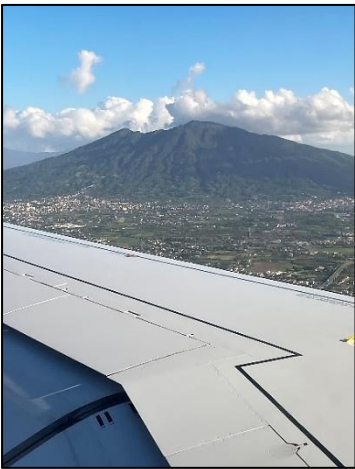


The Streets of Pompeii

The plane banked and then I saw it – Mount Vesuvius.

I stifled a gasp. I've wanted to see the famous volcano since I was a kid, and there it was drifting serenely past as the plane maneuvered its way to a landing in Naples, Italy, on a mid-April afternoon. I hadn't expected to see the iconic landmark. The forecast called for rain and the plane had been stuck in clouds for a while. Suddenly, they disappeared, revealing a magnificent view of green-clad Vesuvius lording over the land. As I pulled out my phone for a photo, I gave thanks to the travel gods for their unexpected act of kindness. Actually, they had been benevolent on the entire journey, teasing me only during the layover in Paris when, after following a tortured route



Mount Vesuvius

to my departure terminal that involved two buses, five escalators, and long, empty halls, my boarding pass failed at a checkpoint, causing a conference of officials. Now, I was gawking at Vesuvius! I happily joined a long line of admirers. From the Renaissance on, the volcano has inspired scientists, philosophers, poets, painters, writers, and, of course, tourists. Among its visitors was a young Mozart, on a tour of Italy with his father Leopold (perhaps inspired by his visit, Vesuvius gets a role in Mozart's late opera *La Clemenza di Tito*). Other famous sightseers include Johann Goethe, Lord Byron, Percy and Mary Shelley, Andy Warhol, and Hans Christian Andersen who witnessed an eruption in 1834.

After landing, I made my way to a restaurant at the front of the airport where I ordered a celebratory cup of cappuccino. I was in Naples! I'd never been south of Rome before, latitudinally, in the whole Mediterranean Basin. It was more *terra incognita*, only this time with a dozing volcano nearby. It was a great way to start the next phase of my Sagalands adventure. Better yet, one of my children would be joining me. When I began planning the six-day trip, I called Sterling to see if he wanted to go. Inspired by a family outing to Rome when he and Olivia were eleven, Sterling caught the Roman history bug, bad. I did too and together we became Rome nerds (I read Livy for fun). When I said we would spend two days in Pompeii, he said "yes!" (Olivia couldn't take the time off from her job, alas). Naples, Pompeii, Herculaneum, Vesuvius, and great pizza. Yay!



Selfie with cappuccino

I ordered another cappuccino while I waited for Sterling's plane to arrive from London. I didn't expect to be here, frankly. I never pegged Italy to be a destination for my Sagalands travels since I hadn't uncovered any evidence that it belonged in my *de Lacy* family watershed. However, that changed over the winter when I decided to take a spit test. Curious what my DNA might reveal about my heritage, I signed up with 23&Me, a popular biotech company that provides ancestry, health, and other genetic data. All I needed to do is spit in a tube (and pay a fee). My results were intriguing. I'm 99% Northwestern European. The other 1%? *Italian*. That was a surprise. Breaking down the NW Europe: I'm 91% British Isles; 1% Scandinavian; 1% French and German; and 6% undefined Northwest Europe. Including what I know of my mother's ancestry, that fit my research! I'll deem the Scandinavian bit to be Rollo. I'll consider the 1% French and German to be Charlemagne, King of the Franks, via his descendants (my ancestors) Matilda of Flanders, the wife of William the Conqueror, and Elizabeth of Vermandois, granddaughter of King Henry I of France. The link to Charlemagne wasn't a surprise. He sired twenty children and research shows that nearly everyone with European ancestry can trace a family branch back to the amorous monarch.

There was more. Within the British Isles, the DNA analysis zeroed in geographically on southern Wales, England's Welsh border counties, Ireland, and the lowlands and southern uplands of Scotland. That fits my research. Walter de Lacy, who fought at the Battle of Hastings with his brother Gilbert, became an important Marcher Lord on the Welsh border. His descendants, as well as other ancestors of mine, led the Norman invasion of Ireland in the 1100s. A major tributary to the *de Lacy River* rises in Wales and merges in 1525 with a key marriage. I've covered Scotland. For my purposes it was the 1% French and German ancestry that I planned to explore next. When the western Roman Empire collapsed, Germanic-speaking peoples, including Franks, moved in, occupying an area from the Netherlands to Austria. Three centuries later, Charlemagne conquered most of Europe, including northern Italy. In 800 AD had himself crowned as the first Holy Roman Emperor. The mysterious 1% Italian connection, however, gnawed at me – until it gave me an idea. I'd go see Naples and Pompeii!

