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Shabbat Shalom, Mary Magdalene!

Martha Schulman

Submitted in fulfilment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in *The Contemporary Novel: Practice as Research*

School of English, University of Kent

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Abstract: The novel *Shabbat Shalom, Mary Magdalene!* tells the story of American expat Connie, a native New Yorker who has been living in Rome for the last twenty-plus years. Set in 2015, a pilgrimage year, it describes Connie's curation of a much-delayed exhibit of Medieval and Renaissance saint paintings. At the same time, she is coping with unexpected house guest, Josh; her daughter Giulia's increasing upset at not having been raised Jewish; and her complicated relationship with her mother and sister. Taking up issues of identity, art, saints, and mother-daughter relationships, the novel centers female lives and the ways multiple roles (mother, daughter, granddaughter, sister, lover, and so forth) inform each other. Studded with jokes, it includes flashbacks to 1970s New York City and extensive use of ekphrasis, the description of art works. Also included is a situating essay discussing how the novel came to include discussion of Judaism and Jewish identity and how the book fits into an existing genre of Jewish-American novels.

88,300 words/359 pages

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Shabbat Shalom, Mary Magdalene!

“Before going any farther, I will give you the exact proportions of a man. Those of a woman, I will disregard, as they do not have any set proportion. –
Cenno Cennini, *The Art of Painting*, c. 1400

“We were both Jews and knew of each other that we carried that miraculous thing in common, which—inaccessible to any analysis so far—makes the Jew.” – Sigmund Freud, 1939.

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Which One's the Magdalene?

I click through the Magdalenes—sobbing, praying, anointing, reading, mistaking Jesus for the gardener, penitent, ascending. “Did you know Mary Magdalene’s one of only three women in Medieval art shown reading?” I say.

No one answers. My mother-in-law’s here, and she’s making coffee for Giulia, who’s telling her about the movie she just saw. They love each other, she says, but they can’t be together. It’s beautiful and sad. Giulia’s 17, which explains why sad is beautiful. In a year she’ll be gone to college. My Italian daughter, proof of and reason for life here. My phone lights up: an email from my mother. I ignore it.

“The Virgin, St. Catherine, Magdalene,” I say. The coffee smells like heaven. I look at the stove, but it’s the tiny Moka meant for one.

“I’m sorry, Connie, did you say something?” Marianna says.

“It’s for the exhibit I told you about,” I say. “The saint paintings.”

Marianna was thrilled when I got the curating gig, but she makes a face. She can’t help it, she was raised that way. Imagine my surprise when I got to Italy and found out that everyone’s parents and grandparents were communists. My phone pings: my mother. On WhatsApp. Claude installed it for her so she could text me. Claude’s the helpful daughter.

“Which one’s the Magdalene again?” Giulia says.

Marianna smiles, hands Giulia the coffee. “Brava,” she tells Giulia. “You shouldn’t know. She’s a folk tale, a superstition. Used by the powerful to oppress the powerless.”

It takes me a second to recognize Giulia’s expression, it’s been so long, but it

comes to me. Complicity. She should absolutely know who the Magdalene is. I dragged her to a million churches, pointed out each saint. I made it a game, find the dragon, find the grill, who's that riddled with arrows?

"Can I make you a coffee?" Marianna asks me, swooping the hot Moka under cold water so it sizzles and steams.

"That'd be great. Thanks." I turn the computer toward them. "I know religion's a snare, Marianna, but look how beautiful these are." I show some of my favorites, avoiding topless, penitent Mary, which in the wrong hands looks like 70's van-panel art.

"The gilding is nice," Marianna says. "And that see-through veil."

Giulia puts down her phone. Add another miracle to the Magdalene's tally.

"I like her dress," she says.

The Magdalene's a snappy dresser, no question. No need to mention that when she's wearing those fancy clothes, she's a courtesan, AKA prostitute.

When my phone lights up again, I turn it over. Lots of people email and text me, but it's my mother who doesn't understand that virtually reachable isn't the same as actually reachable.

When Giulia's phone pings, I have a pretty good guess who it is.

"Grandma says she's trying to get hold of you. She wants to tell you something."

I'm sure she does. I'd rather Marianna not see me in bad-daughter mode, but luckily, G. said this in English, which Marianna doesn't speak. Claude thinks I'm missing the point, that the person I shouldn't want to see me that way is Giulia. What Claude doesn't get is that you don't catch bad-daughteritis, you earn it.

I turn my phone off. "Actually, it's four women," I say in Italian, "The Virgin's

mother Anna taught her to read.” Anna’s a saint, too: the church decided that the Virgin’s nice Jewish family weren’t just crypto-Christians, they were saints. It’s kind of like white people complimenting black people by telling them they don’t think of them as black.

Marianna’s not wrong about the church, religion, any of it. I’m as happy to Pope bash as the next guy, but these paintings, not just Magdalene, the whole genre, the whole period, middle ages to early Renaissance, they make me happy. Swoony, even. They look like the about-to-be-done coffee smells. All that gold, the blue of the Madonna’s cloak, biblical characters dressed in the height of Florentine fashion with striped tights, embroidered bodices, little sock-shoes on their pointy feet; the dogs in crowd scenes; how the gold can be yellow or reddish or green; the stamping and incising of the halos; the landscapes and cities in the background; how busy they are—the crucifixion isn’t my top pick, isn’t my tenth, but there’s so much to see, the horses, the dice, the soldiers, all the rubber neckers and mourners, the army of Marys, that you can pretty much ignore JC up there dying for your sins.

I love how the artists, the good ones, and yes, you can tell, worked in a form but still made each painting new. How they get better at water, start figuring out proportion. And the way they tell stories, how everything happens at the same time and is always happening. Saints make sense here. In Rome you can slip through time by walking a block or climbing a flight of stairs. Buildings from different centuries aren’t just next to each other, they’re built over and out of each other; it’s a cinch to be in multiple times at once. A saint show in Rome—if we get it right—will be like one of those fancy chocolates where the layers of deliciousness just keep going.

“Grazie,” I say as Marianna hands me the coffee. I know the counter argument—that it’s a terrible idea, especially here, like assembling a heap of snow in a blizzard and calling it a special snow show. I get it—Rome’s awash in saints—I just don’t buy it. When Vincenzo asked me to co-curate the show, it was partly, I think, so he’d have someone to dig him out if he got buried.

Amazingly, Marianna and Giulia are still interested, so I keep clicking.

“Wait,” Giulia says. “Is she flying?”

She could, I guess, I mean, she’s the Magdalene, but it’s not part of the story. I put down my coffee to look. “No, she’s ascending to heaven. See those angels? They’re carrying her.”

Marianna snorts. If my mother were here, she’d say, “And I am the Queen of Romania,” which is from something, I think, but it was before the Internet, and I still haven’t looked it up. The painting’s ridiculous, but the gallery owns it and the director likes it, and that’s how shows get put together. Mary’s arms are outstretched like she’s hoping to take off, and she’s pretty chunky for someone who’s been living on nothing but manna for thirty years.

“It does crack me up how sturdy she is,” I say. “Look at those arms.”

Giulia turns away. “I don’t talk about women’s bodies.”

Brava, I tell myself, because who doesn’t want their daughter to be better than them? I could live without her rubbing it in, but you don’t get to pick and choose. “Good policy.”

I ankle my stool to the other side of the counter, finish my perfect coffee. Thank God I didn’t show them the ones where she looks like a pin-up. “Do you have homework?”

“I did it already. Don’t forget to call Grandma. Maybe it’s important.”

I nod. I don't tell her that her grandmother wanting an audience and it being important hardly ever go hand in hand. If it were important, Claude would have told me.

The computer doesn't do the Magdalenes justice: you have to see the paintings—all of them, not just her—in the flesh, yours and theirs. Live, they pack heat; they matter. Live, you see what they're made of. Not tempera and panel, oil and canvas: desire. I remember when I got here and saw them and thought, I want this. This is what I want. The paintings, of course, but more than that, all of it, the buildings in a hundred shades of yellow and tan, the terraces all painted the same green; Rome in all its beat-up, almost-but-not-quite more-trouble-than-it's-worth beauty. The fact that it's 4000 miles from New York was just a bonus.

Turns out it's a Dorothy Parker line. Hunh.

What Museums Are For

“How was school?” I ask when I get home, even though I’m pretty sure it’s on the list of forbidden phrases. It’s good for you, Giulia told me. Thinking up new questions will keep your brain limber, and I’ll be less irritated. It’s win-win. When I suggested putting “win-win” on the list, she laughed. At me, not with me.

“Interesting. Il Buratti took us to the Jewish Museum.”

“The one in the Synagogue?” She’s at the dining table, books out, homework visible, maybe being worked on. Our apartment’s a decent size—I even have a small office, but this space—where the kitchen blurs into the dining room—is where everything important happens.

“Across from it. There was an exhibit about when the Nazis raided the Ghetto. He says it’s appalling that we haven’t been.”

She gives me a look: clearly the blame has moved from generalized to specific. “How come we never went?”

I pour myself a glass of wine. Why can’t I picture this place? The Synagogue, Il Tempio Maggiore, no problem: square dome, bullet-proof guard boxes, turnstile entry and all. It should be easy: one side of the synagogue’s the Tiber, the other’s not the ghetto, but...bupkus, as my grandfather would say.

“When it opened, you had better things to do with your free time than spend it with me?”

“Do you even know when it opened?”

“No. Do you?”

“Not long ago, I don’t think. Signor Buratti says it was supposed to be built like ten years ago, bigger, somewhere else.”

This rings a bell, but too faint to be useful. Lots of projects here get announced without getting built; I've seen whole subway lines fall off the map. I open the fridge. "You hungry? I was thinking pasta for dinner."

"It's really upsetting. The museum. They took more than a thousand people on one day. Only sixteen came back. Monica cried."

I back out of the fridge. "No, of course. That is upsetting. It's terrible." Light dawns as the door shuts. "Oh, the holocaust museum!" Giulia glares from across the counter.

"That's what I said."

I don't argue. "I didn't realize you wanted to go."

"I didn't *want* to go," Giulia says. "Nobody *wants* to go. That's not the point. Everyone should go. I should go."

"Absolutely. That's why Signor Buratti...."

"I shouldn't need a school trip. I should already know."

"You do know. You live in the world; you know what happened. And there's Holocaust Remembrance Day every year." It's a thing here... a guilty-conscience thing, obviously, but they cover the main points. "It's more important that the rest of your class goes."

G. is not impressed by this argument.

"It's more than that. They had a picture of the survivors saying Kaddish for the people who died in the camps. Do you know what Kaddish is?"

"Sure. It's the memorial prayer for the dead." I can tell from G's face that that *sure* will cost me.

"Why don't I know?"

“Because the only person you’ve seen die is your grandfather, and you don’t say Kaddish for lapsed Catholics?”

“Because you never told me.”

“It didn’t occur to me that you needed to know. Anyway, that’s what museums are for, and books, and the internet: because everybody doesn’t already know everything.” Giulia’s expression makes it clear I’ve missed the point. Am not in the same room as the point, possibly not the same planet.

“Think about dinner. I’m going to pee.” The WiFi in the bathroom’s spotty, but for once it’s on my side. The damn thing only opened a few years ago. Did teenage Giulia really want to spend Saturday afternoon with her mother learning about the Nazis sending 1000 Roman Jews to the camps? Or Sunday, assuming it’s closed on the Sabbath? I think not. The glow of being right lasts till I’m drying my hands. She didn’t say she wanted to go; she said I should have taken her. Because it was important, I guess, because if I had, she’d know what Kaddish is. Everything’s my fault, that’s a given, but maybe this actually is? A little?

Back to the kitchen. “Hey, G. I’m glad Signor Buratti took you,” I say. “It is important. It’s just...when I was a kid, my grandparents talked about the holocaust a lot, constantly. I didn’t want to do that to you, but maybe I went too far in the other direction.”

“What’d they want you to know?”

“That it could happen again.”

“So that...?”

“Good question. So we’d know the signs and get out in time, maybe? So we’d keep our guard up, never get too comfortable anywhere? You can see why I didn’t want that for you, right?” Where’d I put my wine glass?

“Maybe it was so you’d speak up if something like that was ever happening again, even if it wasn’t to you?”

“Hmm. That’s the charitable way to look at it.”

“So you never thought of it that way?”

Ouch. “That wasn’t how they talked about it. No one ever mentioned Cambodia. It felt kind of one note, like that’s all being Jewish was. Signor Buratti should take you to the Jewish Museum, too, the one in the synagogue.”

“What’s there?”

“All kinds of things. The history of the Ghetto, the people there, what they did. It’s interesting.” I turn back to the fridge. Mistake.

“You’ve been there?”

“A long time ago. With your father.” It was a twofer: he wanted to show me how groovy and multicultural he was, and he’d heard they might be hiring. Telling me that his parents didn’t believe in God and didn’t care which God I didn’t believe in would have been more to the point, and I wanted a museum job, but not that one. I’d mastered Italian; I wasn’t about to learn Hebrew.

“Then it’s been open forever. Why didn’t you take me?”

Why is the *you* in that sentence so obviously singular, even in English? We may not have a village, but I didn’t raise her on my own. Why didn’t her father or her grandparents or her uncle take her? Why didn’t she take herself, for that matter? There’ve been Jews in Rome since there was a Rome—why wasn’t that a class trip? They go to the Coliseum; hell, they go to the Museum of

Pasta. It takes longer than it should to occur to me that maybe that omission is exactly why I, or someone, should have taken her.

“We could still go. This weekend if you want. Invite Monica.”

Giulia bustles her books together, squeezes past me to get some nuts, grabs a bunch of grapes. “That’s okay. I’m good.”

It hangs in the air. *I’m good; you’re bad.* “What about dinner?”

“I’m not hungry. I’ll just have this.”

Subtext: this sad dinner is the physical manifestation of all you haven’t given me, of which the holocaust is just one tiny, terrible part. I hand her a napkin, realizing too late that it’s one of those gestures that’s fine when someone else does it, but that coming from your mother shows she thinks you’re a slob and a child. I don’t think that. If she were a child, we wouldn’t be having this conversation, we’d be drawing imaginary animals. And she’s definitely not a slob. That’s me. Giulia grabs the napkin so fast I hear the snap.

Like Boot Camp

I wait a decent interval in case Giulia comes back out, then call Claude.

“Hey,” she says, “I was going to call. Where are you?”

“On the terrace.”

“Are you smoking?”

“No.” But I wish I were, and setting helps; I’m method that way. Across the street the family on the third floor is organizing a lovely al fresco dinner on their lovely terrace on this unseasonably warm early spring evening.

“Ask me where I am,” Claude says.

“Where are you?” The grandmother brings out an insalata caprese.

“On 86th Street.”

Three blocks from our apartment, she means, where our mother still lives. Our mother whose emails I haven’t answered or read.

“You’re in New York? Why? Is Ma okay?” Grandma comes back with oil and vinegar, sets them down by the salad, adjusts the basil for maximum beauty.

“She’s fine. You think I only visit when there’s a problem?”

“You visit more than that?” The oil’s from a cousin’s place in Sardinia. She feels so lucky, the mother told me in the market, because so much olive oil you buy these days is fake. We looked at the bottle in my basket, looked away.

“A little more,” she says. “Plus, there’s a lecture I wanted to go to.”

I make her describe everything she passes, even though it’s mostly banks and drug stores. Between the play-by-play and the elevator noise—they’ve been upgrading the good-bones-but-worse-for-the-wear building we grew up in for

the last twenty-five years, but the elevators still groan when they hit the lobby—
I know the second she walks in. “Are they still redecorating?”

“Had they changed the wallpaper last time you were here?”

“It’s like a diamond pattern?”

“You’re way behind. It’s red, now. Reddish.”

The husband brings out the wine, the daughter the glasses, and here
comes the son.

“There’s new art, too. Still ugly, though.”

“Are you just wandering around the lobby now?”

“Pretty much. I’m fine, thanks,” she says, not to me. “I grew up here. I’m
visiting. New doorman,” she tells me, in what passes for a whisper in our family.

“Can you believe he made me sign in?”

“Incredible. You can’t get good help these days.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“How’d he look when he saw where you were going?”

“The usual. Somewhere between sooner you than me and you’re a better
man than I.”

“Yeah,” I say, “what he said.” The begonia’s a little dry. “How’s Mike?”

“Fine. He wants to know when you’re coming to visit.”

I’m fairly sure Mike wants to know when I’m visiting our mother, not
their nice book-crammed apartment in Philly. Two professors together is like
what they say about having another kid: two’s way more than one more than
one. “If you don’t get in the elevator soon, he’ll give you the fish eye.”

“Too late.”

I pull a dead leaf off the begonia, then another. Across the way, they're buon appetitoing and chin chinning to beat the band. "You should see the salad the people across from me are eating."

"Wave at them; they'll invite you over, right?"

"Um, is it like that with your neighbors?"

"No. Obviously. But you live in Italy. Isn't that how it's supposed to be?"

"You know it's not."

"I prefer to think you're just holding out on me so I don't get jealous.

How's Giulia?"

"You know. She's amazing, she drives me crazy." Sometimes I amp up Giulia's adolescent angst so Claude doesn't feel bad about not having a kid. I hope she does the same when she tells me about Mike, because otherwise he is one dud avocado. Tonight though, the truth's enough. "She's mad I never took her to the holocaust museum."

I hear snickering. "It's not funny."

"Yeah, it is. Be happy she knows about the holocaust. One of Mike's students asked if we were still in Vietnam."

"She made it sound like I'd kept it from her."

"You weren't denying it, were you?"

"Oh, shut up. Are you bringing Ma anything?" She likes gummy strawberries; she likes snack-sized Snickers and Almond Joys. She likes, who doesn't, Nutella. It's a wonder she's not diabetic. I pluck another leaf, take a step back. Now it's lopsided.

"Some malted milk balls, but actually, I should just bring you. When's the last time you spoke to her?"

"I don't know. A couple days, maybe a week."

"You used to be a better liar."

"I'll call her soon, I swear, but... it's later here, I'm tired." I talk to our mother. I do. I just like to gear up first.

"Oh, come on. She's a nice, elderly woman; I mean, hell, these days we're practically elderly. And she's your mother."

"You come on. None of that's true." I try to wait out the silence, fail.

"Okay, hardly any. Starting with us being elderly."

"I take it back, especially since you're being such a baby. Better?"

"Are you still in the lobby?"

"Nope. Mike got me a fancy new phone that doesn't drop out in the elevator. We just passed four."

"Claude!"

"Grow up." We listen together to the elevator stopping at five. "Thanks, you, too," Claude says to whoever's getting off. The door creaks open again: sixth floor. I wait for the doorbell; we have keys, but we don't use them: we're modelling boundaries. I could say Giulia's calling; any call from a child is a potential emergency. She'd text, but Claude doesn't know that.

"Hi, Mom," Claude carols. "Guess who's on the phone?" Muffled sounds, then, "No, it's Connie. Want to say hi?" I hear footsteps and think how easy it would be to jab the right-wrong button that cuts us off. I opt for maturity and not pissing Claude off and wait for the wave of my mother to crash over my head.

"Connie!" my mother says, "Perfect, I want to try something out on you. You've been following what's going on in Sicily, right?" And we're off. By the

time she stops to breathe, across the way is digging into their second course. Spaghetti con Vongole. I can smell the garlic from here. The gist—the gist is that my mother, who doesn't believe in waiting for the government to do what the citizenry can do quicker and better, has some thoughts about how we (her we is infinitely expandable. Her and me, our whole family—grand total five, counting Mike—my in-laws, all her friends, the whole Upper West Side, all of Manhattan, all of New York, a full-scale army of the righteous, is a partial list of who that *we* could include) can help with the inrush of refugees hitting the beaches of Sicily. The best thing would be if I can help with translation, but if I can't leave Rome right now, maybe I know someone? They don't have to be up on refugee stuff; she'll take care of that.

She's not just convincing, she's utterly convinced, and for a second, more, I'm in. It's a mess, the government's not doing anything, someone's got to help. I've got the show, but Giulia could go, or Mimmo's from the South, maybe he knows someone. I remember when Gogo was the queen of refugee resettlement and forget she never worked in Italy, hasn't resettled anyone for decades, her contacts are dead or retired. Refugees were after she was downtown famous for her costume and set designs—for one *Midsummer's Night Dream*, she replanted a ton of live moss on stage—and before she was our councilmember's outreach person. I was in college when she was saving the experimental school, and after that I lost track.

The contact high wears off when she asks me if I remember that woman she met when she visited Rome. I don't. It took years, but I've forgotten everything about that trip. When I can get a word in, I tell her Giulia needs me; she doesn't notice the logic fail when I ask her to put Claude back on.

"I'll make us some tea," Claude tells her, which means she's heading into the kitchen so she can talk without Ma hearing her.

"I can't believe you," I say.

"What's to believe? We're talking, and, bonus, you and Mom get to catch up."

"You don't 'catch up' with Ma. That's a category error. She's going to solve the whole Africa's next door to Sicily, but Italy doesn't have the money to handle so many refugees and besides they're black and Muslim and no one here wants any part of them problem. All she needs is some translation help. Did you catch all that?"

"I was standing right there. Are you going do it?"

"Are you kidding? Am I going to Sicily to tell people who either don't want to deal with refugees or are already trying to help them her big idea? The language barrier's the least of the problems."

"Hunh," Claude says. "She got a new kettle. Nice."

Why isn't someone making me tea? "I can't believe you think I'd consider it."

"Sorry. It's just—you do have a lot of experience translating for her. You know, pretty much my whole childhood."

Jesus. Like Ma hasn't already made my brain hurt. "That wasn't translation. That was running interference." Why do I have to explain this to the one person who should understand?

"Potato, potahto. You're out of shape. Admit it, for a second you thought she was onto something."

The inadmissible sin. Which Claude knows because I taught her. Because I interpreted.

“If you talked to her more often,” she goes on, “you’d be fine. It’s like boot camp; first week is hell, second week is worse, then, boom, you’re lifting 50 pounds over your head like it’s nothing.”

She weighs a lot more than that.

“Mom’s waving; she wants to tell you something. “What?” she says. Back to me. “It’s about her friend Betse, do you remember her?”

“No. Tell her to email me.” I hang up before Ma comes back and remembers Betse for me, then bring myself and the leafless begonia in. Since Giulia was too indignant to open the fridge, the mortadella I bought the other day’s still there. It’s delicious, infinitely better than the baloney, sweaty in its plastic package, that Claude and I grew up eating. Still, if I fold it in half and bite through the middle so there’s a circle when I unfold it, I could be on W. 89th Street, aged maybe nine. Before the first big lobby renovation, when the palm trees on the wallpaper matched the faintly Egyptian semi-Deco original fixtures. When the doormen were our friends and occasional baby sitters.

Claude admits some things about Gogo, like how the handymen and super treat her like something between a free show and an unexploded bomb (luckily, hypomaniacs tip well. The money may not come at Christmas, but it comes.), but not my contention that our mother—our only parent—was, even by the low standards of the 1970s, terrible. I used to feel bad that Giulia was an only child, but at least she’ll never know how lonely it is when the person who should know what you know pretends not to. Or maybe Claude’s not

pretending; maybe she really thinks it was fine. If so, it's because of all the interference I ran. All the translation I did.

The only sign of Giulia is a thin line of light under her door. She could be doing homework; texting with Monica, watching a movie, listening to music, plotting my demise, all of the above.

My phone beeps: a text from Claude: *Heads up. I think Betse's coming to Italy.*

Think?

I wasn't listening that carefully.

I resist the temptation to remind her about bootcamp: she's a regular, so sieving the facts out from whatever else Gogo's got going on should be a piece of cake. I don't though: no reason to piss her off.

c.singer89@gmail.com. Pass the word.

She already emailed you. She says you haven't answered.

