

## *The New James*

It is 12:45 PM on a Tuesday, most of New York City is finishing up on lunch. James suppresses the hunger signals of his stomach and tries to listen to his reason. Actually, he first tries to find his reason and then he plans to listen to it. He awoke at 7:30 AM. He made a pot of drip coffee. He drank two cups with sugar and milk. He attended the 8:30 AM sculpting class at the Art Students' League. James allocated the hour between 11:30 and 12:30 to inspirational activities. He glanced at windows of SoHo boutiques; he observed people resting on the benches of Washington Square Park; he skimmed through a couple of art books at his favorite bookstore. James begins every weekday morning with this exact ceremony. He is confident that his morning ritual will help him accomplish a dual purpose: refine his sculpting skills and inspire him to produce. On this particular rainy Tuesday morning however, James fails to accomplish his ambitious goal. He is now sitting in his studio, uninspired. In fact, he is frustrated and ridden with heaviness. His vision is clouded. Now he is blind to the natural beauty of life. He scratches the top of his head to induce activity (or maybe just out of habit) and once again becomes aware of his deeply receding hairline. He scratches his head one more time, hoping to trigger a search engine in his mind that locates solutions. But instead, a 30 second silent film appears in his mind. The film begins with James' unexpected resignation from B&H Consulting and his abrupt departure from the home he had created with his wife and thirteen year old daughter. It proceeds with him moving into this studio space in SoHo, a luxury few artists can afford. This brief flashback carries James through the past year, slowing down as it approaches the present. It is now showing the daily training program he has designed as a path towards becoming a master sculptor. It goes up through this last week of progress on his current piece and ends with this morning's coffee and finally his uninspiring morning stroll.

In an attempt to rid himself of this penetrating nostalgia, James stands up from his chair, puts a new filter of fresh grounds into his drip coffee maker, activates it, and begins to pace in his studio. He listens to the sound of his shoe soles stomping on the wooden floor. He glances at his half complete clay sculptures surrounding the room. Through listening and looking, James allows sensations to enter him. He hopes to rinse the palette of his mind. But his mind disobeys. It once again screens the same dreadful film. As he paces, scenes from his recent destruction of his organized life persist.

James walks into the bedroom and replaces the pair of clay-stained jeans he is wearing with a pair of gray slacks. He removes his dirty shirt and remains in a white Hanes undershirt. He pours himself a cup of freshly brewed coffee and sits at his make-believe corporate desk. It has been one year since James quit his consulting job, but he still finds structured environments more conducive to thought. Even though he is a full-time working sculptor now, his thinking habits remain corporate.

He plays with a pen with the edge of his fingers and reaches over and uses the mouse to open an untitled Microsoft Word file. He releases the pen and types with both hands while staring at the screen:

*Long-term goal:*

*Short-term goal:*

*Strategy for attainment of short-term goal:*

With a click of the mouse, he returns the cursor to the top of the page and begins to respond to each one of the three awaiting colons.

*Long-term goal: To manifest the beauty of mankind in clay and stone.*

This response is an easy one for James, almost instinctual. He had defined this goal years ago before resigning from the firm. He was simply copying this goal from a file in his brain to a file on his computer desktop.

*Short-term goal: To create a sculpture that captures a woman's pride in her body.*

James is not happy with this articulation. He tries again:

*Short-term goal: To create a work of art that captures a woman's attitude towards her own sexuality.*

James is once again unsatisfied. He has learned in business school that short-term goals must be as specific as possible. They are the lowest level of a work plan. They should almost act as instructions. He grows frustrated. He does not wish to articulate his entire theory of women's sexuality to an unsympathizing computer. But his theory of womanhood is vital for understanding his short-term goal. James believes that certain women produce a special chemical that has never before been identified. Such a woman must be daring yet shy, elegant, yet raw. She must be aware of the greatness of her flesh, yet interested in celebrating the beauty of others. Such a woman contains the substance of life. She radiates it in public. James wishes to capture the essence of one such celestial woman in stone.