Sterling arrived on time and after hugs we caught a bus to the Garibaldi depot downtown. We clacked our bags down Umberto Corso boulevard to our third-floor B&B. The only hitch was a baffling keypad mechanism that kept us on the street for ten frustrating minutes. The next morning, we stepped outside to a full blast of Naples. The frenzied traffic and the constant car honking immediately stirred us to vigilance as we worked our way on foot to Piazza Bellini to

meet a tour guide. We were in Centro Storico, the heart of old Naples, and walked along the crowded and narrow Via Tribunales, a principal road. In most European cities, it would have been pedestrian-only. Not here. Amid the crush of people, including swarms of school kids, vehicles and impatient courier dudes on noisy motorbikes kept shoving their way along the crowded road. The chaos was a shock at first, then it made sense. Naples is vividly alive. There were clothes hanging from lines stretched across the streets, trash everywhere including piles of bags on street corners, flags flying – mostly for the Napoli football team – tons of colorful graffiti, loud voices and music, delicious smells, and, of course, a pizzeria every two hundred yards or so. We loved it. My trusty guidebook tried to warn us, calling Naples “gritty” – likely earning a rude hand gesture from its citizens. It was a far cry from Copenhagen and Edinburgh, but that’s the beauty of travel. Naples knocked us off our comfortable tourist pedestal, which was great. Sterling felt the same way.



Via Tribunales in Naples

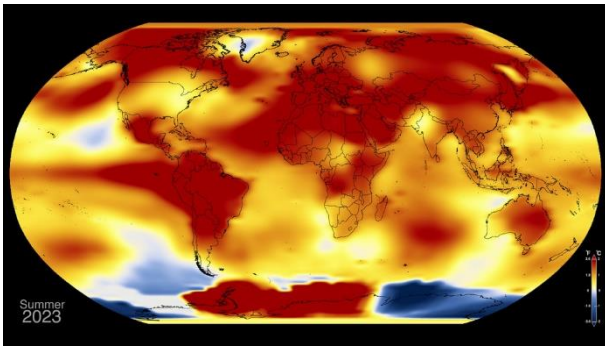
We met our guide, Livio, at a statue. Recalling my solo wanderings around Scandinavian cities, I decided to enlist the help of professionals this time (in the 1990s I worked part-time as a



Livio and ever-present graffiti

tour guide in Santa Fe). Livio was local and talked with his hands. We began at the Greek ruins in the piazza. Naples was founded in the 6th century BC as a Greek colony called *Neopolis*, making it one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world – which might partly explain its modern chaotic vitality. Livio, who spoke rapidly, ran us through the highlights of Naples’ history as we walked. The city has been a melting pot since antiquity and is proud of its diversity, he said. It is also proud of its religious fervor. In addition to countless churches, Naples boasts fifty-two patron saints, one for every type of adversity a city might endure. Livio said Naples lives daily in the shadow of death – meaning Mt. Vesuvius, which scientists say is overdue for an eruption. It contributes to the ‘live-for-the-moment’ nature of the city, he told us. The religious fervor, by the way, extends to Diego Maradona, the famous soccer star who played for Naples in the 1980s and continues to be worshipped as a saint in the city, as we saw everywhere.

Vesuvius isn't the only mortal threat. Climate change is increasingly a deadly challenge to life in Italy. A record-breaking heatwave in July 2023 placed twenty-three cities under red alerts (meaning a risk of death), including Naples. The Italian media called it the “*settimana infernale*” – *the week of hell*. It was followed in August by a heatwave so hot and thick with humidity that it was named *Nero*, after a cruel and tyrannical Roman emperor. Italy also suffers from more frequent



drouths and intense flooding, impacting food production, hydropower, and causing damage to buildings and streets. I was tempted to ask Livio if there was a patron saint for climate change. I wasn't being cheeky. NASA declared Summer 2023 to be Earth's hottest since record keeping began in 1880. The amount of heat exceeded predictions of climate scientists, confounding them. The record heat

continues. March 2024 saw the tenth consecutive monthly record for higher temperatures globally. Against this backdrop, I can certainly understand the Italian live-for-the-moment attitude!

In the evening, we took another tour – this time to eat street food. Naples is famous as the birthplace of pizza, but many may not know it was originally poor people food, made on the streets. It didn't become a kitchen dish until the 16th century when Spanish nobles (Naples was part of the Spanish Empire for two hundred years) introduced an exotic New World crop – the tomato. That's when pizza became *pizza*. Later, it conquered the world with the help of American GIs returning from Italy at the end of WWII who started pizzerias back home. Our street food tour included regular pizza, fried pizza, fried pasta (my favorite), lemoncello liqueur, and two types of desserts. It was heaven. Our young guide, Sara, handled the large, international group with practiced ease. Afterward, Sterling and I wandered around Centro Storico for an hour, digesting and enjoying the nonstop energy of Naples.



Sterling sampling fried pizza

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The next day we went to Pompeii. After making a rookie mistake involving a wrong train, we arrived at the famous city in time to meet our guide, Dario, an archaeologist. I hired him for a full day of touring, split between Pompeii and Herculaneum, to introduce us to the many wonders



and complexities that awaited. I knew it was a two-part story. The first part is the famous one: how Mt. Vesuvius caught residents by surprise when it erupted in the fall of 79 AD, burying the cities with ash and pumice over two days and killing thousands of people. Both cities were frozen in place at the height of the Roman Empire. Eventually, both disappeared, literally and historically. Their accidental rediscovery in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, began the second story. In 1763, excavators found an inscription *Rei Publicae Pompeianorum* – and Pompeii was reborn. Archaeologists have been methodically exposing the city since the 1860s. It's a huge job – Pompeii's population at the time of the eruption was roughly twenty thousand people. It's also a huge maintenance headache, as Dario explained. Also, a huge delight! Just before our visit, officials unveiled a two thousand year-old dining room covered in frescoes, making front-page news worldwide.



