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## Like Sun on a Wet Cobblestone

Renate Childs

Western Michigan University, rlchilds@gtappraisals.com

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Like Sun on Wet Cobblestone

Renate Childs

XIX

“Giorgio.”

He turned at the sound of my voice, his skin crinkling slightly deeper around his dark eyes, and smiled just as I had envisioned he would. His hair was shorter, and he was dressed so differently—in jeans and a sweater, no longer sporting his signature black pants and leather jacket.

“Ah. Silvie, you look just the same. I got you a cappuccino, I hope it’s still your favorite!”

I smiled at him, sat down, and waited, staring at the grains of wood in the table. The colors swirled and faded into one another, and the memory of Giorgio’s gift for interrupting awkward silences calmed me.

“It’s so nice to hear the name Giorgio again. Ever since I came back, everyone has insisted on calling me George. I don’t mind it, really. I feel like Giorgio is some alternate identity. I was starting to fear I lost him in U.S. customs.”

“I’ve only ever known you as Giorgio.”

“You cannot imagine how I have missed you, Sylvie! You and Maddie both. How is she, anyway? Last I heard from her, she had run off with some Russian to Madrid.”

“He was American, and they did go to Madrid for a week or so, but they’re married now and really happy. They’re living back in Michigan.”

“Ah.” His brow furrowed. I had forgotten how he detested being corrected when he was exaggerating. “And you? No husband impatiently waiting outside while you catch up with an old flame?”

He winked, and I smiled, and we had reverted to our natural bit: he, overzealous and outspoken; and I, reserved and quiet.

“No. Nothing serious.”

## I

It was a particularly sunny day, and to celebrate, Maddie and I decided to walk toward the Coliseum. Though the sun beat down, it was still relatively cold and the crisp air was refreshing to breathe in as we meandered through the city. I loved the smells. Cigarette smoke mixed with river mixed with whatever baked close by: coffee, pizza, pastries. With every scent I slowly grew more accustomed to the richness of this city life. In the area around the Coliseum, busy with tourists and vendors alike, every face revealed the sun’s influence, a parade of smiles, wishes, hopes. The streets were bustling, but it was a slow bustle, the “stop-and-smell-the-roses” kind. People stepped languidly in every direction, each in awe of the sights before them, and there I sat, on cool cement, admiring them.

We had found an elevated garden of sorts between the Coliseum and the Forum surrounded by a cement wall, creating the perfect spot to sit for a minute to read or eat or simply admire the view. The wall faced into the setting sun and though it was occasionally hidden by clouds, it was warm enough that I needed to take my coat off, and bright enough that I spent the majority of the time closing my eyes and letting my face soak up the rays. I finally was settled

and content and began to read, yet interested as I was in the book, I couldn't help but be distracted. After a few minutes, I saw someone in the corner of my eye sit down near me. I glanced toward my right to see a young man, around my age, in his early twenties. He had dark hair and eyes and seemed content to simply sit and enjoy the sun, and so I returned to reading.

A few minutes later, I heard a persistent tapping sound coming from the cement on my right side. Initially I tried to ignore it, but curiosity overpowered my interest in reading. I turned to watch a pigeon pecking at some sort of unfamiliar oval-shaped brown nut. Though tenacious in his actions, the bird proved unable to pick up the little nut with his beak. The saga peaked when the nut was pushed over the edge of the wall and the pigeon flew away in defeat. The entirety of the pigeon's struggle only lasted a minute, and when it was over, I caught the eye of the young man next to me and realized that he had been watching the pigeon as well. I smiled at him, and he smiled back.

"Ciao, bella!" he pronounced the words with that fervor for language all Italians have, lingering on every syllable as if the phrase were something significant, something more than simply "hello, beautiful."

"Ciao," I replied. "Parli inglese?"

"Si, si, yes! My name is Giorgio!" he said, with a perfect American accent.

"Oh, I thought..."

"Oh no, I'm not Italian. I'm from Pennsylvania. I came here to study abroad two years ago and I just cannot find it in my heart to leave! Such a beautiful city."

"It is. I'm Sylvie, and this is Maddie," I gestured toward Maddie, who was too engrossed in her own book to notice any of the exchange.

"So what brings the two of you to bellissima Roma?"

“Well, Maddie is interning at St. John’s, the American University in Trastevere, and I’m visiting her for a little while. I just graduated and wanted to do some traveling.”

“What school? I started my undergrad at U Penn, but never finished. I just couldn’t bear to leave this city, so I decided to stay.” He paused here and looked around, smiling. “During the week, I work at a coffee shop, but on the weekends I paint. The city is just so inspiring.”

In the few moments I’d spent talking to him, I could see that his passion for Rome was genuine. He truly loved the city, and I couldn’t help but to admire that.

“We went to University of Michigan, I’ve been here just a few weeks, but luckily, I don’t have much to do, so I’ve seen a lot. I’m planning a trip to Paris in February, and then hopefully London. But other than that, I mostly just walk around the city.”

“And what would you like to do?”

“I suppose I’d like to write, eventually, but I’ll probably work for a publishing company or a magazine to pay the bills.”

“Oh! Hello!” Maddie had finally looked up from her book and realized that we had been talking.

“Maddie, this is Giorgio.”

“Nice to meet you!”

“Listen ladies, it was wonderful meeting you, but I really need to get back. Here, I’ll give you my number. Maybe we can grab a drink or a cappuccino sometime.”

We exchanged numbers and after he left, I turned to Maddie. “He seems nice.”

“Yes, but anyway, this book I’m reading is really interesting.” She began to describe in detail the novel she was reading concerning an interpreter stuck in the crossfires of some great

international mystery. The novel inspired her new career goals to become an international interpreter; she just had to learn Italian first, or maybe Russian.

As the sun began to set and the city cooled, we decided to walk back to Maddie's apartment. It was located in Trastevere overlooking Piazza Trilussa, a small square near the Tiber. By day the piazza was inhabited by workers fixing cobblestones, bakers carrying delicious smelling pastries, tourists visiting the little shops, and more cars than should logically drive in a crowded pedestrian area. At night, the bars opened and the crowds grew bigger; it was the perfect time to people watch. People aged anywhere from fifteen to fifty filled the piazza, carrying beers, laughing, and simply walking around, any night of the week.

## II

The next day it rained, and seemingly continued on in this manner for a number of weeks with only a few hours of sunshine here and there to keep us satisfied. I spent my time planning trips to Paris and London and trying to avoid men on the streets who somehow appeared directly in accordance with the first drop of rain, calling, "Ombrelle, ombrelle, ombrelle?" at anyone who walked near them.

At first I didn't hear from Giorgio at all. I thought about texting him, as I did have his number, but I was also wary. Chance encounters are romantic in theory, but I really knew nothing about this man. A part of me, the overly fantastical portion, was convinced that this was my one chance at true love, yet another part was convinced that if I did meet him again, he and his gang of Romanian thugs would kidnap me and sell me into slavery. (My dad had forced me to watch *Taken* at least three times before I was allowed to board the plane.)

My only conclusion to this endless back and forth was that I needed to find some sort of hobby or creative outlet to pass the time. While Maddie was working, I had nothing to do and would usually resort to wandering around the neighborhood or reading at a coffee shop. I knew I would be perfectly content to wander around discovering the city forever, but I had come here for a reason. I wasn't working or taking classes and my tourist visa was only valid for 90 days. I'd already been here for sixteen with nothing to show but a few museum tickets, bus passes, and an ever-diminishing bank account.

For almost a week I walked around the city as usual, but instead of simply observing, I brought along a notebook and tried to put to words everything I saw or experienced. It helped at first, but after the second day, I ran out of ways to describe cracking cobblestones, fragrant bakeries, and horrible drivers. I kept feeling like I was missing something when I tried to write it down. I saw more when I simply sat and absorbed my surroundings.

On my twenty-second day in Rome, Maddie came home from work with a smile on her face.

"How was your day?" I asked.

"Ehh. It was a day... I have some news for you!"

"What?" I asked skeptically, hoping and also fearing that she had run into Giorgio.

"Do you remember that professor I was telling you about? The Journalist?"

"Um. No?"

"God. You really don't listen to me, do you? Anyway, he's looking for a teaching assistant, and I told him I knew someone... Now I'm not entirely sure that it's technically legal, but since you won't be paid, I don't really see the harm in it!"

"Wait, me? A Journalism class?"

“Silvia, you are so slow sometimes. Of course I meant you, and it’s not really journalism, it’s a Travel Literature course, mostly for study abroad students. But he really needs someone to help grade papers and to teach the class sometimes. I guess he has to travel a lot for some book he’s writing. Anyway, I thought this would be perfect: he’s a writer, you’re an aspiring writer; he needs someone to help him, and you need something to do...”

“I think you just want me out of the house.”

She smiled. “Honestly, Silvie, how do you live like this? Everything is so *organized*.”

In spite of my teasing, I knew she was right and I agreed to meet with the professor. His name was Michele De Luca. He started out as a journalist, working for some big Roman newspaper. Then in his late forties, he wrote mostly travel literature, but he also had one small novel published.

I walked with Maddie to work in the morning. It rained, as usual. My raincoat was thin and, thanks to unforgiving cobblestones, the soles of my boots were beginning to crack. By the time we reached the school, I was thoroughly soaked. I had tried my best to dress professionally, but the constant downpour paired with my unwavering resolve to never buy an “ombrelle” completely ruined any efforts I had made.

Maddie took me to his small and cluttered office; he wasn’t there yet. I sat down in a chair next to the desk and stared at walls featuring no pictures of people, but countless pictures of places: waterfalls, forests, incredible views, cities, and monuments.

I was contemplating a picture of some sort of vast garden when the door opened. In walked a man—no—a character. He seemed to me like something out of a novel. He was neither tall nor short, with dark shoulder length hair that had been tousled back as if he constantly ran his hands through it. There was little sign of graying, yet it was evident that his hairline sat further

back from his thick eyebrows than it used to. He seemed to dress more out of necessity than style: a pair of glasses with black square-shaped rims sitting haphazardly on a broad nose, a lumpy green sweater thrown over a pale button up, and wrinkled jeans hanging slightly too far above a set of worn brown dress shoes.

“Oh, hello.” His voice lilted with sounds of the Mediterranean, yet the ease in which he spoke them assured me of his familiarity with the English language.

“Hi, Professor De Luca?”

“Please, call me Michele.” He sat down at his desk, crossed one leg over the other, and looked at me expectantly.

“Um. Okay. Well, my name is Silvia. My friend Maddie said that you were looking for a teaching assistant...” I waited for an answer, but he just stared at me, like he wanted more of an explanation as to why I was there. “And, I thought that this might be a good opportunity for me. You see, I’m a writer... that is, I’d like to write.” The stare simply continued. “So I thought that if I helped you with your class, then you could help me with my writing.”

“Silvia. Ah.” And then he turned and began to rifle through the piles of papers on his desk. After a few minutes it appeared that he gave up his search. “I was going to give you a copy of the syllabus, but then I realized I hadn’t written one yet. Anyway, this is a six week compacted course that meets for an hour and a half at two o’clock on Tuesdays and Thursdays. You’ll also need to set up an hour twice a week in which you can stay here for office hours. Mondays and Wednesdays, sometime between noon and five, is preferred. It will also involve probably an extra four or five hours a week for grading papers, and of course you will need to be familiar with everything the students are reading.” I found myself concentrating more on the

slow rhythm of his words than their content. He had this way of softly rolling his Rs and he pronounced the “th” sound as a hard T. “Do you think you could handle all of that?”

“Yes, it’ll be good to have something to do.”

He stared into my eyes, and I felt I could not look away. After a moment, he smiled.

“Yes, I think you’ll do.” Then he turned around, picked up a book on his desk and began to read.

“So, should I just email you?”

“Si, si, okay,” he said, waving me away.