James pulls up his gray slacks from above the knees and leans back in his office chair. He thinks of his morning strolls of inspiration through the city. He wonders why this magical female chemical is so rare. He realizes that in order to capture this chemical, he must surround himself by it. He must learn to recognize its smell, notice its subtleties. In a flash, as the computer screen dissolves into a night skyline screen saver, a powerful strategy emerges in James' mind. He must travel to Tuscany. Only in Tuscany is this chemical abundant. He imagines it rising from the villages every morning like steam after a summer's rain in New York City. He must study rural Italian women. He is convinced that many of them are of this celestial type. He must swim in their chemical, and only then he will be able to reproduce it. "Of course, I must go to Tuscany", he thinks. It is so clear to him now, how come it took him so long to realize this obvious step.

James reaches for his Palm Pilot and scribbles with the Palm Pilot pen "Travel Agency" on the pad. He dials the number that appears. He informs John (his old firm's travel agent) that he wishes to purchase a one-way airline ticket to Rome departing New York the next day. James considers leaving a voice message for his wife and daughter. He imagines what their response would be if he tried to explain to them the theory of celestial women. They do not understand why he has turned to sculpting. They do not understand why he has left his comfortable family life. They do not understand that if he remained in the rigidity of his old life, he would have turned into nitrogen ice, cold and hard, yet burning and destructive to all that comes in contact with it. He would have become mute. He would have radiated only a chemical derived directly from death. A chemical which is the exact opposite of the one he wishes to capture.

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On Wednesday at 7:00 PM, when most of New York City is commuting home from work, James checks in his luggage at John F. Kennedy airport. He is wearing his best suit for no particular reason. Actually, he is wearing his suit because this is the only way he knows how to fly. James buys a magazine at the newsstand and boards the plane. He speaks to his mind in a condescending tone: “Why did I choose Tuscany of all places? Why not travel to the South of France? Do I perceive myself as some scientist on a mission? This is a ridiculous idea. I am flying somewhere I know nobody. What am I trying to prove? Am I just escaping my creative drought?”

In a flash, as abruptly as the Tuscany plan came to James’ mind, all his doubts come to a halt. He sits down at seat 47B, and next to him sits a celestial Italian woman. The chemical she exudes leaves him frozen in his seat. Only after take-off does James find the courage to turn his head towards the window and truly witness her aura. She has fallen asleep, or at least her eyes are closed, and James has the opportunity to study her features. Her dark hair is straight and submissive to gravity. To James it seems like a black waterfall. Her fleshy hands rest in her lap. The stiffness of the armrest clashes with the softness of her arms. Her arms also yield to gravity. She is wearing a tight sleeveless blouse and James can see the exact shape of her breasts. They are large, and seem heavy, but they are held high in the pockets of her bra. His eyes surf over her left shoulder and breast and land in her armpit, the one closest to him. He notices the white flakes of deodorant staining her blouse. As she adjusts her body in the tight seat, James gains a glimpse at the jungle of hair hidden in the warm territory of her armpit. And now, as she is once again motionless, he can view the few black hairs that have escaped her arm lock. All the sounds around him become mute. He only hears the subtle sound of her magical chemical dancing around him in rings. He wishes he could hold a box up to her and capture some of her substance within it. But he finds himself frozen once again. James falls into a deep sleep of comfort. He will not question his journey to Italy for the remainder of the flight. James awakes to the touch of God. The celestial woman is tapping him gently on the shoulder, urging him to wake up since the food cart has reached their seat. Before he opens his eyes, a wide smile emerges on his face. The blossoming of his mouth urges his eyes to