Don't worry: I'm being punished. Apparently, I've been buying fake olive oil for years.

Then you're used to it. Problem solved.

Thanks, that's helpful.

No, thank you.

We've been texting and emailing so many years that I know exactly what she means. Thanks—for nothing.

Patron Saint of Mothers of Difficult Children

The Falconeri hasn't shown anything besides its standing collection in years, maybe ever, and it doesn't have the staff or the expertise, which explains both what I'm doing here and why we're so behind. There's also the fact that we should have started planning a year earlier, and the way our works list keeps—evolving, as the Director puts it.

It's hard to tell how much our boss cares about art; Vince says not at all, but Vince hates him. Guido definitely cares about leveraging his connections to get us loans, the more out of our league the better. Vince and I were skeptical at first, but we've gotten caught up in the chase, and we can't stop thinking about what else we might could get.

Today's task: find a St. Francis.

"He's Italy's patron saint," Vince reminds me, not for the first time. "We need him."

We both hate the Falconeri's Francis, but that's where the agreement stops. Vince wants stigmata. I want something in the St.-Francis-preaching-to-the-birds family. Our taste overlaps at Caravaggio, but basically, I like 'em old; Vince likes 'em young. I handle the Middle Ages and early Renaissance; he's got Mannerism through Baroque. I monitor the number of Baroque monstrosities; he makes sure we don't drown in Sienese and Florentine gold.

The problem with Francis is that the good stigmata pictures (the Bellini at the Frick; the Giotto at the Louvre) aren't good, they're great, and either somewhere Guido doesn't have any contacts or has already shot his wad. The not-good ones are lurid, all skulls and lowering purple heavens.

We're in Vince's office. I'm on the internet; Vince is flipping through every art book we have. Of course, we'd never admit to doing this, or Vince wouldn't, anyway, because Real Curators are supposed to know all the art everywhere already.

"What about this one?" he says, showing me a hideous Guido Reni. Francis looks like a beatific sap, and the angel consoling him has wandered in from a Hallmark card.

I read the fine print. "Destroyed in an air raid in 1943."

"Cazzo."

If I were more generous or it was less corny, maybe I'd credit Reni for switching up Francis's iconography. Saints mostly get painted a few standard ways, which means you see them that way over and over, which is why people think the paintings all look alike. A better way to say it is that saint paintings are like sonnets. If you follow the rules and patterns, you can pretty much do anything else you want. There were guys painting by the numbers, but they were basically selling at the medieval equivalent of Pottery Barn. The good ones mixed things up; the great ones invented whole new versions. The best example, hands down, is Antonello Da Messina's *Annunciation*. There are none of the usual indicators: the Virgin, wearing a blue headscarf, is all alone. She's wide-eyed and chastened, and it doesn't take an angel and a dove to show what's happened.

Picturing saints with their emblems—Catherine with a wheel, Peter with the keys to heaven—made life easier for illiterates then and art historians now. And artists, of course, since they didn't have to worry about likeness. Kids draw like that. Identification by association: she's your mother because she's holding

your hand, standing by your house. My problem was that the attribute I attributed to Gogo, constant motion, was too hard to draw.

Failing that, I drew her with extra arms—a less destructive Kali. I started with four, moved to eight, then kept going until they circled her body. Sometimes she was passing something from one hand to the next; sometimes she had a different thing in each hand, an iron, fabric, a sketch, and so on. I'd seen both in the workroom behind the stage, seen her switch between sewing, sketching, fitting, pinning, checking the lights, sending people on errands, seen her moving so fast she had to be doing cartwheels. Meanwhile, Claude's favourite book was about a globetrotting kangaroo who brought her kid, safe in her pouch, everywhere.

I never got the arms the way I wanted them, never figured out how to show her handily doing whatever came to hand. I stopped drawing her like that when I was ten or eleven. (I stopped drawing her, period, when I was thirteen.)

"I said," Vince says, "I'm going to get some coffee, do you want some?"

"No, thanks." Off he goes. Ten, it must have been. It was Thanksgiving, grey and sneaky cold, and the parade went on forever, but we stuck it out because the brand-new Kermit balloon was bringing up the rear. Afterward, we went to the Lincoln Center plaza to run off hours of standing. The fountain was turned off, and Gogo finished her cigarette, stepped into it, and stood in the middle with her arms out. "Jump!" she said to Claude, who was walking around the rim. I was seeing how long I could balance on one foot. My teacher said if you sunk your toes into the earth and pulled your stomach up to your head, you could balance forever.

“Jump, Claudie, I’ll catch you” said Gogo. Maybe it was the pigeons or the banners on the opera house, maybe she saw something behind her eyelids, which my teacher said was possible, but something distracted her. She dropped her arms just before Claude started moving. When I yelled, Ma reached her arms back out, but Claude had already hit the concrete.

Ma gave me her purse to carry so she could carry Claude. I swung it back and forth, not caring that it dragged on the ground. I’d already started suspecting that she was unreliable, didn’t pay attention. She didn’t pick us up when she said she would. (Sometimes she didn’t pick us up at all.) Bits of costumes fell off because they’d been basted and pinned instead of sewn. Minor infractions, mostly, but I was watching. Now I had proof: she was irresponsible, dangerous, even.

Italy’s other patron is Catherine of Siena, another stigmatic. There are patron saints for all kinds of things, flight attendants, the falsely accused, mothers of difficult children. That’s Monica, whose sinning, whoring son grew up to be St. Augustine, so clearly she knew what she was doing. There is not, as far as I know, a patron saint of children of difficult mothers, although there could be: the Vatican makes up new patrons as needed. The patron saint of television? Clare of Assisi. Why? Because once in the 1300s when she was too sick to go to mass, she saw the service on her wall like it had been beamed there.

Claude missed Thanksgiving dinner because it hurt to chew, but otherwise she was fine. She only vaguely remembers it, she says; it’s second hand, like picturing a photo, not the event itself. I remember perfectly, but I’ve told it too many times, and it feels second hand to me now, too. And I know—I admit; I am fully aware—that telling it this way foreshortens, overstates. The

reality was slower; it zigzagged. She was irresponsible, unreliable, yes, but for my birthday that year, she turned my room into a maze of yarn my friends had to unweave to find their goody bags. She taped each color onto a magic marker, and we made our way through the maze, winding yarn onto our markers like we were reeling in a kite.

The Kind of Thing They Like

There's water running in the kitchen, so Giulia's home. If she's washing lettuce for dinner, it means, maybe, that I've been forgiven.

My shriek makes him jump and drop the plate he's washing, which makes him swear, which tells me he's American, which leaves me none the wiser.

He turns around and puts his hands up. "Don't shoot."

"I won't if you won't. Shut the water off, will you?"

He does, then turns back around to face me. "You must be Connie. I'm Josh Goodman."

He says this like it explains everything. "And you're in my kitchen how?"

"Giulia let me in."

I look around—in case she's hiding, I guess. If she is, she's doing a good job.

"She went to get milk," he says. "She'll be right back." He smiles at me.

He has excellent teeth. I don't smile back.

"You have no idea who I am, do you?"

"Should I?"

He picks the pieces of plate out of the sink, just three, all big. "If you have glue, I can fix it."

"Can you put them down till we've established who you are?"

"Right, sorry. Josh Goodman? The grandson?"

I wait.

"Betse Zeller's grandson?" He waits. "Your mother's friend?"

Betse Zeller. Who isn't coming to Rome. "Oh. Shit."

"I thought she'd told you—asked you—but she's not that organized these days."

I throw the plate pieces into the garbage. "It's not her fault. I might have missed a few of my mother's messages."

"I'm sorry about the plate."

"We've got more. Wait. Tell me, ask me what?"

He sits down. "Forget the plate. I'm sorry about everything. I'm in Rome for about a month, and my grandmother told your mother, who said you'd be happy to put me up. I didn't want to add more emails to the million I figured they'd send, but I should have realized how much could get lost in translation."

My computer's on the counter; I pull up my email and open the trash, skim the two from Sunday and the ones from last night, this morning, and three hours ago. "According to my mother, you're starting college in the fall." I look at him: Clear skin, broad shoulders, button-down, stylish glasses. "That can't be right."

"Med school. I'm 27."

"27? Why's your grandmother making your travel arrangements?"

"Mom!" Giulia says. I don't know how she can move so quietly in Doc Martens.

"It's okay," he tells her. He turns back to me. "Because it made her so happy."

Giulia beams with what can only be described as naches. "I got the bread I was telling you about," she says to him. "You're lucky. They're usually sold out by now."

How long has he been here? Wrong question. “How’d you get here, exactly?” I mean, okay, Gogo gave him the address, but did Giulia buzz in some random stranger?

“I called from the airport. Giulia’s directions were great.”

“Grandma gave him my info when she didn’t hear back from you.”

Of course she did. Which I guess means he wasn’t a stranger.

“I texted you,” Giulia tells me. “Twice.”

I’m impressed. She sounds informative, not defensive. Mature, even. She’s not even saying I told you so about getting back to Gogo.

“And called, but your phone was off.”

I dig out my phone. It’s off. Guido doesn’t do well with random noises. No bells, beeps, or buzzers, no rings. Things got tense when Vince compared Guido’s poster design to the one for the Wax Museum’s Popes Through the Ages show, and I forgot to turn it back on. G’s texts are here, along with voicemails from her, Ma, and Claude, who must have gotten pulled in when Ma didn’t hear from me. “I’m sorry. It was a little crazy at work.”

“Listen,” Josh says. “I can find another place to stay. I don’t want to put you out.”

Giulia looks at me, eyes wide. “It’s best with olive oil and ricotta,” she says. “The bread. Or with tomatoes, in the summer. People think tomatoes are year-round here, because of Sicily, but they’re really not. They’re just starting to get good now, but it’s still early, and...”

I used to worry when she got speedy, given her DNA, but now it’s just a useful tell. If I kick him out, my mother will be on my case; Betse Zeller, who just wants to help her grandson out, will be sad; and my daughter, who I hope will

open my emails more or less when I send them, even when she's old and doesn't have to, will, it's clear, be both devastated and unforgiving. I do what any mother would: I give in. "Don't be ridiculous. This isn't your fault. My mother and I don't always communicate well."

"Besides, we love having guests," Giulia says, speaking for herself. She puts the bread on the counter and the milk in the fridge, making it look like a dance to spring.

"Thank you," Josh says. "Really."

"We should toast," Giulia says, wine bottle in one hand, corkscrew leaping into the other.

I look at Josh to see what she's seeing. He's decent looking, maybe decent plus: wavy dark brown hair that probably Jewfroes when it gets long; those good teeth; and, I'll give him this, a perfect nose. Perfect being the exact wrong word. Bumped, angled, big, but for those who like that kind of thing, that is the kind of thing that they like. Those *c'est moi*. And, I guess, Giulia. "What are we toasting?"

"Josh seeing Rome."

"My very kind hostess. Hostesses," Josh says.

She pours; we clink. I take a swig, Josh a sip, Giulia wets her lips. She's pro-wine because it feels grown up, not for the taste.

"So why are you in Rome?" I ask.

He looks surprised, which surprises me. I don't have much occasion for small talk (I can't remember the last time I talked to someone I didn't know, which can't be a good sign), but I didn't think I'd lost the knack entirely.

"Because it's Rome," he says. "I've wanted to come since I read *Asterix*. I can't believe it took me so long. How old were you the first time you were here?"

Asterix? “21 the first time. 23 or 24 the second time.” And when I got back, I wondered what had taken so long.

“And here you still are.”

I nod.

“Exactly.”

A second later, he realizes what he just said. “I’m not going to be on your couch forever, I promise. I won’t even be here the whole time. I should see Naples, right, and Florence?”

“If you like one, you won’t like the other. Right, G?”

“It’s true. But don’t let her talk you onto Team Naples. Florence is great.”

I make a face; Josh laughs.

“The art is great. But it’s too small for all the tourists and the American girls junior-year-abroad, and the Florentines think they’re personally responsible for the Renaissance. Art aside, Florence is Boston.”

“Maybe he likes Boston.”

“Josh. Where do you stand on Boston?”

“You couldn’t pay me to live there. Not that anyone tried.”

“Good man,” I say, getting up to get bread and cheese and oil and whatever else we have. The mortadella’s gone, but we usually keep some prosciutto on hand.

“You’re just sucking up,” G. says.

“As he should,” I say, “if he’s sleeping on my couch. Do we have any ricotta?”

“Bottom shelf,” she says. “Remind us what you did your junior year?”

“Came to Italy. But to a real city, not Florence.” He can sleep on my couch indefinitely if it makes her happy enough to tease me.

“Sucking up is completely appropriate under the circumstances,” Josh says. “But Boston really is awful. I should know, I lived there for a year.” He stands up. “Can I help? Tell me where things are, and I’ll set the table, at least.”

“Thanks,” I say, but you’re too late.” I swoop around him to put out plates and knives and forks.

“Here,” Giulia says, handing him something that turns out to be, when his long arm crosses my airspace, the water pitcher.

“So much for not getting in your way,” Josh says.

While we eat, Giulia teaches him basic greetings, shopping etiquette, how to count to 100. He alternates between saying how good everything he eats is and announcing how happy he is to be here. I feel about Rome the way my mother felt about New York; you’re free to see what’s wrong with it (you’d have to be blind not to) but if you don’t love it, we’re not going to be friends.

After dinner, we show Josh my office, open the couch up into a bed. It’s not a good bed, but beggars staying free in Rome can’t be choosers. Giulia gives him instructions on how to lock our front door, walks him out to show him the lights on the stairs, how to get the building’s big downstairs door to open.

When I came back, I slept on couches and house sat for ancient aunts who wouldn’t have dreamt of staying in Rome in July or August. When they started dying off, the families let me stay on, mostly to keep random cousins from moving in. The buildings were amazing, palazzi d’epoca, the epoca being the 1870s to 1890s, right after Italy was unified. Enormous courtyard buildings with four internal entryways; they’ve mostly been cut up now into weird-

shaped apartments, cheap hotels, expensive hotels, and Airbnbs retrofitted with the world's tiniest shower stalls. Our building has a language school, a yoga school (nice old wooden floors) and a dentist.

The apartments were crammed with heavy dark-wood furniture, brocaded cushions, endless wine glasses and silver settings, mirrors, Oriental carpets, vanities with sets of matching brushes and combs, jewelry d'epoca. And the art. So many terrible 19th Century paintings of girls in dells and peasants cheerfully bringing in the sheaves; so many architectural prints, Roman vistas, and school-of-somebody paintings that were never worth what the family hoped.

You couldn't get out unless you knew where the button that released the heavy downstairs door was, and they were in different places in every building. When the door clicked open, it felt like magic. When Josh and Giulia come back, I can tell he feels it, that sense of being lucky to have gotten in. Our apartment used to be Marianna's cousin's place, which is half the reason Ric and I could afford it; the other half was that in the late nineties, widows started dying in droves and there was briefly a glut. Josh lugs his huge backpack into my office and comes back with two messily wrapped presents. He's staring at them like he's never seen them.

"I hope you didn't let anyone watch your luggage or give you something to carry," I say.

"Nope. Well, yeah. They're from my grandmother." He hands the round one to Giulia and the flat one to me. We heft them.

"Heavier than it looks," I say.

"Mine, too," Giulia says.

I open mine while she's shaking hers. It's a framed photo of a young woman in what's probably the West Village. I look so long that Josh gets worried.

"It is your mother, right?" Josh says. "My grandmother said it was, but..."

"It's grandma?" Giulia says. "Can I see?" She squishes into me, breath warm on my arm. "Wow. She was a babe. I mean, I've never seen her this young."

Much as I enjoy seeing G fall off the PC truck, I can't stop looking at the picture. My grandparents' photos of Gogo stopped after she graduated from high school.

She looks like a handful, like a girl singer from the future. Pre-feminism sexy, down to the white gogo boots, but with Patti Smith bedhead, no makeup, and what looks like a pajama top over her mini skirt. I never saw her like that, but I know that style. Eclectic, as in I found this in the trash, threw that on over it, and made it all look good.

"Do they call her Gogo because of the boots?" Josh asks. "Or is there a they? Is it just my grandmother?"

"It's from when she was in *Waiting for Godot*, and it's everyone, pretty much. Except my grandparents. They called her Miriam."

"She doesn't look like a Miriam. My grandmother says she only saw you a few times after you were little, but you were deep in a so-what phase. You look like your mother. I think that's why she thought you'd like the photo."

Like isn't the word; I something it. "It's Giulia who really looks like her."

"Giulia looks like you," he says.

Giulia starts unwrapping her present. It's a tin, pretty enough, filled with gummy lizards and snakes and insects.

"Your grandmother told mine that you loved these," Josh says.

"When I was 12," Giulia says, radiant no more.

"Oh." He grabs a spider and throws it at her. "Uh oh, there's a spider on your shirt! Oh, my God, there's another."

She giggles.

He dangles a snake into his mouth. "Really, you don't like these anymore? What's wrong with you? They're delicious."

She giggles more.

"Come on, have one. Pink? No? Blue? Lime green? Good choice. They're usually the tastiest." When she takes it, he offers me the tin. "For you, Madame?"

My so-what phase? Like Gogo's outgrown hers? Gogo who can't keep track of how old her one grandchild is or what she likes? I bite the head off a lizard, and the forever it takes to chew it gives me plenty of time to realize that the upside of Ma's self-involvement is that it'll remind Josh that Giulia, whose beauty he should admire, is a kid. Do I contradict myself? All right, then I contradict myself. By which I mean, shut up.

Croton on Something

When I get up, Josh is at the table, surrounded by maps and guidebooks. He jumps when I tap his shoulder. “Morning. I’m making coffee. Want some?”

“I had some while I was out.”

“And? You’re in Italy—live a little. You’ve already been out?”

“Jetlag. I was up at five, so I went for a walk.”

“Where’d you go?”

“Everywhere.”

I raise an eyebrow.

“Half of everywhere?”

I put the Moka on the stove, then look at the stuff on the table. “You don’t use your phone?”

“I do. But I like to start walking and figure out where I am later. I map as I go.”

I look over his shoulder at the book he’s been writing in. “You’re redrawing the map?”

“You make that sound weird.”

I look at him. “Because it is.”

“Not the whole map. Just where I’ve been.”

The map’s not all labeled, but it looks like he took the stairs to the Quirinale, circled the grounds, came back down near the Fontana di Trevi, which he bypassed, crossed the Corso to the Piazza della Rotonda, then edged along the back of the Pantheon.

“Can I see?”

He nods.

After a second, I pick up his pen. "May I?"

"Sure."

I label the Corso and Via Rotonda, which is rotund because it curves to accommodate the Pantheon. It was one of the first streets here I could reliably recognize, which is pitiful, but I grew up on a grid. "Did you go into the Pantheon?"

He nods.

"And?"

He looks at me. "I saw the sunrise from it."

"I've always meant to do that."

"Not a morning person?"

"No. Milk?"

"Yes. It's kind of...it's something. But only if you like that whole rosy-fingered-dawn thing. Maybe you don't."

"Tastes do vary." I pour milk and put the cups in the microwave; when it pings, I add coffee and hand him a cup.

"Jesus, this is delicious."

Correct. I sketch in a tiny Pantheon, the columned portico with its triangular top, the enormous domed cylinder behind it. You can't see the opening in the dome unless you're under it, but I shadow it in anyway. I add Tazza d'Oro north of the Pantheon and San Eustachio Cafè to the east. "Do you have a key?"

"I don't need one: everything on there is somewhere I've been." He looks at the map, pointedly.

“Shit. Sorry. But the coffee’s great at both these places. You should go.”

“Get ahead of yourself, do you?”

I look at him. In the P.S. 9 playground, this particular look was called “cutting your eyes.” The recipient would then respond by saying “don’t cut your eyes at me,” after which a fight might break out. Of course, if Josh were fluent in ‘70’s playground, he would have known to say ‘see with your eyes, not with your hands,’ when I first picked up his notebook.

“Have I mentioned how much I appreciate you letting me stay? Betse, too. She’s mortified about the mix-up.”

I put the pen down. “She sounds lovely. My mother said something like what’s the point of having a daughter in Italy if she can’t put up your friends. My sister said I should read my email.”

I get up and rummage around. “Wasn’t there bread left over?”

He looks shamefaced. “I ate it. I’ll go get some. Giulia told me where to go.”

“Finish your coffee first.” I see the big oval on his map. “You went to the Piazza Navona?”

He nods.

“Smart move getting there before the selfie stick salesmen and the bad artist. Unless you need a selfie stick.”

“I’m good.”

But even for early morning, the Piazza’s too empty. I look at the pen, look away.

“It’s okay.”

“Sure?”

He nods, hands it to me. I draw the fountains, stick an oversized naked guy on the edge of one.

“Is that one of the rivers?”

“Or Neptune. All those water guys look alike.”

I get out yogurt and granola. “Want some?”

“Yes, please.”

I pass him what he needs. “Breakfast number two?”

“Three. After the piazza,” he says, “I was there,” he says, pointing to the intersection of Arenula and Rinascimento, “and I remembered you said never to pass an open church, so I went into the one there.” He shakes his head.

I shrug. “They’re not all worth it, but it’s easier than remembering which ones are.” Saint Anthony della Valle’s your generic baroque streetside church, so I draw the stairs and the columns, stick the virgin—no, it’s St. A, but he’s wearing a robe, so it’s an easy fix—on top.

“Then I smelled bread, so I cut down over here and ran straight into the market.”

“Good work.”

“Thank you. That was breakfast number one. Sorry: I should have brought some focaccia.”

“Indeed. But we call it Pizza Bianca.” I label Campo di Fiori. The third place I could find in Rome.

“Noted. Listen,” he says, looking serious. “I’m not going to get in your hair; I’ll be out a lot. Not that I’ll come back late and wake you up. I’m a very quiet walker.”

“Really? Can you show me?”

“Now?”

“Why not? I mean, if it’s one of your special guest skills...”

“Uh...”

I sip my coffee, wait. After a second or two, he sighs and gets up to demonstrate, stealthing his way across the kitchen in a modified Tai Chi walk—the heel slides onto the floor, then the toes come down.

“Very nice. Were you a bad teenager or a very bad teenager?”

“What?” His skin’s on the olive side, so it’s hard to tell, but I think he’s blushing.

“Why else would you cultivate that skill?”

“Maybe I worked my way through college as a night watchman. Or a nurse.”

I laugh. Meantly.

“I could have spent hours gliding between beds in my white shoes. I could be a healer.”

“Already? Wow, med school’s going to be a snap.”

He sits back down. I reach for the coffee. He puts up his hand: none for him.

“It’s not for you.”

He checks the notebook: “After that, I walked over to the Coliseum.” He looks at me.

“What?”

“Aren’t you going to draw it?”

“It’s the Coliseum: I think you’ll remember it.” The Coliseum’s not that

close to the Campo, though, so I look at his route: he's labelled the big streets; I add names to the little ones. "Did you see the baby Coliseum ruin thingee?"

"I did. It was excellent."

I put in the half circle of Teatro di Marcello, sketch a few lines behind it to show how it got made into an apartment complex in the middle ages, then turn the page. He passed the Palatine, so I shade in some trees and stones. I'm expecting him to make the whole circuit of the Coliseum, but he veered uphill about 90 degrees in. "You went to Santi Quattro Coronati?"

"The thing that looks like a fort?"

I nod.

"Then yes."

"Good call. The Coliseum looks even better from high up. And the church is great." I put a fort on top of the hill.

"You're good."

"Nah. I just use it for stuff like this. Did you go in?"

"I did. I wanted to give you another chance."

"And?"

"It was amazing. It's so old."

I raise an eyebrow.

"I know. The Coliseum's older. A lot. But I expected that, and the church is still being used."