### III

As I left the school, the sun was shining. With fresh enthusiasm I resolved to walk toward Circus Maximus. I had my notebook with me and I tried to promise myself that I would spend the afternoon writing, but I knew I would spend an hour or so watching dogs run around, then have a sudden craving for gelato, and decide to head toward home, stopping at my favorite gelateria on the way. Halfway down the street, however, a cloud blocked out the sun and rain instantaneously began to pour down on the cobblestones. Seeking solace in a little coffee shop I had just passed, I went to the counter, rifling through my bag for my wallet, paying no attention to who was behind it.

“Un cappuccino, per favore.”

“Silvie? Ciao!”

I looked up to see Giorgio smiling back at me.

“Oh, hi.” I had been anticipating this moment in my imagination for so long, I suddenly hoped I wouldn’t spoil it with nervous chatter. “How are you?”

“Bene, bene! And you?”

“I’m good! I just got a job. Well, it’s not really a job since I’m not getting paid, but anyway, I’m going to be a teaching assistant for this Professor at the school my friend Maddie works at.”

“Oh, how exciting! What school is that again?”

“You know the American university just down the street? It’s that one.”

“Oh, yes! That’s the one I went to when I first came here. What professor are you working with?”

“Michele De Luca.”

“Ah yes, I took a travel journalism course with him. He’s... very particular about style. That is to say, we didn’t exactly agree on what was good and what was not. I’m sure you won’t have that problem... Look, I have to go back to work, but I’m off in a half hour. Do you have somewhere you need to be? If not, wait at that table and we can chat when I’m done.”

Considering the only thing I had planned for the day involved walking outside, and it was still raining, I figured this option was better than going back to the apartment and waiting for Maddie to get home. Giorgio gave me my cappuccino, I gave him two euro, and I proceeded to sit down at the table he had pointed toward.

#### IV

“You’re saying you prefer Radcliffe over Austen?” Giorgio and I were talking about books we had read, and I was aghast when he said he disliked Jane Austen.

“In a word, yes.”

“I don’t understand that, but maybe I’m biased. Jane Austen is basically the reason I started writing.”

“It’s just, Austen is so predictable... With Radcliffe I feel like I never know what’s going to happen and why.”

“But Austen is just more realistic—her prose at least. It’s not necessarily about the story; it’s about how it’s told. She tells it with humor and with sensibility. I’ll never understand the notion most people have that a good novel must surprise you. Radcliffe’s language is beautiful and her stories are intriguing, but there’s just something missing, something that’s real, something that’s human.”

“Didn’t Austen greatly admire Radcliffe?”

“I greatly admire Hemingway, but that doesn’t mean I desire to be or write like him.”

“You make some good points, Signorina, but I believe I cannot be persuaded on this matter.”

And the same back and forth between us continued for a time. I had always loved talking with new people, learning their likes and dislikes, challenging opinions. Generally I kept to myself, but there is that first discussion when two parties realize they have more to talk about than whatever initially brought the two of them together. I knew that even if I never saw Giorgio again, this would be an afternoon to remember.

“How was your cappuccino? It’s been said that I make the best cappuccini in Trastevere.”

He had a habit of pluralizing and pronouncing Italian words in an Italian fashion, even when he was speaking English. I smiled, told him it was wonderful, and looked at my watch; I

knew I had been here a while, but I hadn't realized exactly how long. It had been almost four hours. Maddie would be getting home soon.

"Oh, wow, I have to go!"

"Yeah, I should probably get going, too. We should do this again soon."

"Yes, definitely! You still have my number, right?"

"I think so, but if you don't hear from me in the next few days, just show up here. Ciao, Ciao!" he said, kissing me on both cheeks.

As I walked home, it continued to rain without respite, but for once I didn't mind. I embraced it. I walked slowly and let each drop slide seamlessly down my face, soaking through my jacket, and landing softly on the street with each step I took. The walk home was too short, and I wasn't ready to go back inside, but I was already there and had nowhere else to go. I pulled out my key as I walked up the marble stairs to our little apartment. With every step I took, my boots squeaked loudly against them. I reached the third floor and tried the door, only to find that it was open. Maddie was home.

"Hey!" I said.

She was sitting on the little blue couch that faced the door. She was reading, and waited to finish her sentence before looking up to respond. "Hey, where have you been?"

I put my wet shoes next to hers. A puddle of water had already formed around them, even though she couldn't have been here long.

"You know, you really shouldn't let these drip like that—It'll stain the floor."

"Okay, mom. How was your day? How'd the meeting go?"

I told her about the meeting, everything from the garden picture on the wall to his habit of holding intense eye contact for an uncomfortable period of time. (She thinks the picture is of

some place and England and that he does that to pretty much everyone.) I asked if it was an Italian thing; she told me that while Italians generally have no concept of personal space, it was mostly a Michele De Luca thing.

“But the meeting didn’t last that long. Have you been wandering around in the rain all this time?”

“No. I ran into that guy, Giorgio, at this coffee shop, and we chatted a while. He’s pretty nice... has horrible taste in books, though.”

“Oh, gotcha. Nothing too crazy, then?”

“No, nothing too crazy. I think he and his roommate were going to go to that monument... the one that looks like a wedding cake?”

“The Vittorio Emanuele monument?”

“Yes, thank you! Anyway, they want to go into that on Saturday, I think. I guess you can take an elevator to the top and have an awesome view of the entire city. Do you want to join us?”

“Saturday? Sure, sounds fun! Hey, when are you going to Paris again?”

“Not this weekend, but the next. Why?”

“I’ve decided to come, too. When else will I have the chance?”

“Exactly!”

## V

The rest of the week went just as I expected. The rain finally began to peter out, and in the little pockets of sunshine that the city was allowed, I managed to do a little more wandering around. I walked down Viale Trastevere and browsed the goods of the street-side vendors who

braved the constant threat of rain. You could find anything on the side of the street: movies, scarves, toiletries, underwear, clothing—there was an endless array of products. And these vendors seemed more relaxed, less forceful than the little umbrella men. I didn't buy anything as I didn't need anything, but I browsed. During January and February every store has a big sale to get rid of last season's goods before stocking up with those of the coming season. The windows of each store front were plastered with the words "Saldi" in all caps and bright colors.

I ventured into a couple of them, but I never purchased anything. It was enough to see what there was to offer. On my way home one day, I walked past a shop on Via del Moro. It was called the Just Down the Street Bookshop, which, although I had walked this street many times, I had never seen before. I had come to realize this was relatively normal. Many of the shops closed down for a few hours in the afternoon for what Maddie insisted on calling "nap time." The city of Rome had a law that required from one to four that the streets should be quiet. In accordance with this ordinance, many shops shut down at this time, and instead of simply locking the doors and changing a sign from "OPEN, please come in!" to "CLOSED, please come again!" as I was accustomed to, they closed graffiti coated garage doors over each entrance, creating the effect that the store had never even existed. So I wasn't exactly surprised that I had never seen this particular shop before. I must have simply walked by before when it was closed.

I opened the door to the shop and was immediately surrounded by the enticing smell of new books. Despite the cramped size of the store, books covered almost every surface, saving only a thin winding path on which to walk.

"Hello," a man said in an English accent.

I turned to see a sweet looking older man sitting behind a counter covered in novels.

"Hello."

“Can I help you find anything?”

“I’m just browsing.”

“Okay. Well, if you need anything, don’t be afraid to ask.”

I was about to turn around and continue looking on my own, but then a thought occurred to me.

“Actually, I’m looking for a new book. Do you think you could suggest something? I’ve not read any Italian literature really, and I figure, while in Rome...”

“Of course!” he said with a smile, and I assumed that he specialized in Italian literature.

“Now there the classics, Dante, Petrarch... or do you prefer novels?”

“Novels, actually.”

“Let’s see... How about Primo Levi, or maybe Giorgio Bassani? Oh wait, Antonio Tabucchi?”

“How about one of each?”

“I like your style.” He bustled about, pulling the books off the shelf.

“These are in English, right?”

“Of course. Only English bookstore in Trastevere!”

“Perfect.”

“Okay, now these will normally be about thirty euro, but you seem like you appreciate literature, so I’m going to give you the ‘I’m the owner and I do what I want’ deal.”

“Oh you don’t have to do that...”

“Please, it’s my pleasure.”

“Well, thank you.”

I paid the discounted price, and grabbed the bag full of books, excited to go home and tear them open. I thanked the man again and promised I would be back. The whole way home I contemplated which of the three I would start first.

## VI

Saturday came and Saturday went, and all my expectations of our excursion with Giorgio and his roommate were discarded upon our first glimpse of the pair. I don't know what I had expected in a roommate of Giorgio's. I had really heard nothing about him besides the fact that his name was Fred. If I were perfectly honest, my imagination had conjured an image of Giorgio and Fred Weasley combined. I could not have been more mistaken. The man waiting with Giorgio was tall, at least six foot three, broad, and muscular. He had pale hair that had been neatly combed. He was well dressed, though not excessively: a nice blue sweater that complimented his eyes, a pair of well-fitting jeans, and very Italian looking leather boots.

"Ah, there they are!" Giorgio exclaimed on first catching sight of us. "Ciao, ragazze! Ladies, this is Fred. Fred, these are the ladies, Silvie and Maddie."

"Hello."

"Nice to meet you."

"The pleasure is mine." Fred said the words so eloquently, yet he stressed the vowels in strange ways.

"Fred here is from Germany, but don't let that stop you from liking him. Shall we?"

"Where are you from in Germany?" Maddie's father's family was from Germany, and when she was younger, she had visited almost every summer.

“Lindau, in the south.”

“Oh yes, I know it! It’s really beautiful there in the summer on the lake.”

“Yes, I used to think it the most beautiful place in the world, and then I came to Rome, and realized what it is to live in a place with no snow.” Though most of his English was clear, he would occasionally miss a word. Maddie and Fred continued to talk of Germany and I fell into step with Giorgio.

“I think they are really hitting it off,” he said.

“Maddie hits it off with everyone. She’s good at that, talking to people.” I had feared that the few days would reset any easiness we had achieved in conversation, but I was wrong. It was natural, talking to him.

We stayed in pairs. Starting in Piazza Trilussa, we crossed a Lungotevere on to Ponte Sisto, the cobbled walking bridge, which was always littered with various street artists, and homeless people with homeless dogs, and signs reading something along the lines of “Auitami.” We exited the bridge through iron turnstiles preventing any motor vehicles from entering, and crossed a second Lungotevere onto a small street. The buildings on either side of it were tall and stone, leaving the street in shadow, but not dark. Looking at the street from its opening, it seemed endless, but hidden amongst the tall stone fortifications on either side were many quiet shops: a grocery store and gelateria that I frequented, a shop with handmade shoes, windows that showcased exquisite jewelry, and yet, the street was never crowded like Viale Trastevere or Via del Corso. It opened up into a larger, more central street, busy with shoppers, passing from Largo Argentina to Campo de’ Fiori. We turned right, toward Largo Argentina. That street ended into an even larger one. Largo Argentina was on the left, the right lead back to Trastevere. There was a little park, also to the right, that seemed ironic to me; just a little patch of green in the middle of

the city center. People lunched on benches, pigeons pecked around a fountain, and yet the entirety of the park was not half a city block. We moved on quickly, but I vowed internally to come back to that park.

When we reached Largo Argentina, we decided to pause for a little to watch the stray cats lounge around in the grass down below. The square had already become one of my favorite places in the city. It epitomized the entire mood of La Città Eterna in just one city block. Tall buildings surrounded broad paved streets encircling a large opening in the ground that at first appeared as a mere smudge of greens and pale browns, but as we walked closer we saw that it was actually a set of aged marble ruins jutting out defiantly through the rain encouraged grass. The spoils and profits of the modern city sprouted out respectfully around the grandeur of the ancient one, for Rome is neither one city nor two. It is an expansive collection of hundreds of cities that have risen and fallen over hundreds of years and they have all grown up and around each other, living in peaceful acquiescence, side by side by side, and would continue to live thus for hundreds and hundreds of years, simultaneously changing drastically and remaining essentially the same. Rome is proud. Never ashamed of its past, it celebrates all—even the horrors.