open. He examines the interior of the plane with his sleep blurred vision. It all seems so beautiful to him: the long and narrow aisle to his left, leading to a soft velvet curtain blocking his eyes from entering first class, the purple florescent light bathing the interior, the large screen in the center flashing images of a tropical travel destination. He replies to the flight attendant's question and receives a nourishing meal of beef stew. He lets the warm fumes of beef moisten his face. And in his dream like state, where the world is so soft, a conversation emerges between him and his magical neighbors. He is barely conscious of their words. He is mostly aware of her smell, of her smiles. Their conversation consists of gestures and nuances, although to a side observer it might appear like an ordinary exchange of words. Alessandra tells him of the small village she comes from in Tuscany. James tells her of his New York City life. Alessandra reveals her excitement to return home after three months in America. James speaks of his eagerness to discover the Italian countryside. He rides their fluid conversation, succumbing to its rhythm. He places aside all goals and strategies. He swims in the stories she tells. Alessandra recommends that he travel to San Miniato. She speaks of an old man in San Miniato who rents rooms in his house. She speaks of the beautiful country view and the friendly people. She repeats the few adjectives she knows in English for beauty several times. "Beautiful, magnificent, directo from god, beautiful." She pulls out a pen from her purse and writes on a cocktail napkin:

*Papa Germano*

*Piazza del Castello*

*San Miniato*

"I will go there directly from the airport." James exclaims. Alessandra smirks. Her smile is so different from her smirk, he thinks. He notices the sarcasm in her mouth gesture. "In Italy nothing is directo. It will take you one day to get to there." She begins writing directions on the cocktail napkin, and unfolds it so she will have more space to write. She writes at least three lines of instructions filled with train routes and names of towns.

James takes the napkin from her, refolds it, and places it in the inner pocket of his jacket. He is complete in the presence of her voice and smell. He continuously gulps from her

magical chemical, thinking nothing of the experiences to come. For the first time in his life, James is entirely in the present.

A few hours pass by, hours that will be forgotten in James's mind, hours that will forever mark his soul. The plane lands and Alessandra walks with James to the baggage claim. She marks both his cheeks with wet kisses of youth and directs him to the bus stop. As James awaits the bus, he unfolds the cocktail napkin and is comforted to discover that her smell is still contained within it. Only now does he land from the height and think of the upcoming indirect journey to San Miniato.

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James descends the stairs of the airport bus and steps onto the floor of the Termini in Rome (...when most of New York City is in a deep dreamless sleep.) Fifteen minutes later, he boards a train to Siena. One hour later the train leaves Rome. James does not pay attention to the passing country view through the train window. He tries to evaluate his current situation. So far he has found it easy to travel in Italy. Even though the train was delayed and not all the conductors speaks English, his napkin instructions provide him with a guide. He thinks of how talented he is at following directions. At first he feels proud, but then he feels very small. He thinks that maybe his role in life is to execute the commands of others. Maybe this journey will have the opposite effect of his expectations. Maybe it will rid him of the urge to create. Maybe he will return to New York, appeased and ready to re-enter corporate America, produce thorough reports, generate revenue for shareholders. His thought journey halts as the train makes its final stop in Sienna. James exits the train and approaches an employee in the station. He points to the bus route on his napkin, and the employee points to the far left corner of the station. Two hours later, James boards the local bus that travels the country roads from Siena to Pisa. He is once again pleased with his progress and looks back to the napkin. He sniffs it deeply, but there is no special smell. James reads out loud the last portion of Alessandra's script "Papa Germano at the Piazza del Castello in San Miniato." He pats himself on the back. He is confident he will soon reach his destination. He feels a brief sense of accomplishment for having completed the napkin instructions. As a reward, he allows himself to glance out the window and soak in the beautiful country view. Or rather, the magnificent view penetrates James beyond his

control. Only 15 minutes ago the bus left Sienna and the landscape is already rural. Poppy-splashed lanes contrast with strange bare hills. The bus makes a local stop every 10 minutes and a few people get off. After the first few stops James notices that the landscape has changed. He glances at the Arno basin on the side of the road and allows his head to turn backwards fixed on the basin as the bus proceeds. A few stops later he notices that the landscape has become more populated. The villages are more frequent and seem busier and louder. He guesses the population of each village, the gallons of gas they use. The last consulting project James was assigned involved forecasting natural gas consumption for the Midwest States. Then he sees a gem in the view. He spots a hilltop that sparkles. On this hill is an ancient city colored in red brick. He sees clutches of churches, convents and palaces that seem too near to each other for roads to exist in between.