"I'm not making fun. I can see why you'd think so, but I'm not. That's the thing about Rome: you never know what's going to trip you out."

The door opens, and in comes Giulia, sweaty and adorable after running. She does run, but is she usually up and out first thing on a Sunday? She is not. I hope he's impressed.

"Ciao," Josh says. "Good run?"

"Si. It's really nice out. A perfect day to see Rome." She empties a bag of cornetti onto a plate, takes one. I don't. Italy's dirty little secret is that their version of the croissant's lousy. They fill them with marmalade, Nutella, and cream to hide it, and people fall for it. People are dopes.

"Yeah, it's beautiful," Josh says.

"You've already been out?"

She looks disappointed; she must have wanted to guide his virgin steps into the city. I haven't seen her this crushed out since she fell for the senior running the protests against the school budget cuts. They didn't win, but they shut down traffic at Piazza Venezia, where half the city busses stop. That counts for something. I pour her some water.

"Josh was just telling me about Santi Quattro Coronati," I say.

"I didn't get to the best part," he says, beaming. "The nuns were singing. Chanting? It was..."

"You like that stuff?" Giulia wants to know.

"Do I listen to it at home? No. But do I like being in Rome at 7:30 in the morning in a medieval cloister while nuns sing..." he looks at me.

"Hymns," I say.

"Hymns, right. Yes. You're just jaded because you grew up here."

“You sound like her,” G. says, meaning me, but she’s smiling. I can see the thought bubble over her head: she’s thinking how sophisticated jaded makes her sound. “I’m going to take a shower.”

“No cornetto?” I ask Josh.

“I’m pacing myself,” he says. He points to the Mokas on the windowsill, size order, 1-cup to 12-cup. “What are those called?”

I tell him.

“Does everyone have this many?”

“Pretty much” Lots of Italian conventions are ridiculous, but on this I have the zeal of a convert. I remember the first time Ric saw me make extra coffee and stick it in the fridge for later. He was not impressed.

“What size did you just use?”

“Nine cups.”

He looks scared.

“Italians count by espresso cups. It’s three American cups: two for me, one for you.” It’s cooled down, so I unscrew the top and blow into the funnel so the grounds tumble into the garbage. Josh looks like I’ve just made him a balloon animal. I remember the first time I saw this, so much Italianness packed into one small gesture.

“When Giulia was little, she’d act out stories with them. The little ones were the kids, the middle-sized ones were their siblings, and so on.”

“You were the 12-cup?”

I shake my head. “Ric and I were nine. Grandparents were 12. She’s close to her grandmother. Not Gogo, the one here.”

“She lives in Rome?”

“Yup.”

“That’s great. Giulia’s lucky.”

“I’m lucky. Her grandparents picked her up at school three days a week.

It’s pretty common here, but it saved my life after the divorce.”

His eyes have gotten all dewy.

“What?”

“I’m just imagining my life if I could have gone to my grandmother’s three days a week. Man.”

“Betse’s not in the city?” Gogo’s old friends mostly live where they always have, the ones who never bought trying not to envy the ones sitting on apartments worth a million-five. They man the Democratic party tables on Broadway and forget to wear the emergency alert devices their children in Seattle and Minneapolis insist on getting them. They keep an eye on each other. They have varying degrees of cell phone savvy, and a lot of them have stopped taking the subway, so they’re not really set up for emergencies, but it works for other stuff. Surely Betse’s part of that.

“No, she is. Oh, I see what you’re thinking.” He shakes his head. “We moved to Croton when I was four. I remember the first time I took Metro North to the city on my own. I was furious: they talked about the city like it was going to the moon, and it was 45 minutes away. Did you think I grew up there?”

“Yeah.”

“Good.”

“Isn’t it Croton on something?”

“Toast? Waffles? Crack?”

Some people can't handle two cups of coffee—I hope I'm not harboring one.

"Croton-on-Hudson. My mother moved us there because the city was so unpredictable." Air quotes on the last word.

"Still bitter?"

"Wouldn't you be? Isn't unpredictability kind of the point of cities?"

"I'd put art and public transit higher on the list. Good food. Gay people."

"Yes. All of which promote unpredictability. Your mother's still there, right?"

"Yup. She'll die in her rent-stabilized apartment, and the super's guys will be in there redoing the kitchen before we've decided what to do with the body." Cremation, I assume, but we haven't discussed it. When Signor Bialetti, the guy who patented the Moka, died, he had his ashes put in an enormous one, maybe 60-cups worth. That might be too tidy for Gogo.

"But you don't communicate well?" Josh says. "I mean, she raised you in the city back in the day, she's still there; she sounds cool."

"Totally cool. From a distance. What about you and your mother? Everything copasetic?"

"Oh, yeah. She talks, I listen, then do what I was going to do anyway. It's okay; she does the same thing."

"What happens if you really need to talk?"

"My father hands us tin cans and threads himself between us."

He walks his bowl and cup to the sink and rinses them. I wait to see what happens next; if he'll avail himself of the soap and sponge. He's so close, but will

he make the basket? He fills a glass with water and takes it back to the table. Oh, too bad, right off the rim.

He reaches for a Cornetto. Breakfast five. At this rate, we'll never have bread.

"Tell me about what you do," he says. "Betse said something about an exhibit?"

I describe the exhibition and Guido's theory that all the pilgrims will want to see saint paintings. How did I get into this line of work, he wonders. (Line of work, like there's a line, a straight shoot from beginning to end.) I did a lot of different jobs, I say. I tell him about my tour guide days, the calculus of deciding whether or not to let the church caretaker feel me up so we could go up into the choir loft, because better pictures mean happier tourists means bigger tips.

I skip the brief, terrible period of making and selling tourist art—if you ever need to stop loving a place, drawing the same bridges and churches over and over is the best aversion therapy I know—and the fact that when I came back, it was as an art courier, i.e., I answered an ad on the back of *The Village Voice* and flew free to Europe in exchange for holding a small piece of art on my lap. No questions, no checked luggage.

G's back.

"Your mother's been telling me about the show she's working on," Josh says.

"She's obsessed with saints," Giulia says. "It's like they're her close personal friends."

Brat.

“It sounds interesting to me,” Josh says, flicking cornetto shards off his shirt.

We don't revisit the sucking up conversation, but I know she's thinking it. “If you want to know which churches are worth it,” I tell him, “I can make you a list.”

“That'd be great. I really only know about Roman-era stuff.”

I nod. “In the meantime, don't forget the bread.”

He waves the map—the real one—as a promise.

“Eat whatever you want. If you finish something, get more. If you don't know where to get it, ask. If you can't remember if there's milk, buy some. If you smoke, terrace only. And don't give me a cigarette, even if I ask. Deal?”

“I don't smoke, but deal. When did you quit?”

“Eighteen years ago.”

G. looks mortified, but I've had a lot of houseguests.

As I walk out, Giulia apologizes for me. “She's pretty direct,” she says.

“She doesn't mean anything by it.”

A. True. B. False.

No Word for Privacy

G. texts me after school. Can Monica come for dinner? They'll cook. Sure, I say.

Does G. know if Josh will be home? Why yes, she does.

Marianna taught Ric how to cook; Ric taught Giulia. She's good, but she treats it like heritage silver—special occasions only. This, obviously, qualifies.

When I get home, Giulia and Monica are in full chef mode; they pour me some wine and kick me out of the kitchen, which means the whole front of the apartment. I stick my head into Josh's room—otherwise known as my office. It looks different, and not just because it's neater. It's the bulletin board, which is usually covered in postcards, photos, receipts. Now Giulia's drawings are tacked up from edge to edge.

The top row's a set of church studies, fine-line domes and facades and bell towers, four to a page. There's a pastel of Marianna, and a bird's eye view of Testaccio showing the pyramid, the Protestant cemetery and the train station. A self-portrait where Giulia's curly hair morphs into a tree infested by green parakeets—a homage to Frida Kahlo, the colonies of escaped pets that dot Rome, and maybe Bernini's *Daphne*— but somehow still its own thing. There's a geometric pattern I don't love, and a watercolor of mittens and gloves that's good, if a little twee. It's a nice range of subjects and media: they could be a portfolio. Maybe they are; we haven't talked about college since she accused me and Ric of ganging up on her. I don't know why she was surprised. Just because we're divorced, she thinks we can't pull off the high-point parental moves, non sequitur, ambush, tag team, good cop/bad cop?

Monica passes by on her way from the bathroom and stops. "Don't they look great? We did it this afternoon."

Since I saw her last, she's chopped her hair into a Jean-Seberg crop and dyed it orange. It looks great. "Too bad the bulletin board's in here, though; the light in the living room is better," I say.

Monica gives me a pitying look. "This is perfect. They look professional, like she's working on something. Having them in the living room would be like having them on the refrigerator."

She and G. have been friends since they were seven. Back then Monica thought I was the world's coolest mother because grilled cheese sandwiches were a dinner staple and you didn't get in trouble for somersaulting off the sofa. "It's nice to see you. How are your parents?"

"Normale," she says. "Come sempre."

Normal. Like always. Lukewarm condescension, the ultimate dismissal. Should I be pleased Giulia still bothers to find me annoying?

"Monica," Giulia calls. "Vieni!"

"Vengo," Monica says, and disappears.

Chopping sounds ensue.

I'm allowed back into the front of the apartment when the chefs come back to change out of their cooking clothes. I get a glare when I tell them they look nice. No extra effort has been made. This is casual, normale come sempre, and I'd better not blow Giulia's cover.

When we hear the key in the lock, Giulia hustles back to the kitchen so it doesn't look like we've been standing around waiting for him. Monica moves to get a better view. I stay where I am.

“Ciao!” Josh says, flourishing, oh dear, a bouquet. The girls aren’t big fans of the guys at school, but this, flowers tied with a raffia ribbon, not a carnation or daisy to be seen, will ruin them completely for i ragazzi al liceo. Monica and Josh are introduced, Monica described as old friend, not best friend; best probably sounds young to them, like adding half to your age. Ten-and-a-half is older than ten, but twelve-and-a-half works against thirteen.

When Josh isn’t looking, Monica whispers “fico” at Giulia, which is teenager for hot, who whispers back “te l’ho detto,” I told you. She gets a vase out, then gets distracted. I cut the stems and put the flowers in water.

“I almost brought cheese,” Josh says, “but I didn’t know if it would go with what you were making. I hope the flowers are okay.”

He’s assured that they’re okay. Okay plus, even. Giulia’s strong on Roman specialties. I’m hoping for pasta Amatriciana, but it’s not looking good: I didn’t smell onions sautéing, and there’s no sign of guanciale or pancetta.

As soon as Josh has dumped his stuff and washed his hands, we’re waved to the table. The bowl covered with a towel is revealed to be filled with grated pecorino. They’re going for it: they’re making Cacio e Pepe. It’s Roman soul food, one of about five dishes everyone here eats. And despite—or because—it only has three ingredients, it’s hard to get right. You blend the pasta cooking water with the cheese to get a sauce that coats the pasta in salty, cheesy deliciousness. Too much liquid added too quickly or at the wrong heat and you’re left with half-melted cheese clumps in greasy water.

For me, watching Giulia mixing and coating and coaxing is a cliff hanger, but Josh doesn’t know enough to be worried. Finally—maybe seven minutes—the pasta’s coiled innocently in the bowl, a silky stealth bomb of flavor. Giulia

grinds pepper, scatters chopped parsley (not canonical, but it adds color), gives it one last toss, and brings it to the table. I pour the wine and sit on my hands: applause would be unforgivable.

We give Josh a head start so we can watch him while pretending not to.

“Jesus,” he says. “What is this amazing thing I’m eating?”

Monica and I smile; we won’t step on Giulia’s lines.

Giulia explains how the dish originated with shepherds who couldn’t carry a lot of ingredients, how the starch in the pasta water binds everything together.

“It’s rich,” I say. “Pace yourself.”

Question time: Does Josh have sisters or brothers, why is he going to medical school, what does he want to specialize in? Who taught Giulia to cook so well? How is Monica’s English so perfect and idiomatic? What’s Josh’s favorite thing in Rome so far and is he currently seeing anyone? These last from Monica, whose perfect English is 40% school and 60% hanging around our house. Her directness makes Giulia nervous, but nothing fazes Monica.

“There’s no word for privacy in Italian,” she tells Josh. “We use the English word. And I want to be a psychologist, so I’m always asking questions.”

Josh tells her it’s fine, that he’s not seeing anyone right now. He and his girlfriend broke up last year.

“Were you sad?”

I crack up, which infects Josh, who then has a coughing fit that sets Monica off.

Giulia looks sternly at us. “Basta.”

New topic.

“Giulia,” Josh says. “Are those your drawings in my room?”

She nods. “I hope they’re not in your way.”

“No, of course not. You’re really good. You need to tell me where those churches are so I can see them in person.” He turns to me. “You still haven’t made me that list.”

“My favorite’s the self-portrait,” Monica says.

“I need to look at them all again,” Josh says.

“Maybe you’ll dream about them,” Monica says. “Since they’re over your bed, I mean.”

She’s already finished her wine. I’m all for seventeen-year-olds drinking responsibly at home, but again, pace yourself. I top up Josh’s glass, and while I’m at it, mine. Empty bottle—problem solved.

“They’ll be down soon,” Giulia says.

“It’s fine,” says Josh. “It’ll be like sleeping in a gallery.”

“No, it’s just...I needed to see them up, together, and that’s the best place.”

I say not a word about the living room lighting.

“Are you going to do something with them?” Josh wants to know

What’d she think was going to happen? Only a moron or narcissist wouldn’t ask.

“There’s an art contest,” she tells him. “Students all over Italy enter; our teacher wants everyone to submit.”

“Do you have to pick just one?”

“Three,” Giulia tells him. “Different genres.”

She's good. So good, in fact, that I forget this is all made up. "What do you get if you win?"

Monica kicks me. Hard.

Giulia sails on. "First prize is 500 euro. Not bad."

They grow up so quickly. I had no idea she could lie this well.

"Once you've looked again, Josh," Monica says, "you'll have to tell Giulia which ones you like best. You, too, Connie."

"Definitely," Josh pledges.

New topic.

"Cacio e pepe's one of the big three Roman pasta dishes," I tell Josh. "Now you have to try Carbonara and Amatriciana."

As Monica starts reeling off where to find the best versions, Giulia hushes her. "What?" Monica says.

"He's not going to eat that."

"I'm not? Why not?"

"They have pork in them."

"So much the better," Josh says, twirling up the last of his pasta.

"You eat pork?"

"Why wouldn't.... Oh. Yeah. I eat pork. And shrimp. And clams. But especially pork. You eat pork, right?" he says to me. "It'd be sad to live here and not."

"Of course she does," Giulia says.

She would, wouldn't she? She probably has a closet full of Dalmatian-skin coats.

Giulia's face. Her beautiful, earnest face as she takes this in. Josh is a real Jew; I am not. There should be no overlap between us.

"I know people who don't," Josh says. "But I probably know more who do. And everything in between, too."

"What's in between eating and not eating something?" Monica wants to know.

"People have all kinds of elaborate rules about it."

"Like what?" Monica, of course.

"Let's see. Chinese food doesn't count, that's one. Or out is okay, but not at home. Or at home, but on paper plates. That's in the Talmud."

I laugh. Monica and Giulia stare.

"A lot of people have a special rule for bacon, like an exemption. They wouldn't eat a pork chop, but bacon..." His face goes dreamy. "It gets pretty legalistic. I eat everything. Except octopus, because they're super smart and use tools. Is there any more pasta, by the way?"

There is. There shouldn't be; Italians are even more precise about pasta than coffee. They weigh it: four people means 400 grams. G. serves it up, and puts out the vegetable, chicory sautéed with garlic, lemon, and olive oil.

Josh eats the rest of the pasta and half the chicory. When he finally puts his fork down, he looks dazed and happy. Giulia's pleased, I can tell, but the pork thing is worrying her. Judaism must seem like a Mobius strip; every time she thinks she's figured something out, it twists.

I poke Josh so he doesn't fall asleep, offer tea or coffee. No takers. Josh and I insist on cleaning up; Giulia and Monica accept graciously. Equally

graciously, I say yes when Giulia asks if she can walk Monica part way home. It's a school night, but I can't deny them the chance to debrief.

Before they leave, Josh plucks a ranunculus from the vase and hands it to Monica. The girls keep it together until the door closes, when semi-muted shrieking breaks out.

I start clearing the table.

"I'll wash, you dry?" Josh says.

"How good are you?"

"I've never had any complaints."

"I'm a tough audience." Everyone has their oasis of cleanliness. This is mine. After he's washed the first plate, he runs a thumb across it showily so I can hear it squeak.

"Not bad. And so gallant, too. Actually, maybe you could dial that down a little."

"What?"

"The flowers?"

"I couldn't help it. Giulia's adorable enough, but together they're even cuter. Like those goats on the internet that do yoga."

I can't help it; I laugh. "Did you just compare my daughter to a goat?"

"Sorry."

"Remember: you're not at a petting zoo."

He turns the water off and stares at me. "What? Do I seem like such a massive dick that you need to tell me that?" He grabs the pasta pan.

"No, let it soak."

"Seriously."

"I'm sorry. Obviously, you're not a dick. I was just..."

"Being protective?"

"Yeah. I figured you probably felt brotherly, but I wanted to make sure."

"I wouldn't say brotherly, but my intentions toward her are entirely honorable, I promise. Hand me that wineglass, will you?"

Not Quiz Bowl

I've lured Giulia out to dinner with *carciofi alla Giudia*, Jewish style artichokes. I miss bagels, but fried artichokes are up there with monotheism and psychoanalysis and the other big Jewish inventions. Giulia claims she's spent months of her life waiting for me, so I make an effort to be on time. I get there early, instead. I hate being early. I pass the holocaust museum on Largo 16 Ottobre 1943, the day of the raid, and the plaque memorializing "la spietata caccia agli ebrei"—the merciless hunting down of the Jews. I think of Marianna telling me about her mother's friend who never came back. Survivor guilt, worse, never having had to worry about survival guilt, makes me easy prey for the Mitzvah Mobilers in their black hats and long coats.

"Scusami, Signora. Lei è Ebreia?" There's no right answer. It's bad luck to say you aren't Jewish if you are, bad faith, anyway. According to Gogo, Charlie Chaplin was constantly taken for Jewish and never denied it, because so what if he was? Bet Charlie never had to deal with a bunch of Jews who wanted to know so they could point out all the ways he was doing it wrong.

"Yes," which they basically know, since who else moons around the Ghetto on a rainy night feeling bad, is no good, because then they've got you. "Yes" opens the door for "Do you light the Sabbath candles? Do you need candles? Matzo?" A million Passovers ago, homesick for New York, I braved their van to get a box. It was terrible: something during the extra high level koshering process destroys the crispness.

I say "yes, but no thank you," which doesn't quite make sense, but isn't actively rude or a lie. Thinking I'm a confused tourist, his buddy—they work in

pairs, like the Mormons—asks me again, but in English. Yes, I tell him, but not like you, which should be obvious, since I’m wearing jeans. My hair’s covered, but that’s because I don’t have an umbrella.

Giulia waves from in front of the synagogue and I escape. The restaurants are festooned with “In Stagione” signs, some with before and after pictures—beautiful green globes on the left, less beautiful but infinitely more delicious fried brown tangle on the right. One restaurant touts a visit from Anthony Bourdain, another claims its Chef is a genuine Roman Jew.

“Should we go to the one Anthony Bourdain likes, the one your grandmother likes, or the one with the certified chef?” It’s not really a question: you go to the one your family goes to.

We wait on the street for our table. “Marianna says you have to use oil with a high smoke point, but mine weren’t crispy enough. Either she left something out, or I don’t have the fingerspitz.”

“Fingerspitz?”

“It’s Yiddish. It means feeling it in your hands, but also a kind of flair. *Sprezzatura* for Jews.”

Giulia shushes me.

“What, I can’t say Jews?”

“Not here. If people hear it out of context, they might be offended.”

“You sound like my grandmother. Anyway, I’m allowed.”

“Other people don’t know that.”

“Who doesn’t know? The tourists? I know.” A couple trying to pick a restaurant passes us for the third time. “They’re all good, but Da Giggetto’s prettier,” I call after them. Turning back to Giulia, I say. “And they know.”

“Who?”

“The Mitzvah guys. They always ask me. Not that it’s a question. They know.”

“Don’t say *they*,” my daughter says. “It’s ugly.”

“I can’t say *they*?”

“It’s othering.”

“They are other. Their whole life is about their otherness. Which is why it’s so annoying that they want people like me to be more like them, like we have something in common.”

“Don’t you?”

“No. Yes. Sort of.” I get that the Nazis didn’t distinguish between us, but since when are they the model?

“Signore,” the host says. “Your table awaits.”

Ordering puts an end to that conversation, thank God. “Did you see Josh this morning? He was gone when I got up.”

“Yeah. He wanted to see the Sistine Chapel before it got crowded.”

“Shoot. If I’d known, I’d have given him exhibit tips.”

“Yeah.”

The artichokes are perfect, crisp and salty as potato chips.

“Look,” Giulia says, pointing with her ear. “The couple you told to go to Da Giggetto is here.”

“It is prettier; I thought it’d be romantic.”

“Yeah, but then we went here. They’re smart; I’d have followed us, too.”

I chew, concentrating on not asking why that *they* isn’t othering.

They’re kissing now. “I guess this restaurant is romantic enough,” I say.

“Don’t stare.”

Everyone, including the waiters, is staring. This isn’t a post-toast, here’s-to-us-in-Rome kiss, this is a full on make-out session. When they finish, the whole room sighs. Forks start moving; plates get picked up. People smile, a flurry of hand touching breaks out. Giulia’s hands are clasped on the table in front of her, her eyes down. I can’t tell if she’s embarrassed or is modeling how I should behave. I pick up the water pitcher, start pouring, miss the glass entirely.

“Josh says he wants to make us dinner some time.”

“He can cook? Did his mom teach him?”

“Don’t be sexist. Maybe his dad taught him.”

“Did he?”

“His ex. They’re friends, apparently.” She sighs.

She’d hate it if he ragged on his old girlfriend, but she’d love to hear all the ways the ex was unworthy. It’s tough being pure.

Silence, followed by the arrival of our pasta, followed by more sighing. Give me a stranger, and I can make conversation out of hello and two sticks. “It was nice to see Monica,” I say.

“I was with her before, actually. At the Jewish Museum.”

“Wow, you’re on a roll. Is Signor Buratti giving you extra credit?”

“That’s not why we’re doing it. We realized how much we don’t know, that’s all.”

The pasta’s off tonight, maybe. “You should have invited Josh; I bet he’d be interested.”

“I asked him,” she says, “but he met some Australians at the Forum, and they were meeting up at Campo di Fiori.”

After the market closes, the bars in the Campo fill up with college students and backpackers looking to get lucky. Maybe she's got more to sigh about than my flaws. I feel marginally better.

"What'd you think of the museum? It's neat, right?"

"Yeah. But sad, too. Not as sad, but...did you know there were only 70 years when the Roman Jews didn't have to live in the Ghetto?"

"Yeah. They built the synagogue then. Did you know it has the only square dome in Rome?" I hold out a forkful of pasta. "Want some?"

"No, thanks. Did you know they made the Jews stand for hours listening to people praying for them to convert?"

"Did any?"

"It didn't say. I don't think so."

The couple's at it again, but this time only newcomers gawk. "What did Monica think?"

"She felt bad about the conversion thing. Plus she was bummed I couldn't read Hebrew. Can you?"

"Nope. I didn't go to Hebrew school."

"How come?"

How come? Because it was the '70s and if you weren't staying traditional, you could either dig up Moses' sister Miriam and make her the center of the Seder—she's going out an unknown, she's coming back a star!—or, like my mother and most of her friends, just move on. "My mother was more interested in the cultural side."

