

The Walk of Life

By Artie Zimmet

If ifs and buts were candy and nuts then everyday would be Christmas. This catchy adage explains the futility of wishing things were different. Reality would be severely twisted if everyone could take back moments in the past and change them to what might have been; yet everyone at one point or another has pondered the what ifs of life, the road not taken. The path not chosen is much too tempting of a question to be ignored; full of imagination and dreams, what might have been is an infinite realm. The universal question of what might have been if only ...? is but one such question Robert Hellenga probes in his novel *The Sixteen Pleasures*.

Excellent
composed
opening

Choosing a path at a fork in the road has many consequences. A moment is all it takes to change someone's life forever; but the heroine of Hellenga's novel, Margot Harrington, does not shed her skin so quickly. Many moments pile together on top of each other and slowly, Margot evolves, answering her questions along the way. The seemingly unrelated string of events some call chance and some call destiny lead Margot to where she wants to be.

In the novel's opening chapter, Margot is on the move, on the walk of life. She boards a midnight train not knowing exactly where she is on her journey through life; she is searching for something, "looking for a sign." Although Margot is disoriented as she looks out the train window, she knows she has set her life in motion again. Margot is trying to save herself from "waiting around with nothing coming up" by leaving the place where her life is stagnating while the world leaves her behind. She is trying to recover the image of her core: the time in her life when she was nineteen and in Italy, and all was right in her world.

In the following chapters, Hellenega begins to explore Margot's most dominant inner conflict. Margot is clinging to the past. Her mother's death and her family's separation haunt her thoughts and actions throughout much of the story. Margot attempts to distance herself from her feelings, losing herself in her work, Sandro, Florentine life, and ignoring her father's letters. She tries and tries, but almost everything reminds her of her childhood when her mother was alive. She thinks of her mother killing a rat, her father's cooking and her sisters clowning around. She thinks of all the pleasant moments that make her past so enjoyable that she does not want to let it go and accept the changes in her life. Margot still listens for her mother's voice between the moments that make up her life.

Margot travels to Florence to fill in the empty spaces during which she listens for her mother's recording to begin. The head abbess of Santa Caterina Nuova, Madre Badessa, seems to recognize this instinctually and becomes Margot's mother-figure who provides wisdom and assurance during Margot's Florentine days of reckoning. Conversations between the two serve as a microcosm of insight into Margot's emotional whereabouts throughout the story. Madre Badessa hints that Margot needs to give up her deepest hopes to make sense out of her life. Initially, Margot wonders how that is relevant to her life, but the following thought realizes her need to give up her deepest hopes. Margot knows she journeyed to Florence to make sense out of her life and now Madre Badessa has shown her how.

Margot's sojourn at Santa Caterina Nuova raises intriguing questions in Margot's head which readers can easily relate to. Could I ever become a nun? Do nuns ever regret their decision? Do they ever yearn for a lover? Self interrogation is a common human trait and the questions surrounding the oath of poverty, chastity and obedience are just as tempting as the road

not taken. In a sense, they are the same question because Margot is questioning a path she has not chosen.

Human nature abounds in *The Sixteen Pleasures*. Margot is human nature in this novel. There is a part of Margot in everyone. As she stands in front of the Elgin Marbles and wonders if she is wrong not to be overwhelmed by the art, readers nod their heads in understanding. Hellenga writes about events and thoughts many people experience and can relate to. *The Sixteen Pleasures* follows Margot's development from restless to content. The dilemmas, if not the characters, are easy to relate to. Most everyone knows the feeling that comes when clinging to the past. Most everyone knows the restlessness that comes with the uncertainty of not knowing what they want in life. And most everyone knows how hard it is to let go of their deepest hopes.

Margot's time spent contemplating the Elgin Marbles culminates the slow evolution she undergoes and she finally accepts the change that has swept her old life away and separated her family. She is through searching for the moment and has made sense of her life by giving up her deepest hopes. She has "let them go, scattered them like the seeds of a dandelion that one blows into the wind on a warm summer's day." In the end of the chapter, Margot no longer listens for her mother's voice in the moments between the lightning and the thunder. Margot stands in Piazza Santa Croce at the story's conclusion knowing she would not want to be anywhere else but standing in the piazza. Her journey is over and she is genuinely happy. The piazza that she stands in, all "charged with meaning," is not the speeding train she began her voyage in, but the opposite: someplace to be rather than to go. *The Sixteen Pleasures* is about finding the piazza in the walk of life.

Artie,

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there are no marks on ³ these page because this is not only your best writing of the semester, but quite possibly the best I've seen from anyone. Superb both