When I first arrived, I'd heard Largo Argentina described as the scene of Julius Caesar's murder. This fact, I learned, is slightly inaccurate. On March fifteenth, forty-four BCE, Brutus stabbed Julius Caesar in the Theatre of Pompey, which actually stood about two blocks west of Largo Argentina. Unlike the ruins in Largo, the Theatre of Pompey has long been paved and built over. Evidence of its existence, however, remains present in the streets and buildings in that area, which have curved around each other, reflecting the way the theatre benches wrapped around the stage. Dark tunnels crossed between buildings, which to some would appear as

merely a spine-tingling alleyway, but those fortunate enough to know a passionate German studying architecture will learn that these dark alleyways serve as prime examples of Roman innovation.

“Just marvelous!” Fred told us, motioning around him. “These stone barrel vaulted tunnels have withstood over two thousand years and still support the weight of a four story building. It’s amazing, no?”

Later, I asked Fred what Largo Argentina actually was. I’d passed it many times, but never really knew what it was used for.

“You know about the Roman triumph, right?” he asked me.

“Not really.”

“Okay. Well, during the period of the Roman Republic, the tradition of the Roman Triumph began. Roman generals would celebrate their victories in important battles by marching in a sort of parade. Generals would come home from battles bathed in riches that they had won in foreign Lands, but not just jewels or money—they’d have exotic animals and sometimes even the leaders of the lands they had defeated. Then, of course, they wanted to show everything off and thank the Gods for everything, so they built victory temples.”

“So that’s what Largo is, victory temples?”

“Yes, there are four of them.”

I stared at the crumbling remains of marble and travertine while a shiny black cat sauntered purposefully across a fallen column. The first time I came here, the multitude of cats that lounged here immediately struck my curiosity. I returned home and searched the area online. When the ruins were excavated in 1929, the population of stray cats in Rome began to take shelter there, and for years the population of “gattare” the not-so-affectionate Italian name for cat

ladies, would do their best to care for the animals. In the 1990s, a more permanent shelter was created. The cats of Largo Argentina are fed, spayed and neutered, and looked after with regular veterinary visits. On a sunny day, at least thirty cats might be seen lounging among the ruins, soaking up the rays, and occasionally strutting along the sidewalks hoping for a pat on the head or a belly rub from a kind stranger, and every time I saw an orange tabby, or faded calico sprawling among the sunny green grass or pouncing from behind aged marble, I thought to myself what a wonderful life that would be, to lounge among the ruins for days at a time.

We continued our walk past these cats, past these reclaimed temples, and on toward Piazza Venezia. The streets were busier here; the cars and buses drove by with a purpose, and perpetual construction claimed one street or another. On this side of the Tiber, there was a significant change in atmosphere that I always found strange. Toward the historic center it felt about ten degrees warmer, and about three times as loud. While in Trastevere, pedestrians and cars shared the road, toward the historic center, those on foot and those on wheels remained in their separate spheres. Crossing the street always proved a challenge. This part of the city had few cross lights for pedestrians, just simple white cross walks that stretched across four busy lanes of traffic. Eventually, I learned to walk across confidently, like it was my God-given right to cross that street at that moment. Hesitation, however, only caused those behind their steering wheels to grow cross and less inclined to let me pass in front of them. This confidence (or at least the outward appearance of it) took practice. The first time I had crossed the busy street toward the Monument of Vittorio Emanuele II, I waited for over ten minutes, hoping that some kind soul would stop, before watching multiple others go ahead of me and comprehending that if I simply walked out in front of a car it would stop for me. After that first realization, I resolved to only

wait for large buses, and by the time I left Rome, not even the largest, heaviest looking bus would deter me from walking directly in front of it.

The monument to Vittorio Emanuele II, or Altare della Patria (Altar of the Fatherland) struck me as beautiful in the most absurd way. It's largeness and appearance of being made entirely of white marble left me in awe. Finished in the twenties, it was dedicated to Vittorio Emanuele II who was the first king of united Italy. The monument houses the tomb of the Unknown Soldier, as well as a small museum. Controversy arose when its construction made it necessary to cut out a large portion of the Capitoline Hill. Large and commanding, we affectionately referred to it as "the cake" because of its white-tiered shape. On the very top of it two statues of the Goddess Victoria ride in some sort of chariot that I could see from almost anywhere in the city. The four of us approached the imposing structure cautiously. Except for the museum and the very top level, the monument was open to the public free of charge, yet guards in navy uniforms surrounded its open gates. Upon further examination, they all seemed pretty nonchalant and bored with it all, but nonetheless, they were still intimidating. We stood agape, staring at the monument before us; I had never looked at it with the intent of ascending its stately steps.

In the end it was Giorgio who made the first move toward the open gates. He turned, and smirked at the three of us, then sauntered off past the guards, who didn't even look up. As soon as we saw him tread unhindered through the gate, we followed, with Fred taking the lead, and me bringing up the rear. We all climbed the stairs at our own pace. As usual, I fell behind the others. I had brought my camera, and I busied myself with taking pictures of anything and everything. The wind picked up, and it grew colder with each upward step I took, but the sun was out, and the sky was blue, and the Italian green, white, and red contrasted so brilliantly against it, so I

kept taking pictures until my battery ran out. I don't know why. I had basically memorized that day before it had even started. We had to go inside to move up to the next level, and what we found was more marble, and more statues, and mysterious metal bars that separated us from a vast, dark, empty room.

When we made it to the next level, I was amazed by what I could see. We were all beginning to shiver under our sweaters and light jackets. But I wasn't done yet, there was still one tier left to conquer. To get to the very top, we had to take a glass elevator that cost about seven euro. Maddie hated heights, and didn't want to pay for it, and Fred had been up there before.

"Looks like it's just you and me," Giorgio told me, smiling.

"Let's do it, then." We paid for our tickets and got in line. There was a little café on the second level, and we agreed to meet Fred and Maddie there when we were done.

There is something so freeing about standing in a glass elevator, and I did not feel like talking. But on the way up, Giorgio was quiet.

We watched the city grow smaller and smaller as we rose. It did not take very long before the elevator stopped, and we once again stepped foot upon white marble. I watched my feet as I stepped off the elevator, but as soon as I felt steady I looked up, across the marble rails, across the statues of Victoria, and I did not look away for a long time. I forgot about Giorgio, I forgot about the wind, and I simply looked, and wondered how something so vast could be so small. And in that moment I fell in love with that marble eyesore. After a while, I realized that Giorgio was standing next to me. Whether he had been there the whole time, I could not say. He looked back at me, and we smiled, just as we had smiled over that silly little pigeon a million years ago. Then we both looked back out into the city, so filled with color, modern buildings haphazardly

placed next to ancient ruins, and I understood why he never left this place, and I wondered if I could ever leave this place.

“We should probably go back down.”

“Yeah, they’re probably waiting.”

But neither of us moved for about fifteen minutes.

And then, with a sigh of finality, he grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the elevator.

“We’ll come back here,” he promised on the way down. But we never did.

## VII

When we finally left the Monument of Vittorio Emanuele II, none of us were quite ready to go home. We talked about the forum, but the ticket booths had already closed, so we decided to walk up Capitoline hill. It was only when we reached the top that we realized we didn’t know what there was to actually do up there.

“There’s a museum,” Giorgio remarked.

“Too expensive.”

And we were going to leave, but through a row of Columns I glimpsed a hazy something, a something made of color—greens and purples blurred together, and I was curious. I noticed a few people walking to and from that direction, and my hunch grew.

“We should see what’s over there.”

And so we changed our course and headed toward the blurry colors.

We had stumbled onto a captivating little overview of the forum. We could see the weathered ruins from a whole new outlook, a whole new angle. Looking at the Forum from

behind the Arch of Septimius Severus, we beheld a few ancient Colonnades. A large one captured my attention immediately; commanding and proud, it stood over my view of the Forum. The murky cream of the marble contrasted with the jade hues of the grass below it, giving it an even more prominent stature, and not shadowing, but guiding my eyes to the immensity of the ruins behind them, showcasing, one by one, the grace and strength of each column and structure behind it.

Closer to where we stood, I spotted another colonnade, a shy, quieter one, but no less proud. It was shorter, lacking in the grandeur of the other, made of a darker, shadier stone, with a simple structure, and no frivolities in detail. Fred mentioned the idea of throwing coins onto the colonnade, and suddenly a thousand glimmering metal pieces became visible to me on the top of the colonnade itself, as well as in the grass surrounding it. I realized that the goal of this particular coin-throwing was to land one on the top of the colonnade itself. The general consensus between us was that in throwing the coin we would, naturally, make a wish, and that the granting of the wish would be dependent on whether or not the coin successfully landed on the colonnade.

This caused a mutual rush into wallets and pockets to find the instruments that would influence the destiny of our individual hopes and dreams, and with the necessary countdown, “Three! Two! One!” four hands tossed four coins toward the colonnade below, each carrying a little piece of its beholder. As each coin landed softly on the grass below the colonnade four, pairs of eyes turned away from their coins, four legs walked away from the view and down the slope of the hill, and four mouths smiled all the while.

## VIII

“I think you’re getting an accent.”

“I think you’re crazy. It’s probably just the connection.”

“Well, honey, are you having a good time? Making friends? I know that Maddie is there, but, you know, Maddie...”

“Mom.”

“I’m serious, sweetie. I worry about you. You’re spending all this money. You better not just be sitting around. You could have done that at home. For free. Well, almost free. I would still charge you rent.”

“Mom, I’m fine. Maddie got me this job. Well, not really a job because I’m not getting paid, but I’ll be working with this professor, just helping him out with classes. He’s a journalist.”

“But I thought you didn’t want to be a journalist.”

“I don’t, but I mean, a little experience never hurts.”

“You’re right. I’m glad you’re doing something. But are you having fun? Seeing the sights? Drinking lots of wine? Tell me about the wine, Silvie!”

“I don’t want to disappoint you, but I have to admit we only really buy the two euro wine at the grocery store.”

“How much is that in real money? I bet it gives you a killer headache.”

“It’s like three or four dollars. And it’s not that bad, actually.”

“Well, whatever you say, dear. Listen, do you have much more to say? I’ve really got to finish painting my nails.”

“Not much, but how’s Dad?”

“Oh you know your father: work, work, work. He misses you, though. I can tell though he’d never admit it. You should call him. Okay! Love you, have fun, meet nice Italian boys. Or don’t—Italian boys love their moms too much. They would never want to leave and I can’t have my future grandchildren living in another country. Except for maybe Canada. But don’t move to Canada, dear. It’s cold and boring; you might as well stay with me in Michigan. Okay. Love you. I really need to get this second coat on!”

“Love you.”

I hung up the phone and smiled over at Maddie who was pretending to study some language or other, but was actually taking a very necessary and surely life-altering quiz on BuzzFeed.

“Out of these choices, which color would you say matches my soul?”

“Hmm. The light blue. What quiz are you taking?”

“Which 90s boy band are you?”

“Awesome. I’ll take it later.”

“Ooh. I got Hanson! Mmbop ba duba bop. Someting like that...”

“Brava! I think they’ve got you pegged.”

“I don’t think I could have gone on in my life without knowing that.”

“Definitely not.”

“Hey, which Downton Abbey Character am I? I hope I get Sybil. Or Anna.”

I smiled and went back to reading one of the books the man from the bookstore had chosen for me. In a few minutes, Maddie closed her computer exasperatedly and looked at me with a long sigh.

I finished my sentence before answering. “What’s wrong?”

“I got Edith. You don’t think I’m an Edith, do you?”

“I don’t think you should let BuzzFeed quizzes define you. The only quizzes you should actually rely on are the ones on Oprah.com.”

“You’re right. You always are, Silvie, and I can’t even resent you for it.” She sighed dramatically, and sprawled out on the couch we had been sharing, lying on her back and placing her head on my lap. I had to move my hands, which were holding my book so that she could settle there.