"Like...?"

There was plenty we could have done. Workman's Circle, Yivo, teen tours of Israel. "We did some Israeli folk-dancing, for a while." Claude was pretty good, but I hated it, and things got awkward when Ma briefly dated the accordion player. I was supposed to keep taking Claude, but we went to the movies instead.

The pasta congeals while Giulia quizzes me about when I've been to synagogue. Bar and bat mitzvahs don't count, because I had to go (and also, apparently, because G. assumes my bad friends and I were drinking and that tipsiness is verboten in synagogue. We were, but I'm pretty sure there are times when everyone in the joint is lit up and no one minds.). The one in Singapore—marble, with a circular gallery, the first time I understood the scope of the diaspora (New York's the anti-diaspora, a magnet drawing in the scattered)—was tourism, which also doesn't count.

She's acting like I'm the bad child at Passover. He comes to the Seder; he doesn't blow it off, but during the four questions, when he asks "what does this holiday mean to you?" the *you* shows he's separated himself from the community. She's missing the point. It's because I'm not separated that I'm pissed off. Rome's a transfer hub for Israel, so there's always a bunch of Hasids on New York-Rome flights. My fantasy, which is reality based—it's happened twice on El Al, which I will never fly—is that I'm seated by one, and he asks the stewardess to move me because he can't sit so near a woman. When she agrees, the scene turns operatic. I don't mention this to G. She can't call me the wicked child: she hasn't been to a Seder since she was five. She wouldn't know him if he handed her a cheeseburger.

Out of nowhere, I remember Gogo taking us to the Gay and Lesbian synagogue—I think a friend of hers helped find it.

G.'s having none of it. I shrug. Grasp at straws. "You should talk to Josh about this stuff. I bet he was bar mitzvahed."

"He was," Giulia says, then looks like she regrets it. "But he says he's been reading a lot of Buddhism these days."

"Being a Jubu doesn't make him any less Jewish."

"This isn't about him," Giulia says

I expect her to complain about "Jubu," which must be a micro-aggression twofer, but she doesn't bother.

Sad about our unfinished food, the waiter brings us tiny glasses of limoncello, which we swill down.

We're on the street maybe two minutes when another pair of Mitzvahers stops us. *È Ebreà, Signorina?* one says to Giulia. I wait for her to say yes, take the candles, the matzo, whatever they've got. When she hesitates, first in Italian, then in English, I snap, "She's Jewish, not that it's any of your business," and walk away, pulling her behind me.

"What was that?" I say.

"What?"

"I don't care what you tell them, but you know you're Jewish, right?"

"How would I?"

"What do you mean, how would you?"

"I don't do anything a Jew does. I don't know anything a Jew knows."

"It's not quiz bowl, Giulia; there's no topic list. And no one cares whether you go to synagogue."

“They care.”

“They live in a different century! You’re Jewish.”

“Because why?”

“Because I am, my mother is, her mother is, and so on, ad infinitum.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in the chosen people thing.”

“Who said chosen? I’m saying Jewish. If you weren’t Jewish, you wouldn’t care about this.”

Eye roll.

“You’re as Jewish as those guys with their kaftans and side curls. More. Judaism’s about questioning, not certainty.”

“Whatever.”

We’re out of the Ghetto, which is basically two blocks long, and onto Via Arenula. Then, and for a second I think I’m hallucinating, another pair of the Chosen bears down on us. Maybe they have a quota.

“Excuse me,” they start, and Giulia steps back, sick of them, me, all of us. Now we’re a we. Fantastic. The trams are noisy, and the lead guy leans in to make sure I hear him. I lean that last bit closer and rest my hand on his arm.

“Signora?”

“Oh,” I say, “I’m sorry, but I’m just very tired”—I’ve got both hands on him now and most of my weight—“I’ve had terrible cramps all day.” His eyes get huge; his friend lets out a quiet yelp. I drop his arm, watch them scatter.

“Do you even have your period? Forget it. I don’t care. Either way that poor guy thinks he’s...I don’t know, contaminated.”

See, she knows plenty about Judaism. “Maybe it was a little mean, but come on; don’t you think it’s funny?”

“No,” she says, loud enough that people look at us. “It’s not funny. And it wasn’t a little mean.” She shakes her head. “I can’t believe you. No. I can.”

“Sweetie...”

“Don’t call me that.”

A tram stops four feet from us, and before I even notice her moving, she’s on it. It’s five minutes of standing there being jostled before I realize it’s pouring.

By then, the bag I’m carrying—Giulia’s shoes, maternally picked up from the repair place—is almost soaked through. Dripping wet, bag clasped to my chest like an infant, I think about the best route home. If we’d been paying attention, we’d never have come this way—It’s the wrong side of the Ghetto. I cross Via Arenula, only realizing why when my synapses catch up with my nose: I’m following the cigarette of the guy in front of me. Please don’t let him be one of those freaks who only smokes it halfway down.

Even second-hand smoke clears my brain—which means there’s no avoiding the fact that Giulia and I have just had a huge fight about Judaism and my take has been revealed to be massively inconsistent, not to mention a little bit Nuremburg. Next I’ll be invoking the one-drop rule. Fuck. Fuck. “Fuck!”

“*Cazzo*, I’m so sorry!” I say to Signor Sigaretta, whom I’ve just plowed into.

“Please. It was my fault for stopping short. Tutto a posto?”

“You stopped because you heard me, didn’t you? I’m sorry.”

“No, no, non ti preoccupare. Here, take this.”

For a second, I think he’s handing me the cigarette, but it’s just his umbrella. I hand it back. “I’m drenched already. You should stay dry.” We’re going back and forth when the bag gives up and the shoes hit the ground.

He bends to pick them up. "Yours?"

"My daughter's." I'm mesmerized by his cigarette, still lit, the tip pointing into his palm.

"The one you were with?"

I nod, then think about him seeing her take off.

"It's normal. Gli adolescenti fanno così."

Giulia would be furious at being called an adolescent, but it makes me feel better. Till I start wondering how much he heard. His cigarette's burning dangerously close to his fingers. "Attenti. You'll get burned."

He grinds the butt into the cobblestones. "Disgusting habit."

"Totally. God, I miss it."

"Capisco. I've quit twice now. Was she mad because of those boys?"

"The shoes, please?"

"I saw the whole thing."

I shove the umbrella at him and hold my hand out for the shoes.

"Grazie," I say as I cram them into my bag.

"I almost said brava," he says, "but I didn't want to embarrass you."

Too late. "For what?"

"For getting them to go away. They're always in the street bothering people."

He sounds a little too happy about how annoying they are. I'm being congratulated by an anti-Semite. I don't know why God bothers announcing that he's vengeful; did anyone not get it? "You can't say that."

"I can't agree with something you did?"

“No. I shouldn’t have done it, but it was ... internal. A family dispute”—
how are the mighty fallen!—“you could say. Buona sera.” I turn around, since
there was never any reason, besides that beautiful smoke, to go this way.

“Buona sera.”

I trudge home. When I finally make it to the far side of Piazza Venezia,
who’s there taking a photo but my close personal friends from the restaurant.
They’re so dry and pressed that for a second, I wonder if it only rained on me.
They wave, all smiles. Recognizing someone in this big city they don’t live in has
made their night. I’m tempted to ignore them, let them think they’re wrong, but
I can’t be an asshole again today.

Saints, Gold, Saints

When the alarm goes off, all I think is how much I want a cigarette. A cigarette and a do over, or failing that, a daughter who rebels the normal way, by cutting school and hooking up. My head weighs a ton, and I feel stupid and mean. The shower does nothing, and when I come out of my bedroom, Josh is standing there offering me a cup of coffee.

“I’ve mastered the Moka,” he says, beaming.

It’s like walking into the sun when you’re hung over: I shut my eyes. The coffee’s so foul it’s almost impressive, in a backward way. I pour it down the sink, put my finger to my lips to keep Josh quiet, and find a bottle of aspirin.

He opens his mouth.

I tap my finger against mine, dig out two aspirin and dry swallow them. I don’t need water; I need silence.

I get my bag; he hovers around like we have business to transact. I shut my eyes; when I open them, he’s still there.

“Sorry,” he says, in a whisper, “but are we still going to the gallery?”

What gallery, I think, then remember telling him I’d show him around the Falconeri. I sigh.

“I won’t talk. I promise.”

“Andiamo.”

First stop is the place next door for coffee. I get two espressos, but Josh shakes his head, so I drink his and feel marginally better.

You have to be careful here if you’re pissed off: a breeze, the smell of the lindens, a random Madonna on a windowsill, the sun hitting the Coliseum just

right, and you're cheering up or calming down before you've exhausted the ugly little fire you were tending. So far, I'm toughing it out.

Via Nazionale helps. It's filled with interchangeable stores and bars and restaurants serving tourists bad coffee and overpriced food. Hating tourists is unoriginal, easy, but they're like hay in a fire: natural accelerants.

A couple blocks in, I start to feel bad about taking Josh on this route.

"Have you had breakfast?"

He hesitates.

"You can talk."

"Not really."

The one thing Nazionale has going for it is Castroni, which makes excellent coffee. Fede went to the original in Prati every day of his life. I get us bombolini and cappuccinos.

We bite into our bombolini—Italian jelly doughnuts—while we wait for our coffee. It's not long, thank God; it never is.

"Is everything all right?" Josh says. "You seem...and Giulia looked upset when I saw her. I don't mean to pry. I get it about parents and kids."

I stir my cappuccino slowly, Italian style. It's meditative, and by the end, the sugar's totally dissolved, not a speck left. Josh copies me. "She's mad I didn't raise her Jewish. Jewish enough. I think she's jealous that you were bar mitzvahed, all that. Did you do one of those indoctrination trips to the holy land?"

"Birthright Israel? God, no. She's crazy. I'm jealous of her."

"Why?"

“She grew up here, for one thing. Her Italian is perfect. I speak gringo Spanish, and here I mostly just point. Tell her I’ll trade. She can have my fountain pen and the trees in Israel my grandmother planted for me.”

“Betse?”

“Other side.”

We drink our cappuccinos. “Have another bombolino. I’m sorry for being so awful.”

“It’s okay.”

“Can you convince my kid?”

“Is the Jewish thing new?”

“Yeah. I thought it would pass, but it seems to be getting worse.”

“Am I missing something? You’re Jewish; she’s Jewish. What’s the problem?”

“That’s what I said. She doesn’t buy it. She’s not at her most articulate on the subject, but basically, she thinks she can’t call herself something if she doesn’t know anything about it and she blames me for the not knowing. Also, she might think I’m a tiny bit anti-Semitic.”

He laughs, getting sugar all over himself in the process. He brushes it off, takes another bite, unleashes another sugar shower. “You’re not, are you?”

“An anti-Semite?”

“Technically, wouldn’t you be a self-hating Jew?” His voice drops on *Jew*; Giulia would approve.

“Nope: I like me fine; it’s the others I can’t stand.”

He laughs so hard he has to put his cup down. “She’s just trying to, what’s the word, individuate. Separate.”

He sees my expression.

“I went out with a psych major for a while.”

“I’m the one who wants her to go to college in the States—that’d be a fine way to separate.”

“Yeah, but if you’re into it, it ruins it. Making you happy isn’t the goal. I know about this. It’s why I almost became an urban planner.”

I think of his map, wait for this to make sense.

“Croton was like a toy town, it had one of everything. I thought if I were a planner, I could make places that were lively and interesting like cities, but without arson and red-lining.”

My ears feel like they’re vibrating. I should have gotten decaf. “I get why you wanted to do urban planning, but not why you decided not to.”

“I’m getting there,” he says, but then we get distracted. The tables are tightly packed, and a woman starts walking out just as a man stands up to put on his jacket. The woman—nearer my age than Josh’s, high heels, leather skirt, cleavage—squeezes past the man, brushing against his back. “Mi dispiace,” she says, and keeps moving, her hand hovering at his shoulder to keep him from backing up any further.

The man, older, with an Omar Sharif mustache, says, “Perché dispiace? A me non dispiace!”

She smiles, keeps moving.

“What’d they say?”

“She apologized for squeezing by, and he said ‘Why be sorry? I’m not.’”

“Nice,” Josh says, then, “I could never pull that off.” Then, “Not that I’d try. The psych major minored in women’s studies. Wait, that sounds bad, like she

had to school me, or something. I totally knew. But he's got something, some kind of...

"Fingerspitz," I say. "Chutzpah."

"Yeah. Wait. Was that a test? Did I just fail? Okay, I'm going to be quiet now."

I laugh. At, not with, him. "Why aren't you an urban planner?"

"It was between that and medicine, but I was pretty sure I wanted to be a doctor. I had a job in a lab; I'd taken the MCAT. But I couldn't fill out the application: every time I started, I'd picture my mother kvelling, and start googling planning masters programs."

"So what happened?"

"I eventually realized that it was idiotic not to do what I wanted just because it would make my mother happy."

"So you think G's not that interested in Judaism, she's just trying to make me crazy?"

"Teenagers do that," he says.

Gli adolescenti fanno così "She'd be a good urban planner," I say. Or an architect.

"Not really my point."

"I know. I'd love it if you're right, but I think the Jewish thing's real. She thinks there's something called the Jewish community that she'd be part of if I hadn't kept it from her. Whatever it is, because she doesn't have a clue."

"Obviously. If she did, she'd know that any place with more than three Jews needs at least two synagogues, the one we go to and the one we'd never go to."

“Something else I failed to tell her.” I stand up. “Come on. I was due at work half an hour ago.” Because I said that, my phone beeps: Vince, wondering where I am. I look at my watch. “An hour ago. Shit. Today’s not going to work for the Falconeri. I’ll drop you somewhere better, how’s that?”

I get us off Via Nazionale and onto Via delle Quattro Fontane, point out the one out of the four renaissance fountains that’s not under a construction shed. They’re at the top of a hill, and when I hear Josh chortle, I know he’s realized that whichever way he faces there’s an obelisk. I let him look for a while, then march us to the Barberini.

“What should I see here?” he wants to know.

“Everything, pretty much.”

“Yeah, but anything specific?”

“Don’t worry. There’s no right way to look at art.”

“I just don’t want to miss something great,” he says. “Yesterday at the Vatican, I got to the Sistine Chapel early. It was almost empty, but I didn’t know where to look. That sounds dumb, I know. “

“No, it doesn’t.”

“This will. I thought I’d seen it already. My high school English teacher had that poster in her classroom, the one with Adam and God and the hands, and it just seemed corny. Then I started looking at the back wall and the last judgement, and I couldn’t stop. Everywhere I looked there was something to see. When it got crowded, I just moved to wherever there was an empty spot. I left when I got into an elbow war with a guy taking a selfie.”

“I’ve seen people weep. Or laugh, because they can’t believe what they’re seeing.”

“But afterward, I couldn’t focus on anything. I must have walked past a million paintings and barely looked at one. Eventually I went and had pizza.”

“Was it good?”

“So good. I hope Giulia’s not really thinking about giving up pork. I feel bad for people who don’t eat it.”

“You’re practically Italian. That’s exactly how they feel.”

I look at the gallery map. “Start here, with the 14th and 15th century. Things will look alike at first: saints, gold, saints. You have to slow way down. The gold’s more complicated than it looks: it has like five different shades. Look for paintings with four or six little panels, or a big saint in the middle and panels on the sides. They’re usually about the life of the saint, and they’re full of details, dogs and birds, women giving birth, babies falling down stairs, bedspreads and curtains. Oh, and cities, towers and street scenes. You’ll like that.”

“Bedspreads?”

“Shhh. Keep an eye out for the devil and his minions, they’re usually great, and pay attention to the shoes and tights and hats. The hats are genius.”

“The hats?”

“Do you want to miss things?”

“Sorry.”

“After that, let’s see.” I turn the map over and find the Barberini’s A-list. I circle the Caravaggios, the Bronzino and Holbein portraits, and La Fornarina, the baker’s daughter. “She was Raphael’s mistress,” I say. “You’ll see why. Look at the faces, and when you’re back on the street, you’ll start to see people who look like them.”

“Wow, thanks.” He looks like I’m sending him on a mission. I suppose I am.

“There’s a sandwich shop on Via Amendola. Get the Porchetta.” I push him toward the first gallery. “You’ll be fine. A dopo—see you later.”

“A dopo,” he says, starts moving, stops. “Giulia’s really lucky,” he says, then he’s gone.

I should leave, but I duck into a room for some quick recognizance. I’ll never see the Sistine Chapel for the first time again, but the Barberini did a big rehang last year, and it looks great. A fourtych by Pietro da Rimini, deposition/lamentation/JC exiting the tomb/JC enthroned knocks me out. The colors are amazing, but I can’t stop looking at Magdalene. She’s on the far side of Jesus’s coffin, the only woman whose hair isn’t covered, her arms up and out above her head, palms out. She’s not semaphoring; she is a semaphore: arms, hair, red dress, body.

Three-D Boyfriend

I fall down an internet hole waiting for Vince and find a St. Jerome I've never seen. He's in his study, surrounded by books, with his red cardinal's hat and his lion, and, why not, birds and foxes and bunnies.

It's paler than usual (Jerome's hat is a faded pink), and the studio's gigantic. It's light and airy, and if he wants to pace, he's got a huge hallway with vaulted ceilings. He looks like a New Yorker who wakes up and finds an extra room in his apartment.

"Connie," Vince says, "listen to this."

"Vince, I was there. I know Guido's poster sucks. I found something good."

"It's not about the poster. Show me."

"You first. It sounds more urgent."

"Yours is about the show. And mine...isn't."

Which means it's about his love life, which is complex. Baroque, even. I've known Vince forever; we met in a museum, went to a bar, went out for a few months. We were the same age then, but I've been too old for him for years.

"What happened? She was a repeat offender, but neither of you realized till she recognized your décor?"

Vince sits on my desk. "You make my life sound like a cheesy Italian movie from the '70s."

"It's not?" I slide some papers from under his thigh. "So you weren't out with a woman whose twin switched places with her mid-date?"

"You know what? I'm not telling you. Let's talk about the show."

I show him the painting.

"I've never heard of Steenwyck."

"Me neither. Which is good. Instead of, oh, too bad they couldn't get the Da Messina, it's wow, look at this under-seen gem."

Vince grunts, zooming in and out.

"Look at what he does with the space," I say. "And the colors! Plus we could use more Northern European stuff."

"Yeah, yeah. You just like it because it's your imaginary saint boyfriend."

Smart women, foolish choices. I do love paintings of Jerome, but in real life, he was a misogynist who lived off his wealthy female patrons while telling women not to preach and men not to let them. "You should be proud of me. It's way later than most of the stuff I like. It's in a small museum in Holland. We must have something they'd trade for."

He shakes his head. "You need a 3-D boyfriend."

"Tell me what happened."

"When was the last time you saw someone?"

"It's not so easy, you know. Men my age are either married or dating thirty-year-olds. Remind me what they see in you? Besides a nice meal?"

"They're tired of dating puppies."

"Speaking of. We've got one staying with us."

"One what?"

"A puppy. American. Courtesy of my mother."

"Is he handsome?"

"Not bad. Nice face, good build. Now you."

“The woman I went out with last night has a connection to the gallery. Guess.”

“She worked here.”

“Boring.”

“She’s been here. No. That’s really dull. She’s an artist.”

“Nope.”

“She’s a saint. That’d be amazing. Let’s see. You’d want someone with all her parts, which narrows things down. Barbara? She hasn’t had anything cut off. Nowadays probably she’d just wear tower earrings or a ring instead of lugging around the whole building.”

“Are you done?”

“Not a saint. But it’d be cool, don’t you think? They’re everywhere, up on churches, at crosswalks—why wouldn’t they walk among us?”

“Because they aren’t real?”

“Tell Catherine of Siena that.”

“Okay. The real ones are dead, and the rest are made up. She’s not a saint. As far as I know.”

“Too bad. They’re sexy, don’t you think?”

“Stop. Just stop. When I told her where I worked, she said, ‘oh, you must know Guido.’”

“Well, you must. Wait, this is why I rushed here?”

“She went out with him! She’s 34. He’s, what, 68?”

“More like 63.”

“He looks 70, but with a good doctor.”

“He doesn’t look 70.”

“Being so well preserved makes him look older.”

“What’d you do when she told you?”

“It almost put me off my dinner.”

“But not dessert, I bet.”

“Shhh,” he says. “It was terrible. I didn’t want to hear about it, but at the same time, I wanted something juicy.”

“Like what?”

“Like that he couldn’t get it up.”

I cover my ears. “Eww. Stop. Never, ever say or do anything that makes me think about Guido having sex. Clear?”

“Look, I didn’t want to think about it. It was forced on me.”

“Please. Are we going to try to get this painting?”

“We’ve already got a bunch of Jeromes. People like variety.”

“Then why’d I just see five Judith Slaying Holofernes in one show?”

“Because that’s Artemisia Gentileschi’s brand. And because people like beheadings. Which reminds me. We need more martyrs. Crucifixion, stoning, flaying, that stuff. How’d Barbara die?”

“Fire? Doesn’t matter. Look what else I found.” I pull up another painting, a big diptych divided into twelve panels, each an apostle being tortured. It’s like that counting game with Henry the Eighth’s wives: divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, survived.

“It’s at the same museum, that’s how I got to it. Isn’t it amazing?”
Crucified, (upside down), crucified (X-shape), beheaded, boiled in oil (that’s John, who died in bed), crucified, flayed, stabbed, clubbed, beheaded, beheaded, crucified. It doesn’t rhyme, but you get that pattern feeling.

“This is great,” Vince says. “Let’s put Guido on it. He’ll do his Big City Gallery Director sweet talking the provincial museum head, telling him how many people will see it, how prominent the loan notice will be, how people will leave wondering what else he’s got in his collection.”

“Her. The director’s a woman. So’s the head curator.”

“Even better. Women seem to like him. ‘My, what beautiful teeth you have, Guido,’” Vince says, his voice up a pitch. In his own voice, he adds. “The better to eat you with, my dear.”

I’ve never seen him so excited about something this old and this gold. It must be the violence. John in the stew pot is my favorite, I think, although Andrew stretched out diagonally on the cross has a *Saturday-Night-Fever* flair.

“Maybe we should have one room with just martyrdoms,” Vince says.

“That’s a terrible idea.”

“I know. Am I going to be dating thirty-four-year-olds when I’m Guido’s age?”

I can’t tell if it scares him or if he’s wondering if he’ll be up to it. “Are you going to have Guido’s job or his family?” (*Figlio di papà*, Italians say about guys like Guido: Daddy’s boy. “What do you think they talked about?”

“His cobbler in Florence, mostly, she said. His country house came up a few times, too.”

“His shoes are awfully nice, but you don’t want to end up like that. Why not find someone you like and stay put? You could bring her to dinner and show Giulia you’ve reformed.” G. used to love Vince, but now she’s down on him for being a hound, which she thinks is disrespectful to women. It is, of course, but they’re all grownups, and as Pope Francis said, who am I to judge?

Vince zooms in on the individual apostles, blowing them up and shrinking them back down. If I could turn old art into a video game, I'd be rich, and the world would be a better place. Ten-year-olds arguing about whether Masaccio is better than Masolino, swapping art playing cards, bargaining for rarities.

"Sorry, what?"

"I said," Vince says, "would you go out with someone I know, if I set you up?"

"Doing penance for your and Guido's sins?"

"I know someone who'd like you."

"Why now? What makes you think I'd be interested?"

"Because you knew your puppy was handsome."

"I look at art all day; I can't turn off my eyes."

"What color are his?"

"His what?"

"Eyes, ovviamente."

"He sees me as a mother, not a woman."

Vince snorts. "How long have you lived here? This is about what you see, not what he sees. Answer the question."

"Greenish brown, with gold flecks." In Italian, *occhi nocciola*,. Eyes like hazelnuts.

