side of the dam lies an artificial freshwater beach, resonating with the sounds of crying and laughing children, the murmurs of parents, and the roar of jet ski motors. The chapel is just around the corner now. The final leg of the journey involves driving up the hill.

The crowds at the top are even more overwhelming than in the town below. Cars are now crammed into every available space along the roadside, as the designated parking area can't accommodate the multitude of visitors. Opting to test our luck, we try our chances, and we are fortunate enough to secure a parking spot right next to the chapel.

As we approach the chapel, we are stunned by the view. The entire town unfolds beneath us, surrounded by the forest, resembling scenes from a Poussin landscape painting. The only disruption to this cinematic panorama is the yellow and red Canadair plane circling overhead. At some point, you become aware of their name. In the summer, they play this crucial role, equipped to land on water, collect it, and transport it elsewhere. They can then release the collected water from the sky over a fire. Although there's no visible fire or smoke clouds at this moment, it's a reminder that a blaze may be raging somewhere nearby.

I had read somewhere that French painters, in contrast to their British counterparts, rarely depicted fire directly. Instead, you'd often see clouds in the background, hinting at a fire without revealing the actual flames. This portrayal aligns with the familiar scenes in southern parts of Europe during the summer, where clouds suggest wildfires, a phenomenon that has been part of the landscape for decades. I remember a day when I was outside my parents' house, capturing with my new camera a massive cloud that almost resembled a nuclear mushroom. It was fascinating to witness, not very far from my location. Yet again, you could smell it, observe the veil rising to the sky, and observe it dimming the saturated sunset in the background, but you wouldn't see the actual flames or fire.

We finally reach the chapel, and I'm taken aback. There's no one walking on their knees around the chapel. I'm momentarily disappointed that I can't show Sarah this strange phenomena, but at the same time, I feel relieved that it's not happening.

Recalling a conversation with my mother, I had once asked for her opinion on these practices and whether she had done it herself. She responded in the most Catholic way possible, "Only they know why they are doing it, so I don't judge them. When things are bad, we rely on God, and to no one else."

Going inside felt like the typical visit to a church—stepping in quickly, scanning nice paintings, and performing small rituals out of respect for others. Aside from the cute flower bouquets, I didn't come across any remarkable paintings or statues, leaving me slightly disappointed. Exiting the chapel, there was a line forming to enter the rear section, where people could kiss the statue of the saint and contribute coins to the collection box. Opting to skip the queue, we walked past it and noticed the metal boxes outside where visitors could light candles.

Here, the cinematic essence of Catholicism was palpable. Enormous flames roared, consuming the huge amounts of wax offered by devotees. The scene looked truly impressive—the flickering of the flames, the sound of wax dropping on the hot metal, and the play of light and shadow. Among the candles, some remained unlit, likely extinguished by occasional wind breezes. I decided to relight two of them. I know this is something you are not supposed to do. You should pay for your own candles, and it

feels wrong to lighten up candles that someone else brought.

To show Sarah the more morbid corners of this place, and since no one was walking on their knees, I suggested that we visit the gift shop across the street. The shop presented one of the more unsettling highlights of the experience. Stepping inside, we encountered the typical Catholic gift shop, full with rosaries in every color and material imaginable, magnets, saint statues of various sizes, candles, and the customary coin stamping machine—an oddity I still ponder, questioning its legality, as coins technically shouldn't be damaged.

Yet, the real absurdity lay in the wax figure candles. Since people visit this place to pray for sick or injured family members, the church had the rather macabre idea to sell wax figures that visitors could then light in the metal boxes outside. While the abundance of little Holy Mary figures seemed ordinary in these shops, I still shiver at the sight of the wax figures. They come in various forms, representing every human body part, from heads to left arms to right feet. You can find whole true-to-size baby bodies in wax, as well as breasts and one-meter-high legs. Imagining these wax figures in the metal box outside, where, amid the flames, all the body parts melt together, becomes particularly uncanny for me.



After leaving the gift shop, we decide to head back to the car. We feel we had experienced enough morbidity for one visit. On the way back to the car, we notice a large space under the terrace with the amazing viewpoint, filled with tables and benches, all occupied. Little children were running around, and large groups of people, from various ages, sat together enjoying their lunch. The smell of grilled meat, potato salads, and fried dumpling went through the air. The scene was set with red and white checked plastic blankets, entire ceramic sets, alongside blue and white lunchboxes containing family-sized sodas and wine dispensers.