“What are you reading, Silvie? Tell me a story.” Sometimes she reminded me of a child: so dramatic in one moment, so sweet in the next.

“It’s about a boy. He’s Jewish, near the beginning of World War II. And there’s this other family, who are really wealthy and Jewish, and he goes to play tennis at their house because they stopped letting the Jews into the athletic center, and their house kind of reminds me of some gothic abbey—I mean they have this huge morbid tomb.”

“And he falls in love.”

“Yes.”

“What’s her name?”

“Micòl.”

“Micòl. That’s pretty.”

And we stayed there like that: I read, and occasionally she would ask me questions. With the window open behind us we could hear the soft rain outside. A breeze drifted through our apartment smelling sweetly of rain and cooling exhaust pipes. Through the rain we could hear people shouting, and cars splashing through puddles and the distant boom of the cannon on

Gianicolo Hill telling us that it was noon. Eventually I stopped reading, and simply stared at the words, and listened, and felt Maddie's childlike, drowsy head on my lap.

"Let's go for a walk," I said, breaking through the whooshing of the wind as it passed by our open window.

"Silvie, it's raining." She sat up. "You're so silly sometimes."

I stayed silent, running my finger along the binding of the book: *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*.

"Besides it's Sunday, nothing's open today. Hey! If you're really bored, we can watch a movie! I figured out how to set up my computer so that Netflix thinks I'm in a country that actually has Netflix."

"Okay, you've convinced me. What do you want to watch?"

## IX

I had told Michele De Luca that I would have my office hours from one to two on Mondays and Wednesdays, and he wrote back and told me that two to three would really be better. I told him that was fine, and though I couldn't understand why I needed to come to office hours before class had even started, he said I should start on the Monday before our first Tuesday class. In truth, I was a little curious to see this strange professor again, and still relatively confused as to what I actually needed to do for him.

When I stepped into the doorway of his office it was 1:59. He sat at the desk. I stood there for a moment, waiting, hoping he had heard me and would turn around any second. He didn't.

“Professor De Luca?” I didn’t feel comfortable calling him Michele yet, even though he had told me to. I figured that if he really preferred his first name he would correct me.

He looked up after a long moment, but I couldn’t read his face.

“Oh, it’s you.” I had forgotten his particular way of speaking, the hard T, the Is that sounded like “Ee,” and the way the words all blurred together with over-pronounced syllables.

“I thought you were coming at one.”

“Oh, you said you would prefer two.”

“Yes. No matter. What can I do for you?”

I tried not to be thrown. “I just came to help you out with your class.”

He looked as equally perplexed as I felt. “The class starts tomorrow, no?”

“Yes...”

“Ah,” he interrupted. “You want to look at the syllabus.”

“Um. Sure?”

“Well that is unfortunate, as I still have not yet written one.”

And I just stood there, and looked at him, because I could think of no adequate response, and he stared back, because neither of us could think of any exquisite reason as to why we both happened to be sitting in that little office covered in pictures of places I was unfamiliar with.

Finally, I broke the silence.

“Where is that?” I asked, pointing at the picture of the garden, breaking our eye contact.

He didn’t turn around, he smiled, and I lowered myself into the little chair next to his desk, relaxing.

“It is a portion of the gardens at Chatsworth House. They were designed by a famous landscape architect, Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown.”

“You’ve been there?”

“Yes.”

“Chatsworth... that sounds familiar.”

“It’s in England, just outside of Matlock. I believe there have been a few movies filmed there. I don’t remember which ones. Something Jane Austen, most likely.”

“Ah.” I made a mental note to look it up later.

He turned back toward his desk and I assumed that that was my dismissal. I started to gather my things.

“Oh, do you have somewhere to be?”

“No, not really.”

“Do you drink coffee?” he turned away to start gathering his own things. “I was just going to grab a cappuccino myself. I thought we could chat about me helping you, now that you are helping me.”

I hadn’t realized he had been listening to me at all at our first meeting. I was caught off guard, but I managed to spew out a simple “sure” amidst my disbelief.

As we walked out of the building and into the street in silence, he stopped suddenly. I was behind him and almost ran into him, then he turned around quickly and, due to my inobservance, he stood much closer to me than I was really comfortable with. He didn’t seem fazed.

“You’ll have to forgive me. I really don’t know this neighborhood, only the path from my car to the school. Do you know anywhere with decent espresso?”

“Um. Yes, this way.” I stepped around him, feeling the mild symptoms of claustrophobia ebb away as I did so.

As I lead the way, it occurred to me that I had habitually started walking toward the shop Giorgio worked at, and the only other one I knew was in the opposite direction. I remembered Giorgio's implied opinion of De Luca, and hoped that he would not be working. When we walked in, however, I thought that perhaps luck was not exactly on my side.

"Ah, Silvie! Oh. Hello, Professor." Giorgio's smile faltered.

"Hello, Giorgio."

De Luca simply nodded and said, "Ah. It is always good to see former students." I tried to detect any condescension in his words, but his voice was steady. "Doppio for me, and..." He looked at me expectantly.

"A cappuccino?" interjected Giorgio. I nodded the affirmative.

"A cappuccino for la Signorina."

I tried to give him some change, but he refused. I smiled and thanked him, but I was distracted by the obvious scowl on Giorgio's face.

"Do you want to grab a place to sit, and I can bring the drinks when they're done?" I asked De Luca. He agreed, choosing a quiet looking table that was in a corner, but also next to a window that looked out on a thin but busy street.

As soon as he had sat down, I looked back at Giorgio.

"How are you?"

"Fantastic, now that you are here!" he winked. "Did you have a good time on Saturday?"

"Yes, of course."

"Good, good! What are you doing this weekend?"

"Maddie and I are going to Paris for a few days."

"Ah. Paris. The city of lights." He said it dreamily, as if he were lost in memories.

“You’ve been?”

“Oh, me? No. But the imagination is powerful. The Eiffel Tower lit up at night, the decadent food...”

“Yeah. I’m pretty excited. Although, it’s going to be cold.”

“Ah. But it’s Paris.” And he said Paris like “Par-ee.” “Well here is your cappuccino, made with love, and his *doppio* made with espresso and hot water.”

I tried to give him a look of disapproval, but he smiled so charmingly at his own joke, that I couldn’t help but to smile back. I turned and walked over to the table, giving De Luca his double espresso, and thanking him for the cappuccino once more.

“You know him?” He casually sipped his espresso.

“Yes, he’s been showing me around the city a bit. You said he was a student?” I did not mention that Giorgio had already told me this.

“Yes. He took a writing course I taught... it must have been two years ago? Anyway, he wasn’t very good, and he didn’t like that I told him he wasn’t very good.”

“I’ve always been taught that writing can’t be bad, that it’s too subjective to be placed into boxes of ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ It can be grammatically incorrect, maybe inaccurate. But if there is someone somewhere who likes it, it can’t really be bad.”

“Well, you’ve been taught wrong. There is such a thing as bad writing, and his is it.”

“In what way?”

He had been slowly sipping his coffee looking out of the window, but when I asked him this, he looked at me, and studied me in the appraising way I was already growing accustomed to. I looked down into my cappuccino, avoiding his gaze. He began to speak slowly, quietly, deliberately, but then his words took on a rapid pace, and I found myself watching him intently.

“It was not, entirely, a problem with his prose. His sentences were relatively well-crafted, or in the very least syntactically correct, and there was not necessarily anything wrong with his subject-matter, though I believe that he tried too hard to make things more exciting than they actually were—no appreciation for simplicity. No, I believe his problem was in a lack of sensibility. His thoughts never seemed genuine, but rather forced, as if he wrote so that his readers would see him how he wanted them to see him rather than who he actually was. Even if you are writing fiction, which is, by definition, composed of lies, it is my opinion that it must come from a place of truth. That boy over there is incapable of writing anything from a place of truth, and so, Silvia, his writing was bad. I told him this, and instead of asking how he could remedy his fault, he grew angry and refused to return to class.” He paused for a moment, looking out the window, taking a sip of his almost empty glass cup, before looking back at me and adding, “Anyway, we’re here to talk about you.”

He shared his opinion so eloquently and unabashedly, I paused, convinced that my own words could never live up to his standards and simultaneously hoping that they would. It seemed to him that he was in the right and that Giorgio was in the wrong, that perhaps he may have been a tad abrupt in his critique of Giorgio’s work, but that his critique was honest. He studied me, waiting. I watched the miniscule bubbles in my cappuccino pop, agitated by my spoon.

“Can I just send you something, and then you could give me your thoughts?”

“Do you have something ready?”

I lifted my eyes toward his. “Not exactly.”

He nodded. The small glass sat in between his fingers, empty. “Okay. Well, I have to go now. I’ll see you tomorrow for our first class. We’ll talk.”

I returned his nod and looked out the window. After the swish of a coat, the screech of chair legs pushed across tile, and the swing of a door, I watched him walk down the street until he disappeared around a corner.

## X

“Silvie. Silvie. Silvie, wake up.”

I felt a soft prod on my shoulder and my eyelids sprang open, my hands threw the warm down comforter off of my body, and I was sitting up.

“Oh my god. Maddie. Is it time? Did I sleep through my alarm?”

“No. We still have an hour before the car picks us up, but I can’t sleep. I’m so excited!”

“Oh.” I looked at the time on my phone: 3:07am. I considered chastising her for waking me up when I had actually fallen asleep, a feat I had thought impossible not two hours ago, but the excitement of that morning took hold of me.

“We’re going to Paris today,” I whispered.

“I know.” And we both lay down on our parallel twin beds, giggling into our pillows.

“I’m going to shower, then.”

We dressed, double checked our backpacks, tripled checked that we had all our money, identification, boarding passes, reservation information, and finally, my phone rang.

“Uh, Ciao!”

“I am the driver.” His accent was heavy, rhythmic.

“Okay, are you here, then?”

“Si, si, si, I am the driver.” He pronounced each syllable acutely, like it was somehow one word and five words all at once.

“Okay, we’ll be out in a minute.”

“Si, si, si, I am the driver,” he sang again before hanging up.

I looked at Maddie. “That was the driver. I don’t think he speaks much English.”

We walked outside and across the piazza to where the driver waited. He looked mid-forties with a greying moustache and a little black cap perched on his head. He leaned against a clean, dark van.

“Due?” he asked when he saw us approach.

“Si,” I replied.

“Fiumicino?”

“No. Ciampino.”

He looked at us quizzically for a moment, and said, “Okay.” Then he picked up our bags and opened the door for us. He said nothing more until we arrived at the airport, when he simply announced, “Ciampino,” parked, opened our door, and retrieved our bags.

Maddie and I paid him, and thanked him with a “Grazie” to which he smiled and gave a fervent “Prego!” Then we went our separate ways.

The airport was small, housing only one airline. We walked through the entrance and I was surprised to see so many people in one place at 5am. I felt nervous and my palms were sweaty. I peered around and found that I was more or less alone in my anxiety. All of the passengers were languidly standing in lines, or sitting on suitcases and chatting with fellow journeymen. I was so accustomed to U.S. airports that encourage travelers to arrive at least two hours before their flight to ensure they have plenty of time to check in, go through security, and

find their gate. In American airports everything is taken care of before the waiting begins; in Italian airports, waiting is done in increments.

“Is this the line we need to be in?” Maddie asked me.

“It says non-European Union, right?”

“Right.”

We stood in the line Maddie pointed out, but the whole time I remained unsure as to whether or not we had picked the right line. Maddie yawned.

“I know,” I told her.

“Why isn’t the line moving?”

I had been thinking the same thing, so I stretched my head, trying to look around the people in front of me. “There’s no one up there.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean there’s no one behind the desk.”

“Oh. That’s weird.”

After about fifteen minutes, the line finally started to move, and once it started, it took only a few minutes before we reached the front. I handed my boarding pass and passport to a bored looking attendee who gave it only a passing glance before stamping my ticket and waving me on to the long unmoving security line where a similar process awaited us.