"I love noccioli," Vince says, leering. "Can I talk to my friend?"

"Let me think about it. But Guido can definitely talk to the nice museum director in Holland."

Abe and Benny

“Giulia’s having an identity crisis,” I tell Claude, “and Vincenzo wants to fix me up.”

“Great. Do you trust his taste?”

“That’s where you’re starting?”

“Giulia’s 17. She’s supposed to be having an identity crisis.”

“That’s not what I meant. Don’t you want to know if I’m interested?”

“Aren’t you? I can’t even remember the last time you saw someone.”

“Maybe I just didn’t tell you.”

“So tell me. How long’s it been?”

“Why’s everyone asking that?”

“Because it’s been forever?”

“A man’s not the be all and end all of a woman’s life, you know.”

“I do know. And quoting Mom doesn’t make you a good daughter.”

“I called her, by the way.”

“Yeah, well, you kind of had to once Betse’s grandson was sleeping on your couch. Is there some reason you wouldn’t be interested? Something I don’t know about?”

I’m on my evening walk, the exercise kind, not the getting somewhere kind. It used to be that wearing sneakers was enough to convict you of Americanness, but now everyone goes to the gym. Ric and his new wife Fabiola do Crossfit. “I didn’t say I wasn’t interested.”

“What I hear is you being a chicken. Pawk, pawk, pawk.”

“Remember when I went through that sleeping around phase?” There are more English speakers around these days, but I’m outside the tourist zone, and Claude and I talk too fast to follow.

“I do. It made for excellent vicarious living. Marriage may not kill sex, but it kills talking about it.”

This is true.

“That was years ago. What’s it have to do with this?”

“I stopped because Giulia turned ten and started paying more attention, and I didn’t think it was a good model. So I quit.”

“Cold turkey?”

“Easier than quitting smoking. Sex is nice, but cigarettes go with everything. And they’re more reliable.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“No sex talk from married people.” I speed up; the woman ahead of me doesn’t know I’m coming, but she will when I pass her.

“Why are we talking about this?”

“What if Vince’s guy is decent? I’m out of practice. I need a pre-fix-up date.”

“That’s what the Internet’s for.”

“I want to practice drinks and dinner, not sleeping with someone.”

“The internet does that, too.”

“Wait, hold on, I’m at a water fountain. It’s not that I don’t like speaking to Ma, you know. It’s just ... I need to be in the right mood.”

“That’s what she said.”

“Really?”

"If only. It's a meme."

"What about you? What's new?"

"Nothing. I've got office hours in a while, and I'm trying to get out of here early. I'm meeting Mike."

"Ooh, is it date night? Like in the women's mags?"

"Read a lot of those, do you?"

"Do you take off your wedding rings and one of you tries to pick the other one up? To keep things fresh?"

"It's like you were there. If the curating thing doesn't work out, you'd be a natural at marriage counseling. You and Mom both."

Does marriage kill sex? We listen to me breathe for a while.

"Tell me about Giulia."

"She's gearing up to go Jewish. And she has a huge crush on Betse's grandson."

"She can't go Jewish, she is Jewish."

"Jewish Jewish."

"Do you get points every time you say it?"

"You know what I mean."

"Is this still about the holocaust museum?"

"I wish. There was a... I wouldn't call it an incident. I mean, I thought it was funny."

"What'd you do?"

"You sound like I'm Ma."

"If the impulse fits."

I let that go. When I tell Claude, she laughs.

I stop to tie my shoe. "See, it's funny."

"Bet Giulia didn't see it that way."

"She felt bad for the 'poor kid.' Like I'd slimed him or something."

"I'd see that movie: menstruating women on a mission."

"Shut up."

"How mad was she?"

"Pretty mad."

"You're the worst Jew ever."

"Apparently. Also embarrassing. And mean."

"Trifecta."

"What did Ma tell us about Judaism?"

"Nothing. She didn't need to. We had grandma and grandpa, school, *The Odd Couple*, you name it."

"Did she take us to the gay and lesbian synagogue, or did I make that up?"

"No, she did. Oh, my god. That's Betse."

"What's Betse?"

"Betse grandmother of your houseguest Betse. She went gay, remember?"

I squinch my eyes shut to think and nearly get brained by a branch.

"Her husband tried to get custody, I think, and they'd drink and talk about what a prick he was. How do you not remember this stuff?"

"Why do you remember this stuff?"

"Because it's interesting. Because I don't treat my childhood like a charm bracelet of grievances."

"Whatever."

"She didn't have to do anything. It was New York. Black people called Puerto Ricans gonifs. Everyone was Jewish. Pete Seeger, Mayor Koch."

"Pete Seeger's not Jewish. And Koch is a schmuck."

"It was in the air is all I'm saying."

"Not here it isn't."

"Is that panting I hear?"

"Hill," I pant. "But at least I'm not sweating. An Italian woman taught me the secret."

"Tell me when they teach you how to spin straw into gold. Giulia's not sure she's Jewish? Jewish enough? I guess you should have told her more."

"Clearly."

"You're worried she'll pick it up on the street?"

"Ha ha. I don't want her to think that being Jewish means being observant. Do you want your niece walking around thinking she's ritually impure when she has her period?"

"I'm pretty sure they don't lead with that."

"Exactly. They'll lure her in with candles and challah, then, boom, patriarchy. Or how about that thing where God's okay with taking other people's land away and giving it to us because you know, covenant."

"It's not just Jews: most religions are bat shit."

"Sophisticated analysis, Professor Singer."

"But relevant. You wouldn't be any happier if she were going to Mass or, I don't know, speaking in tongues."

"Yeah, but those aren't options. She thinks she's supposed to know this stuff. Next she'll start feeling guilty about putting prosciutto on her pizza."

“Nothing’s even happened yet, right? Besides her being mad at you, which you can’t complain about.”

“Of course I can.”

“Have you heard of this thing called Karma?”

“That’s ridiculous. I pay attention to Giulia. Ma wouldn’t have noticed if we shaved our heads and joined the Hari Krishnas. Why are you taking marriage advice from her?”

“I just said I wasn’t. And I’m not taking it from you, either. It’s probably nothing. Maybe she’s just Jew shaming you.”

“It’s okay to Jew shame me, but I can’t body shame Mary Magdalene? Who isn’t real?”

“What?”

“Never mind.” I take it back about the Magdalene. She’s plenty real. If I was shaming anyone, it was the artist.

“For all you know, she’ll just do the hipster thing and study Yiddish. That’d be okay, right?”

“Sure. But no one here speaks it. Also, they’re orthodox.”

“All of them?”

“Pretty much. But their own version. There’ve been Jews in Rome since before the destruction of the temple.”

“Before the diaspora?”

I hear the amazement in Claude’s voice. The idea of Jews who aren’t defined by exile or nostalgia for a place they’ve never been is kind of amazing.

“They must have come from Israel at some point, but it was by choice.”

“Since when do you know all this?”

“Giulia told Ric she was Jew-curious, and you know how he likes to do research. He’s been talking to a guy in his office, and now he’s an expert. He keeps sending me factoids. You know the big arch below the Campidoglio, the one that shows the Romans carrying off loot from the Temple? Roman Jews had this thing where they wouldn’t walk under it until the temple was restored.”

“Good luck with that,” Claude says.

“Right, but when the state of Israel was founded, that’s what they did, they had a celebratory procession under the arch.”

“Fascinating.”

“Really?”

“Sort of. But it’s not like it’s going to help G.”

“No. “

“I go to synagogue with Mike a couple times a year. He likes it, the cantor has a pretty voice, it’s not so bad.”

“Pretty high praise. You’re a grown up. She’s a susceptible teenager.”

“Where’s she now?”

“At the movies.”

“On Friday night? See? Nothing to worry about. Take a leaf from Mom’s child-rearing book.”

“Weren’t you just talking about what a lousy mother she was?”

“That was you.”

“What leaf? The going out of town and leaving your ten-year-old in charge leaf?” Being the six-year-old left in the care of your ten-year-old sister is an adventure. Especially during a blackout. Try being the ten-year-old.

"Jesus, are you still going on about that? I just mean. . . a looser hand. Less reactive. Most people raised in the 70's survived, you know."

"Sure. Let's get rid of seat belts. Or start smoking in hospitals and schools again, that was fun. Wait. Is Betse the one whose marriage broke up because she slept with her kid's teacher? Ms. Ms. Ms. Di Nardo! See, I remember stuff."

"Yup, that's her. Don't tell G; she'll fall even harder. Is he nice? The kid?"

"He's 27. Ma got the details wrong. Shocker. But yes, he's nice."

"You think she's still a lesbian?"

"If so, she's the coolest grandmother ever. You think she's still with Ms. Di Nardo?"

"You know how lesbians are. Listen. If Giulia wants to know what being Jewish means, tell her."

"Tell her what? What do you think being Jewish means?" I wait. "Not so easy, is it?"

"Okay. Start with the jokes."

"I can't tell her jokes. She already thinks I'm anti-Semitic."

"Anti-Semites aren't funny. Jews are funny. Tell her that, for starters. But it's not just about being funny: those jokes are packed with information. Tell her the one about the guy who brings his parrot to services. No, I know. Tell her Abe and Benny at the church."

"You want me to tell her about Abe and Benny converting to make a quick 100 bucks? Did you not hear me say anti-Semitic?"

No, that's the point. It seems like it's about Jews, but actually it's about what Christians think about Jews. It's meta.

I run the joke in my head. Abe and Benny are out for a walk and they pass a church with a big sign that says: converts get \$100.00. Abe wants to do it, but Benny's nervous. 'What you think, I'm suddenly going to believe in what's his name, Jesus? Ridiculous.' He tells Benny to wait for him, and when he comes back, they'll split the money. It takes much longer than Benny expects, and he's getting worried. Finally, Abe's back. "Abe!" Benny says. "I was worried. Did you get the money?" And Abe says, "You Jews...always with the money."

"If it were meta, it'd be a joke about jokes," I tell Claude. I hear polite but determined knocking.

"I have to go, my student's here. Nice kid. Too bad he thinks he's a chicken."

"You haven't sent him to mental health services, have you?"

"Are you kidding? The class needs the eggs."

"That's not even Jewish. What's Jewish about that?"

"Ciao, Connie. Stop worrying, Giulia will be fine. And go out with Vincenzo's friend. What do you have to lose?"

Maybe Claude's right. Is Claude right? Can I be the world's worst Jew without Giulia thinking she has to atone for it? That's possible, isn't it? I'm almost convinced, but then I picture G. walking around the city. She's the perfect target—a guilty blank slate.

Sometimes I stop at the dog run on the edge of the park, but tonight I keep moving, past the Center for Psychoanalysis on Via Panama and into Villa Torlonia, the next park over. Mussolini had a house here. They've renovated it, but I haven't been. The ancient Jewish catacomb is here, too.

To learn Judaism by osmosis, you need Jews. I need an adopt-a-Bubbe program—no temple, thanks, just latkes and sour cream and a Seder every couple of years. Claude could send us matzo, not because anyone's giving up bread, but because it's delicious with butter and salt. What else? I learned most of the Yiddish I know playing Gin Rummy with my grandfather, but Giulia and I aren't going to start playing cards. Does that leave jokes?

I pass a guy panhandling, probably a refugee. The ones who manage to make it to Italy aren't allowed to work, so they end up either doing dangerous under the table jobs, or begging. He's got a good pitch: his sign says "Pellegrini: tutto quello che avete fatto a uno solo di questi miei fratelli più piccoli, l'avete fatto a me."

Pilgrims: what you have done for the least of my brothers, you have done for me. I don't have any change, and I'm not his demographic. I keep moving.

Closer to home, I pass a good-looking man, about my age, salt-and-pepper hair and beard. No ring, but for all I know, he's about to meet his wife and pretend she's a hot stranger. I raise my elbows, pump my arms, speed up. This is exercise, not a pleasant spring stroll.

In the shower, later, I think about the guy on the street, then, near the end, Josh. I blame Vince.

He Had a Hat?

No further word on the fix up, no movement on the Jewish front. Giulia's not exactly avoiding me—Josh lives where I do—but when he's not around our conversations are my questions and her grudging answers.

Vince and I stopped arguing with Guido and bribed the graphics department (one guy) to mock up a poster. It's a Falconeri Saint George (Guido's rule, you don't advertise someone else's goods), that we cropped. You get the lance entering the dragon's mouth and piercing its belly, George in his weird tiara, the horse's red trappings, and the dragon's freakishly human hands trying to pull the lance out. The princess didn't make the cut, but we kept the hand coming down from the sky and emitting rays that crackle across heavily red-rubbed gold. Above George, it says "The Power of Saints" in big letters. If Guido okays it, we'll have to actually open the show on the date on the poster.

George is on the pale side, but he's still pretty sexy. I don't know why Vince was so negative about dating a saint; he's seen Bernini's Saint Theresa.

We circled back to the fix up today. I said yes. Which is why I'm standing in my closet looking for something to wear. I make a pile of possibles. The first dress I try on is the kind of tight you have to commit to; it moves immediately into the pile I'm making for Giulia. The next one's got a funeral vibe, the one after that has shoulder pads. I'm buttoning another, kind of cocktailly, black with embroidered bits, when Giulia and Josh get home. Giulia can't do happy and mad at the same time, so I go out to say hello.

"We brought you some gelato," Josh says, handing me a plastic tub.

“What are you dressed up for?” Giulia says, taking the sticky tub out of my hands and handing me a napkin.

“I was just trying on a few things.”

“For the exhibit opening? We did a gelato crawl.”

“It was delicious,” Josh says. “All of it. That dress is nice, by the way.”

Giulia turns to look. “It is nice, but...”

Whatever she’s not saying is probably true. She has a good eye, and the dress was iffy when I bought it. “Yeah. I haven’t looked in the mirror yet...” I turn to go back to my room.

“Maybe we can help,” Josh says.

“How?”

“Second and third opinions.”

“I don’t know,” Giulia says. “If we disagree, it’ll make it harder to decide.”

“Come on,” Josh says. “I did theater. I’m good at this kind of thing.”

“Why? Did they run out of gay guys?”

“Mom!”

“It’s okay,” Josh says. “I think my mother was worried, to tell you the truth. But she’s hypersensitive because of her mother.” He shrugs.

“Your grandmother’s gay?”

“Didn’t Connie tell you?”

“You knew?”

“I forgot, actually, then I remembered. Why would I tell you? It’s not a big deal,” I say. I’m so cool, I don’t even see sexual persuasion.

“It’s not,” Josh says. “But it was tough for my mother when her parents split. She moved with her dad to the Upper East Side. I think that’s what made her so uptight.”

I’m not clear if *that’s* the divorce or the East Side. Both, probably. “How old was she? It must have been hard.”

“Ten.” He opens the refrigerator, surveys the contents. “She’s not ten anymore. Was her mother supposed to stay with someone she didn’t love? I just think she could be a little more generous.” He shuts the fridge, stares at it like it knows something it’s not telling.

“Well. If you really want to offer advice, let’s do it.” We troop into my room, and when I see where the embroidered parts fall, I pull the next thing from the pile and go change.

“Does your grandmother have a partner?” Giulia says.

“She died about three years ago. My grandmother hasn’t been the same since.”

I don’t have to see her to know Giulia’s melting into a puddle of admiration and sympathy.

“What about yours? The New York one.”

“She’s not a settler-downer,” Giulia says, which is what I told her when she was seven and asked why she only had one grandfather. It’s true, although I suppose I could have added some details along the way. I’m surprised Claude never has; it’s the one place where she’s judgier about Gogo than I am.

When I come out, I show Giulia the pile I’ve made for her. She grabs an armful and goes into the bathroom to change.

I look in the mirror, even though I already know the dress doesn't work. Behind me, Josh says, "I liked the other one better."

"Very tactful," I say. "I don't like either of them."

Giulia's back in a floaty polka dot number I can just remember wearing. It looks fantastic.

"That looks amazing," Josh says.

"Wait a minute," I say, heading into the closet to find the scarf I wore with it. Giulia ties it around her hair. "Bella!"

"Bellissima!" Josh says. We look at him.

"That's a thing, right? People say that?"

I give him a thumbs up; Giulia's overcome.

When she recovers, she goes into the closet and comes back with a black beaded cardigan I think is Marianna's. I put it on.

"No," she says, "take the shirt off first." She pushes me into the closet. "Try it with this skirt."

We come back out for the mirror.

"The skirt's wrong," she says. "Why does it stick out on the sides?"

"It's A-line," I tell her.

"It makes you look like a secretary. But with something clingier and the right shoes, the sweater would be perfect."

I don't mention that she's being secretary negative, nor do I say anything about what the skirt would be clinging to. I like my ass. I do. As a man in the Piazza della Repubblica once announced, it would make a beautiful pillow. But even if I didn't, I wouldn't say anything. No down talking, Giulia would say, and she'd be right.

"I think it looks nice," Josh says.

"You were raised well," I say.

"No, I mean it. The sweater's great."

I toss a jacket at him. "Try this. I thought Ric cleared out all his stuff, but apparently not. It's yours if you want it."

"It feels great," he says, stroking it. "Wait, it's cashmere. Are you sure he doesn't want it back?"

"Try it on."

He puts it on over his T-shirt.

"Not bad," I say.

Giulia looks uncertain.

"Try it buttoned," I say.

"I don't know," he says. "I think it hung better before." He unbuttons it, turns up the collar and sleeves.

"The pants are here, too. Might as well try them."

Josh turns away and drops trou to put the pants on. I avert my eyes politely. G. does not.

"They're too short," she says.

"Just bend your knees," I say. He does.

"Now the jacket's too long," Giulia says.

"No problem. Hold it like this." I demonstrate. He does.

"Now it's slipping down on one side," says Giulia.

"Hike that shoulder up." He does.

"It's perfect," Josh says, one shoulder up, one down; knees bent; hand clutching the jacket at his waist. Watching him gimp across the room is painful.

“It’s a great suit, but you’re limping. People will feel bad for you.”

“Some will,” Josh says, “but the ones who know tailoring will say ‘but his suit. It fits perfect!’”

We both crack up. He puts up his hand, and I high five him.

Giulia looks like we’re not letting her play with our dollies.

“It’s a joke,” Josh tells her.

“My grandfather told that joke,” I say.

“Mine, too. But it wasn’t his favorite. Do you know the one about the Jew, the German, and the Frenchman in the desert?”

I’m kvelling, silently. “No. Tell us.”

“A German, a Frenchman and a Jew are lost in the desert. The German says, ‘I’m tired. I’m thirsty. I must haf ein beer.’ He does the accent. Of course he does.

“The Frenchman says, ‘I’m tired. I thirst. I must have some wine.’ His Frenchman needs work, but I don’t care.

“And the Jew,” Josh says. “The Jew says....” Dramatic pause. The money he could have made in the Catskills. “The Jew says, ‘I’m tired. I’m thirsty. I must have diabetes.’ Palms and shoulders up, eyes down; he’s channeling Zero Mostel.

I crack up.

He cracks up.

“The Jew says,” Giulia says. “Isn’t he from somewhere? Couldn’t he be Italian?”

“Absolutely, he could be Italian,” Josh says. “American, Canadian, South African.”

“Maybe he’s from Minsk,” I say.

“Or Pinsk,” Josh turns toward G. “He could be from anywhere, but it’s funny because he’s Jewish.” Back to me: “Maybe I didn’t tell it right?”

“No, you did. Try another.”

“Okay. You’ll like this one. A grandmother’s at the beach with her grandson. She’s pushing him down the boardwalk in his stroller, and suddenly an enormous wave comes all the way up to the boardwalk and sweeps the baby right into the ocean. The Grandmother’s beside herself. ‘God,’ she says, ‘God, did you see? My grandson! Help me, God!’ She’s wailing and crying, and another wave comes in, and lo and behold, it rolls the baby back and drops him into the carriage. He’s laughing, he’s fine; he thinks the whole thing was hilarious. The grandmother picks him up, kisses him, wraps him in his blanket, puts him into the stroller. Then she looks up at the sky, and says, “God. He had a hat?”

He nails the punch line, half-question half-complaint.

“Why’s that funny?” Giulia’s taken the scarf out of her hair and is winding and unwinding it around her arm.

Josh looks at me.

“She’s gotten this miracle,” I say. (And so have I, this is exactly what I wanted, and am I happy? No.). “God himself has intervened to save her grandson, but she still finds something to complain about.”

Wind, unwind. “So the point is that Jews—Jewish people—complain? And the desert joke is about how Jews are worrywarts?”

“And hypochondriacs,” I say.

“Why would Jewish people tell these jokes? Who are they telling them to?”

I let Josh field this.

“Each other,” Josh says. “And sometimes Goyim. But not too often. And only if they’re friends.”

“Goyim?”

“Non-Jews.”

My turn: “They’re funny. And a coping strategy.” Maybe the parrot would have gone better? Probably not.

Fucking hell. I should call Claude and put her on speaker. “The first one’s kind of triumphant. This schmuck with the messed-up posture, maybe disabled, at least his suit fits.” It’s really about the lengths the tailor will go to make the sale, but no way am I telling her that. I go on. “They don’t have much,” I say, “these people, but they celebrate what they have.” Josh’s head tilts as I think, no, that’s not right. That sounds like ... Christians. “Scratch that. Look at the grandmother. She seems like she’s complaining, and she is, but she’s also in dialogue with God. They have a relationship.”

Giulia bursts into tears.

In Bocca al Lupo

Two weeks till the opening. Guido got tired of fighting, so our poster's up all over the city. To prove it was a graceful concession by the bigger man, not a loss, Guido snagged the preaching Magdalene I wanted. He had it driven from Belgium in a box that was sturdier and more secure than most apartments I've lived in. I know this is divide and conquer, that it's no way to run a railway, but I don't care. The painting's a thumb in the eye to all the doctors of the church who said women couldn't preach.

In return, I volunteer to write all the labels. Twice: in Italian and English.

Since neither Vince or Guido will read them all, I can say pretty much what I want. When my phone rings, I've got about 100 books open on my desk, and I'm fighting with the tiny word count that means you can talk about the painting or the saint, but not both. It's Ric. I'd let it go to voicemail, except he never calls, which is brilliant, because when he does it seems important.

By the time we were together, I knew Italian; I had a decent job, even if I was being paid under the table, which is totally normal here. Assuming you don't get caught, no one thinks twice. What am I saying? That Ric's walk on the wild side wasn't very wild. He was like those people who moved to the Upper West Side when it was safe and still wanted credit for being recklessly bohemian.

Still: I was definitely not from around here, and that was a big deal for a boy from Prati, which is famous for its campanilismo, the residents' refusal to live any place they can't see the bell tower of the nearest church. (Whether they actually attend that church is irrelevant.) We got serious around when his

brother Paolo came out to Marianna and Fede, and I can't believe how long it took me to realize that taking up with an American was Ric's attempt not to get edged out of the interesting sweepstakes.

I stop typing an explanation of how St. Agatha, whose breasts were cut off (the Gallery has two versions; we're going with the less bloody one) is, by analogical logic, the patron saint of bell makers, and pick up the phone.

"Is everyone okay?"

"Why wouldn't they be?"

"Because normally you email." He sighs, and I know why: I've gotten the discussion off on the wrong, unplanned foot. Ric wouldn't mind discussing his feelings about email versus phone calls, but not when there's something else on the agenda, even if that agenda is known only to him. I check for repeated words while I wait.

"It's about Giulia," he says. "I'm worried about this whole Jewish thing."

"What did she tell you, exactly?" Post meltdown, Giulia ducked out early for school, then called to say she was spending the night at Ric's. She went to watch Monica's soccer practice the next day, then stayed as late as Monica's parents would allow. She's back now, playing Leonard Cohen on permanent loop. This morning, Josh admitted that was his doing.