The bus stops and the driver announces “San Miniato.”

James steps off the bus with a few locals that indicate to him in crippled English to wait with them for a local bus. Twenty minutes later an orange minibus arrives and he boards with the others. The bus begins its bumpy ascent into San Miniato. It climbs up a windy road that grows steeper as they proceed. James shows his napkin-badge to a passenger that instructs him to get off at this stop. James finds himself standing in front of the San Miniato Alto. He is standing in a breezy old quarter that stands on the highest point of settlement on the hill. James smiles with an open mouth, swallowing the wind. He sees the sign for Papa Germano’s.

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This is the third morning that James awakens to a square of golden sun on his room’s wooden floor. Like the prior two mornings, he is hypnotically drawn to the window, the gate of this light. As he glances at the quiet cobblestone alley, sensations from the past days surface his mind. He stands erect, recollecting. Since he arrived two days ago, he has been continuously swimming in an ocean of life. He is in love with a woman in the village. He is in love with all the women of the village. He is in love with the air, earth, sky.

James is inspired. He feels life flowing through his veins. His hunch about the women of Italy was right on. Almost all women here radiate the magical substance and it is in such

abundance that sometimes James spots it resting on the ground with no woman in sight. When this happens, he always tries to imagine the celestial woman that exuded this magic and left it like a puddle in the street. Indeed, the substance of life rises from the earth in San Miniato. The villagers are friendly and hospitable. The women are passionate yet innocent. James eats fresh pasta at the local trattoria each day. He converses with the villagers in nuances and gestures. He drinks life. He sees earth. He smells wind.

On this third day in San Miniato, however, James notices a growing frustration from a deep place within, hidden inside his abdomen. He is experiencing the opposite sentiment from the one he knew in his New York studio. These two frustrations are so different, James thinks to himself, that if they were mixed together, they would probably cancel each other out. James has become fully aware of the greatest miscalculation in his Tuscany plan. He is upset with himself for not researching further before embarking on this journey. He does not understand how such a thorough planner as himself, did not forecast his current problem. Although the women of San Miniato are playful, they are also Catholic. James asked several women in the town to model for him, but they all refused. He even offered a hefty dollar sum, but not one woman agreed to pose nude. San Miniato was too small a town for a woman to risk her reputation. In New York James had the tools to create, but no feelings to sculpt. Now inspiration swirls within his body, but he has no mechanism to manifest it. James walks around town with his growing angst. He is walking in a glass shell, surrounded by beauty, yet unable to reach out and touch it.

At 8:30 PM, after a burdening day of walking, even the freshness of his dinner fails to uplift his spirit. James decides to return to his room. He drank plenty of Chianti with his dinner at the trattoria and suddenly all the streets look the same. Every piazza he reaches seems identical to the one he just passed. As James walks, he feels claustrophobic inside his body. The shell of his skin is too small to contain this evening's pasta and the many sensations he has stored. James picks up his pace, and his upper body tilts forward over his feet as he walks. He is determined to win the battle against this giant labyrinth of cobblestone. If he could only reason, he thinks. His thoughts begin to form at an accelerated pace, to match the movements of his feet. Now, it is not optimism he is experiencing; it is forceful will. He recognizes a few street signs, and the red towel hanging from the laundry line across the alley from his hotel. Finally, he wins. As James ascends the staircase to his room, his hand dives into his pant's pocket. His mind is still racing even



though he is seconds away from being safe in his room. Suddenly, it is clear to him that he must find an outlet for his growing inner turmoil. In the archives of his mind he searches for the solution to his deeper problem: how can he use his elevated awareness to produce great art in clay or stone.

He yanks out a brass key from his pocket like a cowboy draws his gun. He is proud of his arrival, his victory against chaos. Then, he glances at the celestial woman sitting by his door, blocking the keyhole. “Am I dreaming?” he asks himself.