About twenty chairs had been placed in front of our gate, but no one was really sitting down. They had all gone to get breakfast. I knew I would be starving by the time we landed, but I was too nervous to eat. It was also only about six in the morning at this point and my body wasn’t exactly awake, despite the fact that my eyes had been open for three hours already.

Maddie and I simply sat there, fidgeting, and lifting our heads every time an announcement came on the overhead speakers that we couldn't understand, anyway. Eventually the screen at our gate announced "Now Boarding" and suddenly, a crowd of people swarmed the almost empty gate. They did not line up single file; instead, they all grouped together hovering around the two flight attendants who were checking boarding passes and passports. Maddie and I stood up, making no efforts to get to the front of the line. When I did reach the front, the flight attendant checked my documents and waved me out the doors. A cool breeze accosted me as I stepped toward the waiting plane.

## XI

Standing in line under the Eiffel Tower, shaking irrepressibly despite the two jackets I was wearing, I could not even begin to fathom its enormity. I was a flake of snow in comparison, and I stood in line with hundreds of other flakes of snow and I knew that if we would have all stood on top of one another's shoulders we might not have stood half as tall as the tower. And while my body was vigorously fighting off the winds with chattering teeth, my mind was engulfed by visions of men climbing and falling and never reaching the top.

I was too cold to ascend to the third and highest level, however, even on the second level, I could see the city in its entirety, and my stomach plummeted hundreds of feet to the ground whenever I stepped too closely to the edge. Because of Maddie's fear of heights she stayed near the middle, while I took quick panoramas with my aching numb fingers. After a sudden breathless gust jostled my gloveless hands, blurring one last bird's eye view with my Nikon, I

turned away from the stunning metropolis of Paris and sought solace in a gift shop with the heat on high. Maddie was there, mulling over post cards. She saw me and waved me over.

“Silvie, look at this.”

It was a black and white post card that pictured a little old man standing in front of the Eiffel tower, wearing a suit and a beret, and pulling a very uninterested rabbit on a leash. I laughed.

“Where did you find this?”

“Just over there.”

“You have to get this. Even if you don’t send it to someone, we can frame it.”

“I was thinking of sending it to Greg.” She said it quietly; I could barely hear her over the sound of the fans blowing heat by the doors.

“Greg?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

“Listen, Silvie...”

“Maddie. It’s okay. If you want to send it to Greg, then send it to Greg.”

“I just know you don’t like him.”

“It’s not that, it’s just... no. You know what? You like him, and that’s what matters. Now go buy that post card so we can find somewhere with coffee. I’m still freezing.”

She smiled and did as I told her. It wasn’t that I didn’t like Greg, he was nice enough. It’s just that I always thought she could do better. Maddie was so tall and beautiful and intelligent and Greg had barely graduated high school. He thought college was all part of a governmental conspiracy; the government encourages companies to hire only college grads so that people

would spend thousands of dollars a year. He and Maddie had been on and off for almost two years now—two years while I tried to be a supportive friend, secretly hoping that each break up was the final one, and when it wasn't, wondering if maybe this really was true love. I'd had so little experience with relationships that honestly, who was I to judge?

By the time we had descended the heights of the tower and found a shop with an overpriced café au lait, it was late enough that we could check into our hotel. We took a cab because we had no idea where we were going. The driver was not very reassuring.

“Do you know anything about this place?” I asked with slight trepidation—the price of a double room had been about equal to two beds at a hostel, but I also figured his answer would not be nearly as frightening as his driving.

“I ‘ave never ‘eard of this ‘otel before.” His accent was heavy, but not indistinguishable. “Are you sure there is a ‘otel on this street?”

“Uh, pretty sure. But can you tell us about the neighborhood?”

“It is not the best, but it is not the worst. There is a restaurant which is okay.”

“Ah. This is the street.”

It didn't look as bad as I had thought it might: a thin one-way with white buildings and cars parked on either side. About half way down the street he stopped.

“Ah look, ‘ere is a hotel!” he said with unadulterated disbelief.

“Well, thanks,” I replied and gave him his money.

The hotel was only marked by a small sign and a pair of nondescript double doors. As soon as Maddie and I stepped out of the cab, the driver sped away without a second glance, leaving us shivering in a haze of exhaust fumes. Maddie and I looked at each other and then stepped nervously toward the doors.

They opened into a tiny lobby composed of a desk, behind which sat an older man reading a newspaper, a vending machine, a small couch, and a table covered in brochures advertising various tourist attractions. As the doors shut behind us, the man behind the counter looked up.

“Bonjour.”

“Um. Bonjour. Do you speak... um, parle anglais?”

He simply looked confused, and then shook his head slightly.

“Oh, okay...” I pulled out the reservations I had printed off.

He looked at them, nodded, and then gave us two keys, pointing toward the numbers, then pointing to his left and up, and saying “deux.” I nodded as if I understood, and Maddie and I grabbed the keys, then headed in the way he pointed. The door we went through led to a little room, with a severely leaking ceiling; there was a puddle almost three feet in diameter in the farthest corner. I crossed the room trying not to be too discouraged. Through the next door was a staircase. I started to climb, hoping that by “deux” he had meant two floors. He had. On the second landing we came across, I saw our room number on a door.

I opened it and was pleasantly surprised by what I saw. The room was small, but just big enough to fit a double bed, a radiator, and a little desk. We also had our own bathroom, complete with a shower and a toilet—I had found that bathrooms, especially public ones, in Europe were generally of the take-what-you-can-get variety.

“Not bad!” Maddie said, throwing her backpack and herself on the bed. “Is it horrible that I’m in Paris, of all cities, and all I want to do is take a nap?”

“I feel the same way. I think we can spare an hour. It’s been a long day, and honestly, I’m not sure if I’ll ever be warm again. I say we try to warm up, relax a little, and then go explore while looking for somewhere to eat.”

“Sounds perfect to me.”

## XII

The next day we planned on going to Notre Dame and the Louvre. We awoke early and decided to walk instead of taking a cab. It was only a forty minute walk and I wanted to see as much of the city as I could in that short weekend. We stopped at a little bakery and bought, in my opinion, the best meal I had in Paris. It was simple; just a warm, flaky croissant and a café au lait, but still tastier than anything I had eaten thus far. A cool wind reddened my cheeks as we walked, but I had had a hot shower, and had prepared myself with two cardigans and two jackets to fend off the cold. I traipsed along, humming songs from *Les Miserables* and taking pictures of anything and everything. Every time Maddie stopped to consult the map, I would stare in awe of some wrought iron gate on a window, or some hand crafted shoe store. The architecture, as well as atmosphere was so different from Rome. While Rome was full of warmth and color and raw ancient grandeur, Paris was structured with cool romantic sophistication. Even on the grayest, rainiest of days, Rome felt saturated in color, yet Paris was painted in a softer palate.

We finally made it to the island on which stood the magnificent Notre Dame. I considered its stony and dramatic appearance and felt a little intimidated. The line to enter was long. Families and students and tour groups cluttered the staircases in front of it and I was perfectly content to sit among them. I felt no need to confront the structure from its inside, but

Maddie disagreed. I followed her to the back of the line, which moved quicker than I had envisioned.

As expected, the interior was spectacularly daunting. In the center aisle, crowds piled around the Bells of Notre Dame, which were each roped off and engraved with a name. I wandered through these crowds, people watching, absorbing the information provided by labels on each bell and daydreaming all at once. I had lost Maddie almost as soon as we had walked in, but I didn't let it worry me. I wandered languidly around the cathedral taking everything in. Next to the altar, I saw hundreds of little tea lights. For a small donation visitors could light one in prayer or memory. I meandered past these lights and into a dark hall, which wound past a series of smaller altars, each with stained glass windows and its own mural, depicting biblical scenes. I stared at them, lost in memories and images.

I grew up in a family where faith was not necessarily pushed upon me. I attended church relatively regularly when I was younger, and to me it had always seemed something routine, but never really something spiritual. The entire congregation consisted of little old couples—a handful of great aunts and uncles that had known me since that first day I wore that white dress and cried when Father John splashed holy water on my forehead. I wasn't Catholic, I considered myself only traditionally and culturally Christian, and yet standing there, staring at the familiar, universal image of the Son of God, I had a strange sensation of the inevitable importance of this man. I felt His power, not necessarily as my savior, but as the source of inspiration for hundreds of years of conflict in history, in art, and in literature. I took a deep breath, losing myself in the cool musty air.

After a few minutes, I thought I should find Maddie. Turning back the way I came, I noticed a big visitor book. I wrote my name and where I was from, then I found Maddie waiting near the exit.

“I’m starving,” she said as soon as she saw me.

“Me too,” I replied, taking one last look around.

We found a place to eat, and then made our way to the Louvre. I had never had much knowledge of art, but I had always been rather inclined to gain some. After making our obligatory regards to the Mona Lisa and the famously armless Venus marble, we made our way through Renaissance paintings, tapestries, and portrait halls, taking our time, sitting on benches at the center of the room, and staring at paintings that swept across entire walls. Some portrayed religious scenes, some historic, and then there were the cows.

Country scenes scattered the majority of walls in a French painting section: cows grazing in pastures that were so incredibly beautiful in their simplicity. I paid little attention to who painted them when and with what; I cared only that I liked them. For some reason unbeknownst to me, I was drawn to these rooms filled with little pictures of cows in fields. Something about the soft greens and browns, something about the peace and tranquility drew me to them. There was no drama in these paintings, there was no story—I didn’t have to try to interpret them. I only had to look at them, and I imagined myself sitting on a chair with the windows open letting in a breeze that carried in scents of hay and manure and grass with a paint brush in my hand, moving it in my fingers, spreading hues of greens and browns and whites around a canvas, so straightforward and uncomplicated.

“Silvie, are you getting ready to leave?”

“Yeah, I think I’m good. What time is it, anyway?”

“Quarter after five.”

“Is it really that late?”

“I know. I think we could spend days in this place and never leave.”

“I wish we didn’t have to go back tomorrow.”

“Me, neither. I’m glad I came, though.”

### XIII

On Tuesday, Michele De Luca asked me to tell the class about my trip to Paris. The class had started the previous week; it was smaller than I was used to, but relatively large for the university. Sixteen students had registered, but so far no more than thirteen had made an appearance. They were all study abroad students and only one or two were actually studying some form of writing or literature, but the majority of them acted genuinely eager about the course. They had to do their first reading (a few chapters from Goethe’s *Italian Journey*) and I was curious to see if they were just as enthusiastic about actual reading assignments.

Michele De Luca rarely came late for class, but he was never early, either; he arrived unflinching on time. Just as I thought that he might actually be late, he would abruptly appear. Tuesday proved no exception. I sat in my chair, the whole class (well, the thirteen that actually came) sat in theirs, yet when the clock struck two, Michele De Luca’s chair sat unoccupied. Then, when the second hand was just passing the nine, he stepped through the door, flustered.

Throwing his bag on the floor and coat on the chair, he pronounced, “It’s hot in here. Do you mind if I open the window?” But he had already made his way over to the window before anyone could protest.

The desk I sat in happened to be right in front of that window.

I tried to tilt my head out of his way, but apparently I leaned in the wrong direction, because I felt his hands grasp my scalp firmly and move it the opposite way. He then proceeded to open the window, and walk back into the center of the room. I moved my head back to its normal position.

Michele De Luca stood at the front of the room for a moment, appraising his students. Then, he turned and looked at me. “Silvia, how are you?”

“I’m, uh, fine.”

He appraised me for another moment and then turned back to the class. “And how was everyone’s weekend? Silvia went to Paris. Why don’t you tell us about Paris, Silvia?”

“Okay. Well, It was really good.”

His eyes were on me again. “What was your favorite thing?”

“Well, I really liked Notre Dame. Then there were these cows, at the Louvre.”

“Cows.”