I looked at him. "It's a mitzvah," he said.

"Making someone coffee is a mitzvah. Picking them up at the airport. Building houses for the poor."

"Those too. Thanks for the coffee, by the way." He spread stracchino on his toast, poured olive oil on it, added salt, and bit into it, happy as a lord. When he saw I was waiting, he put it down. "Leonard Cohen is gateway Judaism."

I didn't say anything.

"You know, like pot's supposed to be a gateway drug?"

"Yeah?"

"But it's not. That's the point. Most people just stick with pot. And a little pot is fine, which I'm sure you know. Or as my grandmother would say, Leonard Cohen, what could it hurt?"

"Betse?" I already knew the answer.

"Other side."

"She wants to know more about Judaism," Ric says. "I'm just trying to support that."

"Are you calling with more factoids?" I stand up, the better to pace.

"No. No one seems to find them useful."

He means Giulia: my interest level isn't a big concern.

"I think you should talk to Daniele," Ric says.

"He knows stuff he hasn't told you?"

"I'm starting to think I'm asking the wrong questions. Fabiola agrees."

"Maybe the right question is how some random Roman Jew's going to help G. figure this all out?"

"That's why you need to talk to him. He's from Livorno. Did you know they never had a ghetto there?"

"I didn't know that. Did you know the English call Livorno Leghorn? Bizarre, right?"

There's a pause while we remember that when it comes to G., we try not to fight, no matter how annoying the other one is. We're better at it than you'd think. For one thing, Ric knew what he was getting into. He thought I was a

radical, and he thought that was neat. Down with the patriarchy, he'd say when we walked past a huddle of men in suits or a bunch of Seminarians. It was funny for a couple of years.

That's how I met him. His friend—they'd stayed friends when Ric went to law school and Piero joined an anarchist collective—was hitting on me at a bar. Ric was there to hear music and see Piero; Piero was there to get laid. The collective had decided that the women could hit on the men, but not the other way around, not till there was real equality. After a brief interview, he decided, correctly, that I had good impulses, but wasn't fully committed. (Cue '60's joke: In a bacon and egg breakfast, what's the difference between the pig and the chicken? The chicken's involved, but the pig is committed.) He dumped me at their table and disappeared to chat up a blonde in a Sandinista T-shirt. Ric offered to buy me a drink. I said yes. And here we are.

"What am I supposed to ask him?"

"If I knew, I'd have asked. I just think you two might have more in common."

"Really? You're both lawyers, Italian, men, he's around your age, right? What am I missing here?"

Exasperated sigh.

"And that outweighs everything else?"

"In this case, yes. When I talk about this I sound like, what does Giulia say, like I'm mansplaining."

"Fair enough." I do a quick head count of boy versus girl saints.

"I'm an outsider. And it's a matriarchal religion."

"No, it's not. It's passed on through the maternal line."

“That’s what I meant.”

“In that case, my work is done.” We’re about 60/40 because the apostles skew the count, but Mary Mag has her own room, so...

“And yet...”

What he means is, you broke it, you fix it. “What’s he like?”

“He’s nice. He went to school here, lived abroad for about ten years, believes, but isn’t crazy.”

“Abroad where?”

“England, mostly. His English is perfect. I forget where else. Does it matter?”

Of course it matters, but I’m not going to open the can of worms that is Israel. “Believes what?”

“Whatever Jews who believe, believe. I don’t know. Abraham. Moses. Tablets. Plagues.”

“I never should have taken you to a Seder.”

“Practices, that’s what I meant. He’s a practicing Jew.”

“How much practice does he need?” St. Agatha stares from my screen, calm as cream despite her severed breasts. “Observes is the word you’re looking for. He’s an observant Jew.” That’s the distinction that matters. Belief is fine if that’s what you’re into, but it’s up to you. Light the candles; read the Torah; the rest is commentary.

“Okay.”

“So Fab’s having us over? Or should we go out?”

“You don’t need us. And don’t call her that.”

Ah. Strictly in-group.

“He’s free tonight, he told me.”

“I’m not.”

“What about tomorrow?”

“What’s the hurry?”

The sound I hear is Ric looking at the picture of Fabiola he keeps on one side of his desk (to remind him how far he’s come) then the picture of G. on the other (to remind him what’s really important). Plus, the water in his electric kettle is boiling. It’s unmanly and nationally inappropriate, but Fab sold him on green tea. Unless it was their Crossfit trainer.

“Never mind. Give me his info and I’ll get in touch.”

“Great. Batti il ferro quando è caldo.”

I used to think the Italian idioms Ric used were adorable. Some were just like ours, imagine. Some were better. Instead of saying someone had made her bed and should lie in it, Italians say she wanted a bicycle—fine, let her pedal it.

When I hit a wall with the labels, I go out to buy lipstick. I don’t always wear it. Mostly I don’t, in fact. Lip balm is fine. The twelve-year-old behind the counter welcomes me back to the fold, upselling me on some under-eye cream in the process.

On the way back, I stop and get two espressos; one to drink, one for Vince. He’s in his office, moving index-card-sized printouts of paintings around like he’s playing three-card monte. He looks me over.

“You look nice. Excited?”

“Così così.” So so.

“Please. For that you could have stayed married.”

"I'm having a drink with a stranger. I think I'm at the right level of excitement." I let Luca and Vince make the plan, and they picked today. Vince already had a date, and he didn't want to feel guilty about me being stuck at the Falconeri while he was boring some woman about wine. I love Vince, but middle age hasn't done him any favors.

When I told him that, he told me I'd definitely like Luca, because at thirty-six he hasn't had as much time to fall into bad habits. "It's feminist," he said, pleased with himself. "A blow against men and their egotism. Against me and Guido."

"That's not really what feminism is," I said. "Does he know old I am?"

"I told him you're 45."

"46."

Vince waved that away. "That's for your driver's license. I don't care, and neither does Luca. That's what he likes."

"46-year-olds who can pass for 45?"

"Older women. He doesn't want kids, and he says if he has one more conversation about rising signs, he'll shoot himself."

It is odd how often you find yourself talking about astrology here. "What else did you tell him?"

"That we work together, you're American, but speak Italian like a Roman."

"And."

"That's all."

"No, I mean, I'm American and I speak Italian like a Roman. *But* is negative; *and* is a plus."

“He’s from Varese and speaks Italian like he’s Swiss, so you’re ahead of the game there.”

“And why do you think I’ll like him?”

Vince shrugged. “I think he’ll like you; after that it’s up to you.”

It’s an interesting approach, but I see his point.

“I like the sweater,” he says now, sucking down his coffee. “And the camisole thing underneath.”

“Giulia wanted me to wear it with nothing under it.”

“That would also work.”

After G’s door slammed, Josh and I stared at each other. He looked horrified, like maybe it was his fault; my expression was probably more like, shit, my fault again. But I’d seen it before, which made it easier. I have a theory about it, in fact. I think G. being willing to cry in front of me is a good sign, because I’d have eaten glass before I let Ma see me like that.

I got out a deck of cards and started dealing Rummy. I was well on my way to schneidering him when he finally got some decent cards. “Gin,” he said, laying down his hand. “Also, um.”

“What?”

“Your sweater. You might want to...”

I looked down. Two buttons to the wind; breasts front and center. “Shit. Sorry.”

“Why? I’m not sorry,” he said, counting his points.

I still haven’t fixed it, so, camisole.

At 6:00, I change my shoes, run masking tape over my black linen pants to pick up office schmutz, put on the lipstick. The pants swish pleasantly as I walk; they're wide-legged and stop above my ankles. I have excellent ankles.

They picked the day; I picked the place, in the Piazza Santa Maria in Trastevere. Close enough to come back to work if Luca's a disaster. The piazza's touristy, but the church façade's great and the bar's a spremuta temple, with huge orange-crammed vases flanking its outside tables. I'd been here a good three years before I had the nerve and the dough to sit down at one of those tables and order a drink.

Luca's in front when I get there: wavy light-brown hair, blue eyes. Linen jacket, ironed jeans, nice shoes. God, it was thrilling to get to Italy and realize that the men wore real shoes. Does he look 36? He looks younger than Vince and older than Josh, so, sure.

Good points: he tells me twice how nice it is to meet me, doesn't tell me about how Trastevere's ruined. (Trastevere's like Bali: no matter when you get there, you're ten years too late.) He compliments my Italian, and follows it up by saying, but you live here, of course you speak well.

Drinks in Italy always come with potato chips and nuts. (Add that to the coffee and the men's shoes, and you see why Italy seemed like the height of civilization.) When I got here everyone I knew was broke, and the snacks were a big part of our daily consumption. Even now, they feel like a gift.

Luca's enthusiasm isn't restricted to my Italian. It extends to his Negroni, American Football, Mary J. Blige, the improved WiFi on Italian trains, my job and possession of a seventeen-year-old daughter. What does he do? He's in advertising. Of course he is.

When his phone rings, he apologizes before picking it up, and walks over to the church portico so his conversation won't bother anyone. Points for that, too. I'm people watching and congratulating myself on how well it's going (But do you like him? Claude asks. Don't get ahead of yourself, I tell her.) when I hear my name.

"Ciao!" Josh says. "Drinking alone?" He leans across the wire enclosure that demarcates the table area to, I realize too late, kiss me. Americans who've decided to switch to Italian-style greetings should announce it in advance, otherwise it's super awkward. I lean back before he gets to the second cheek.

"Hey. What are you doing here?"

"What do you mean? It was on your list. Let's see. Beautiful church, check; beautiful piazza, check; nice place for a drink even though it's overpriced." He sees the second glass. "Not drinking alone."

I point to Luca.

"Is that Vince?"

I shake my head.

"You look nice."

I swallow the last of my drink and stare at the lipstick imprint on the glass. It's disgusting.

"Giulia's drawings are really good."

"Yup."

"Do you still draw?" Our table's in the last row next to the building, so Josh has a wall to lean on. He looks comfortable.

"Not really." Why don't I just say, Josh, hon, I'm on a date. Scram?

"But you taught her?"

“At first, a little. But she was always good.”

“You think she’ll be an artist?”

“I hope not.”

He takes out his phone, pulls something up, hands it to me. It’s a wooden box with sides that open out. The top’s lined with purple velvet, the bottom half is divided into compartments and cubbies filled with glass bottles, things I want to call ampules, paper pouches with old script on them.

“That’s beautiful.”

“It’s Byron’s traveling medicine chest. All the gentlemen had them, apparently. It’s at the Medical Museum near the Vatican. Have you been?”

I hate admitting I don’t know everything in Rome. I shake my head.

“It’s amazing. Look at these.”

These turn out to be models of fetuses, most still in the womb.

“There’s a bunch, because they couldn’t dissect actual pregnant women. Although it does kind of make you wonder how they knew what they looked like. This one’s made of wax; this one’s ivory. These twins are glass, from Venice.”

And here’s Luca.

“Ciao,” he says to Josh, hand outstretched. Josh shakes it. “Piacere. Sono Luca.”

“Piacere,” Josh says, passably. “Sono Josh.”

“Americano,” Luca says.

We both nod.

Luca switches to English. “You are a friend of the daughter of Connie?”

There's no possessive apostrophe in Italian, so that's what happens. It one reason it's so hard to make the word limit in Italian—everything takes longer.

"And Connie," Josh says.

"Old family friend," I say.

"Not so old," Luca says.

Josh rearranges himself against the wall, settling in. Luca hasn't sat down yet. It's a pain to look up at them. Literally.

"Join us," says Luca, waving at the waiter. "Why not?"

"No, no, I was just passing by."

"É qui per caso," I say, forgetting we all speak English.

"By accident," Luca says. "Of course."

The waiter's here with another chair. I remember this, the honeyed trap of Italian manners, how difficult it was to convince an Italian that no, I didn't want seconds; yes, I really did want to pay—for myself or, nearly impossible, for them.

"No, no," Josh says again, pushing off the wall and heading toward the restaurant entrance.

Luca orders another round. "You live here, a Roma?" he wants to know.

"Just visiting," Josh says. "I'm staying with Connie."

It's a small table, and he has long legs. There's a moment's jostle as he gets them organized. The chips are excellent. Crisp. Salty.

"Bravo. And how do you find it?"

"She's a great host."

I have to work later, but another sip of Campari and orange won't kill me.

“Rome, I mean.”

“I love it,” Josh says. “The ruins, the Tiber, the art. Have you been to the Palazzo Barberini? It’s amazing.”

“But Rome is not all. Have you been North? Torino is beautiful, to say just one.”

“So how do you two know each other?” Josh says.

“Through Vince,” I say.

“We only met this once,” Luca says.

Josh looks at me, at Luca, at me again, lingering, I think, on the sweater.

“This is a date! You’re on a date! You should have told me. Do you know the expression third wheel?” he asks Luca, who clearly doesn’t. Josh points to a baby blue Vespa parked nearby. “It only needs two wheels. The third one’s unnecessary, extra.”

“That’s mine!” Luca says. “Tell him. È la mia. Gli faccio fare un giro ... Sai che questo è il modo migliore di vedere Roma?”

I do as told. “He says,” I tell Josh, “that he’ll take you for a ride. That’s his Vespa, and it’s the best way see Rome.” Luca doesn’t wait for an answer; he’s already gone inside to pay.

“His Vespa. Nice. What are the odds?”

“About the same as you walking by?”

“I’m sorry I barged in on your date. I didn’t know. You should have told me.”

“You should go. Rome looks great on two wheels.”

“You barely know this guy. What if we get in an accident? There must be accidents all the time here. What if he just wants a human shield for some big shootout he’s planning?”

“Are they shooting at him from behind? Because otherwise you won’t be much use. Are you actually worried?”

“No. But I am kind of tired. And thirsty. Who’s to say I don’t have diabetes?”

“Andiamo?” Luca says, bright as a new penny. Why did Vince think I’d want to go out with someone so cheerful?

“Si. Text me so I know you survived,” I tell Josh. “I’ll be at the gallery. In bocca al lupo.”

“Crepi,” Luca says automatically as he goes to unlock the Vespa. Josh and I trail behind.

“What?” Josh says.

“It means good luck.”

“Really? It doesn’t sound like it.”

“Literally it means into the wolf’s mouth. When someone says it to you, you say, crepi, down goes the wolf.” We watch Luca get out his spare helmet.

“Ciao, ciao, arrivederci, era un piacere,” I tell him as I give him the regulation kisses.

“A presto,” Luca says. Till soon. We’ll see.

When I turn around, Josh is right behind me, coming in for a kiss, arms wide. He’s better the second time. And the third. Then he puts on the helmet and hops on like he’s done it a million times.

Failure of Imagination

I take the prettier way to the gallery. It's a twofer: I avoid Via Arenula and pass the best pizza bianca in the city, crisp, slightly greasy, perfect. The best way to see Rome, for the record, is on foot. Pizza bianca optional. That's the scale it's built for, the one that lets you see the naiads in the fountain at Piazza Repubblica, the liberty-style courtyard near the Fontana di Trevi, the monument to Anita Garibaldi, pride of Brazil, on the Gianicolo. Walking gets Rome into your body the way a piece of music gets into your fingers.

On a Vespa, Rome's a dreamscape, endless stairs, arches, curves and straightaways, buildings merging into each other. Then you stop for a light, and things separate back into themselves, but just when you've gotten oriented, you're moving again, people blurring into lights into buildings, a panorama unrolling itself. It's not the best way to see Rome—it's the sexiest. I hope Luca and Josh make the most of it.

I work until I hear footsteps. It's Jacopo, the gallery's registrar, art handler, and conservator. Everyone wears multiple hats here, which Vince finds annoying. I don't. A gallery with a real HR division probably wouldn't let me curate at all, but if it did, there'd be an education director, and we'd write the labels by committee.

Jacopo and Vince are old pals, but he's supposedly difficult, so I've stayed out of his way. After the obligatory exchange about working late and how quiet it is, he asks if I want to see something. It's like being invited to the moon, clean and sterile, under the care of white-jacketed professionals. (Or, in Jacopo's case, white coveralled.) A pack of cigarettes bulges sexily in his breast pocket.

"I just took it out of the crate. For your show," he says, after we've put paper booties over our shoes and washed our hands at the sink by the door.

My show. A cardboard-encased painting, about 24 x 20, on a huge white table. Everything should already be in, given how soon we're hanging. *Should* being the key word. "What is it?"

"Wait." He photographs the package back and front, puts on gloves, undoes the heavy cardboard. Another layer, light but opaque, cross-hatched for extra density, like business envelopes or high denier tights. When he gets to the last layer, glassine tissue, the tape, tabbed for easy removal, marching across the seams in perfectly straight lines, he moves even more quietly, peeling the tape off in long slow strips. I hold my breath as he unfolds it to the left, then the right.

"É bello, no?" Jacopo says.

Super bello, but that's almost beside the point. I know this painting. I chose it. I wanted a Di Paolo and this one, in storage while its museum is being earthquake proofed, was perfect. But seeing it on the internet's one thing; seeing it on a wall in its full institutional armor is another, better, one; seeing it like this, back and front, knowing I could touch it if I wanted, is a different thing altogether. A lifetime of guards yelling at me for standing too close, and I'm maybe six inches from a painting Giovanni Di Paolo made in Siena in the 1400s. Eventually, I close my gaping mouth.

At the center is a boat in trouble, its masts snapped, everyone on deck praying. A haloed man in a black robe flies over the water, totally unfazed by the sails and mast tops floating around him. The boat isn't in the water, though, it's stuck astride small green hills—unless they're waves. When my eyes slow down, I realize that the storm that tore off the masts pushed the boat aground (unless

they're waves). It's a spatial problem: the saint's in the sky, above the boat, but the water—the recognizable water, anyway—is out beyond the boat, at the horizon. Figuring this out makes me smile. So do the masts in the sky, their tattered sails whipping and curving below St. Nicholas.

Seeing a painting in a book or on the web is like falling in love with someone just from letters and pictures. When they're finally in front of you, you realize everything you thought you knew was, not wrong, but inadequate. A failure of imagination. You can't stop looking, trying to keep their face, its impossible fullness, in your mind.

Jacopo coughs. "I'm standing it up," he says. "It's not good to lie down too long." Gloved hand on each side, he tilts the painting up, and turns toward the vertical files in the back of the room. They're wood, handmade, probably by Jacopo.

"Don't worry," he says. "It's not going in the file yet. I need to see it while I fill out the condition reports." He rests its bottom edge on a foam block on another table and tilts it toward the wall, stuffing wads of tissue paper behind the upper edge. "In case the wall's dirty," he says, "not that it would be. Now you can look as much as you want." He takes his gloves off, gets the plastic sleeve that was taped to the cardboard, and starts looking through the shipping papers.

Now that we're eye-to-eye, everything's different. In the middle ages, they thought the eye sent out light rays toward the object it was looking at while, at the same time, the object emitted rays of light back toward the eye. Seeing was reciprocal, an exchange. That's how I feel, like I'm not just beholding, but beheld, beholden. If Jacopo weren't here, I'd get even closer, nose to wood, breath misting the surface.

Now I see how the sails are attached to the mast pieces by rings, how sharp the broken edges are, how the praying sailors look up, first to God, then, as they realize that a miracle's occurring, to Saint Nicholas. The saint's feet are lost in a small cloudbank, white against the dark sky; his halo stands in for the moon.

The figure on the bottom right, a woman swimming between the hills that are both land and water, doesn't make sense, but there she is. This close, there's no way to pretend she's a drowned passenger or a sea creature. She's swimming on her stomach, naked except for the long hair trailing down her back, head turned toward the boat. A mermaid, a siren, who, along with the storm, has pulled the boat off course.

The first time I saw the painting, I thought it was St. Nicholas of Bari, but it's his namesake, St. Nicholas of Tolentino, patron saint of mariners. N of B is the patron saint of sailors, and no, I don't know the difference. He was a bishop, and one of his miracles, when he saved three dowry-less girls by dropping golden balls through their window, made him the prototype for St. Nick, AKA Santa Claus. We've got a painting of that in the show, and the best part is how St. Nick, who can fly, has dragged over a rock to stand on and has one bright-red stockinged-foot half way up the door, the better to reach the window.

Medieval people thought sight was dangerous because seeing was so close to wanting, and wanting brought trouble. As far as they were concerned, Eve's fall started way before she bit into the apple, was inevitable from the moment she took a good, i.e. covetous, look at it. This makes perfect sense to me. My invisible-ray-shooting eyes aren't just looking; they're tracking along the painting's surface, trying to devour the painting and have it, too.

A phone rings: Jacopo's. His wife, he says, about to step out to take it, but I go instead. I'm a little afraid that if I'm alone with the painting, I'll lick it. The old varnish gleams like candy.

The night guard calls to say someone is at the staff entrance claiming to know me. Do I want to come get him?

I grab my bag and head out to meet Josh. He's windblown from bro-ing around the city with Luca.

"How was it?"

"Can I buy you dinner?"

"Um, why?"

"Because the last time I saw you, you sent me off like a schoolboy on the back of some twit's bike, and I'd like my manhood back."

"Is it really that fragile?"

"Were you really on a date with that guy?"

"Luca? Sure. Why wouldn't I be?"

"He's not your type, is he?"

"Handsome, friendly, has a Vespa. He's everyone's type." The gallery fronts on a handsome piazza; we're at the side entrance by the loading dock.

"Except he's kind of an idiot."

"He's smarter in his native language. Walk." He starts moving. I wave good night to Marco.

"Maybe. But he's still in advertising."

"Don't be a snob. Did you enjoy the ride?"

"So much. Rome's beautiful on a Vespa. And you can't really hear someone when you've got a helmet on and the wind's swooshing by."

“Then what are you pissed about?” I head us toward the park.

“That I totally enjoyed myself. And that you were on a date. Can I take you to dinner?”

“Why dinner?”

“So that afterward, we’re standing on a street corner. . .”

“Are we waiting for a light?”

“No. We’re just stopped. You’re pointing out something, or you’ve just tied your shoe. I lean toward you, and keep leaning, slow enough that you have more than enough time to stop me or move if you aren’t interested, but you don’t. That’s why. Also, I’m hungry.”

Me, too. I swallow. I don’t look at him. “I’m wearing sandals. Did Luca get you high, or is this the beauty of Rome talking?”

“You mean, is that a gun in my pocket, or am I just happy to see you?”

“Don't make me laugh,” I say, laughing.

“Too late.”

I sober up. “Josh. Do you know...”

“Oh, come on.”

“What?”

“Were you about to ask if I know how old you are?”

“Maybe.”

“Lame.”

“Lame?”

“Lame. Cowardly, even.”

“What’d you like at the Barberini?”

“Is this a test?”

“Nope. Just wondering.”

“Slowing down to really see the paintings and knowing I didn’t have to look at them all.”

I point. “You’ve seen the Spanish steps, right? I’m not a fan, but the park behind them is beautiful. Maybe I’m just not interested.”

“Possible. Maybe even probable. But if that’s true, wouldn’t you have shot me down already?”

“Maybe I want to revel in the attention first.”

“Would you do that?”

“Maybe?”

The park is up about a million steps. Practice makes perfect; I’m neither sweating nor panting. When we’re at the top, I look at him. Big mistake.

“I have a daughter.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“Who has a huge crush on you.”

“Not to sound mean, but that really doesn’t have anything to do with me. It’s like me having a crush on, I don’t know, Marian Cottillard.”

“Marian Cottillard? Really? Good taste. Okay, so Marian Cottillard’s staying in your house. What then?”

“She thinks I’m great; she wishes me well. And oh yeah: she knows that doing anything with me would be gross and exploitative. Which is fine, because she’s not interested in me. Turns out, Marian Cottillard can’t stop thinking about my mother. And no, she did not expect that.” He covers his face with his hands.

Which are beautiful. “You don’t have to think about Giulia’s crush. I do.”