I would never bring a lunchbox with me; the idea always distressed me. It often fell on the women to stay in the kitchen until 2am the day before, frying the last-minute items, packing and wrapping up sandwiches. The task of carrying those large, heavy boxes, the inevitable slight soggiess of the food, and the struggle to keep drinks cold made it seem like an enormous amount of work and planning for a somewhat unsatisfying outcome. However, as I observed the scene below, I find myself envying them. Sarah seems to share this sentiment. Perhaps we could have taken care of such things the day before, or I could have done it myself, altering the narrative of how such situations unfold. We ended up only watching the crowd from afar on the staircase.

Back in the car, we decide to proceed to the actual reason for our trip. Our main goal was to visit some waterfalls in the woods, named after a Polynesian Island. I can't help but wonder who came up with that name. It feels so generic and random, considering this island is on the other side of the world, and probably no one from this region could pinpoint it on a map—myself included. I wonder whether the name dates back to the time of colonialism and dictatorship or if it's a more recent development used as a tourism gimmick. Both scenarios make some sense, but it's quite possible that the actual reason behind the name is entirely different.

The road leading to the deepest woods where the waterfalls are situated turns out to be nothing more than a dirt road. The anthracite metallic paint of the car rustles against the dry tree branches lining the narrow path. I console myself with the thought that the insurance will hopefully cover any small scratches that seem almost inevitable. Anticipating the challenges ahead, particularly when encountering another car coming from the opposite direction, adds an extra layer of stress to the journey. The recurring viewpoints we pass and the breathtaking landscape serve as the only source of solace during this tense part of the trip.

Upon reaching the last visible parking spot, we decide to stop there, hoping that the hike to the waterfalls won't be too long. Despite being deep in the woods, there are surprisingly many people around, which catches me off guard. It seems the waterfalls are not as much of an insider tip as I thought. Once again, luck is on our side with parking—we find a spot right next to the trailhead. The last challenge now is descending a steep, downhill path. While my heart is still racing from the previous car ride, it doesn't slow down as we observe that the way down appears quite dangerous. There are no proper steps or handrails, the stones are so smooth that any contact with water would make them slippery, and the ominous handwritten sign reading "Life danger" does little to reassure me.

We decide to stay at one of the waterfalls in the middle, opting not to go all the way down as we couldn't figure out the exact path, and there was already plenty of action for a single day. As we lay towels on the stones next to one of the waterfalls, I need a bit of time to unwind. Gradually, I start to appreciate the beauty of the moment and the place. The sensation of the fresh and clear water drops against my back feels good. The sun filters through the trees, casting a warm glow on the waterfalls facing north. It feels almost like being on a stage, with the sun illuminating the set. Cold reflections shimmer from every direction, creating a pleasant contrast to the surrounding heat. Not a single breeze stirs the air, but the waterfall and the cold water hitting the stones refresh the atmosphere. The sound of the surroundings lulls me, and I finally find ease. I'm not even bothered anymore by the sight of teenagers performing backflips while leaping from the stones into the small water pools.



We hit the road back home. My head feels slightly heavy, but simultaneously, a sense of peace washes over me. Despite the long journey ahead, I feel calm. I simply follow the procession of cars moving slowly along the winding road. It seems there's a tractor leading the way. I was on the verge of getting annoyed, but I decide to embrace it. Why not? There's a Portuguese saying, loosely translated, that goes something like: "I have already earned for the day." And that's how I feel in this moment. I go with the flow, confident that the truck will eventually make a turn. And, indeed, it does at some point, I believe.

Back in my hometown, we decide to have a late afternoon drink, enjoying the milder, diagonal sunbursts that are gradually transforming into shadows. We sit outside at a terrace next to a church. Unlike the earlier ostentatious one we saw, this church is quite modest, with mainly white walls. However, what catches my attention is the tile panel attached to it. It's not the usual blue; it's green. Thankfully, it's not a Phthalo or Cobalt, but I wonder if it's Sap or Veronese green. As the shadows fall on the tiles, I think that the green tone becomes Sap green, and I realize that the color has probably been slightly bleached by the sun over the years, and maybe that is the reason why it is so hard to tell now.

a
s.t. 2024
Oil on linen
30 x 20 cm
2024

b
s.t. 2023
Oil on linen
40 x 32 cm
2023

c
s.t. 2023
Oil on linen
70 x 40 cm
2023

d
s.t. 2023
Oil on linen
30 x 20 cm
2023

e
s.t. 2024
Oil on linen
30 x 20 cm
2024

