

She was one of those people who come in and out of your life. After a certain age, they collect like dust. They bob around aimlessly in your consciousness, like those little floaters in your eyes. Half the time you can't even remember their names. But I remember hers, first and last, and how she looked: thin, curly black hair, Semitic. Her name was Gail, and we traveled a bit together in Rome, in 1984.\*s

I met her through Hope, a colleague at a trade publishing house where I worked in the early 80s. I was still ambitious in a conventional way then.

I'm not even entirely sure how Gail and I struck up plans to travel together. It was probably during lunch. It's a funny thing about lunch and work. Lunches were major events in my early working life. I eventually grew to detest them. So I cannot honestly remember but it's likely I mentioned I wanted to travel to Italy, and she mentioned that she was going to travel to Italy, and in the way young people make plans, plans were made. She was staying at this great pension someone in her parents' circle of friends knew about.

The next thing I knew, I was in Rome. Fiumicino was occupied by phalanxes of grim soldiers holding automatics. This was during the so-called "*Anni de piombo*," the "years of lead," when left- and right-wing terrorism was tearing the country apart. Real terrorism: bombings, kidnappings. In 1978, the Prime Minister had been kidnapped, held in captivity, and executed!

We were to meet at the pension. A bus ride from the outskirts of Rome to the center and I'm hurtling up to the third or fourth floor in an elevator so tiny it gave me claustrophobia.

Gail had a nasty habit of saying nasty things because she was a nasty person, something I hadn't picked up on during our meetings in New York City. Or perhaps I had and I'd brushed it aside. This is a habit of mine. You could say I've collected those "floaters" out of curiosity, intrigued as to what makes them tick, confident I can just move on after I've observed them. But they hurt while I'm observing them.

Gail was a practiced and vicious stealth attacker. You'd say something innocuous, and she'd fix you with cold, hostile eyes and respond with a question, or a remark, always delivered in a vicious, cutting tone after a cool second or two. I remember—or perhaps exaggerate—that there were more than two of these instances, but I only remember those two. I do clearly remember my feelings when these sneak attacks happened: shocked, hurt, and dumbfounded.

Her attacks weren't predictable. That was part of her method. I've since learned that this is classic borderline behavior. Always keep the other person off-balance. There's nothing you can do about it other than get away. I've learned that, too.

One instance occurred as we were sitting on the Spanish Steps. We were watching the fountain and the world going by. (By the way, travel-wise, there is nothing better in the world than sitting at the top of the Spanish Steps on a warm evening and watching the world go by. If you haven't done it, do it.)

At the top of the Steps sits the Hotel Hassler, a stunning luxury hotel built in the 1920s by a Swiss family. I happened to mention that my aunt and my mother stayed at the Hotel Hassler.

She said in that cutting, cold tone that I remember with a shudder, "Only idiotic, rich tourists stay there." Or something like that. In other words: spoiled fools who don't know about or wouldn't stay in cool little pensions with claustrophobia-inducing elevators, like the one we were staying in.

It ripped into me. First: how could she speak in such a fashion about someone's mother? And then, the actual content of what she said.

I began to defend my mother, haltingly. I mumbled something in her defense, but I was so angry and scared that I gave up and sat there, numb and hurt.

Here is the background. My mother depended on her rich older sister Estelle for a lot of favors. Estelle was the older sister who married well, whose only child married brilliantly, whose grandchildren went to Ivy League schools and became hugely successful Americans.

My mother's marriage was troubled, her eldest son was diagnosed with schizophrenia, her younger two children barely survived wrecked childhoods.

When Estelle's husband passed away in 1974, she was hail enough to be a merry widow. She sold her house, moved to an apartment on the Upper East Side, and traveled, often taking my mother with her. They stuck to the usual: Paris, London, Rome. And stayed in the best places.

Back to my paralysis on the Spanish Steps. I had a therapist once who correctly identified the reason for my paralytic inability to defend myself: fear of my own violent rage and what I might do if I acknowledged it.

So, thirty-seven years after the fact, I'll say it out loud: I wanted to punch Gail in the nose and tell her to go fuck herself. Maybe wrap my hands around her neck and choke her for good measure. Yeah, that is really what I wanted to do. I wanted to choke the living life out of this bitch. (On a gut level, I still do.)

But—even that wouldn't have been enough. I also wanted to stand my ground and speak my piece. And since I didn't do that then, I will now:

When you're older, you have a right to spend money on yourself, no excuses. You may have had a bitter life full of disappointments and travails and blind alleys that's added up to not much, and you'll have to return to that, but by God, you spent a few days at the Hotel Hassler, like a movie star or a head of state, at the top of the Spanish Steps in Rome, and it was glorious. It will cast a rosy glow on the years you have left and the shitty years that came before it. That memory will make your life a little bit more worth living. Is a stay at the Hotel Hassler worth the cost? Yes, it is.