“Yes, paintings of cows.” I then remembered that I was supposedly telling the class, not just Michele De Luca. I shifted in my chair so that I could face them more easily. “In the French paintings section, there were a lot of country landscapes with cows in them.”

“Why?”

I looked back at Michele De Luca. He was, as usual, studying me intently. “Why there were so many paintings of cows, or why I liked them?”

“Both, either.”

I looked back at the class. They were all looking at me, a few seemed bored but most of them actually looked interested.

“I guess it’s kind of the same answer. I liked them for the same reason that I’m assuming they were painted. There’s a simplicity to them. They aren’t really about much, but they’re beautiful anyway. It’s about the natural beauty of the world, rather than the perceived or expected. I guess, I liked that they were just cows, nothing really special, but there was still a kind of picturesque wonder there.”

I waited, but no one said anything. I looked back at Michele De Luca, but he was not looking at me, he was looking expectantly at the class. “Do you have any questions?” he finally asked.

A few people shook their heads, and then one girl, I think her name was Caitlyn, slowly raised her hand.

“Yes?” said Michele De Luca, acknowledging her.

“Did you see the Mona Lisa, too? Is it really as small as everyone says?”

“Technically, you could say that I saw it. But it was so crowded I could only look from a terrible angle, and because it was covered mostly in glass, I could only see the glare.”

“Wonderful!” exclaimed Michele De Luca. “Now that we have learned a little of our Silvia’s weekend, let us now delve into the world of Goethe.”

And for the next hour that is just what we did. Mostly I sat back and listened, though occasionally Michele De Luca would ask my opinion. At the end of class, he suggested coffee. I agreed as I had no afternoon plans. De Luca led the way to the coffee shop I had taken him the week before. Giorgio was not at work, and I sat down at the same table we had occupied before while he ordered our drinks. After a few moments, he brought them over.

With no preamble he said, “I think you should write about the cows.”

“Okay,” I said, with some trepidation. “Why?”

He ignored my question. “Can you have a draft by tomorrow?”

“Um. I can try, I guess. How long should it be?”

“That doesn’t matter.”

I stared at him, incredulous. “Two pages?”

“Sure, if that’s what it takes.”

I wrote a page and a half. When I gave it to him the next day, he threw it on his desk alongside piles of other typed pieces of paper and I assumed he would not get to it for a while.

On Thursday he walked into the classroom at his normal time. I had opened the window when I arrived; he saw this and smiled at me. He put his bag on the floor and coat on the chair, and turned toward the class. “Today we are going to do something different. Instead of talking about the reading, I am going to read you something and then we will talk about that.”

And then, with no introduction he began to read the piece I had written about the cows out loud, striking me with a sudden onslaught of nerves. My fingers trembled, my palms were sweaty, yet, in his lilting voice, my words sounded better than I had remembered. This calmed me. When he reached the end, he stared at the paper and it seemed that everyone besides me simultaneously drew breath—I held mine. Finally, the silence was broken by a boy named Jacob, who had yet to win me over. He always had a lot to say and what he did say was spoken well with a surprisingly eloquent vocabulary, yet his content always felt a bit tired. He had a habit of stating the obvious, yet it was so distorted by big words that to the untrained ear, it might sound incredibly intelligent.

“I’m guessing that this is Silvia’s work, as she discussed French cattle in our previous class.” He looked at Michele De Luca who nodded; both seemed to be ignoring me. “I’m intrigued by the way in which she utilizes color, or perhaps a lack thereof, to portray the

straightforwardness of not only the scene rendered in the painting but also her interpretation of it. However, I am wondering where she—where the narrator is in this piece. It seems to be purely compiled of observations, and little of her actual perception of it. Why would anyone want to read a work of literature that simply describes one’s surroundings, with no commentary on why they might be important?”

“That is where you are wrong,” responded Michele De Luca. “The brilliancy of this piece lies in her ability to step away from it. She doesn’t tell me her feelings about the cows, but I know how she feels about them through her descriptions of them. This is travel literature, not a diary. In your diary, you can talk about your feelings. In travel literature, no one cares.”

Jacob scowled. He was not accustomed to being corrected.

I hoped no one would try to talk to me, as I was still trying to fathom why he had called my work brilliant—for that matter, I was still dumbfounded that anyone wanted to talk about my cows at all.

“Celia,” Michele De Luca called out a girl sitting near the back. “What do you think of this piece?”

“I guess I really liked her descriptions.”

“Like what?”

“Um. I liked the part at the beginning when she was describing the outside of the Louvre.”

“What did you like about it, specifically?”

“I like how she contrasted the old and new with the museum building and the triangle.”

“Good, good,” he said, turning. “Charlie, what do you think?”

This went on for another fifteen or twenty minutes with no one so much as looking at or speaking to me. Rather abruptly, De Luca decided that it was time to go on and talk about the actual reading the class was assigned for that day.

“Here you go, Silvia,” he said, handing the two pieces of paper back to me. “Now, Let’s talk some more about Goethe.”

#### XIV

After class I saw I had a text message from Giorgio saying, “Hey lady, I want to hear all about Paris! Meet me at the coffee shop later? I get out at four!”

It was just after 3:30, so I figured I would just go to the coffee shop and wait for him there. I walked through the door and he was already smiling at me and calling my name. He must have seen me walk by the window.

“Silvie, bella! Come stai?”

“I’m good.” I couldn’t help but to laugh a little—his enthusiasm was infectious. “How are you?”

“Oh, no one cares about me!” His smile faltered for a moment before reappearing in full strength. “How was Paris?”

“I absolutely adored it.”

“Okay. Well, it looks like Mauricio just got here, so I can leave. Do you want to tell me about it over coffee, or we could go for a walk? It’s actually nice today.”

“I vote walk.”

We headed across the Tiber toward Largo Argentina, and decided to sit down at the little park near there.

The week before, Maddie had to spend a day on the other side of the city for work and asked if I wanted to meet her for dinner. I was early and decided to wait for her at the little park. I had twenty minutes or so to simply sit and observe; it had a rectangular shape, with a proud, two tiered fountain, eight or ten benches, and a resident flock of pigeons. Something about this park attracted me. It's not necessarily quiet, not necessarily open, but it looked a little bit green, and felt a little bit peaceful. I'd walked by it multiple times going other places and had always been curious about it. There was a pair of love-struck teens across from me, sharing a pizza, an Old man on his cell phone, an older lady with a dog—nothing too out of the ordinary. I lost interest in the people, and turned my attention to the large group of pigeons.

Two of them stood out to me almost immediately. One was fluffing its neck and tail feathers and chasing the other. My first thoughts: cock-fight. But on second thought I realized, this was no fight; instead, this was some sort of mating ritual! Then it became a little game of mine: the persistent males versus the females constantly playing hard-to-get. I picked sides and cheered. Essentially, I became the crazy American who talks to pigeons, but I was kind of okay with it. After a while, however, even the pigeons ceased to entertain me, and I began to be interested in the sights and sounds around me. With a sudden burst of inspiration, I pulled out a pen and the only piece of paper I could find, and wrote:

“Whistling workers, pigeons cooing softly,  
men coughing, stones crunching,  
hammers laughing as they pound.

Cars Passing, trams screeching,  
saws sizzling as they spin.

Water falling, wind blowing,

smells of...

The pigeons just leapt, a glistening group.”

And indeed, the pigeons had dispersed from my little haven, the entire flock, in one swift movement, as if by some unheard signal. And I watched them fly off in awe. Around this time I had looked across and noticed Maddie laughing at me from outside of the park. I smiled, gathered my stuff, and went to meet her.

Today only one or two pigeons pecked at the dusty ground. Giorgio and I sat down on a bench, and I began to tell him about Paris. I lingered on my descriptions of the Eiffel tower, and he was equally sympathetic about the cold and amazed at the height, and when I talked of Notre Dame, he was only disappointed that I didn't recall hearing the bells actually ringing.

“Then there was the Louvre.” I laughed because I knew he would laugh at me for being so drawn to cows. “In the French painting section there were all these cows...”

And he began to join in my laughter, and I expected him to say *and of course you loved them, of course you did, Silvie!* but instead he said through giggles, “Those French! That must have been so boring for you.”

“Yeah, those French.” I laughed for a moment, quietly, at my own mistake and watched the flock of pigeons that had gathered around the fountain. “I love this park.”

“You should see the aqueduct park. This is nothing compared to that. I'll take you there sometime.”

But he never did.

“I'd love that! Hey, you don't have to work tomorrow, do you?” I asked him.

“No.”

“Good. I have a bottle of wine at home that's calling our names!”

“Sounds perfect. Mind if we stop by my place on the way?”

“Sure. May I ask why?”

“We’ve got to pick up Fred!”

## XV

The next few weeks developed into a routine. Maddie would go to work, I would write a little before heading to the school. After class or office hours, I would usually grab coffee with Michele De Luca or Giorgio, and in the evening Giorgio, Fred, Maddie, and I would meet at Lorenzo’s, a little restaurant in Trastevere. It wasn’t actually called Lorenzo’s, but Lorenzo was the owner and the actual name was too long for any of us to remember. The food was delicious and the wine was cheap, and no matter the weather, we would sit outside on the sidewalk, playing a game we invented called “spot the American.” We were truly terrible at it. Most of the time, all four of us would be convinced that someone would be American, only for that person to walk by us chattering fluently in Italian.

On the weekends Giorgio and Fred would take us around Rome. We sampled bakeries in the Jewish Ghetto and shopped on Via del Corso. We sat on the Spanish steps and took horrible pictures in front of the Trevi Fountain. We walked around St. Peter’s Square at night, staring at the long rows of glowing columns that pointed toward the immense basilica, trying to guess which smokestack belonged to the Sistine Chapel. We took two day trips: one to Naples and one to Florence.

We booked the train into Florence. It was one of those days where the sky couldn’t decide whether or not it wanted to rain or shine, and we couldn’t decide if we wanted our coats

on or off. When we first got there, Fred led us toward Piazzale Michelangelo, a square situated entirely on the other side of the city from the train station. He was the only one who had visited Florence previously so we let him take the lead, but that did not mean any of us questioned his authority. We walked frantically through the leather markets, then on past The Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore, more simply referred to as the Duomo. Maddie, Giorgio, and I were all inclined to stop there, but he pushed us on forward. Fred passed all the important looking places without a second glance, attempting to reassure us by frequently repeating “We’ll come back here” whenever we paused to ogle some new sight. Fred herded us through Ponte Vecchio, which was laden with expensive looking jewelry shops, down the river, and up some quiet back roads. Eventually we reached a tall, steep, imposing hill that Fred proceeded to climb. There was a gravel path that wound languidly toward the top. When we approached the hill, the sun was shining and the four of us had been carrying our coats, but our legs grew tired and we had all ceased talking due to breathlessness. Without blocking the sunlight, the remnant clouds in the sky provided us with a light shower, cooling our sweaty brows. The four of us finally reached the top. A black top road encircled a column-fronted restaurant. The road opened on the other side to a large parking lot. We made our way through the parking lot and found a sort of make-shift observatory. There was a side walk, a railing, and a few benches, but what really caught the eye was the view. The sun-rain had continued and a soft, yet fully extended rainbow crossed over the city below us. We could clearly see each street and landmark we had just passed by. Giorgio and Maddie appeared just as amazed as I felt. Fred wore a smug, I-told-you-so smile that brightened his face.

“It’s beautiful,” said Maddie.

“Totally worth the climb,” Giorgio added. “Hey, Fred, did you say you went to that restaurant?”

“Yes,” Fred replied, ceasing to smile. “Now that restaurant is not ‘worth the climb.’”

His terse accent, paired with the sour hardness in his eyes and lips was too much. I began to laugh, and the rest followed suit. We giggled all the way down the hill. It seemed that each time the laughter died down, one of us would think about it and resume chuckling, triggering yet another series of snorts and cackles.