**Visitors in bathhouse**

We joined a throng of visitors at the entrance and then followed Dario into an intact Roman bathhouse. My jaw hit the tiled floor. You could practically hear the water running and feel steam rising, the place was so well-preserved. I've seen a lot of ruins over the years, but nothing like this. I stared so much, Dario stopped talking and asked if I was listening to him. Our next stop was the open-air Forum, the heart of the city, where we could see Mt. Vesuvius looming nearby. Dario said some of the buildings were reconstructed both recently and in antiquity. After a major earthquake in 62 AD, the city was rebuilding when Vesuvius went off. Its rediscovery in the 18<sup>th</sup> century led to decades of royal looting as kings and princes filled their palaces and gardens with Roman statues. During WWII, the Allies dropped bombs on Pompeii in the mistaken belief the Nazis were hiding ammunition in the ruins.

Neglect caused the collapse of a Pompeiian house in 2010 that shamed Italian authorities. Today, the blows come from climate change – and tourists. Most of the nearly six hundred excavated buildings are roofless, exposing the walls and frescoes to erosive power of increasingly bigger storms. New technology is being employed, Dario told us, including thermal imaging cameras and drones to alert staff to maintenance problems, but the task is overwhelming. The other threat are tourists wearing backpacks who scrape unprotected frescoes as they turn to take pictures, he warned, eyeing my backpack and water bottles. Duly noted.



**A beautiful, exposed fresco**

Dario led us through some of the many highlights of Pompeii, including the famous House of the Faun and the lovely House of the Vetti Brothers, owned by the richest citizens in the city. He emphasized that although the destruction of Pompeii froze the city in time, painting a vivid picture of life – especially of the wealthy – at the height of Roman civilization, many people don't know that Pompeii started life as a Greek colony, founded in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. Next came the



**Dario and Sterling**

Etruscans, then the Samnites, who lost a long, bitter war with the Romans. Pompeii prospered in this new world order and grew fat. Located on the Sarno River, the city was a commercial hub for trade routes north to Naples and south to the 'boot' of the peninsula. It was a typical – i.e., unremarkable – city for its day, Dario said, and would have slipped into oblivion if not for a certain cataclysmic event. Pompeii died in a heartbeat. Archaeologists found bowls and plates sitting on snack bar counters, bread baking in ovens, food ready-to-eat on tables – and people huddled in corners of rooms where they died. The macabre side of the calamity, including the plaster casts of dead people, has long dominated the popular image of the tragedy, but many scholars now

believe the majority of the population managed to escape during the early stages of the eruption. It's what they left behind that matters, especially the homes of the ultra-rich with their magnificent frescoes and over-the-top opulence. Naturally, the experience of their slaves was vastly different. Archaeologists recently discovered a single-room bakery/prison where slaves and donkeys worked, lived, and slept together in brutal conditions, including near darkness.

The opulence was impressive, but what really caught our eye were the mundane, everyday parts of life in Pompeii – the ceramic water pipes exposed in walls, the stone sills for missing storefront doors, the water fountains at street



**Ceramic pipe in a wall**

corners where you can fill up a bottle (very cool!), the square shut-off valves that looked totally modern, and bakeries with their grinding stones. I loved the snack bars. Called *thermopolia*

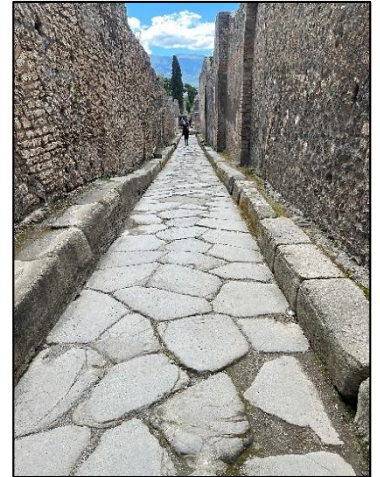
('hot food') they are located at street junctions, often across from one another. It was easy to imagine their proprietors yelling to customers "My snail and fish stew is the best! Not his over there!"



**A 2000-year old snack bar**



Most of all, we loved Pompeii's streets. Sunken, lined with uneven paving stones, rutted by countless donkey carts, flanked by sidewalks, and crossed at intervals by blocks of stone, all of the streets were mesmerizing. You could almost hear the loud creak of the cart wheels and the curses of the donkey driver or imagine a fine-dressed matron lifting her stola as she stepped on the large crossing blocks to avoid staining her garment with the water and effluent flowing down the street. The streets were both functional and lovely to look at – i.e., very *Roman*. Sterling said they reminded him of the Pont du Gard, a famous aqueduct in France that is an engineering and aesthetic marvel, which we saw on a family trip. Some of Pompeii's streets were wide, some narrow, some pedestrian-only, and some one-way. The main streets were wide