“Wait. Does that mean that otherwise you might...?”

"Here," I say, handing him a greasy bag.

"Here what?"

"The best pizza bianca in Rome. It cures everything. Hangovers. Bad exam results."

He pulls out the last square, takes a bite. "Jesus."

"I know."

He takes another bite. "Are you watching me chew?"

"Uh. Yes. Now that you mention it, yes."

"Because you find me compelling?"

"Because I can't believe I gave you that whole piece."

He breaks it in half, hands me the unbitten part. I take a bite, then another until I've finished it all. Then I lick salt and oil off my fingers.

"For fuck's sake, Connie."

I look up at him, and keep looking. I look and look, and when he picks up my hand and runs his mouth from the palm up my index finger and back down my ring finger, I sigh.

"I'm going to need audible consent," Josh says. "I went to Oberlin."

I'm already on tiptoe. "For fuck's sake. Yes."

Get up Everybody and Sing

I start the day by hanging the whole first room of the exhibit.

No. I start the day by sending Josh to Naples.

Well, no. I start the day by getting up early enough to make coffee for Giulia and ask if she's done her homework and what she's up to today. Like mothers do. It went pretty well, until she cranked up Leonard Cohen. If it be your will, over and over, until I told her if she didn't turn him off, I would.

As soon as G. was gone, out bopped Josh, jeans, bare feet, bare chest. Fuck me.

"Put a shirt on."

And while he dawdled, back came Giulia, because she'd forgotten her phone.

"Ciao!" Josh said.

"Ciao!" Giulia said, not even pretending not to stare.

"Oh, good, G, now you can say goodbye. Josh just told me he's going to Naples for a few days."

"But you're coming back, right?"

"Of course," I said.

"You heard her," Josh said.

"You might need a shirt," she said on her way out. "For the train. Have fun. Have granita. And pizza." She turned around at the door, waved, and snapped a picture. "For Monica. Ciao bello!"

"Put a shirt on," I said. "Before my mother-in-law or god knows who else drops in."

“Naples?”

“You’ll love it. It’s as close to New York in the ‘70s as you can get outside a videogame. And they have a funicular. The pastry’s too sweet, but Giulia’s right about the granita. I can never decide which is better, the lemon or the coffee.”

“If I put a shirt on, will you stop talking about granita? Please?”

I nodded.

He came back in a half-buttoned white oxford. “Do I need to put on socks?”

“No.” When I go to blow out the Moka, I get coffee grounds all over the counter.

“I’ve never felt so...unsettling. I like it.”

“I’ve seen chests before. It’s just...there’s a lot going on. In not enough space.”

“Would I still be going to Naples if I’d had a shirt on when Giulia came back?”

“Yes. But you’d have had a little more notice. Monica’s a big instagrammer, by the way. Don’t be surprised if you go viral.”

“Do you really want me to leave?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sorry you kissed me?”

“You kissed me.”

“They’re not mutually exclusive. Are you?”

“Obviously.”

He stuck his bare foot out and ran his toes up my shin.

“They don’t cover toe consent at Oberlin?”

“Naples is what, two hours away?”

“On the fast train, an hour. There’s WiFi now.”

“You know, right, that I’ll be back in a couple of days? And that you hustling me out of town is maybe the most flattering thing that’s ever happened to me?”

“Fuck off. This isn’t playing hard to get. This is shutting the barn door before the horses burn.”

I’ve never been at work so early. The gallery’s empty; most of the guards and the women at the ticket counter come in at 9:30. We open at 10:00. Guido and Vince roll in about 10:30. I go up to the first floor to see the Falconeri’s masterpiece, one of maybe three intact polytypic altars by the di Cione brothers. Six-feet across, five-feet high, it has its own wall. It’s saint central, the perfect introduction. People knock the di Ciones for not getting with Giotto’s new realism, but I don’t buy that. I love Giotto as much as anyone, but why should they have had to follow him? He hadn’t been anointed yet, and he wasn’t the only game in town.

It’s a little JC-centric (literally, there he is, dead center), but he’s surrounded by little angels who wear their curly hair rolled on the sides and tops of their heads like baby Mozarts. The two at the bottom are the best, swaddled in their wings and crossed like a coat of arms, they look like caterpillars on the verge of becoming their butterfly/angel selves. Full-grown miniaturized angels come next, then the parade of saints. St Michael’s to JC’s left, wearing gladiator thigh boots and floral pasties and standing on a dragon that looks like a very toothy, very scaly horse. Saint Catherine of Alexandria is next. She’s got all her emblems with her (which, probably because I’m the tiniest bit

high, turns into “I got all my emblems with me,” to the tune of Sister Sledge’s “We Are Family”): the palm frond that shows she’s a martyr, the book that shows her learning, and, of course, the wheel that was meant to break her and ended up broken. “We Are Family” came out when I was 11, peak disco: it played on every radio, through every open car window. The girls in the building worked up a version of it, complete with dancing. “We are family/I got all my sisters with me/We are family/Get up ev’rybody and sing.”

Next is Thomas Aquinas being presented to Jesus by the Virgin. He was canonized in the 1320s, and this was painted in the 1350s, so it’s hot off the presses. The other side of Jesus has Peter, kneeling to match Aquinas, then John the Baptist, then Paul. Everyone’s legible, you can tell the boys from the girls (not a given), and they’re all brand names. (Every saint’s a brand name in her hometown, even Saint Guinfort, whose grave was venerated because she saved a baby from a wolf. It turned out later that Guinfort was...a Great Dane. The saints in the di Cione are global—the Nike, Apple, and McDonalds of saints.)

It’d be nice to have a few more ladies in the upper section, but the predella, the row along the bottom, is better. My favorite’s Margaret, with her wee cross and dragon, but Lucy’s there, too, with her pot of fire, and Mary Magdalene with her tub of ointment. Augustine’s in full bishop drag, and St. Anthony the Great’s brought the pig who helped him steal fire from the devil. Because it’s our marquee painting and the start of the show, Guido’s giving me extra signage here to tell people what to look for and at.

The di Cione and its signage are on the first wall to the right of the door; the next wall has signage covering pilgrimage, intercession, miracles. The rest

will be apostles and evangelists, on the well-known curatorial principle of first called, first served.

We have two sets of images to use for planning. Vince likes them card sized, but I like at least a legal and preferably tabloid-sized image so I can see the saints' faces. I lay them out again to see if the order still works: they look great. Guido isn't going to close the room for the rehanging until the absolute last minute, but I'm cooking with gas.

I meet Vince at the entrance, take him upstairs to remind him where the text will be, then zip him down to the basement.

"Check it out." I lay out the apostles and co. for him to see. First up is Titian's John the Baptist. Ripped and manly, he wears his fur singlet like it's the latest thing, and stands as tall as the cliff he's next to. It's a nice contrast to the Di Ciones' John, whose fur peeks out from under a pink robe, and whose ringleted hair has way more product in it. He's left the lamb that stands in for Jesus home, and though he's pointing to Jesus (that's what John does, points to the one who comes after him), he's pretty restrained about it. Having failed to get Guido to agree that less is more, we decided to have two versions of each saint when possible. Less overwhelming, and it'll let us show different styles.

Next is St. Peter, partly because he's one of the first called, partly because he's in the di Cione. It's a super moody de Ribera, Peter guilt-ridden and penitent after betraying Jesus. That takes us to the third wall, the biggest of the four. I start horizontal, with John the Evangelist on Patmos: the beast with seven heads is about John's size, but is he frightened? He is not.

I keep walking Vince through the line-up.

"You ran the numbers?"

“Everything fits.”

“What time did you get here?”

“About eight fifteen.” Nothing to see there.

“How was the date?”

The date. “The date. Luca’s nice. Too enthusiastic for my taste, but nice.”

“Too enthusiastic? That’s the problem? Did he talk incredibly fast while explaining how he’d gone ahead and planned something in two hours without checking with his colleague?”

“He went on about WiFi on trains. And I haven’t changed much: it’s just a variation on your plan.” I point out how the round Matthew and Mark are on either side of the exit door, catty corner from the entrance. Vince is a sucker for a tondo.

“Where’s Saint Thomas?”

“Vince. It’s a lousy painting.” It’s a good story, Thomas sticking his thumb knuckle-deep into Christ’s side to make sure the man in front of him really was the resurrected JC, but our painting’s muddy and generic. “Thomas fans can go to San Croce and see his actual thumb. Look, that Guercino St. John you love is over here; I played fair.”

Vince is looking at the Malesskircher next to the Guercino. They couldn’t be more different. Guercino’s all soulful tortured eyes and face, whereas you kind of suspect that Malesskircher’s using Matthew as a cover for his office supply fetish. Matthew’s sharpening his pencil at his reading desk; he’s got another behind him, open to show his protractor, wooden pencil box, extra quills and nibs, a couple rosaries (wrong theologically and chronologically, but I

bet they're fun to paint). I can see Vince wanting to find fault, but the two paintings look great together.

"No second date? You didn't like him?"

"I liked him fine, but there wasn't any spark."

"Sei sicura?"

I had an Italian teacher who'd ask you that when she was hoping you'd self correct. Are you sure? "Yup. Why?"

"Because the only thing that would explain all this energy is un colpo di fulmine."

A lightning bolt of love.

Filed Under Italian

I ditch work early and take a nap. The house is blissfully quiet; no one's explaining why he didn't join a frat or how he met his first girlfriend—when Monica and Giulia get their hands on Josh it's like a *Tigerbeat* interview. No one's playing Leonard Cohen or asking what our favorite part of the Old Testament is. A trick question, I'm pretty sure, since G. was surprised I had an answer. I let Josh break the news that Jews don't call it that.

I take off my shoes and bra and hit the couch. I love this couch. I'm drifting off when I hear a beep.

I think I just saw Al Pacino, circa Dog Day Afternoon.

Don't text and walk, I type back. Rome is kindergarten. Naples is Post Grad.

I have two hours before I have to get dressed and go to Marianna's. I turn off the phone. When I turn it back on, no one's dead, and there's a text from Josh showing a tiny granita place wallpapered in articles calling its granita the best in Naples and thus the world. In the mirror, even with nap face, I can see the residual glow that made Vince think I was into Luca. Fuck.

I'm meeting Marianna for dinner—since Fede died, we make it a point to see her regularly. We were full of ideas when he died: maybe she wanted to travel or spend more time with her brother and sister. She wanted to stay right here.

Marianna's house hasn't changed since the first time I saw it: it makes me feel young. She's reading Isaac Bashevis Singer, she tells me. It's for her book group.

Of all our big ideas for Marianna's post-Fede life, the only one she liked was a book group, possibly because she came up with it herself.

"Do you like him?"

"Un sacco."

She loves him.

"But I don't have to tell you. Your mother told me you're distantly related."

Of course she did. "Yeah, us and all the other Ellis Island Singers. What do you like about it?"

"How he describes the peasants. Even when they believe something ridiculous, like they're cursed, or their wife is possessed, they're down to earth. They think about this life, not the next. But at the same time, they're religious."

"Since when do you like religion?"

She shakes her head, looking like the teacher she used to be. "What I don't like about religion is that it makes people passive. The meek will inherit the earth, just not when they need it, and not if they try to speed things up. These people aren't like that."

"You'd be fine if Giulia got interested in Judaism?"

"Certo. Why not?"

"Superstition? Opiate of the people?"

"Marx was Jewish."

"That's how he knew!"

"Trotsky, too. They wanted to build something better, here, now."

My phone beeps. *Have you called Daniele?*

"Anything important?"

“Just Ric.”

“If Giulia gets interested in Judaism, send her over here. I want to ask if she thinks Judaism’s focus on this world influenced Marx.”

I doubt it, but the problem with all the stuff I don’t know about this benighted topic is that I only realize I don’t know it when I realize it might be useful to know.

I look at the text. “Is it okay if I make a phone call before we go out?”

“Sure. I’ll keep reading.”

I walk deeper into the house, and dial the number Ric gave me.

“Pronto,” a man says.

“Ciao. I’m Connie Singer. I think Ric said I’d be calling?”

“Ah, yes, of course, ciao! We can speak English if you prefer,” he says, in barely accented English.

I think of Marianna in the next room. “Actually, that’d be great. Thanks. Ric said you lived abroad for a long time,” I say.

“England, mostly.”

“Did you like it?”

“Some of the time.”

“What’d you miss?”

“The food, of course. And sunshine. Not very original. Oh, and coffee.”

“That wasn’t covered under food?”

“Not sufficiently.”

“Fair. It was nice of you to talk to Ric. I don’t know what he’s been asking, but you’ve been really patient.”

“Hasn’t he been talking it over with you? He said you were both concerned about...”

“Giulia. Yes. Well. We’re differently concerned. I did learn a bit about Livorno, though. You weren’t tempted to move back there?”

“God, no. Ric said you’re from New York? What do you miss about it?”

“Chinese food. Ethnic diversity.” There’s a pause, which is fair: I called him, after all. “I think Ric thinks you’ll tell me different stuff, secrets. Which is a little creepy, actually, like in a blood libel way, you know?” Jesus. Of course, he doesn’t know. “Sorry,” I say. “That’s not what he meant. Obviously.”

“You know that Jewish boy the Pope kidnapped and raised Catholic? Right before unification? You’ve heard of that?”

He doesn’t wait for an answer. I have, for the record.

“He’s a distant relative.”

“Oh, God. I’m sorry.” Wait...that’s insane, but it has nothing to do with the blood libel, does it? How quickly can I Google this?

There’s a pause. “That was too easy.”

“You made that up? What’s wrong with you?”

“Come on, European Jews have so little, the least we can do is make American Jews feel guilty, no?”

“You have history. Gravitas. We have Sandy Koufax and Jewish American Princess jokes.”

“Are you going to tell me one?”

“Absolutely not. Not only are they sexist, they’re not funny.”

“Hmm.”

“Anyway, Ric says you ... Italian Jews don’t really tell Jewish jokes. Which you know, because you told him.” Why and how this even came up is not something that bears thinking about.

“True. But that doesn’t mean I don’t like them. What would be the worst-case scenario?”

“With Giulia? Her becoming religious. Orthodox, or God forbid, Hasidic.”

“You can be religious without being Orthodox.”

“Of course,” I say. Marianna’s got an old drawing of G’s up that I’ve forgotten. A dog’s telling another dog why he shouldn’t chase squirrels. “But she might go all the way. She’s a romantic.” And a fan of the underdog.

“Do you really think that?”

“I don’t know. She wants to belong, I think. To fit in. Your English is extremely good, by the way.”

“Altretanto.”

Which means back at ya. “Grazie.” What do I want to ask this man? Can he actually get exercised about eating pork? Does he go to synagogue, and if so why, and what does he feel when he’s there? How many of the things that Jews are supposed to do does he do and does he think it’s enough? What would enough look like, and who decides? Apparently, Ric and I aren’t so different: we both think there are answers and that this guy might have them.

“You don’t want to?” he says.

“To what?”

“Fit in. You live in a country you’re not from.”

“I’m not against it, but yeah, I guess it’s not a priority. What about you? Is that why you went to England?”

“Fuga dei cervelli,” he says. “I went for the job.”

“Why’d you come back?”

“My mother’s old. And England was wearing thin.”

“Too much Brexit talk?”

“That, but other stuff, too. I got tired of always being the Italian. No matter how good my English was, I felt like they were picturing me in one of those Venetian plague masks with the bird beak. You know?”

“You must have run with a cultured crowd: Americans would imagine you twirling a pizza.”

“You don’t feel like that?”

“Like they’re stereotyping me? Not really. For one thing, New Yorkers never feel like people mean us when they say American. Also, my Italian’s even better than your English.”

“Really? Why aren’t we speaking it?”

“Because I’m at my mother-in-law’s. And you know....”

“Right, the secret matzo recipe. Like I’d give it to you over the phone. But I’m happy to tell you anything else you want to know.”

There’s a pause.

“If you’re still figuring out your questions,” he says, “we can talk another time.”

“I’m not sure I have anything to ask.”

“Really? The horse is here, mouth open, and you’re not going to take advantage? You don’t want to know about being Jewish in Italy?”

“Technically, I’m Jewish in Italy.”

“You’re a Jew in Italy. It’s not the same. If it were, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

It occurs to me that Daniele might be a jackass. Which, given the blood libel comment, might make two of us. “What should they have thought of you as?”

“Excuse me?”

“Besides Italian.”

“All kinds of things. Handsome. Football player. Lawyer. Jew.”

“You’re all that?”

“Well, I don’t want to sound immodest...”

“You didn’t mind a second ago.”

“Touché.”

“Are you that good at football?”

“Then, yes. Now, no.”

“They might have filed handsome under Italian. Football, too.”

“They filed good cook under Italian. Right next to garlic and talking with my hands.”

“Is it 1953 in England?”

“What do Americans think about Italians?”

“That you talk with your hands. But so does most of the East coast, and I think the whole country’s incorporated garlic. They didn’t think of you as Jewish?”

“It never crossed their minds. I was Italian. Basta.”

“What’s your last name? Ric never said.”

“Segre.”

I laugh. Daniele Segre is functionally Solomon Minkowitz, minus the throat-stuck gutturals. "When Italians meet you, do they know you're Jewish?"

"Sometimes, if they know my last name. In high school once, I put on my glasses and a friend said, oh, now you look Jewish."

"People of the book equals people of the glasses?"

"He didn't explain. But when Italians know, they never forget it, which means you can't either."

"Really?"

"Really. You're always on the outside, it's just a question of how far."

"So you don't like that in Italy you're always a Jew, and you don't like that in England you never are?"

"Exactly."

"I don't mind being incognito," I tell him.

"Are you ashamed?"

"Are you kidding? But I'm not proud, either. I don't get people who wear *Kiss Me I'm Polish* or *I Heart Being Black* t-shirts. You were born that way; you didn't have a choice."

"Of course you have a choice."

I'm losing track of the yous. "I do? Or other people?"

"You. You could use Ric's last name, and it would never come up."

"Pass, you mean? Why would I do that?"

"The pleasure of being incognito?"

"Temporarily incognito. I'd never deny I was Jewish. It's..."

"Pointless. Historically speaking."

He's right, but that's not what I meant. It's bad karma. I'd tell him the Charlie Chaplin thing if I knew it was true.

"I prefer people know I'm Jewish up front," he says. "And if I think they don't, I tell them."

How do those conversations go, I wonder. "Because...?"

"Because they should know who they're talking to. And in England, they should know things aren't as simple as they think. The downside is that it opens the door for people to talk about how they admire the Jews. So family and community oriented."

"Aren't they? Look at you, back in Italy to take care of your mother."
(Look at you, an ocean away from yours, Claude says in my ear.)

"There is literally nothing more Italian than a grown man planning his life around his mother."

This is not something I can dispute. I hear Marianna laughing at something, presumably one of Singer's devout but earthy shtetl dwellers. "Ric's mother just told me that Jews handle religion better than Christians, because we don't get fixated on some imaginary after life."

"That's the positive version. Aquinas said Jews were cursed because they were in thrall to this world instead of the heavenly one. Letter, not spirit; body, not soul."

Maybe I should try that out on Giulia. I'm all about the spirit, I could say. I don't need to get bogged down in the letter. But there I'd be again, siding with the wrong team. Thomas Aquinas, not to be confused with doubting Thomas, who's always struck me as kind of dumb (what did sticking his thumb into Jesus actually prove?), is a big shot philosopher and Doctor of the Church. The first

saints were all martyrs, but once most of Europe was Catholic, the church expanded the parameters.

My phone beeps, I pull it away from my sweaty ear and see Caravaggio's *Flagellation of Christ*, Jesus gleaming out of the darkness like he's lit from the inside. Since it's Caravaggio, JC's built, but realistically. He's not a gymmed-up Michelangelo with muscles in places they shouldn't be. I have to admit, his collarbone-trapezius-Adam's Apple sweep is a little riveting. Caravaggio painted this scene twice; this version's better. It's also at the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples. After I stare at it a while, it occurs to me to scroll down.

Not to brag, but I played Jesus in Godspell.

Maybe not all about the spirit. "Sorry, what?"

"Call me when you know what you want to know," Daniele says, and hangs up.

The World Cracking

Giulia's at Monica's—with Josh away, home's not much of a draw. He texts while I'm taking a bath.

Sorry if this is weird, but my grandmother just told me she's worried about Going."

Going where, I wonder, till the next message comes in.

Fucking Autocorrect. Gogo. She's worried about Gogo.

I slide lower in the tub. *Did she say why?*

She went over, and there was a lot of cleaning going on. Is that bad? It's spring.

Cleaning is manic. Can be.

Manic like manic depressive?

Minus the depressive part.

Oh. Are you worried?

I don't know yet. Tell her thanks, and can you give her my contact info?

She doesn't understand WhatsApp.

Email's fine.

Email, he types back, lacks immediacy.

It'll be okay.

It—your mother?

No. It—email.

I like the real time effect. I can imagine you typing. And breathing.

When I don't say anything, he texts again: *Are you imagining me typing?*

Not really. I try to remember when I last shaved my legs. Doesn't matter; it's time.

Hurtful. Then: *I like the back and forth. The you then me then you thing. It's rhythmic. Which is hot.*

You're easy. Chess? Seesaw?

Nope. Okay, seesaw, but only in midair.

Isn't that the opposite of you then me then you?

Blissful consummation.

So, typing.

You type, I read. I type, you read. It's a bunch of tiny high-speed letters.

Epistolary novels for Millennials.

Mean.

The water's cooling down. *I need to decide if I'm worried about my mother.*

Right. Is it more a zero to sixty thing or a slow burn?

Variable. Wait, what? Me worrying or her mania?

Her. But if there are other possibilities, you know how to reach me.

I stare at the phone with a stupid smile. Just as I'm about to put it down and turn on the shower, there's one last ping.

When the rhythm falters, it's hotter.

Maybe I can hear him breathing. Kids today.

I haul myself out of the tub, steamy and pliant, and email Harry to see if he'll check on Gogo. We grew up together, and he still lives in what he likes to call his ancestral apartment. His mother was a singer, and she'd leave him with us when she had gigs, sometimes as long as a week. I don't know if she didn't

notice Ma's laissez-faire parenting or if the mothers who did motherly things said no.

When we were old enough to be useful, we got to go to the theater after school. We'd fetch and carry, pick up sandwiches, coffee, cigarettes. I don't think Giulia believes me that there used to be separate want ads for men and women; I know she doesn't believe they sold ten-year-olds cigarettes.

Harry gets back to me about an hour later. He's an actor/copy editor and drag queen emeritus; he's home a lot.

I play the video he sent: Gogo's walking back and forth between the living room and the bedrooms with armloads full of stuff. She looks good, although her hair's maybe a little too interestingly spiky. (Ageism or Gogoism?) Harry zooms in on the pile: clothes and books and drawings from high school I've forgotten making, much less saving. She drops a thick sheaf of the envelopes you used to get photos back in, and photos and negatives drift onto the pile and the floor. Between the clothes and the paper, she's got the makings of a nice bonfire.

The next load is a big tangle of fabric. Some I don't know, but I definitely recognize the mustard yellow chenille. I was a lion in it one year; Claude was a duckling the next. When she brings in a pile of red satin, Harry breaks the fourth wall.

"Gogo, don't tell me you're throwing that out?"

If she's not, what the hell is she doing with it?

"Throwing it out, giving it away, digitalizing it."

"You're digitalizing the satin?"

"The photos, Harry, keep up. The satin, who knows? Do you know anyone who'd want it?"

The camera's all over the place, but I can tell from Harry's voice—Jessye Norman meets yelping dog—that he's drawn up his six-foot-something self and gone into drag mode. It's not the costume, he once told me, it's the attitude. Lady Finger could teach posture and deportment to debutantes, and in a just world, she would. Red satin would be a very good look for her.

