

The Well at San Gimignano

by James Como (January 2016)

Remy was a whore and her husband Dickey a 24-carat prick who thought he had thrown his best friend, Andre, and Remy's only true love (though she was too imbecilically narcissistic to know it) under the bus: now Dickey could have Remy to himself. But those details don't matter. What matters is that these two phony bastards had decided to vacation in Italy where, as Remy put it, they "could eat *real* pizza."

Soon enough they found themselves at the medieval citadel of San Gimignano, high atop a cliff as though grown from raw rock and glowing in sunlight, all stone walls and towers, turret after turret. Remy thought it promised "authenticity," so they drove as close as they could then walked up the stone path. It went twisting on and at one point Dickey thought to turn back, but Remy would have none of it. Finally – near its end the path had become a stone-encased tunnel: "like a tomb," Dickey said – it opened onto an unpaved piazza that somehow looked bigger on the inside than it should be and was surrounded mostly by small, irregular buildings and colonnaded walkways.

No people. Heat to grill by from a sun that seemed to sizzle.

There they saw, oh, maybe thirty yards across the piazza and another thirty to their right, the oldest church they had ever seen, oldest of the few they had bothered to pay attention to anyway, with lots of broad steps leading up to a wide cracked wooden door. To their left, another thirty yards across and away, was a lone free-standing tower, very narrow and very tall, with a small metal door at its base. No windows.

"Like Dante's Second Circle," said Dickey, the circle of lust, the only section of the Cliff Notes that he had bothered with, so he couldn't know any better. Remy – feet apart, knees locked, back arched, one arm straight up with fingers spread, the other straight down as though reaching, head tilted back so she could look up and around – "look at these towers on the walls, so many, so straight, and big, and that one by itself . . ." She ran out of breath.

Dead center in the middle of the piazza was a circular stone well, in prime

condition yet, somehow, ancient. You could feel it. Its trestle had no rope and no bucket. You could trace a diameter from the church through the well to the solitary tower. The dirt was desert-dry, and though it was not high noon there were no shadows. And there was no sound.

They were still, squeezed by their own emptiness and the emptiness around them. "What do you suppose is down there?" Dickey asked suddenly. "It sure isn't water, not without a bucket."

"Demons, baby. Demons always come out of the well, don't you know?" Remy could see a shiver ripple through Dickey's body, so she added, "Hey now. Look. Something goes wrong, there's always the church, just opposite. We're covered. And you know what? A perfect place for some classic Remshots." Dickey smiled.

Now, Remy was the classic bird-faced twerp, sleeping with other women's husbands (which Andre had not been) and fond of being photographed nude, or just about, and then sending the photos to selected . . . friends. She flounced jauntily to the well where she could pose for Dickey to snap some pics.

Dickey of course was always the photographer, he thought, and the only recipient of the photos, he thought, so he was an eager accomplice to this *jeu d'sprit*, as Remy had heard her hobby once called by Mimi, a girlfriend who, like Andre, actually was French. In fact, Remy's plan was to send one of them to Andre, as mischief, for fun.

So here she was grinning like a circus clown, her eyes wide, her breathing heavy.

So here by the well Dickey clicked away on his phone.

First Remy dropped her blousy peasant top to her waist and posed frontally. Then, spinning, with her skirts lifted to her waist, leaning over the well. Truth be told there was much to admire: her most fetching enticement. Brassy Ass, as Andre called her inverted heart-shaped and pliant swell of satisfaction.

There were other shots, one showing Rem's Glam Garden (Andre again, and by now glistening, because nothing aroused Remy faster than the thought of her own

carnality). "But none really *vulgar*," she thought. By the time she and Dickey were done, she already knew which to send Andre: "Brassy, yes. Taunt and haunt. Serve the pathetic wanker right."

"The camera, love," she said, "I want to edit." Dickey came to her, gave her the phone, lifted her skirt again, knelt behind her, and kissed Remy's great treasure. While he was kneeling she sent off the photo. When they were done they leaned back against the well, faces up. Thinking . . . thinking what? A *tan*?

But that was not to be. Very suddenly the sun got even brighter and hotter – "it's a furnace," Remy said – and dirt rose gently. With no breeze it seemed to levitate. Dickey coughed and his eyes teared.

"*Bon giorno*, young people," they heard from behind, and they jumped. Remy turned and noticed that the door in the tower was open. "Come. Get out of this heat. There. Across the piazza. To the church." By then several people had come out of the building – smiling, merry – and, scooping up the couple, just about danced them towards the church. A boy was waiting with the door opened. Once everyone was inside he closed it.

There Dickey and Remy beheld utter calm, a cool, refreshing, settled peace. The people – twelve: women and men, some children – walked to the alter, knelt, and prayed aloud in unison.

Remy whispered, "Dickey. They're, like, some cult. I don't like this."

Neither did he. "What's happening?" he rasped. "What kind of place is this?" He hoped he sounded manly enough to merit an answer.

"Only our church," answered the oldest, most crinkled woman, who seemed to be in charge. "Once it was a saintly place, and so beautiful. Originally – I was a very little girl, hardly more than a baby – there was a garden – with life and color, flowers, fruit, even two trees, so cool it was – all around the well. Until the great sin. It was like a bomb that set off so many, so many other sins. I cannot say more. Everything began to die. Sin spawns sin, you know, and feasts on sinners, and not only sinners." Remy stared. "Many come to the well. And we pay with our suffering. And we pray that one day this will again be a holy place."

Remy and Dickey may as well have been aphasic. A small boy stood and walked to the door, thinking to allow the visitors to leave. There, just inside, he picked up the phone Dickey had used to take the photos. In the bustle Remy had dropped it. He brought it inside and handed it to his older sister.

Then everyone heard a gasp. The sister, no more than fifteen, had used such a phone once before and knew to press a button, and that is when Brassy came up.

“What is it child?” It was the old woman. With her head turned away, the girl held out the phone for the old lady to see. “Are there others?” she asked, calmly, so calmly. The girl came close to her and swiped the screen. The old woman never changed her expression. Finally she turned slowly towards Remy and fixing her with a stone dead gaze said slowly, severely, “*quella li e una putana.*”

Remy understood that last word all right and desperate, irrational fear spiked up her spine into her lizard brain. She peed. “No. No I’m not a whore, I’m not a *putana*. Honest, I’m not. Those are just . . . they’re just for my husband and me, for fun. I swear. *I swear to God!*” Tears began rolling down Dickey’s cheeks.

The old woman, almost in a whisper, said, “*portarli al pozzo.*” In truth so little time had passed: a very small portal to eternity. The boy walked back to the door, opened it wide, turned towards the well, and waited. He would lead them.

For a while Andre wondered about Remy’s silence after receiving that final picture. Remy, with those banal images, who “kept in touch,” as she put it, chuckling at what she thought a clever pun. Touching. She actually believed he’d keep them. What was the *grisette* thinking? Then again, maybe this *one*? Mimi would be amused. It would be fun.

But in that instant he decided, Nah. Clean break, clean slate. Nothing all that special – and he realized how glad he was to be rid of her. Eventually, along with the rest of the world beyond the well, he forgot all about Remy and Dickey.

James Como is professor emeritus of rhetoric and public communication at York College (CUNY). His latest book is [here](#).

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