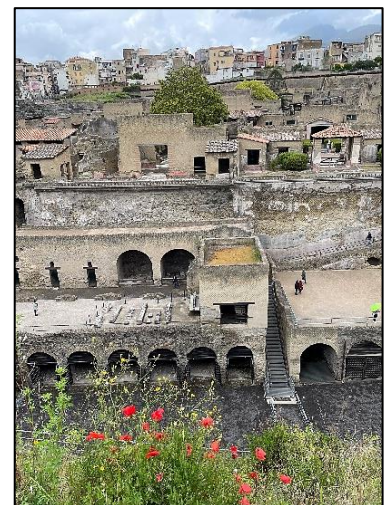
**Pompeii**



**Naples**

enough for two carts to pass each other, while others were essentially alleys. All were mysterious and enchanting. Where did they go? What was around the next corner? Most were lined with shops. They immediately recalled the streets we saw in Naples with its stores, pizza bakeries, and fast food joints. The continuity was striking. There is something timeless about a street. The earliest globally date back six thousand years and were a foundational part of the emergence a radical new idea in human history at the time: *the city*. While cities have changed dramatically, the purpose of streets hasn't really. I love these deep connections. That's why I kept lingering outside the fancy homes, to Dario's bemusement.

After lunch, we traveled to Herculaneum, a port that was also wiped out by Vesuvius. It was a different experience. Compact and surrounded on three sides by a modern city, Herculaneum has a 'hole-in-the-ground' feel that makes it more museum-like. It complements Pompeii by having better preserved second-story architecture and, I thought, more interesting tile flooring. Its story is more tragic too. Spared the suffocating rain of ash and pumice by favorable winds early in the eruption, some of its citizens tarried too long, only to die horrifically when boiling-hot pyroclastic gases swept down from the volcano. Hundreds of bodies were found in bathhouses at the water's edge, apparently waiting for rescue.



**Herculaneum**

Dario took us to one of the highlights of Herculaneum, the Villa of the Papyri, which had recently been in the news. A luxurious residence constructed on terraces overlooking the sea, the villa likely belonged to Lucius Calpurnius Piso, a Roman senator, consul, and father-in-law to one Julius Caesar. Its name derives from a spectacular discovery made in the 1750s during a hunt for Roman treasures to fill the palace of King Charles II of Naples. In a library, workers came across more than a thousand baked and blackened papyrus scrolls, in what is still the largest collection of Graeco-Roman books ever found. Their existence fired up the Romantic minds of Europe, who hoped the library contained lost Greek plays or ancient histories. Early efforts to unroll the fragile papyri revealed books of philosophy, not plays, but also destroyed them in the process. Modern X-ray and CT scans allow researchers to peer “inside” the scrolls but not determine their contents. In 2021, a group of Artificial Intelligence experts came together to see if they could find answers. Calling themselves the Vesuvius Challenge, they managed to digitally ‘unroll’ some of the papyri, detecting ink-based letters – and more philosophy. Although they didn’t find a lost play, their work was considered a big victory for AI, potentially opening new doors into the classical world.

Silver linings to a story of tragedy and death.



Sterling and I eagerly returned to Pompeii for another full day of exploring and gawking. He was as enchanted by the city as I was, especially by the streets, and was equally amazed at the freedom we had to roam. We could walk on 2000-year old tile floors, which was pretty incredible.

On the train ride, we reminisced about a board game called *Pompeii* that was a favorite of ours

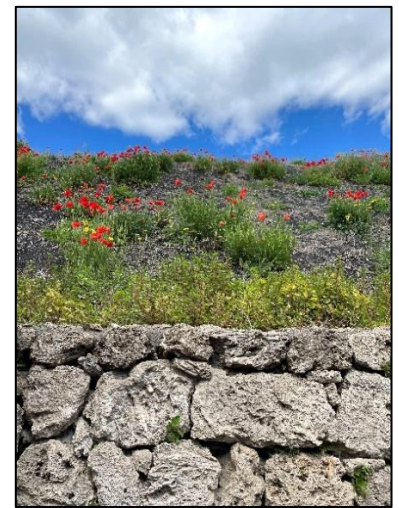


when he was a kid. The mission: get your team of citizens out of the city before the volcano erupts! The memory caused a pang in my heart. I loved raised kids. It filled me with purpose and great joy, especially in the early years when we traveled often to ranches and national parks, back when everything was new again. Entering Pompeii, we agreed to split up and explore on our own. Sterling wanted to prospect for photographs. He had become quite the shutterbug in the past year, with a backpack full of lenses. He was even contemplating buying a 35mm analog camera. I had to smile. When I was his age, I caught the same camera bug. I guess what they say about apples not rolling far from trees is true!

***You can walk on the tile floors!***



After parting ways in the Forum, I headed east toward a quadrant of the city that I had not seen yet. Passing more houses, bakeries, snack bars, fountains, and enticing streets, the thrill I felt yesterday quickly returned. That's the thing about Pompeii – it's *palpable*. It's real. You feel it with all senses at once, including the aroma of the flowers in bloom. Its palpability is impossible to capture with words or photographs, though I took plenty. You have to be there to experience the full effect, feel the paving stones under your feet, stand in the center of a silent amphitheater, walk through a bathing complex, contemplate a child's tiny, windowless bedroom. And that's only the part we can see. Nearly a third of the city remains unexcavated. What's still hiding? Pompeii satisfied an additional sense for me – a deep need to seek and find. I've been a seeker since I can remember. Choose whatever word fits best: curiosity, restlessness, risk-taking, questing, wanderlust, a desire to know, a need to discover. It might be a genetic thing. Some years ago, the gene DRD4-7R made headlines when it was scientifically associated with a predisposition for novelty-seeking and risk-taking, sometimes leading to addiction (the gene is linked to dopamine, a hormone that triggers strong feelings of pleasure). The media immediately declared it the 'travel gene' and ran stories about people who were born to roam. Researchers were more cautious, noting that novelty-seeking is a complex behavior with many potential sources and influences. My DNA spit test didn't say if I had the 'travel gene' or not, but I wonder.



