

Eleanor Roosevelt

One could argue that Eleanor Roosevelt saved my mother's life, and most likely mine as well. But it wasn't the former First Lady herself who was so significant; like love, it was the *idea* of her that allowed us to survive the physical and psychological ordeal we went through on an ill-fated expedition one night in Italy in the late '90s. Or, more specifically, the *distraction* of Mrs. Roosevelt, which can resemble love.

I lived in Italy for four months, researching and writing a screenplay based on the life and death of Nicolo Paganini, the violinist and classical composer. Knowing my mother the way I did, I don't know why it surprised me that she decided to visit when I was there. She was with me for Christmas and New Year's Eve, which ended up being something we'd share for a few more years to come. At the time, I thought her visit was very thoughtful since I was completely alone in another country (which was okay since writing is a lonesome job), but thinking about it more in later years, I realized her trip was mostly based on self-serving motives – that being, she had an excuse to visit Italy.

Upon further examination of it after the fact, it wasn't in my best interest for her to visit me then. I was there for only a short time and for a specific purpose, so I had to make the most of every minute, as there was a lot of research and interviews to be done, not to mention the writing. So, in truth, it was inconsiderate for her to visit. She wasn't the type of person who ever asked permission. Had she truly considered what I wanted to accomplish, she would have at least asked me first. Sure, she could have visited Italy whenever she wanted, and she did ask on a few occasions while she was there if I needed time to write (which I always took her up on), but even that wasn't enough, as I felt obligated to spend as much time with her as possible since we weren't exactly in a tourist area and she never would have survived the day-to-day experience on her own (to say nothing of our mountaintop life-or-death experience).

She was a Jewish mother, so saying no to her was not an option. Putting it that way, I guess even if she had asked ahead of time and I had said no – that it wasn't ideal for her to visit – she would have come anyway with an excuse like, "I won't interfere. Just do whatever you need to do and I'll do things on my own..." I'll say it again, though. There was no saying no to her, and with my guilty obligation to spend time with her (especially as she was getting older and I didn't visit her as often as I should have), it was a small miracle that I succeeded in what I had set out to do in that short amount of time. (The end goal was only a first draft, which ended up being a whopping 228 pages. It was my first screenplay and I still had a lot to learn, especially about length!)

I was staying in the northern seaside town of Rapallo, which was a short train ride from Genoa, where Paganini was born and raised. So whenever I needed to go into Genoa, it was an easy commute. Plus, I visited other cities in Italy and France that were important to his life and/or his death. I mention death specifically because his body was moved back and forth among various locations for 56 years – two years shorter than his actual lifespan. It was one of the greatest religious travesties in recorded history, and one of the longest pilgrimages of a dead body... but I won't get into any of that right now, as it doesn't directly relate to what happened to us – except that if I had actually listened to my mother that night and done what she had wanted me to do once things went bad, I would have had to deal with the pilgrimage of *her* dead body and I didn't really want to compete with Paganini's posthumous problems.

Despite my required short intervals of travel to nearby cities, Rapallo was still my home base, so that was where my mother came to visit. She stayed in the same hotel, just down the hall, and I can guarantee that even though I was there for four months and she for only two weeks, if the staff from back then remembers either of us, they remember her. (I still keep in touch with a waiter from that hotel who was clearly upset when I informed him a few years ago of her passing.) People always remembered my mother, no matter where she went. She once pointed this out to me, and I agreed, but also reminded her that it wasn't always in the best light. (Her

tombstone reads, “Her life made a difference.” That she wrote that epitaph herself pretty much sums her up.)

The hotel staff would have remembered her as a generous American lady who was very nice to everyone, regardless of their position on the staff, and very talkative in a friendly and not typically American, aggressive way (which was more her true nature). So in this particular scenario, they would have remembered her in a good light. But the main thing they would never forget about her was how she almost died while she was there and I had to save her life.

I’ve made plenty of stupid mistakes in my life, not to mention a host of regrets to go along with them, and what happened to my mother and me in Italy is near the top of the list in both categories. Had she died, it would have been entirely my fault.