After we left Piazzale Michelangelo, we unhurriedly explored the rest of the city. We browsed the unaffordable shops of Ponte Vecchio, and Fred told us that it was good luck to propose to someone on that bridge. We ate delicious sandwiches at a little indiscriminate shop off of some side street. Then, when we decided we had worked up enough energy, we approached the enormous and intricately handsome Duomo. A collective decision was made to climb the tower that stood beside the Duomo. I wanted to be able to see the Duomo from up above, but I was also eager to avoid the much longer line to climb the Duomo itself.

The tower, called Giotto’s Campanile, stood next to the Duomo in the Piazza del Duomo, yet it was not connected. The path to the top proved nothing less than treacherous: 414 stone steps completed nearly 700 years ago, all circling upward in a thin stone hallway. Some steps could not have been more than two inches on the inside, and there were no windows, only little holes no more than twelve square inches, letting in just enough light to see by. The staircase was only really wide enough to take one person at a time, yet there was only one staircase to climb, whether one was climbing up or gingerly treading down. While I was definitely exhausted on the way up, I preferred exhaustion to the terrifying prospect of walking down.

We finally reached the top, and no one spoke at first. I couldn't tell if our silence was a result of exhaustion or incredulity. At the top of the square-shaped tower, I could see all of Florence, but it was from a different perspective than the Piazzale Michelangelo. I stood tall at the city's center, not just outside of it, and we were so close to the Duomo. I could see all of the details, the bronze roof, the pink and teal paneling. I heard a noise and saw Fred to my right.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he asked when he saw me look at him.

"Yes."

"When I first came here, a friend of mine who was living here at the time told me that Michelangelo never finished all the paneling of the Duomo because he felt that true beauty lies in a structure's faults, that like life, a structure shouldn't be perfect."

"That's really interesting."

"Yes, it's completely inaccurate, though. I've done a little internet research since then, and as far as I know, Michelangelo had nothing to do with the architecture or construction of the Duomo. The Duomo was completed in the 1430s and Michelangelo wasn't born until 1475."

"Oh."

"Yes, that's how I felt. But it's still an interesting story. It's like Rome's foundation stories. Was there really a Romulus and Remus that were raised by the she-wolf? Unlikely. Were they really descendants of Venus? Even more unlikely. But it makes a nice story, and gives Romans something to be proud of. It makes you think."

"That's true," I said. "Where should we go next?"

"Well, we haven't seen the David yet, and of course we must go the leather markets."

"We still have plenty of time before our train leaves, so I say both!"

We found Giorgio and Maddie and made our way to the otherwise undiscerning museum that was home to Michelangelo's David. The marble figure, like the Eiffel Tower, was much more commanding than I had imagined. I found every detail exquisite—down to the veins on his arms. Once we had browsed the entirety of that little museum, which took no more than a half hour, Fred led us toward the leather markets.

They reminded me of craft fairs I had been to in the states: little booths set up side by side on a street filled with handmade goods and people ready to sell them. Unlike craft fairs however, the San Lorenzo leather markets in Florence are busy every day of the week, and much more extensive than small town craft shows. The vendors we passed seemed to know what would catch our eye even before we knew ourselves. "You want a mask?"

They also knew we spoke English before we'd so much as said a word, or maybe they just assumed that everyone spoke English. Either way, the vendor was right, I did want a mask. They were Carnival masks, intricate in detail, bright in color, and they were only five euro. I bought two because I couldn't decide. One was an aqua blue, trimmed with gold paint and decorated with tiny black music notes; the other was sparkly and pink with purple feathers that extended over the right eyebrow. I also found a dainty leather bound notebook priced at fifteen euro, but I managed to haggle it down to ten. A stall that sold leather bags and wallets had drawn Maddie in, Fred was debating between two engraved leather belts, and Giorgio had already made purchases from multiple booths: a mask with me, a belt with Fred, a wallet with Maddie, and he was currently being fitted for a leather jacket.

I had savings, Maddie's internship paid surprisingly well, and Fred had hinted at a pretty wealthy background, but I could never figure out how Giorgio afforded everything. He'd been in Europe for two years, and from what I'd gathered, his decision to stay there wasn't exactly

supported by his parents. I just couldn't quite rationalize how a barista/painter could afford to live in Rome and travel all around Italy. Then again, maybe baristas in Rome make a lot more than baristas in the U.S. did.

I made the decision that I had spent enough money for one day, and went to see what Giorgio was up to. Many of the booths that sold leather jackets had a more permanent shop just behind them. A vendor had taken Giorgio into one of these. I walked in and Giorgio stood toward the back, eyeing the black leather jacket he was wearing in a three way mirror. He saw me wave in the reflection.

“Silvie! What do you think?”

“It looks very nice, Giorgio.”

“I can't decide. Can I show you the other one?”

I laughed, “Of course.”

He took off the one he was wearing and began to put on another one. This one was black as well, but it had accents of white on the zipper. As he was putting his arm in the second sleeve, a man walked in from a door at the back of the store.

“Ah, hello!” he said clapping his hands together with a smile and looking at me. “Do you want to try on, too? I have a nice red one. I think that will suit you well.”

“Oh, no thank you,” I replied. “I'm just helping him decide.”

“Ah, I see!” he said, rubbing his still clasped hands together. He then moved over to Giorgio who was again studying his reflection. The shop worker then grabbed Giorgio's arm, forcing Giorgio to turn and face me. “What do you think of the fit?” But he was asking me instead of Giorgio, like it was up to me what Giorgio would wear.

“Um, it's nice.”

“Hmm... Oh! I have another thing. Hold on just one moment.” He disappeared into the back to come out with yet another coat of dark brown suede. Giorgio put it on. The shop worker looked at me again. “What about this?”

“That’s nice, too.” And I figured since he was asking me, I might as well play along. “But is that waterproof?”

“Waterproof? Oh, yes! Yes! I’ll show you!” Then he ran into the back yet again, but this time he came back with a glass of water, which he proceeded to toss onto the coat Giorgio was still wearing.

“Hey!” Giorgio exclaimed, but when he realized that none of the water had trickled over anything more than the coat and the floor, he just laughed.

“Alright,” I said, keeping a straight face. I looked at Giorgio in the reflection. We met eyes and I couldn’t hold back a smile. “Giorgio, which one feels better?”

“Hmm, I think I need to try on the first one again.” Eventually Maddie and Fred found us, and each had their own opinion of what color and cut of leather and suede Giorgio looked best in. At some point we all realized we should make a decision so that we had time to get dinner before our train left. We all agreed that the second one, the black and white one was the best choice, and Fred, who was apparently an expert haggler, managed to get the shop worker to cut the price in half. Honestly, I think the shop owner was so excited to get us out of there, he would have practically given it to us.

We had a lovely dinner, bursting with decadent dishes, sweet wine, and contented laughter. On the train home, both Maddie and Fred fell asleep within the first ten minutes. Giorgio slumped in his seat across from me.

“The children are out,” he said.

“They’ve had a long day,” I replied.

“We’ve all had a long day.” He looked toward the window, but it was too dark to see anything but our reflection. “Silvie, when are you leaving again?”

“Well, I was going to leave the first week of April, but I decided to leave here a week early and spend a few days in England, then just fly home from there.”

“So, in two weeks then?”

“Yes. Two weeks. It’s all gone by so fast.”

“Too fast. Seems like I just met you outside the Coliseum; we just smiled over that stupid pigeon.”

We’d never really talked about the little pigeon before this. I thought about the Giorgio I met that day. He’d seemed so carefree; I thought he had the perfect life, living in one of the most beautiful cities in the world, doing what he loved. In over two months, I had never seen him paint, not once.

“Giorgio.”

“Yes, Silvie?”

“Why haven’t I ever seen your paintings?”

“Paintings?”

“Yes. When we met you told me that you painted on the weekends.”

“Did I?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

“So?”

“So what?”

“Do you?”

“Do I paint?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Did you ever paint?”

“Yes. Well, sort of. I always wanted to, always planned to. But I just got so busy, you know?”

“Oh.”

I stared at our reflections in the window and eventually fell asleep.

## XVI

On Tuesday, our last week of actual classes, we talked about *Under the Tuscan Sun* by Frances Mayes. Michele De Luca was not a fan.

“It is just full of powdery writing,” he kept saying.

I still hadn’t figured out what “powdery writing” was. I surmised that it was probably Michele De Luca’s version of flowery writing, but I decided to ask. “Professor De Luca, what exactly is ‘powdery writing?’”

“Okay, so you know when you have baby powder, and you squeeze the bottle and all this powder comes out all over, covering everything. That is powdery writing.” I, along with the rest of class must have looked confused because he continued. “It is writing that is just too much. There are too many adjectives or adverbs or something and you don’t know what is happening because all of the words are smothering anything that is important. This,” he pointed to his copy

of *Under the Tuscan Sun*, “is filled with powdery writing. Personally, I don’t like powdery writing, but a lot of people like this book, especially women. My wife absolutely loves this book.”

I don’t know why I was so surprised he was married, but he had never mentioned her; he had had no pictures in his office, and I’d never noticed him wearing a ring.

“Why do you think women are so interested in this book,” he continued, “despite all of its powdery writing?”

Jacob answered, “I think women, particularly American women I would surmise, but women in general as well, romanticize this escapist idea. The thought of leaving everything to buy a house in Tuscany, a place many women already love because of its slow quiet atmosphere but mostly for wine...”

“Jacob, will you get to the point?” Michele De Luca interjected; he was becoming more and more impatient with Jacob as the class had progressed. Sometimes when we were both in his office, he would tell me about how annoying he thought he was. “He’s smart, no doubt,” he would say, “but, he knows it. I can’t stand that. That’s probably why people hate me, to be honest.” I didn’t disagree because a lot of people did hate Michele De Luca, Giorgio included.

Despite De Luca’s multiple interruptions (or perhaps because of), it took Jacob the rest of class to get to the point.

The next day was Wednesday, my last day in Michele De Luca’s office. He hadn’t arrived when I got there, so I sat down at my usual seat and pulled out my book. It was the last of the books I had picked up at that bookstore so many weeks ago: *Survival in Auschwitz* by Primo Levi, a short, non-fiction account of one man’s fight for survival in a concentration camp, and it

proved to be just as heartbreaking as it sounds. After a few minutes he came in, as flustered looking as always.

“Oh, hello,” he said.

“Hello.”

He stood there, and looked at me questioningly. “You’re leaving soon.”

“Yes.”

“What are you doing?”

“Now?”

“No.”

“After I leave?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to England for a few days, and then I fly back to Michigan. Oh, I realized where I knew Chatsworth from. It’s the inspiration for Pemberley, and in Joe Wright’s adaptation in 2005, it is Pemberley. So I’m going to go see it while I’m in England.”

“Good. You’ll like it.”

“I hope so.”

Then he finally sat down and said, “But you didn’t answer my question.”

“What question?”

“What are you doing?”

“After I get back to Michigan?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know.” He just stared at me like he knew that I did know and that I was afraid to admit it because admitting it meant that I was actually going to do it and actually doing it was

terrifying. But he kept staring at me and I knew I had to tell him because he would not stop until I did. “I guess I want to write.”

He just nodded.

“Listen, I just wanted to thank you. I’ve really learned a lot working with you.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“After reading your first piece, I didn’t think I could teach you anything.”

But he was wrong. He may not have made me a better writer, but he made me a more confident one. He believed I had the talent, and if he believed it, then it must be true. I smiled, and then did one of the braver things I’d ever done: I kissed him on the cheek. He said nothing, and I was glad. I sat back down, and then a few minutes later Jacob came in to discuss his final paper, abruptly ending the last time I would ever talk to Michele De Luca.

## XVII

“Listen, Silvie, I have to tell you something. I’m going home.”

My head swung away from the pigeons—we were sitting in my little park outside of Largo Argentina. I had only two days before I left for London. My eyes appraised his in the same way I had felt Michele De Luca appraise mine so many times before. He held my gaze for a moment before looking down at the ground. I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t imagine Rome without Giorgio, or Giorgio without Rome.