***Unexcavated Pompeii***

It was on my mind this winter. It had been another dreary one. I missed Gen, though time had dulled the ache as memories began to fade around the edges. Soloness was no longer a novelty. I had settled into a routine that kept me busy, though the specter of loneliness kept making an appearance. I'll admit that I rummaged around some online dating sites for seniors (I hate the word "senior" which is a stand-in for "old" and not how I feel), but they seemed kinda icky. It wasn't clear what I wanted from them anyway. Not another relationship. I valued my independence too much now. No, other things drearied me through the long winter months. One was my day job. Although I called it a career in 2022 (see essay), I had an ongoing save-the-world contract with a prominent climate activist to write and edit hopeful climate solutions for his organization's web site. It was good, thoughtful work. It paid well and I liked the people involved, especially the young writers that I supervised. I loved their upbeat energy and I looked forward to our biweekly

Zoom calls. As the winter wore on, however, I began to feel adrift despite the urgency of our work. News headlines weren't helping, particularly the ones about climate change as humans continued to heat the planet calamitously. My spirits sagged. Good days (work) were followed by bad ones (news) until they became mashed up together, creating a lethargy that was unfamiliar to me. I snapped out of it one night in March while watching a pirate movie. The brave and reckless pirate captain had steered his ship and crew into a hurricane to avoid capture and nearly drowned everyone as a result. Emerging from the storm, the winds died, stranding them in the open sea, in peril again. A subtitle appeared on the screen announcing their predicament. *The Doldrums*, it said. A light went off. That was me – boat, crew, and captain. Despite the Sagalands journey that I had embarked on, I felt like I was stuck in the Doldrums. I turned the movie off, thinking. The next day, I called a real estate agent I knew.

I had decided to sell my house and quit my day job.

After an hour or so of wandering, I found myself in the middle of Pompeii's amphitheater. It was no Colosseum, but it had a serenity to its modest scale that made it feel more human, like going to a football game at a mid-sized university. Looks are deceiving, however. This was a house of killing, the earliest known stage for gladiatorial combat in the Roman world. Twenty thousand

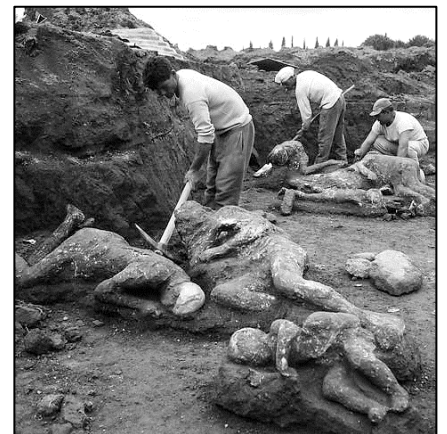


spectators watched the bloodlust. Things could get out of hand. In 59 AD a deadly fight broke out between Pompeians and fans from rival Nocera that began with taunts at the games, escalated to stone-throwing and flowed into the street where swords were drawn and blood spilled, suggesting that Italians have been taking their sports seriously for two thousand years! I snapped a photo and kept going.

The decision to sell the house triggered a process of evacuation that grew quickly into something like a purge. Days before flying to Naples, I hauled six cargo van loads of accumulated household belongings to the dump. I had lived the house for twenty years, the longest stretch by far of any home in my life. The kids were four when we moved in. Gen and I were forty-two.

Sterling and Olivia grew up there, moved away, came back for the pandemic, moved away again. Every part of the house held evidence of our lives, including bric-a-brac I had not seen in years. It tugged hard at my heart. Three years after moving in, Gen was diagnosed with cancer. I found medical files in drawer after drawer. The house spanned our entire medical odyssey together. It is where she died as I held her hand. Emptying the large garage was the hardest of all. The entire span of our lives were there, high school mementos, old furniture, tubs of Halloween and Christmas regalia, piles of books, class notes from Reed and graduate school, detritus from our carefree years in Los Angeles, stuff from my childhood, my mother's old electric typewriter, on and on. I threw a lot of it out, including the hopes and plans from the early days of the Quivira Coalition. Nobody wanted it. I did, but I needed to close doors and hatches. Put fresh wind in my sails.

