

Gabriella

by Hamish Spiers

About 2.5 million years ago, magma rising through the Earth's crust about a quarter of a mile from here caused it to expand, forming a mound that increased in size until it became a mountain. It then exploded in a violent eruption, so I've read, and has been silent ever since.

There's a village just a few miles from its base these days, a little to the west of where I'm sitting right now, and many little farms scattered about the rolling foothills and picturesque plains surrounding it. The locals wonder what I'm doing here. I wonder that myself.

There are some people back home who also wonder, though for different reasons. The volcano is only dormant, not extinct, they've told me. It could erupt again. But so could the volcano overlooking Naples. So could Mt. Fuji. You can't worry about these sorts of things. It's like watching the sky all the time in case a meteorite hits you.

The locals aren't worried, I know that. For the most part, it doesn't cross their minds. One old man says it's pointless to worry over it since they don't have anywhere else to live. Others say if the old volcano does erupt, then it's just God's will and they'll go along with it.

I'm not sure if I'd feel the same way but I get where they're coming from. Things will be what they will be and all that. Besides, I can't fault them on being religious. I think everyone's religious in one way or another. Some people worship a god or a variant of the concept. Some worship the almighty dollar. People have faith in the ones they love and there are people out there who dedicate their entire lives to a single cause. And I'm no different. I'm not quite sure what I believe or what it is I'm looking for but I've got this blind kind of faith of my own that one of these days I'll find it.

For the past few weeks, I've been living in the hope that I might find it here. Well, at least something tangible that will give me that sense of fulfillment I'm lacking. Some people are after an elusive recognition or fame and fortune to give them that. But for me, I'm looking for a sign of a civilization lost to the ages. I admit the whole thing's a little balmy though. I've come all this way with my tools, my notes and a heap of miscellaneous supplies but my reasons for doing so are about as shaky as the tectonic plates that formed this whole area. I'm here because some farmer *apparently* said he'd found some unfamiliar artifacts near the volcano. Expeditions may well have been organized over less but not by anyone I know.

But that's what I do. I jump on planes at the slightest hint of a rumor and go looking for lost cities of gold. Imagining that I might someday become a Fiorelli for a new generation and excavate the next Pompeii. Or maybe another Machu Picchu. In an age where just about every inch of the Earth's surface has been surveyed a hundred times over and photographed from space. But a man can dream, can't he? Still, it's what I've always done. And I've been doing it for so long, I can't remember why any more.

I don't want to get my picture in the papers. At least I don't think that's the reason. And I'm not even sure what I'd do if I *did* find something. Dig and dig until there was nothing left uncovered, sure, but beyond that? I'd probably just tell my friends at the university and let them decide what they want to do with the ruins. I doubt I'd even be that interested in carbon dating them, to be honest. All I want to do is find them.

However, it's all academic anyway. The realist in me says there's nothing here. And the many days of wandering around, brushing sand off rocks, getting sunburnt and not finding anything seem to concur. The locals say there's nothing here either. And as for the farmer who said he found some artifacts, not only are none of those artifacts anywhere to be seen but neither is the farmer. The locals don't know anything about him or his tales of dug-up treasure so God knows where the rumor came from. By the sound of things, it was every bit as hollow as this mountain that's decorating the scenery. Or my life's pursuits.

Although, it's not a bad life, fruitless though my various endeavors are. And as I sit here looking at all the little citrus and olive farms below me and enjoy the warm sun – perhaps a little too much for my own good – I can't say I'm sorry I came here. I suppose it's like an old fisherman out on the sea all day in a tiny dinghy. He might not catch a thing but he wouldn't be anywhere else for all the world.

And then there's Gabriella.

She's one of the local girls. Her mother's deceased. Her father grows lemon trees. He looks like he's seventy, if he's a day, and she's maybe a little north of twenty. Also, he gives me lemons – more than I can possibly need – and she comes and sees me every day. No matter what side of the volcano I'm on or how far up the slope I am.

She's walking up the slope now. I can see her clearly from here, although I'm not sure if she can see me yet. She always talks to me. Sometimes for a few minutes. Sometimes for hours. Sometimes she tells me to get out of the hot sun, and I do wish I'd listen occasionally. Other times, it seems as though I'm an object of curiosity for her. Not that it's a bad thing, to be the object of curiosity of a pretty young woman. And she is pretty, even if it's in a manner all her own. I imagine a lot of men back home would find her plain but there's a sweetness to her nature that I can't help but find attractive. And she has a lovely smile. She does.

However, I should say I don't really mean anything by any of that. Because I'm not the kind to take advantage of that kind of thing. And I'm not saying that because I think I'm a terrific guy, because I'm not. I'm an unattached drifter who's more interested in scraping around in the dirt than in making meaningful connections to people. I'm saying it because I know there's nothing really going on here. Gabriella's a little curious about the stranger who's come to town, so to speak, and she feels sorry for me roaming around the foot of this mountain getting dehydrated and sunburnt. And that's all there is to it.

Well, almost all. There is that village dance tonight and she's been asking me to go with her all week. I'm pretty sure she's only asking because she doesn't want me to feel left out but maybe there's more to it. I don't know. Of course, I've told her I can't make it. Many times. I'm busy. I've got a lot of sites to investigate. Reports to write. Things like that. It's all nonsense of course. The truth is I think I'd just stand around looking awkward if I went.

Although, I'm wondering now if maybe I *should* go. There certainly wouldn't be any harm in it and maybe I'd have a nice time. Maybe *she'd* have a nice time. Stranger things have happened. So maybe I should.

I've spent so much time here looking for buried artifacts and looking around the empty caves and foothills. Maybe I'd be better off looking down the hill where all the people are for a change. Just one night away from all of this...*emptiness*. Not looking for glimpses of something long gone but something here and now, in the land of the living where the people go about their daily lives. After all, it's just one night.

Gabriella's almost here now. And I've made up my mind.