It started with me not thinking thoroughly of who she was as a person. She was not a hiker. Nor am I, for that matter, but I could hike if I wanted to. I’m not referring to her advanced age at the time, as I knew a few people her age, and even older, who did a lot of physical activity, some even more than I did. But she was more of an “aristocrat,” or, at least, an attempted one, as opposed to someone who wore sneakers and wasn’t afraid to get dirty. When I got the brilliant idea of taking her to Cinque Terre to walk among the small towns there, I had no idea what we were in for.

I had been to Cinque Terre before (or, as I refer to it now, “Cinque Terror”), but I’d just stayed in the one town I arrived at and had a coffee or something; on that trip by myself, I hadn’t ventured to any of the other four towns (five total, hence “Cinque”), which are separated by steep hills and rocky terrain. In other words, they’re not right next to each other, as I assumed they were. This was mistake number one.

Mistake number two was arriving there in the late afternoon, not long from sundown. My mother was no morning person, nor someone who ever arrived on time, so it was near impossible to get anywhere at a decent time. She enjoyed a long breakfast every day, as that was her favorite meal. It was mine too, but I was done with breakfast hours before she ever was. She would sleep incredibly late, as if she were a club hopper who went to bed at 4 a.m. every day, so by the time she would “put her face on” and have a three-hour breakfast, it was pretty much late afternoon by the time we started our first activity. Hence the late arrival at Cinque Terre.

My biggest mistake that day was multi-pronged. I thought it would be a nice idea to walk from one town to the next and then have dinner in the second town. After a relaxing dinner (as if there were any other kind in Europe), we’d take a train back to the hotel. She was not a walker though, as I’ve said, much less a hiker, so she was inadequately dressed. I don’t remember what I wore, but I can usually adapt; she was not an adapter whatsoever. So the egregious error on my part was starting this pilgrimage so late, not fully acknowledging the big sign that strongly recommended not starting after 1 p.m.; we were already over three hours beyond that. I thought it was a 15-minute walk or thereabouts, so I took the warning as meaning not to try to make it to all five towns after 1 p.m., and we were just going to the next town, so how far could that be? I didn’t bother to find out exactly how long the walk was before setting out, or to factor in my mother’s physical condition; nor did I even ask about the terrain, as I imagined it was just a straight walk by the ocean, like walking from Santa Monica to Venice Beach.

In other words, it was a walk we never should have begun, no matter what time we started. The only reason I even mention our starting time is because nightfall almost guaranteed our deaths. It was winter, and in the mountains at night, especially by the ocean, it can get cold.

My final error in judgment was a major red flag that I also ignored. When we set out, I asked someone how long the walk was to the next town and they said 15 minutes, which confirmed my estimate. I should point out, though, that I’d pulled “15 minutes” out of my ass, and apparently this guy I asked did too, because around 15 minutes into the walk, I asked someone else the same question, as my mother had already started complaining and was asking questions I couldn’t truly answer. The second person’s answer should have stopped us in our tracks and

made us turn back. Had we turned around at that point, it would have been just a 30-minute mistake, the sun would have still been up, and the worst thing would have been enduring her shit about it for the rest of the night (and possibly the rest of her trip, if not the rest of her life), but that would have been far preferable to what eventually happened.

This second person I asked told us that it was around a four-hour hike, and upon glancing at my mother, strongly advised us against continuing. But for some reason I'll never know, maybe pure stupidity, I ignored this person's warning and soldiered on, convinced that we would get there in a few more minutes.

My mother even suggested we turn back, but I reminded her that the first person we'd asked had said it was 15 minutes and that this other person I'd just asked was probably talking about the hike among all five towns. She bought this pitch but, as was her nature, continued to bitch about it, especially since the walk started to turn into a climb, and a strenuous one at that, even for someone my age at the time. So we continued, walking up the mountain higher and higher. I asked a few more people we encountered the same question about the distance and every single person gave a different answer. Some said it wasn't much further, while others confirmed what the second person had said – that it was a good four hours. Another thing I didn't realize at this point was that everyone we encountered was walking the *opposite* direction, towards where we'd started. No one was walking the same direction we were; yet another red flag.