I headed west from the amphitheater, walking through the Palaestra, a large, open area that served as a gymnasium, slave market, and military camp. It was very square, with sharp corners. The Romans loved things with corners – rooms, city blocks, interior patios, palaces, forts. I turned left onto a narrow street and entered an orchard. It was time to see dead people. In 1863, Italian archaeologist Giuseppe Fiorelli came up with the innovative idea of pouring a mixture of plaster, lime, and water into hollow cavities that his workers discovered while digging. The resulting casts, which included humans, animals, clothing, food, and plants, captured the tragic last moments of the city powerfully and indelibly. I found a cluster of bodies in a glass shed at the end of the orchard. It was as far as they got. The agony they felt as they died was obvious to see, and heart-rending. I know it's a cliché but standing there reminded me that our journey through life is brief. Sooner or later, it has an end point, though hopefully not a violent one! It was another reason to leave the Doldrums. I needed to shake up my life and move on, literally. Fortunately, after deciding to sell the house, I quickly found a nice house to rent in Santa Fe, close to fun things, for a year or two. After that, who knows.



***Plaster casts of dead Pompeians***

Leaving the orchard, I headed for a water fountain that I knew on a main thoroughfare. Reaching it, I was quickly reminded that Pompeii is the second-most popular archaeological site in the world (after the Colosseum in Rome), with nearly three million visitors a year. I had been wandering in the quiet neighborhoods of the city, which I mostly had to myself. The thoroughfare,





***Water fountain and street***

however, flowed with people, including groups of tourists and schoolkids. After refilling my water bottles, I pulled off my backpack and sat down on a 2000-year old bench outside someone's home. Globally, tourism levels are expected to return to pre-pandemic numbers in 2024 – roughly 1.4 billion arrivals – according to the United Nations. Europe remains the most popular destination. Italy is projected to endure 266 million overnight guests, though many will skip Naples. I doubt its citizens will mind. Venice gets thirty million visitors a year and is struggling to maintain its authenticity under the crush. It has instituted a number of unpopular restrictions – unpopular to tourists.

I watched the flow of people in the street. Not long ago, I would have attached greenhouse gas emission numbers to the tourism industry when discussing it (while being aware of my own contribution). However, shortly after I decided to sell my house, I gave notice to the climate activist in charge of my contract. April 30<sup>th</sup> would be my last day on the job, I told him. What I didn't tell him, I'll say here: it will be my last day, period. No more greenhouse gas numbers, ever. They had been a source of my Doldrums, even as I wrote about nature-based solutions. The human-created pool of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere continues to expand despite the repeated warnings from scientists that levels were already too high. Lately, there had been talk among researchers that we had possibly reached a point-of-no-return for heating. I didn't want to think about it. I had done my bit professionally (as my children keep reminding me) on the climate front for more than two decades. It was time to find that fresh breeze.

I packed up my things, rose from the bench, and made my way up an unpretentious street nearby. There weren't any famous houses, temples, baths, or public buildings along its length, just more shops, bakeries, and unnamed domiciles. There weren't any tourists either, just me. The street had ruts, though. I love Pompeii's ruts, worn into the hard stone by the iron-clad wheels of countless carts and wagons over countless years. Touching the ruts is amazing. You feel their smoothness, trace their edges, and follow them like a detective. The cart ride must have been bumpy for the driver (a slave) and his goods. And noisy with the yelling and creaking. Smelly too. That's why the streets had stepping stones!



***Pompeii street with ruts***



***Selfie with faun***

I ducked into the House of the Faun again, this time for a selfie. The 31,000 square-foot house occupies an entire Pompeii city block and was the original home of the famous Alexander floor mosaic, now in the Naples Archaeology Museum. Its palatial size and Greek design make it one the most luxurious homes of the ultra-wealthy in the city. Even so, it was fronted on the street by commercial shops as usual – a nice touch, I thought. After lunch, Sterling and I visited another ultra-elite home – the Villa of the Mysteries. To get there, we had to exit through a city gate and walk along the Via Delle Tombe, so-called because it is lined with tombs of wealthy Pompeiians. Soon, we entered the magnificent villa, one of the best-preserved in the region. Its most famous feature are frescoes in a

room depicting what appears to be the initiation rites of a girl into a mystery cult of Dionysus. Despite a century of debate, no one really knows for sure what they represent. It recalled a book I read in the 1980s called the *Motel of the Mysteries* about an archaeological dig in the ancient land of Usa, which was buried by a cataclysmic air pollution event in 1985 AD. The archaeologists believe they have found a religious temple but are stumped by the number “26” on a door. Entering the room, they find a body in a ceremonial bed facing a square box on a table, which they assume is a holy altar. In a small adjoining space, which they think is the Inner Sanctum, they discover a body lying casually in a porcelain sarcophagus. The archaeologists are completely baffled.

As Sterling and I headed toward Pompeii’s exit, we decided to return the following morning for a third day of exploring. Sterling didn’t need any convincing. He continued to be as awestruck by Pompeii as I. We decided to make it a half-day. At the train depot, I purchased tickets for a ride to a parking lot near the top of Mt. Vesuvius, which we would “climb” (walk) in the afternoon, capping off our sojourn to Italy. We loved the train depot, by the way. Its peeling paint and run-down condition not only captured an essence of the region, the graffiti on its walls echoed all the scribblings we saw in Pompeii itself. Some things never change, which was fine with us.