“I wait for you long time, ah? She says with two stretched out arms and open palms. James gathers himself and stands straight. He glances down at her thick brown hair falling like fettuccini and curling playfully around her shoulders and chest. Her olive skin is the same tone as the door behind her. James focuses on her voluptuous lips. He can see the many vertical lines in her upper lip, it is curled upward towards him. Her long skinny legs are gathered in her hands. Her scabbed knees kiss each one of her breasts.

“I am René. I come to model. You are sculptor, no?” James smiles widely, as if he is receiving morning sun on his face. His head is not tilted to the sky, though; it is glancing down at René. He is struck by the title she gives him, “sculptor.” Everyone at the Art Student League knows him as the ex-consultant. All his college friends and ex-coworkers tell the story of how he left home. He knows they never call him a sculptor either, just troubled James. The art is probably a small part of his story. He is sure they all have bets on how long it will be till he returns to his wife and home.

“Yes, yes, that’s right. I am a sculptor.” He walks forward to shake her hand. His palm is sweaty. Hers is cold. He looks into her eyes and he helps her rise to her feet. He recognizes her now. He had seen her passing by in town twice. He had seen her at the vegetable market and at the cheese shop. He took notice of her because she was strolling a pink baby carriage. He remembers his thoughts after the first time he saw her at the cheese shop, exchanging some words he could not understand with the man behind the counter. He was startled by how seductive he found her as a mother. He remembers thinking that the baby she is caring for only strengthens the chemical she exudes. He turns the key in the door and shows her in.

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James is now in his third day of mad sculpting. Renée lies naked on the bed with her head high supported by several pillows, her long curly hair spreading onto the mattress. Her legs are straight and slightly parted. One hand is by her head. The other rests on an inner thigh. She is smiling very subtly, grinning to herself. James has fresh clay stains on his jeans and shirt; sweat bubbles appear on his upper lip and forehead. He stands before a life size clay sculpture. He is carving out chunks from her legs, trying to create the space between them. His hands move from a bucket of water to the clay, his fingers massage, pull, then back to the water, then they caress the clay surface again. Suddenly, he is flooded by a memory, a story his sculpting teacher at the Arts Student's League told him once about a figure in a Gustav Klimt painting. His hands keep working rapidly, independent of his mind, apathetic to this memory.

The painting discussed in class was of the famous mythological figure Arnel. A prophet once told the king that the son of a woman named Arnel would be the one that would kill him and rule his empire. The king, wanting to avoid this prophecy at all costs, captured Arnel in the tallest, most secluded tower of his castle. Servants fed her well, and her mother and female friends were allowed to visit. However, the king strictly forbade any male visitors. Only female servants tended to her room. The king himself never visited Arnel. He didn't even know what she looked like. He made sure that once she was captured, she was brought straight to the tower. This was because the king had heard of her seductive beauty, and feared that with all his strength he would be a prisoner to her magic. Arnel was only sixteen when the king captured her and as the years went by she grew full of sexual desires. Since she was forbidden to see men, all she thought of was men: she spent all her days and nights imagining their smell, fantasizing of their touch on her skin. Many artists depicted Arnel in different and contradicting ways. Some saw her as a virgin in white, never touched by a man; some created her lustful and seductive, thirsty for a man. James loved Klimt's painting of Arnel so much that he asked his professor to retell her story a few times during class. He would fantasize about her at night. He was convinced she was full of the magical substance of life; it surrounded her in the castle tower, filling her prison with potent aroma, produced and consumed only by Arnel. James believes that this viscous cycle, living and consuming her own magic, eventually drove her to madness.

James carves out a crucial piece of clay, leaving Renée's clay legs parted. Now a thin strip of light passes through this line of negative space. His moist hands immerse in her round clay shoulders, her fragile long spine, her parted thighs. James looks at Renée and sees that her hand is moving gently between her legs and her lips are now slightly parted. Renée is Arnel right now in front of him, all filled with lust, exuding, exuding, exuding... he must be the most privileged man on earth to have snuck into her room and to witness such celestial behavior. He continues to sculpt. The movement of his hands is entirely beyond him. He is a machine of instinct. He doesn't know what most people are doing in New York right now, or even if they are awake or asleep. He cannot think. He doesn't even know if Renée-Arnel is in the room. In fact, James is not in the room. No consciousness or time are present, only the aromas of the substance of life.