As the sun began to set and my mother's complaints and questions became incessant, I started worrying myself, but didn't let her know that. Every time she asked me how much further, I told her it wasn't very far and tried to speak with as much confidence as I could, as if I knew what I was talking about. I don't know whether she bought it or not, but the other thing that started to worry me was that I wasn't seeing any more signs telling us which way to go. Even by daylight the signs had been hard to follow, but as the sun began to set, it became difficult to even find them. I remember going the wrong way very early on when the sun was still out and having to turn back a short distance because I'd missed a sign; this obviously got much harder as we lost the light. Not to mention, at some point, probably early on, I had evidently missed a sign, so we were already walking the wrong way. We were lost, and my mother begged that we turn around and head back to where we'd started... but it was way too late for that. I was fairly certain, and told her so, that doubling back would be the longer route. At some point earlier on, when it was still light out, turning around would have been the smart thing to do; but as the hours wore on and the sun completely faded from the sky and we had only the scant light of the moon when it occasionally filtered through the dense trees, we were surrounded by the blackness of night and the cold ocean winds.

I've lived through some scary situations – the Northridge earthquake, the L.A. riots – but don't think I was ever as scared as I was that night in the Italian Alps with my mother. It wasn't just my life at stake, it was hers too, and I felt responsible for it. As it grew darker and colder and I had no idea where we were (and neither of us had cell phones – not that they would have gotten a signal anyway), I was certain we were going to freeze to death and that hikers would find our cold, dead bodies the next morning. I had no idea at that point that our eventual demise could be brought on by anything else; any other way of dying never crossed my mind.

Walking for the hours we did, not to mention the distance we must have covered, we had to stop and take frequent breaks to catch our breath, especially my mother. I had trouble breathing, and she had a lifelong smoking habit, so you can imagine what shape she was in.

It was probably around 9 p.m. (we had walked maybe five hours already with no end in sight) when, during one of our stops, my mother fell off a cliff.

We had been standing there in the dirt surrounded by trees, probably nowhere near the path we should have been on, most likely talking about how much farther it might be (and I admit, the false confidence I wanted to portray to her was probably getting less and less believable), when she stepped backwards and disappeared from my view. Granted, it was dark, but one minute she was standing there in the dim moonlight, probably complaining, and the next second she wasn't standing there anymore. It was like a magic trick. She didn't scream; at least, I

didn't hear a scream.

At first, I thought maybe she had stepped out of the moonlight we had at that particular vantage point, but I think instinct took over and I immediately ran to where she had stood, sensing that something bad had happened. And I was right. When I found her, she was hanging off a cliff. She had a tiny ledge that she could get a portion of her toes onto, but she mostly just hung there, and I don't think she had any idea what waited below if she lost her grip and fell the rest of the way. It wasn't a straight drop to the ocean, but a sloped terrain full of trees. The trees were dense, but with the little moonlight and what I imagine were lights from a nearby ship or something, I could still make out the dark ocean beyond. Had she fallen, more than likely she would have ended up in the sea, but only after banging through a bunch of trees along the way, so she probably would have died before hitting the water; but even if she survived the fall, the ocean would have swallowed her up instantly. To state it simply, she was in trouble and I was the only thing between her and death.

No one who knew her would be surprised to know that all she did while she hung there for her life those few minutes was argue with me. She wasn't necessarily mad at me or blaming me for her fall. She had apparently just taken a step backwards for balance and there had been nowhere to step; due to the darkness, she hadn't realized that she was standing on the edge of a cliff. The ensuing argument centered on the fact that she felt she was too heavy to lift up and that I should just go and get help and come back. This wasn't an argument she could win, however, for if I had indeed done what she wanted me to and left her alone, hanging off the mountain, she would have fallen to her death shortly thereafter; by the time I could have realistically found help and figured out how to get back to her, she probably would have been somewhere near the wreckage of the *Titanic*.

We went back and forth on this for a minute or so as she continued to lose her grip, insisting that I wouldn't be able to lift her, so I told her, in no uncertain terms, that if I didn't lift her up immediately, she was going to die. I remember repeating these words exactly: "If I leave, you die."

As was her nature, when I first went to pull her up, she fought me. She wasn't a heavy person to begin with, but she wasn't going to make anything easy for anyone, not even in the face of imminent death. I could see that the cliff was jagged with rocks and lifting her straight would surely cut her open, so I had to swing her out and then up to avoid this. Her resisting me made her body even heavier. But, due to my sheer will to save her life, and the adrenaline surging through my veins, I lifted her up and over the jagged rocks as if I were merely picking up a paper clip. It ended up being far easier than I'd expected once I went through with it – and a moment earlier I'd begun to believe her that I wouldn't be able to do it, but knowing I was her only option for survival, I just did it.