***Sterling at the train depot***



The next morning, we split up again and headed out to unreconnoitered parts of the city. I beelined for the theater district, which held a large, open-air, half-circle theater that could hold five thousand spectators, an adjacent smaller, roofed theater apparently used for musical events, a foyer where the elites could mingle with each other, and an open area in the front where the masses could gather before or after the show. Talk about continuity! It felt incredibly familiar. It recalled the many modern events I had attended over the years in a similar set-up. Entering the large theater



***The Greek-style large theater***

from the top, I sat down in the nosebleed seats, which the Romans called “up with the gods.” Good for them. I watched workers assemble a wooden stage for an upcoming public concert. That’s another thing I love about the continent, they’ll use a 2000-year old historic monument for a musical event because, well, that’s what they are for. Past and present blending in practical and harmonious ways. It reminded me of a visit Gen and I made to the amazing Roman theater in Orange, France, which was also being set up for a musical event. At the top of the theater’s tall backwall you could still see the burned stone from a fire set by attacking “barbarians” in the 5<sup>th</sup> century!

Ah, Europe.

As I wandered on, my thoughts turned to Gen, as they had yesterday. She would have loved Pompeii for exactly the same reasons that Sterling and I did. He and I joked, however, that she would have seen a lot less of it. When visiting museums or historical sites, Gen took her time to absorb as much detail as possible which often slowed her pace down to a crawl. I’m much speedier. We learned early in our long relationship to split up as soon as we entered a museum or ruin and meet later. Occasionally, I needed to be creative. At a Roman site in Nice, France, Gen tarried so long that I took the kids outside to watch a group of locals play boules, which I’d never seen before. Sitting under the sheltering cover of tall trees, we struggled to figure out the game’s rules because the players spent so much time arguing! The visit to the theater in Orange was part of memorable sojourn to Provence that Gen and I did in 2014. We didn’t know at the time, but it would be the last romantic trip we’d take together before financial debt and cancer treatments swamped our lives. I carried the memories with me through all the streets of Pompeii.



***Coffee with Gen in Provence***



Selling the house and moving on meant sailing away from Gen. I felt ready. It had been a year-and-a-half since her death – long enough to feel like it belonged in the past, not the present. I spent some of this time consolidating her things, which helped. In the process, I found various journals. Gen kept a journal, off and on, for a long time, though I didn't realize they extended back to our freshman year at Reed. I read through them slowly, glad to hear her voice again and share her hopes and struggles once more. I didn't find any secrets. Not that I expected to. As with any relationship, especially a long one like ours, there were low moments to go with the high and happy ones, particularly in our early, youthful years, but we talked through them together and forged on. The last ten years of her journals were dominated by cancer. Despite her public-facing stoicism, I knew the cancer fight made her privately unhappy. The need for top-notch health insurance that would cover the specialists at Cedars-Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles forced Gen to take a state job that she didn't like very much. It was a no-win situation she came to resent. I knew all this, though not in the emotional detail that she reserved for her journals. Being a Midwesterner, Gen rarely talked about her feelings, hiding them behind her big smile and warm laugh. Grin and bear it was her *modus operandi*. I tried to draw her out occasionally, without success. I even suggested therapy once, to no avail. That made reading her words both hard and heart-breaking.

Then there were the words that Gen didn't write. Or say. She stopped journaling after the heart surgery and held steadfastly to her *modus operandi* in public and private even after she had decided to stop all medical treatments. She knew she was dying but kept silent on the topic, sticking to day-to-day subjects. That was her prerogative, of course. It was hard on me, however, especially as I began to administer the hospice. I didn't know what she wanted or what she was thinking. That was just the practical stuff. There were also no 'goodbyes' or 'thank yous,' no squeeze of my hand, no sad smiles or tearful embraces, even at the end. It wasn't deliberate, just a coping strategy on her part for what was happening. Still, it hurt. In the months following her death, I harbored a small hope that I would find a letter from her in a drawer or among the last pages of her journals, saying in words what she couldn't say aloud. We had been together forty years, raised two children, went on many wonderful adventures, and braved an intense sixteen-year cancer journey together. There was no letter. I knew she loved me, but the lack of final words was hard to process. Among other things, I denied me closure. Goodbyes are important – I had to say my mine alone. The hurt eased over time, but it also contributed to the Doldrums. It was another reason to sell the house and move on.

Finding myself back in Pompeii's Forum, I texted Sterling to see if he wanted to meet up or keep exploring. Keep exploring, he said. He was in a new part of the city and wanted to look around for photos. Not a problem. I was impressed by how much ground he was covering. He's definitely speedier than me. Partly it's his youthful energy, but a lot of it is his training. He and Olivia began traveling when they were three, so both of them grew up thinking strategically about destinations, how to navigate unfamiliar terrain, and problem-solve. Sterling took to it like a fish to water. Once when the kids were thirteen, Gen and I lingered too long at the top of a medieval castle admiring the view until Sterling warned us that the gates were about to close. On our visit



***The Amazing Race duo***

to Venice when he was eleven, Sterling led us around the dense city using a paper map. Like his dad, he has an innate sense of direction (Olivia, by her own admission, does not). We would have been a formidable *Amazing Race* team. We discovered the reality travel series in 2015 and watched every episode twice (at least I did). The winning duos, we noticed, were not only strategic and physical – and lucky – they were also compatible and supportive. That's us. Maybe we'll still apply!