My reverie continues:

Gail interrupts me in her cold, scuttling, disquieting way. People like Gail thrive on knocking you off your game with interruptions, but I have learned how to handle Gail from watching Margaret Thatcher on TV. Whenever a dipshit interviewer tried to interrupt Mrs. Thatcher, she did not lecture the dipshit in feminist theory, like Kamala Harris. She fixed her interlocutor with a steely, unwavering gaze, leaned in (literally) and said with a slight smile, "bear with me," and cruised on, unruffled. Thatcher ate people like Gail for breakfast.

"Bear with me," I say, and stand my ground.

One of the prime directives of standing your ground is to never let on that your feelings are hurt. You are a cool, impregnable character with no vulnerabilities. I think that sometimes you should break this directive. But no screaming, no tears. Be as cold as your tormenter.

I say, "You have hurt my feelings because you disrespected my mother. I don't like that."

Having slipped in the knife, I twist it. "Besides, I think you're a huge phony. I think all this budget-authentic travel is phony. All non-essential travel is the same: it's a luxury, so stop acting otherwise. We're staying at a lovely *pension*, not some pesthole."

The name of the place is lost to me, but I'll never forget the gorgeous ambience of high molded ceilings, dark polished wood, and spotless etched glass. "What's the difference between this and the Hassler except one of degree?"

I continue:

"When you go to a foreign country, you are an interloper. The only thing that distinguishes you from a trespasser is a temporary document, which expires at a set date. The documents you carry certify that your presence in the host country is a privilege they've extended to you, and not a right. It can be revoked at the discretion of the host country at any point, unlike one's citizenship.

In addition to your documents, you carry viruses and attitudes, sometimes a combination of the two.

'Backpacking' is one of the worst virus-ideas. There is nothing new under the sun, but surely *mass* backpacking travel, with its assumptions of superiority over other types of travel, is an invention of the 60s generation. I take exception to most forms of Boomer-hate, but this one's on us.

Budget travel has the unsavory, low-class reputation of being cheap and ersatz. Backpacking on the other hand is somehow noble and authentic. I will concede that there's a grain of truth in the stereotype of the budget package: the gated compound in a Caribbean island where the only indigenous people the traveler encounters are fawning service personnel, the bus tours where you get to know the insides of hotels, the bus, and dull couples from the Midwest.

I had such an experience in Turkey, and I'll never do it again. That said, I saw a fair bit of the real Turkey both on the tour and on our free time. Most of your travel experience has to do with your attitudes, not where you stay, or whom you travel with. I was the only person on that Turkey tour who had bothered to learn the Turkish alphabet, basics of the language, and who had read a bit about Ottoman history. I could have gone to Turkey, bummed around with a backpack, not learned the alphabet, not read about Turkish history, or learned the language. Who had the more "authentic" travel experience?"

At this point, I've almost prevailed over Gail, but she's not ready to give up yet.

She says, "That's true of Italy, a rich first world country, and Turkey, which is also fairly developed. But what about going to an undeveloped country like Ethiopia? Wouldn't you be missing out on the real Ethiopia if you stayed in a luxury hotel?"

"It so happens I've been reading about Ethiopia," I answer. "The short answer is that it's the same as Turkey or Italy and the fact that it's undeveloped makes no difference. It's not where you stay, it's what you see and how you see. In fact, I'd say that going to a developing country and insisting on traveling cheap is stingy and inhumane. These people need your dollars. When you stay in a hotel or buy their goods, that money goes to a family and circulates through their economy. What makes Westerners think they have the right to tramp through poor countries and not pay for anything?"

“Among the writers I came across was an Irishwoman, Dervla Murphy, who makes a habit of doing just that: going to exotic climes, subjecting herself to all manner of dangers, not staying in hotels, and making a profit off of it by writing books. She wrote a book called In Ethiopia On A Mule; about a trek she took to the Ethiopian hinterlands in 1967. Sounds amazing, doesn’t it?

I downloaded the book from a bootleg site and read eagerly. After a few pages, I began to get a sour taste in my mouth. The author continually insisted on disregarding sound advice, and on doing crazy things that necessitated other people saving her.

For example, she decides to take books on her journey, to ‘maintain contact with my own civilization. I also packed a Shakespeare anthology, Tom Jones, W. E. Carr’s Poetry of the Middle Ages, Cooper’s Talleyrand and Boros’ Pain and Providence. Unfortunately, other books inexplicably accumulated in my rucksack between London and Massawah and when climbing to the 8,000-foot Eritrean plateau I found myself carrying a weight of fifty pounds.’

The mule had to carry this excess baggage. How did books “inexplicably accumulate” in her rucksack? The entire tone was like that: scatty, offhanded, British eccentric, a tone I detest. Throughout the book she persists in a blind, blithe stubbornness, regularly blowing off the advice of the Ethiopians. Who are helping her.

I wondered if I was alone in my dislike. I looked up reviews on Amazon and Goodreads, and amidst all the fulsome praise was one observation, a small note of dissent from a generally positive review: during Murphy’s entire journey, she never once saddled up her own mule. She always depended on an Ethiopian man to do it for her. I’m not sure I would have noticed that, and I credit this reviewer for pointing that out. I returned to reading the book with a sharpened and I admit, more hostile eye.