I didn't then, nor do I now, consider myself any sort of hero, like a fireman running into a burning house to save a baby. We were just in a bad situation and I did what I had to do; anyone in a similar situation would have done the same. Once she was safely back on solid ground, she told me she had a lot of pain in one of her ankles (it turned out she'd twisted it, not to mention cutting it and her lower leg fairly badly), and once we were in better light, I discovered she was pretty bloody, although I wasn't certain if it was blood or just mud (it turned out to be both). I don't remember if it rained significantly during our trek, but I remember getting muddy myself. I think there was a sprinkle here and there.

So we were still stuck up in the mountains at night, cold and shivering, with her twisted ankle a new addition to the equation, and now more than ever, I was certain we were doomed. I still had no idea how much farther we had to go, and with her injury, we were now moving even slower as I had to hold her for support while she basically limped the rest of the way. Even then, she insisted that I leave her to find help and come back for her later, but just as I had told her when she was hanging from the cliff: "If I leave you here, you will die."

A glimmer of hope came to us then in two ways. One, I finally started to see city lights off the coast through the tree line, which I assumed was the next town, but sometimes distances can be deceiving. What looked close was really still quite far, but the mirage of its closeness at least gave us a destination we could occasionally see through the trees and, with that, "a light at the end of the tunnel." So when she continued to ask how much further, I would point to the lights and say "Not much further now," but I can't say honestly that I believed it myself. The

lights gave me some hope at first, but after walking and walking and the lights not getting any bigger with our apparent approach, I began to fear the worst again, and with her injured ankle, I thought our chances of making it were slim to none.

But I think the city lights gave her some hope. With her still asking me to leave her to get help, I began to suspect that she knew I wouldn't be able to find help in time and that if I left her she would die, but I think that was when her motherly instinct began to kick in, as she felt she was now slowing me down, and rather than both of us dying, on some level, she was asking me to leave her to die so that at least I could live. But I wasn't going to do that. If she died, we both would.

At this point I knew time was against us, as the later it got, the colder it became, and even though we were moving, albeit slowly, I now worried about freezing to death before making it there.

That was when Eleanor Roosevelt saved us.

I had always known my mother had a fascination with First Ladies, especially Jacqueline Kennedy, who I think had the life (minus her husband's assassination, of course) that my mother had always dreamed of. My mother never wanted to be a movie star, so it wasn't necessarily fame itself she desired, but there was something about being married to the President of the United States that captivated her. That glamorous life was far removed from the reality of my mother's small world, and became more so as she grew older. The one thing she did have in common with Jackie was that she had been a young widow as well, and I think that fact bound her to Jackie in some way. (My mother's first husband – not my father – died when she was very young and already had two children, and another one recently born, to raise on her own. "Recently born" is no exaggeration. Her husband was dying from melanoma on one floor of the hospital while she gave birth on another.)

For some reason, though, that night in the mountains, it wasn't Jackie she wanted to talk about. Shortly after her fall from the cliff, she asked me to tell her about Eleanor Roosevelt. Mind you, I knew nothing about Eleanor Roosevelt other than the fact that she was married to F.D.R., but she insisted on me telling her about the First Lady. I figured out fairly quickly that she wanted me to distract her from our present circumstances, which was actually a brilliant idea, but what I didn't realize until later was that it distracted me too, especially since I was making things up as we went along. With each step we took, I continued to weave a fictional story about a real person. And her idea worked. We both got lost in my story about Eleanor Roosevelt, and just before midnight we suddenly came within steps of our intended destination.

When we finally arrived in the small seaside town, nearly eight hours after departing for this would-be short afternoon stroll, an old woman spotted us and exclaimed, "Momma Mia!", which I'll never forget, as we were probably a fright to see coming out of the dark woods, especially considering the caked dirt and the blood that just about covered us from head to toe due to the numerous scratches from tree branches. The old woman spoke no English, but she ushered us to people who did and eventually we were taken by ambulance to a nearby hospital. We were in bad shape both physically and emotionally, especially my mother, but we were filled with a fictional story about Eleanor Roosevelt that ultimately saved us both.

Perhaps it was that night when I began to suspect that life had more in store for me than I could ever imagine.