I needed coffee. After scoring a cappuccino, I stepped back into the streets of Pompeii and turned my thoughts to Italy and the Sagalands. Vikings raided the western coast of the peninsula but apparently never made an attempt at colonization. The Normans, however, conquered southern Italy, starting in 999 AD. Hired as mercenaries by feuding princes, Norman knights quickly took things into their own hands. Overthrowing the local nobility, Normans sank deep roots in Italian soil. They defeated armies sent by the Pope and others and kept conquering. By 1130, they had established the Kingdom of Sicily, which included the southern third of the peninsula, Malta, and bits of North Africa. Ah, Normans. This particular bunch were minor nobles from the Hauteville area in western Normandy. Like their royal kin, they had a thirst for fighting and a talent for winning. The only relative of mine involved in the Italian conquest that I can determine was Ralph de Tosny, a noble forced into exile in 1015 by Duke Richard of Normandy (Tosnys were famously hot-headed) and went south to fight alongside his fellow Normans for glory and booty.

The source of my 1% Italian DNA? I still had no idea. Not Pompeii. It was likely someone from the north end of the peninsula, the House of Lombard perhaps, or from the Piedmont area surrounding Turin. Both were sources of spouses to Anglo-Norman nobility. That's the thing with

family watersheds, there are so many side streams in their own sub-basins, flowing into bigger ones, that it's a challenge to map every one, much less explore them. For example, the grandmother of Elizabeth of Vermandois, who I mentioned as being an ancestor of mine via four of her fourteen children, was Anne of Kiev, the daughter of Grand Duke Yaroslav the Wise, leader of the Kievan Rus (in modern Ukraine). Yaroslav, in turn, is descended from vikings, which makes Anne part of a significant *de Lacy* family sub-basin. My spit test, however, didn't identify me as 1% Eastern European, so I won't be making a trip to Kyiv anytime soon.

Sterling and I met up in time for lunch before catching our ride to the top of Mt. Vesuvius. We were a little sad to leave Pompeii. Despite all our time in the city, there was still so much more to see and explore. That's how travel goes, however. Get a taste of a place, or a feast in this case, and come back later for more. Sterling was already making plans to return to Naples and Pompeii with his friends, causing another pang in my heart. Ah, to be twenty-five again with horizons beckoning. A big difference today: the world is wired for travel now, which means the opportunities



***The summit of Vesuvius***

are extraordinary. Alas, so are the challenges. Heat waves, for instance. They change how you think about travel (or ought to, anyway), as well as when to go. They are another example of how the world has changed so stupendously since I was twenty-five. It means I'm at a loss for advice to give young people – not that they would listen to someone raised in the analog era! I do often offer two unsolicited tips to my kids: find a safe place to live with good friends; and go see as much of the world as possible. They understand what I mean. With the decision to sell the house and move into town, I chose to follow my own advice. Santa Fe is a great, safe place to live. As for the world, in addition to my Sagalands adventures, I plan to see as much as I can, while I can. Humpback whales.

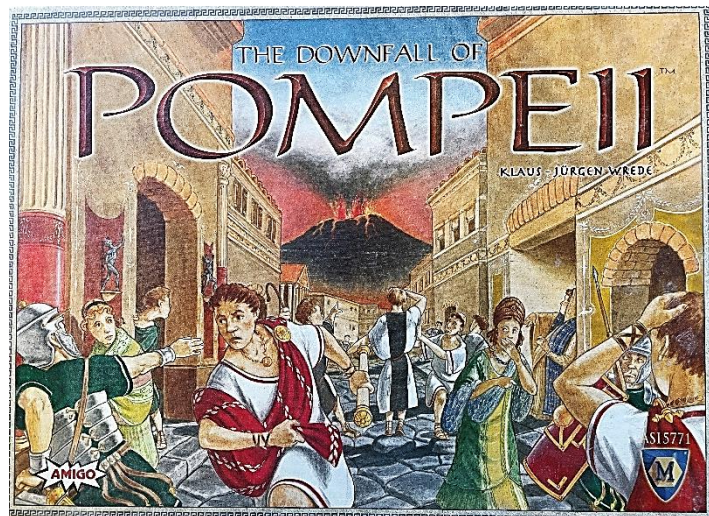
Maccu Pichu. The Amazon. Tigers.

A few hours later, Sterling and I stood on the edge of Vesuvius' crater, looking down. The walk to the summit had been a bit anticlimatic after the hair-raising bus ride up the the narrow and very busy access road to a tiny, chaotic parking area. But here we were! The only sign of life was steam from a sulphur vent tucked under the lip of the volcano. It was hard to imagine the crater as a source of violent destruction and death, past or present. That's the thing about volcanoes, though, as the ancient Roman residents of the area could tell you. Turning, I could see Pompeii in the



distance. It was a dark, circular void in a landscape densely packed with modern buildings. On our walk in Naples, Livio told us this part of Italy was packed with more people per square kilometer than anywhere else in the country, including Rome. It was easy to believe. For everyone's sake, I hope Vesuvius keeps snoozing. As for the existential threat posed by rising temperatures, well, let's hope that the people in charge of the world wake up soon and get busy. So far, they've been as dormant as Vesuvius. But I didn't want to think about it. Instead, I walked over to Sterling, who was busily snapping photos, and gave him a big hug. It was so good to travel with him. Olivia too. In two months, the three of us would be together again on the road, this time to the Low Countries, chasing an emperor.

More wind in our sails.



*The board game*