This is not the place for a thorough book review; I will confine myself to the issue: authenticity. Did Murphy see more of the “real” Ethiopia on a mule? I would say no, with a few exceptions. A Land Rover would have transported her more safely to most of her destinations with side trips on muleback or foot.

And that poor mule. She worked it nearly to death and overpacked with useless items such as the books I have already mentioned. A couple of times the mule sensibly refused to do her bidding. At the end of the trip, she left the poor beast with someone ostensibly humane, extracting a promise that he wouldn’t just slaughter him, but I had my doubts. I’m not an animal rights activist, but this struck me as the cruelest thing she did. She could have arranged a dignified retirement, as she was a guest of the emperor’s daughter...

Oh, but I forgot to mention that. She wasn’t any old backpacker; she was a personal guest of Princess Aida Desta, Haile Selassie’s granddaughter, wife of some Governor-princeling in the northern part of the country. In other words, she had friends in high places and that really helped her: “and such is the Imperial Magic that within twenty minutes no less than six pack-mules were being paraded before me, by hopeful owners, in the stable-yard behind the palace.

True, in a remote part of Ethiopia the papers they gave her didn’t mean anything, and she had some hairy experiences, but in most places those letters from the Princess plus a white skin gave her access to power and safety. In fact, throughout the entire trip, her white skin conferred mostly protection and near worship. She downplays the race aspect but it is quite evident, and I’ve read an awful lot of other stuff which backs this up.

Most outrageously, Murphy is viciously critical of the Amhara people and shows no sensitivity to their existential plight. She describes them as “spiritually defective” and acidly notes the ubiquity of fleas and dirt and disease. She showed zero sensitivity to the plight of striving, upwardly mobile young Ethiopians, dismissing them as crass and hurtling down the road to our “materialistic sewer” – the same materialistic sewer that enables her to escape it and escape back to it. These same young people were, at that very moment, gulping down Marxism and would soon toss her royal friends into prison and exile within a few years. There is no hint of this in the book.

Let me develop a point to which I’ve already alluded and wrap up. Murphy hated hotels and proudly told us so numerous times. And this is the most ridiculous thing about backpacking travel—this pride in not spending money.

Imagine the following exchange.

An Ethiopian shows up at my door and says, ‘I’ve decided to visit New York City. May I stay in your home?’

‘Stay at a hotel,’ I say. ‘There are plenty of them. They’re set up for people like you.’

‘But I don’t like hotels. I want to stay in your house. For nothing. I expect you to extend hospitality.’

I asked you to imagine this but you cannot because it’s a ridiculous scenario. Yet Dervla Murphy expected Ethiopians—poverty-stricken people—to do exactly that. Once or twice, she offered to pay, but her hosts always refused. I would have paid anyway. I would have left money as an offering somewhere in the house.

Every step of the way she was a burden to the people she met. She actually does acknowledge this at one point and states how difficult it would be for her Ethiopian hosts if she were injured or died. Her habit of blowing off sound advice and forcing her mule into hair-raising adventures led me to conclude that she wasn’t there to see Ethiopia, she was there to flagellate and congratulate herself.

And that is my opinion about backpacking travel. It is ‘flagellate and congratulate’ and status competition. It has nothing to do with really seeing the country. Before I read Murphy’s book, I admit to having a residual spark of deference for the backpacker ethos. I now have none.

Of course, if you have little money and you really want to travel, go, go, go! There’s no time like now. There’s no time like youth. Seize the day.

But don’t deceive yourself into thinking that less money means more authenticity. And don’t drive yourself crazy in a futile attempt to “out rough” and “out real” your friends. Feel no guilt about living it up abroad. Quite the opposite—spend as much as you can! Stay in the best accommodations you can afford! Tip generously, and don’t haggle unless the vendor enjoys it.

Most of all: never sponge off your hosts. They need the money in a way that you don’t.

Above all, keep your criticisms to yourself, and don’t try to make money off them in a travel book. It’s a fundamentally corrupt and rotten exercise.”

That is what I would have said to Gail, but did not.

Why didn't I talk back? I wasn't just scared of my own rage; I was scared of losing her as a travel companion. But eventually I overcame this, and I dumped her. At some point I informed Gail that I wanted to see Venice and Florence on my own. I vaguely remember she was puzzled and hurt and tried to convince me to stay in Rome a little longer. Maybe that's a self-serving delusion. I don't know. I do remember that being away from Gail was like shaking off an illness.

Elated, I took the train north to Venice and Florence, had a great time, and then returned to Rome. I stayed at the same pension. I knew Rome pretty well by then, and I spent a few glorious days banging around on my own, so happy not to have that awful girl around.

Perhaps one day I will stay at the Hotel Hassler.

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\*I misremembered the year. It was 1981. The wedding of Charles and Diana was going on in the background, something that escaped me as I was writing this.

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