“Why?”

He looked out toward the street. “This city... this city is expensive, Silvia.”

He didn't have to say anymore, and I didn't ask him to. We walked home silently after that: side by side, swerving through crowds, crossing busy streets, avoiding loose cobblestones. We reached my apartment and I asked if he wanted to come up. He shrugged and followed me through the marble halls and up the marble stairs to our little apartment and our little blue couch.

We sat on the couch, drinking instant cappuccinos I had made in silence. When mine was almost gone, he finally spoke. "You say you came here because you didn't know what else to do, but that's a lie. Everyone comes here for the same reason, and I am no exception. You came, we came to find love and adventure."

And as he said the words, I knew he was right. He may not have been right about many things, but he was right about that. I didn't come here because I disliked my other options; I came here because, above all else, I liked this option. I did want adventure. I did want love. And I had thought I would find it here.

"And did you find it, love and adventure?" I asked, hoping for a different answer than the one I would receive.

"Did you?"

In his eyes I saw the truth. It was my truth, too. It was the truth of every person who wasn't born in this city. The answer wasn't as easy as yes or no; the answer was *yes and no*. I did find adventure, I did fall in love, but I found adventure in trying new cheeses at the grocery store, in taking side streets I was unfamiliar with. I fell in love with kiwi sorbetto, with the dogs of homeless men.

"You see now, why I have stayed here for so long."

Again, yes and no. I saw that he was still searching for that ideal formula of love and adventure. He wanted the thrill of skydiving and the passion of unrequited love all at once, and I had a feeling that even that would not be enough. I saw it all, and yet I couldn't understand it.

I smiled sadly and kissed him on the cheek. "I hope you have it all." We held each other tightly for a moment and as I let him go, I honestly thought I would never see him again. As he shut the door behind him, I thought to myself that this was the most honest we had ever been with each other, though so few words had actually been spoken.

I sat back down, and it suddenly occurred to me that Maddie should be home by now. We had a little notepad on the fridge that we used on occasion if we were going to be gone. Texting and calling were expensive, and our phones weren't very reliable, anyway. I went to the kitchen and there was a note in Maddie's handwriting. It read:

*Silvie-*  
*You're not going to believe this, but I got a call from Greg last night. You were asleep and I didn't want to wake you. Anyway, he's in Madrid and he wants me to meet him there. I've thought about it all day and I think I need to go. My phone will be disconnected so don't try to call. Feel free to stay at my apartment as long as you need, I technically have the lease for the next month still. I don't know when or if I'll be back. Just give your key to the security card when you leave! Love you and Adios!*

*Maddie*

#### XIX (continued).

"Do you ever hear from Fred? I still feel terrible that I never said goodbye to him."

"Yes," Giorgio said, "We Skype every now and then. He's still living in Rome. He's giving tours around the city while he works on his PhD. Something to do with architecture."

"Good for him. And you, what have you been up to?"

“Well, I had to live with my parents while I paid off my debt... no one was happy about that situation. But I finally settled it all about two years ago and could live on my own again. I’ve been working at this art studio downtown, and I’m taking some night classes.”

“Painting?”

“No, I’ve been really interested in performance art lately. I hear there’s a really cool performance art scene in Berlin. I’ve been trying to convince Fred to move with me, but I think he’d be content to never have another snowy winter again.”

I laughed, six years can only change so much.

“Silvie, though, tell me about this book you wrote.”

“I mean, what do you want to know?”

“What’s it about?”

I debated telling him, but in the end I realized he would never see himself in it, even if he ever did read it. “It’s about a guy, he thinks he’s got it all figured out, but it’s not as easy as he thought it would be.”

“Sounds interesting! I’ll have to read it someday!” Something told me he never would, and not because he didn’t intend to in this moment, but because he would never think about it. He would continuously say he’d do it someday, until he was completely out of somedays, and then it would be too late. That’s just how Giorgio worked.

I looked at my now empty mug and thought about how well I knew how Giorgio worked, yet how little I actually knew about him.

“Silvie, I just remembered. How was London?”

“It was wonderful, but it wasn’t Rome.” I said this because I knew that that was what he wanted to hear. We chattered brokenly for a few minutes and then said our goodbyes, both of us

genuinely hoping to see one another again, but also knowing that the time for us was over. We could never be more than an hour spent catching up in a coffee shop every six years.

I stepped out into the street and was greeted with a cold burst of air. Giorgio's question about London hung in my mind, and took me back to that time. I had such a wonderful time in London, on my own, but what really stood out, after all these years, was the day I spent just outside of London, at Chatsworth house.

## XVIII

I stood in front of a double-decker bus, but it was a dark maroon instead of the fire-engine red I had come to expect: I wasn't in the city anymore. The driver was a sweet looking older man.

"How much for a round trip ticket?"

"To where?"

"Chatsworth."

"Three pounds."

I gave the man my money and moved down the bus, picking a seat by the radiator, hoping that it would help thaw me out. Instead, it angrily vibrated against my knees the entire ride without giving much heat at all. The bus was almost empty with just me, and three or so retired couples. It drove outside of the little town as I watched the snow glisten out the window.

I had taken a train from London to Derby, then a two car train from Derby to Matlock, a small town in Derbyshire, England, a beautiful mountainous region known as the Peak District. The bus began to wind up a hill. I could not see much until the road finally reached a point where

it overlooked a valley and I could see a large stone house. As soon as Chatsworth was clearly in view, I was immediately struck by the certainty of Chatsworth as Jane Austen's inspiration.

“They gradually ascended for half a mile, and then found themselves at the top of a considerable eminence, where the wood ceased, and the eye was instantly caught by Pemberley House, situated on the opposite side of a valley, into which the road with some abruptness wound. It was a large, handsome, stone building, standing well on rising ground, and backed by a ridge of high woody hills;—and in front, a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater, but without any artificial appearance.” —Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

My descent into the valley of Chatsworth seemed to coincide almost entirely with that of Elizabeth Bennet, and while part of the landscape had changed over time (instead of through a thick wood, I emerged from a small neighborhood) the overall effect was the same. A bright layer of snow covered the entire landscape; I stepped off the bus and the brisk cold air inspired a sense of clarity.

The bus pulled away and I stood shivering, undecided as to where to start. For a quiet moment I simply stood and admired the grandeur of the place. Built in the English Baroque style, the square central structure of the house overlooked a small snow covered courtyard. Three stories of gold painted windows covered each side of the house. Stone had been carved between a few of the windows in the shape of ionic columns. The roof was flat and crowned by a stone balustrade. Though simple in its design, the intricacy in details provided a regal impression. Chatsworth has been owned and used by the same family since its construction in Tudor times. In 1549 the land was bought by Sir William Cavendish and his wife, Bess of Hardwick. Today, the house is still owned and used by the Cavendish family, now the Duke of Devonshire.

A few signs pointed us in various directions: the house, the garden, and the carriage house. The snow seeping through the holes of my boots made the decision for me. The house

would, hopefully, provide some respite from the cold. Besides, the house was the reason I had come all this way.

I walked in to a parlor, which must have once been lavish: carpets in rich colors, thick dusty curtains, and antique furniture, but its additional use as a welcoming station for visitors, the adding of cash registers and brochures on top of card tables, drew away the from luster of its heyday. I showed the man at the reception table my reservations; in return, he gave me a guide book that I had pre-purchased, and a single ticket that no one else bothered to look at.

I left the parlor and entered a large rectangular foyer. The floor, checkered with black and white marble, lead up to a broad staircase with gold detailing. Figures of men and women in a celestial setting had been painted on the walls and ceilings, all in bright jeweled tones. What wasn't painted was lavishly detailed in gold. Though vivid and extravagant, the room seemed smaller than I had imagined. I had seen that particular room time and again, and off-screen, it had lost a certain shine. I walked toward the red carpet lining the staircase, remembering the look of wonder on Keira Knightley's face as she, portraying Elizabeth Bennet, walked the same path I was walking. Yet, despite its splendor, I could only see how faded the paint was, how worn the carpet, how much shorter the ceiling.

I continued through various rooms: green rooms, state rooms, bedrooms, drawing rooms, dining rooms, painted rooms, papered rooms, each blurring one after the other, in different styles, for different purposes, but all with the same mood; all with the same feeling that they had been beautiful once, but that years without use had taken their toll.

The tour of the house did not take nearly as long as I had planned, and I was in no way excited to be thrust back out onto the frozen grounds. Buying time, I studied every item in the gift shop. It was filled with items selected by different members of the family: books, blankets,

scarves; products from the estate's farm; and memorabilia from various movies filmed at the estate. However, this was still not nearly large enough to occupy the three hours until teatime. After circling of the shop three or four times, I finally summoned up my courage, pulled my hat around my ears, and stepped out into the ivory outdoors.

The sun was shining almost too brightly, it reflected off the whiteness of the snow, and I could barely see in front of me without squinting. I took a deep breath and was taken off guard by the scents of the air. I had gotten so used to smelling a variety of scents with every new step, that the emptiness in this air, the simple smells of snow and nature were satisfying.

I began to walk around the backside of the house, toward a large pond with a spurting fountain. After only a few minutes my toes were already numb, but it didn't matter. I had been spared the harshness of a northern winter, but I had forgotten the tranquility gained by breathing in the cool stillness of winter air. The sunshine could not warm my skin, but its brightness energized me and I walked on briskly. The gardens, famously designed by English landscape architect Lancelot "Capability" Brown, were now shielded by a glistening white sheathing of snow. It stuck to branches and bushes, and gathered around glimmering fountains. We wandered up a hill upon paths made from the steps of those who had trekked on before us. I walked by a cascade built up on the hill that appeared roughly fifty meters long. Surprisingly, it still ran in such cold temperatures. The sound of water falling from landing to landing added to the soft hum in the air around me. In that moment, a favorite line of Austen's came to me: "What are men to rocks and mountains?"

Upon a ledge of one particular garden sat a fat pheasant. It was hard to see at first because the path I was on was far from it, but the bright emerald and ruby shades of its head stood out against the small bush it had perched in front of. The bird did not move the entire time

I stared at it, but something in the way it sat told me that it was simply happy to absorb the sunshine.

After I felt I had ambled through every possible path, I decided to head out of the gardens towards the carriage house. On my way to the gate, I came across a large greenhouse. Though I had little interest in greenhouses, I was ready to give my frozen feet a break. I stepped inside and the effect was immediate. The greenhouse was divided into three rooms: a temperate climate, the one closest to the door; a Mediterranean climate; and a tropical climate. Guests only had access into the first two, but they were warm enough to defrost my toes. The humidity allowed the soft earthy smells of soil and water to swell around me. Scents that took me back to greenhouses at home, when I helped my mother pick out new perennials for her garden on Mother's Day.

Finally, it was time for tea. Uphill from the house, in what used to be the carriage house, a little tea shop had been established. I had not had a real English tea since I had been in England, and it was something I had been anticipating. I felt a little silly at first, sitting there by myself, but as soon as the waitress covered my table in goods, I completely forgot any of my concerns.

They brought a pot of tea alongside a three-tiered serving tray. The top tier was laden with little finger sandwiches: cucumber, smoked salmon and cream cheese, ham and swiss. The middle tier had a sort of brownie, topped with a strange, hard, marshmallow-like topping, as well as a lemon-flavored custard. The bottom had a set of raisin scones, complete with butter and the estate's homemade strawberry jam. I had a lovely time. Thanks to warm tea and delicious snacks, I almost forgot the chilly weather.

When tea was over, I still had time before the next bus could come to pick me up. I decided to wander around the grounds outside the gate. The sun had not yet gone down, and the

snow was as bright as ever. I looked back at the house—though I did not find what I had come for in there, I had not come away with nothing. Turning away from the house, I watched as a flock of sheep foraged through the slush near the river, a young couple walked across the bridge, an elderly couple walked their dog, and despite the tingling sensation of my numb toes, I was simply happy to run around in the snow.