Renée leaves that celestial evening of creation and never returns. James waits for her for over two hours the following morning. When he walks downstairs to find out why she was so late for their morning session, Papa Germano of the pensionne advises him to leave town. He tells James that Renée's husband discovered that instead of shopping for groceries and tending to the baby in the mornings, Renée was naked with an American.

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James learned in business school that when doing business in foreign countries, it is important to listen to a local adviser. He swallows his sorrow, and tries to activate his reason. He believes that only the cerebral should be listened to. He must remain objective, he keeps thinking. James casts his clay in plaster at a local sculptor's studio. Even though his sculpture is still a few days away from completion, he realizes the soft clay will not survive the flight back to New York. He lifts his plaster casting by the waist and his single piece of luggage, and walks to the bus stop in the cobblestone Piazza del Castello. Before boarding the bus, as the sun sets slowly, coloring his face orange and red, James takes one last deep breath through his nostrils of the substance of the women of San Miniato. He prays that some residue will remain in his lungs.

As he sits down on the bus - a bumpy journey downhill to the main road where he will take another bus that will bring him to Sienna - James buries his head and all its thoughts in the cocktail napkin with instructions that Alessandra gave him. He concentrates on reversing the instructions: a train from Sienna to Rome, instead of Rome-Sienna. He pays

no attention to the view. He looks at the napkin and concentrates as if it were a crossword puzzle. He is pleased to find this task easy for him.

It is 2:45 PM on a Wednesday, most of New York City has returned to their cubes after a quick lunch and sit facing their computers. James sits in the apartment-studio and scratches his head. He cannot explain his failure even to himself in silence. He goes to the Art Student League every morning, he then thoroughly engages in his inspiration walk, then works in the studio for at least five hours. He thinks that maybe the reason he cannot complete the sculpture of Arnel is because it is made of plaster. He was never good at working with plaster. His fingers are so much freer on soft clay. But he had no choice four months ago when he left Tuscany. He had to act quickly and a plaster casting was the only reasonable solution. In his mind, he scans the figures of the last ten models that posed for him in his attempts to find one to complete the magical Arnel. He does this as nonchalantly as he used to flip through his Rolodex of contacts back in his consulting days. They are all professional painters' models, skinny and lifeless, he thinks. A couple of the girls were more voluptuous. One he had met on the train and convinced her to pose; the other was a painter friend, doing him a favor. But even though their bodies were fuller, they were so uncomfortable with their shapes. They covered themselves in shame so tightly that he felt like they were fully clothed when they posed. James places his hands at his sides and looks around his studio. He focuses on the plaster sculpture of the reclining woman with her hand on the cusp of her thigh. Arnel is so, so close to capturing the magical female substance, James thinks. He searches through his drawers for the list of goals that he had typed up six months earlier. He was writing these goals when he first conceived of the Tuscany trip. Maybe this list will give him yet another dose of inspiration. He rummages through each drawer but he cannot find it. He thinks he remembers not even saving the Word document on his computer out of excitement. James sits at his desk and flips a pen in his fingers staring down at a blank sheet of paper. He decides that from now on he will lengthen his walks of inspiration and shorten his time in classes and the studio. He will thoroughly search the streets for a celestial beauty that produces the magical substance of life, a woman that radiates it freely in public. She will be aware of her flesh, yet interested in celebrating the beauty of others. He will get a neighborhood map from city hall, and mark every block that he covers and the time of his visit. He will be so, so thorough that he will miss nothing. Eventually, he must find her, he

has to find her. He knows she exists. He leaves his apartment wearing gray slacks and slippers. James is filled with calculated enthusiasm. Who knows if he will ever come back.