I can hear him tell her this, but he must have dropped the camera because all I see is the ceiling and the legs of the coffee table.

"You've really gotten the spring-cleaning bug," Harry says, back to his regular voice.

Why didn't I teach him to recognize manic behavior? And why didn't it occur to me that the refugee thing was a sign? Gogo Singer saves the world is textbook grandiosity.

He's picked up the camera, because I can see Gogo holding up a huge tangle of muslin. "Can you use this? It takes dye well."

"Cheap looking."

"True," Ma says, stuffing it into a big garbage bag. There are bags on the floor, on armchairs, draped over lamps. It's a garbage bag fantasia.

I dial Claude's number, then regret it. Get ahead of myself much? Yes, yes I do. "Manic episode alert," I say.

"Did someone say wolf?"

"She's on a cleaning jag. You tell me."

"Good. Do you know how much ancient crap she's got in there?"

"I do. Although I don't get it. How could the costume box still be full?"

"Was it going to magically empty itself?"

“No, I know. I just figured...” Nothing Claude’s saying is wrong. Spring cleaning could be a good thing. I’m 46: no one, not even me, needs my high school drawings.

“How do you know all this? Did you actually call her?”

“Not actually, no.” *Actually.*

“Then?”

“Betse saw the wolf, too. She told Josh; Josh told me. I called Harry, Harry went down to Ma’s, shot some video, sent it to me. She’s in the putting stuff in bags phase.”

“What do you want me to do, go down and help her organize them?”

“What? No.” That doesn’t even make sense: Claude could sooner fly than help someone organize or clean. I learned to clean by watching Marianna; I learned why after G. was born. I’m not sure what Claude’s place looks like these days, but I assume Mike takes steps to limit the damage. She’s famous in her department for her messiness. It’s the one place she’s exactly like Ma. Do I find it secretly satisfying? Is the Pope Catholic?

“You don’t have to do anything. I’m just alerting you.”

“That’s convenient.”

I make a face, realize she can’t see me. “Convenient?”

“You told me. Your work is done.”

“Jesus, Claude: you just said you don’t think anything needs to be done.”

Silence. I don’t have to worry about letting anything slip about Josh: this is not a conducive vibe. “Are you just mad at me or is something else going on?”

“I’m tired.”

She sounds global tired, not end of the week tired, but I don't push it.

"Okay."

"How's Harry?"

"He looks great. Ma's giving him a huge pile of red satin. Lady Finger's the daughter she never had." My legs are incredibly smooth.

"And Harry's the son. Bonus."

"Remember when Lisa said the reason there were so few boys in the building is because our mothers douched with red wine to target the boy swimmers?"

"Wouldn't that sting—a lot?"

"Probably. And Lisa was ten; she didn't exactly have a degree in biology. How would you explain it?"

"I think sometimes they went with the fathers...you know, after a split."

"Hunh. Really? They'd break up the family?"

Claude snorts.

"What?"

"If the fathers were leaving, the family was already breaking up."

"The marriage was breaking up. That's different."

"It's good Mike can't hear you. He'd be all over that."

"All over it how?"

"He's got a—theory, I guess? Although he'd say that's like calling evolution a theory. He thinks Mom was a bad role model."

"Duh. But for what specifically?"

"For the way we—he doesn't care about you, but you, too—think of men."

“Go on.”

“He says she made us think they were—optional, I guess. Only necessary for their seed.”

“That’s a fact, biologically speaking.”

“Biologically speaking. Did you get your PhD from the university of Lisa?”

“Good one. So what I said is what, proof?”

“Yup.”

“This isn’t some general philosophical debate, right? It’s about the two of you?”

Big sigh.

“He’s a jerk,” I tell her. “Sorry if I’m being a bad role model.” My room’s muggy; I head for the terrace, but somehow end up in my office, AKA Josh’s room.

“That’s not fair. I haven’t told you his side.”

“You just did. I mean, if you’re having problems”—are they having problems?—“maybe that’s about him, or how you interact, or I don’t know, that he feels free to rag on your family and how you were raised. There’s no reason it has to be about Ma or feminism. Maybe he should consider that?”

I start rifling through the stuff Josh left on the desk, mainly tickets. The Barberini, Borghese, the ancient frescoes, the Colosseum, the Forum (it’s one ticket for both, but since the Forum’s filled with identical looking pieces of Roman buildings that the guidebooks insist used to be temples, house, stores, etc., I usually tell people to skip it). There’s a half-finished postcard to Betse; I don’t read it. I retain some honor. “Sorry, what?”

“I said, you can’t separate those things. The personal is political, remember? He’s not dissing Mom—well, he is, but not only. I mean, that’s not the main point...”

I snort.

“You’re a piece of work,” Claude says. “Really. As soon as Mike points out the flaws in Mom’s M.O., you start defending her.”

“It just seems self serving. But maybe I’m not getting it. What does he think?”

“That I don’t take him seriously. Or no. That I think men are just passing through.”

“That’s ridiculous: You’ve been married fourteen years.” Giulia was their flower girl (Claude’s wedding wasn’t full-on white dress and puffed sleeves, but the most feminist thing about it was that Ma gave her away, which, if giving away was being done, was a given. Giulia was adorable.) “If either of you were just passing through, you’d be long gone, no?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Anyway, you like being married.” Giulia’s self-portrait stares sternly down at me.

“Do I?”

“Don’t you?”

“I mean, what’re you basing that on?”

“You like that stuff. Joint bank accounts. Wearing a ring.” Wedding ring, okay, but Claude wears an engagement ring. Which I don’t think she even likes, unless I’m related to someone with a taste for pear-cut diamonds.

"I like being married to Mike. And just because it's not what you'd like doesn't mean I'm in it for the bank account. Stability. Someone to come home to. He's funny."

"Not as funny as you are."

"You think I'm funny because you think you're funny."

"I am funny."

"Freud says jokes are a form of aggression."

"Yeah, well, Freud thinks women have penis envy. Anyway, we're saying the same thing. You like being married...to Mike. You're with him when you don't have to be, when you know no harm comes of not having a husband and father in the picture: how is that not love?" I hear honking. "Where are you?"

"No harm? You never missed having a father?"

Guess it doesn't matter where she is. We talked about this stuff when we were kids, but at this point, there's not much to say. We assume they aren't the same person on the fool-me-once, shame-on-you; fool-me-twice, shame-on-me principle. We disagree about whether Gogo knows who they were and if she'll ever tell us. I suspect Claude has tried, but since she hasn't told me, I haven't asked.

"When I was little, sure. You know that. I thought about where he might be, how he could be anyone. The guys at the theater. The guy we bought the paper from. Mr. Jackson." Best second grade teacher ever. We both had him.

"Mr. Jackson would have been a great dad, but it didn't occur to you that you'd be black?"

"Later. And by then I'd mostly stopped thinking about it."

"Why then?"

"I made friends with kids with two parents. They fought, they played favorites, played the kids off each other. Having a father didn't seem like it was automatically better. Two parents just means you're more likely to be outnumbered."

"Weren't you precocious."

"Okay, I didn't literally think that. But I couldn't see that having two parents was automatically better. And it meant you had to wear clothes all the time. I bet Mike doesn't mind Ma's it's-your-house-so-you-don't-need-to-wear-clothes-unless-you-want-to policy." Claude's like Ma: she can put on anything and look good. Too bad she's committed to academic dowdiness. Mike probably thanks his lucky stars when she comes home and takes off her boring straight skirt.

"And you don't think any of this contributed to your divorce?"

"I think it contributed to not being afraid to get a divorce."

"Isn't that another way of saying you were just passing through?"

"Are you seeing how it feels to argue Mike's side?"

"Maybe."

"And?"

"I think he has a point," Claude says, "but about you, not me."

"Thanks."

"It's not an insult if you're fine with it. You're fine with it, aren't you?"

"Yup."

"And with Ric paying alimony. I'm pretty sure that isn't what your feminist heroines were all about."

"It's child support."

“Child support that means you don’t have to work a full-time job and you have an apartment in downtown Rome.”

“Centro Storico. And I work a million freelance jobs. You think that’s easier?” No answer. “You know what? I think they’d be fine with it. Remember that statistic about how every woman in America was one divorce away from welfare? Women being able to support themselves doesn’t make being a deadbeat dad cool.”

Silence. I get out of Josh’s room and start circling through the apartment. “How long have you guys been having problems?”

“Not problems, issues.”

“What are you doing about them?”

“Talking.”

“To ... someone?”

No answer, which is probably a yes. “Sorry about the whole date night thing.”

“Yeah. Sorry about the alimony crack.”

No one says anything for a while. I assume Claude’s thinking about Mike. I’m thinking about our childhood. We didn’t have a bedtime or packed lunches, but we had opinions. Beliefs. *Keep your laws off my body. Women belong in the House...and the Senate. A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle.* I had a t-shirt that said that. Orange, of course. The 70’s were basically sponsored by the color orange.

When I think of the phrase sisterhood is powerful, I picture the women in our building. They kept an eye on each other’s kids, loaned each other milk and sugar and money. At night and on weekends, they’d hang out in clatches in

someone's kitchen. Lisa's mother cut hair, so someone would usually be getting her hair washed at the sink. They'd attach a hose to the faucet, and she'd lean back and smile as someone ran hot water over her scalp. Then she'd wrap it in a towel, pick up her wineglass and wait for her turn with Lisa's mother.

She'd make a few cuts, step back, swap the scissors for a cigarette, look at what she'd done through one eye like she was sighting a gun. The other women talked and laughed and complained, usually about their husbands. It's when their voices went tight with anger and something I eventually realized was contempt that divorce was imminent. They'd congratulate Gogo for never marrying.

I stopped hanging out in those kitchens when I stopped wanting to be around Ma. But I still loved them. I don't hear the word coven much, (why is that, I wonder, or no, I don't), but when I do, I picture the building women talking. It's less languorous and late night, more percussive, angrier. Good anger, mostly, energetic, buzzy, like the sound of Mizzzzzzzzzz back when you had to correct people, when no one said it naturally. There was a line then, something like if women told the truth about their lives, the world would crack open. I grew up with that sound, the world cracking.

I'm still circling: kitchen/living room, Josh's room, my room, back around. I don't go into G's room. She keeps a diary, and I don't trust myself.

They interrupted each other, voices crossing and trailing off. They agreed, argued, laughed. Even when they were angry, they laughed. In college when I encountered T.S. Eliot's women talking of Michelangelo, I thought, that's not what they're talking about, dickhead. They're talking about you. They have

your number; soon they'll have your job, some of them will have slept with your wife. It didn't work out that way, but why let that spoil the memory?

"Hey, Claude."

"Yeah?"

"Remember when Ma and the other building women dressed us up as grapes, and we stood in front of the Shopwell telling people to boycott grapes to support the farmworkers?"

"And you think *I* romanticize our childhood?"

"I think you smooth out the jagged edges."

"Whereas you keep them nice and sharp."

"To each her own. It doesn't bother you when Mike trashes the way we grew up?"

"Nah. I figure you'll handle that."

"I appreciate your faith. Do you really think Ma's fine?"

"Who knows. But she mostly takes her meds these days. How fast was she talking?"

"Normal speed."

There's a snort. "Normal to you."

"Normal for her, which is what you asked."

"I gotta go," Claude says.

"Sleep tight," I say, even though I'm the one going to bed. I get ready, not skipping the skincare regime I've recently recommitted to. Ma had a stroke about five years ago; small, but that's not the point. The point is I didn't get on a plane. We should have a plan in place; we don't, unless hoping that Ma dies quietly in her sleep (uncharacteristic and highly unlikely) counts.

Alimony, for fuck's sake.

Someone's Mother, and Responsible

Josh is back. He and G are sitting at the table with what must be forty drawings, pastels, gouaches, and watercolors, piled up around them. There's no reason he should have told me he was coming. Except basic manners.

"Josh is back," Giulia says.

"I see. Ciao. Bentornato."

"Are you calling me a tornado? I like it."

"It's just welcome back," Giulia says.

"Sorry I didn't give you more notice," he says.

I'm not sure I can calibrate the look I give him with enough precision to convey that *more* implies *some*, but I try.

"Giulia's showing me her art," he adds.

Why do people keep telling me things I can see? "Beato te," I say and mean.

He looks at G. "Literally, blessed you, but people use it to say someone's lucky," she tells him. "He hasn't told me about Naples," she adds. "He was waiting for you."

"Beata me," I say, only half sarcastically. I put the groceries away, feel the cool air from the fridge on my face.

Josh is asking Giulia how she chooses her subjects, what she likes about drawing, the different between gouache and watercolor, what's hard, what's easy. What a very nice young man he is, drawing my daughter out, asking her questions, taking her seriously.

I wash my hands, then take out the mallet Marianna says every well-equipped kitchen should have and pound the chicken breast into submission.

“This is delicious,” Josh says, eating more lemon chicken.

“It really is,” Giulia says, smiling at me.

Josh regales us with tales of Naples. I provide an update on the show—behind, but getting there, possibly more manpower needed for the hanging. Josh asks how Monica is. Not so well, it turns out. Monica’s mother’s insisting she go to Florence with her family for Easter, and she doesn’t want to.

“Pascua con chi vuoi,” Giulia says, as if it were a law and not just an expression.

“Easter with who you want, Christmas with your family. It’s a saying,” I tell Josh.

“That’s a saying? It’s a sentence.”

“In Italian, it rhymes. There’s a joke that goes with it.”

“So...?”

I’m off jokes, but okay. “Natale con i tuoi; Pascua con chi vuoi; after all, that’s how Jesus did it.”

“That’s good,” Josh says.

Giulia rolls her eyes.

“I’m not sure it applies if you’re actually living with your family,” I say.

Another eye roll.

They clear the table, and Josh offers to do the dishes. “But first, una passeggiata.” He puts the accent on the wrong syllable, so it takes us a second.

“You learned Italian?” G. says

“I learned what a passeggiata is. All of Naples takes one. By the water, or in the old city, or that big shopping street. Let’s go,” he says to the room. “We can get gelato. Although now that I’ve had granita...” he trails off.

“You two go,” I hear myself say. “I need to work on the label texts.” Inside jokes are a privilege, not a right, and his has been withdrawn.

Petty, yes, but I really do have to work. If I ever want a full-time job, and I do, the show needs to be good. Or at least open on time. But before I start, I’ll sit quietly and remind myself that the person I care about most in the world is Giulia, and as much as I’ve pissed her off, screwed up, and otherwise failed, I’d never do anything to hurt her. Which means that Josh turning up with no notice and a selective memory couldn’t matter less. Which doesn’t stop me from taking pleasure in Josh’s expression, or from saying, “I can do the dishes,”

“No,” Josh says. “Please. You’re making me feel like a bad guest. I’ll do them. We won’t stay out long.”

“Definitely not,” Giulia says. “It’s a school night.”

It’s nearly nine: if she has homework, she shouldn’t go.

“Should we bring you back some gelato?” Josh asks.

“No, thanks.”

Finally, they leave. Do you know why the evening stroll is such an Italian tradition? Because it puts off dinner, which is good because there’s literally nothing else to do here after dinner besides go for a walk, maybe get a gelato or one last espresso. But those sound lovely, you say. Yeah. Well.

I’ll tell you what’s lovely. Being married. Because it means the person you’re mad at is around and doing something you can pick a fight about. In lieu

of which, I do the dishes. Then I pour myself a glass of the sweet wine we keep for Marianna, and get out some biscotti.

Before Guido left for Florence—Vince says Guido was picking up his new shoes—the three of us met. Pro-forma, until he asked why Maria Maddalena had a room to herself. When I started to explain, he put up a stop-talking hand. “Don’t tell me,” he said. “Just make sure the visitors understand it. That they feel it.”

If you can’t feel Mary Magdalene, I feel sorry for you, I said to Vince on our way to get coffee. Meetings with Guido require more than our usual coffee place offers, so we walk ten minutes to a fancy Neapolitan joint. We don’t have to worry about running into other Falconeri people, and the pastries are fantastic. This is key, because Vince thinks extended exposure to Guido sucks out your life force and sugar helps restore it.

To which Vince said, sure, but that doesn’t make Guido wrong.

“Since when do you agree with Guido?”

“Since he’s right.”

“Did Guido suck out your brain?”

Vince forked up a chunk of babà al rhum, shiny with syrup. “You know I think he got the job because he looks good in a suit.”

“And because he knows everyone.”

“And because he knows everyone. But he’s not talking about Mary Magdalene; he’s not even talking about art. He’s talking about selling. Sure you don’t want a bite?”

He knows how I feel about babà al rhum. I opened my mouth to object to what he’d said, and up went his hand. Twice in 45 minutes. A new record.

“He just wants you to sell the room, give her context, don’t assume people know things they don’t.”

“If not, what?”

“If not, Pamphilj.”

It’s the Galleria Pamphilj, not the Barberini, that’s the Falconeri’s real competition. And by the way Guido counts things, we’ve already lost. The Pamphilj family are related to Andrea Doria and Pope Innocent the X (who just happens to have been painted by Velazquez). There was an article about them in *Vanity Fair* a few years ago; Guido probably envies them their scandal—it’s so old school aristocratic. But when Vince and I are doing the scoring, the way they hang their art—old-fashioned salon style, paintings double and triple hung—means we win. Even worse, nothing’s labelled, because labels would ruin the whole visiting-a-noble-palazzo effect. (You should go, for the Velazquez alone, not to mention the three Caravaggios, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.)

I gave Vince the finger.

I lick moscato off the last biscotto and get to work. The Magdalene’s not hard to sell—she’s the most painted saint for a reason, and it’s not just her breasts—the question is where to start. Should I open by saying that she’s a trinity in and of herself, a composite of (at least) three different women? Or by pointing out that the world’s most famous prostitute wasn’t one, that nowhere in the Gospels does it say that the Mary out of whom Jesus cast seven devils exchanged sex for money?

I check to make sure my phone’s on, because I’m someone’s mother, and responsible, and if Josh were hit by a bus, I’d want Giulia to be able to reach me.

The fact that she's the one who told the apostles about the resurrection definitely goes in. JC's first act as the resurrected savior is to tell Mary that he's back. Of course, it helped that she was actually at the tomb—the apostles had all taken off in case crucifixion was contagious.

Around 10:30, I move shop into my bedroom.

They come back about a half hour later.

"Mom?" Giulia says to the empty kitchen. "I guess she went to bed," she says, almost achieving a whisper.

They say goodnight and go their separate ways.

Obviously, I'm not putting in anything Calvin said. He called her grief pointless and said she and the other women only stayed at the tomb because they didn't understand that his spirit was more important than his body. I'm no theologian, but isn't him being back in the flesh—human yet divine—kind of a big deal? Besides, is it a miracle if no one's there to see it?

My phone pings. Josh.

Did you miss me?

In the last two hours? I'm okay, thanks.

You're mad, aren't you?

Nope.

Sigh.

That's what I get. He literally typed the word *sigh* and hit send. He must realize how lame that is, because he doesn't wait for an answer.

Can I come by?

To my room?

Yes. To talk, I mean.

Aren't you supposed to be smart?

Yeah, I'm wondering about that, too.

He's a twit, but at least he knows how to use a comma.

I'm going to bed, he adds.

Knock yourself out.

I'd be mad, too, if that helps.

Say good night, Gracie.

Goodnight, Gracie.

Grandmama's boy: knows all kinds of things he shouldn't.

In the middle ages, the compiler of the Golden Legend, the best-selling, endlessly plagiarized, translated-into-every-Western-language book of saints' lives, wrote Mary a whole second act: she leaves Jerusalem for Provence, converts the king and queen, keeps their baby alive after a shipwreck, raises the queen from the dead, converts thousands, then abandons it all to become a hermit. Shakespeare ripped off part of the story for *Pericles*. Really.

Penitent Mary busts out in the 16th and 17th centuries when the Church starts to stress forgiveness. Exhibit A: Mary Magdalene, who feels so bad about her sinful past that she can't button her dress.

Version one comes out angry. Version two is snarky. Just right doesn't feel like it's on the horizon. I shut off my phone and get under the covers. And then have to get out again because the stupid overhead light's still on.

Tween Jesus

I roll out of bed, late enough to miss Giulia—Josh is a wild card—and find her artwork piled on the table. She's tidy; if they're still here, it's an invitation to look through them. A thank you for last night, maybe.

It's not just watercolour I didn't know about, she's making collages, mixed media stuff. If the contest were real, she'd have a shot. "Oh, for fuck's sake."

Josh peeks around the doorframe. "I can come back if it's not a good time."

"What, now we're colleagues?" I feel bad when his face falls. He's an idiot, obviously, (or I am, or we are), but he's not what I'm mad about. Not right now, at least. "Sorry. Come in. There's coffee."

"Sure you don't need it?"

"We can split it."

He puts some milk into the microwave. "This is all you use it for, isn't it?"

"Pretty much."

His hair's damp from the shower, and he smells like soap. My soap. I look like shit in my ancient pyjamas and un-brushed hair, dark circles under my eyes. When I stepped out of my room maybe 15 minutes ago, this seemed fine; what I looked like was of no concern to either of us. Clearly, I didn't factor in mortification.

He stretches his legs out under the table and pokes mine with his toe. An alert, not a caress. "I'm sorry," he says.

I look at him. "For?"

"Yesterday."

"The whole day?" I get up, taking my coffee cup with me.

"You know what I mean."

I rinse out the cup, put the milk away. When Guido wants to be done with something, he starts moving stuff on his desk around. Vince loves it because it means he's successfully discombobulated Guido. I love it because it's so scenic: Guido's phone in its yellow suede case slides across the dark green leather of his blotter, his walnut pencil cup rotates on his mahogany desk. The milk isn't even a poor cousin. "I don't actually, but it's okay."

"It's not."

When I turn around, he's bringing his cup to the sink. Leaning over me to get to the tap. Going me one better by washing the cup. All of which entails body contact, his arm snaking past my waist, his side brushing mine. I move out of arms' reach and hand him the piece I was looking at when he came in.

"I didn't see this one. I'm not sure I get it," he says.

"You're not the audience."

"Oh?"

I put the picture on the table. It's not what I'd call subtle, but her use of space is excellent. Mid ground, she's pasted a postcard of Dürer's *Christ Among the Doctors*. In the foreground, black and white, looking at it as if she's in a museum, is a girl wearing a shirt that, in color, is one of G's favorites. Her back's to us, but her head's tilted so we can see the faint tear on her cheek. Behind her, people throng all the way to the paper's sides and its far edge. Some wear camp stripes; one or two are turned to show the star on their chests. Behind the ü is

another swell of people. You can tell they're from olden times, because all their heads are covered—hats like in the Dürer, plus turbans, scarves, jaunty pillboxes.

“The hands are amazing,” Josh says, pointing to the Dürer. “But I’m guessing that’s not the point. Why are those creepy old men surrounding that poor girl?”

“That girl is tween Jesus.”

“Isn’t that a band?”

“If only. But Giulia’d be pissed if I liked them, so don’t get any ideas.”

“About starting a band? Or Jesus?”

It’s too easy to flirt with him. I sit up straighter, hope my nipples aren’t visible. “There’s a part in the Gospels where Jesus wanders into the temple and starts arguing with the rabbis and learned men there. This is that.”

“So they’re not just creepy...”

“Right. They’re creepy and Jewish.”

“Jewishly creepy. Come to think of it, this one kind of looks like Woody Allen.”

He’s pointing at the worst offender, the one that’s basically a caricature. The others are human; they hold books, look smart. The one in the background looks like he’s enjoying the debate, the one on the right’s a dead ringer for Saint Paul (né Saul). But this one. He checks all the anti-Semitic boxes. His open mouth shows two stumpy teeth; his hook nose and apish jaw jut out from under his receding forehead. His skin is corpse pale, presumably because he’s too busy counting money or sorting rags to go outside. He’s got one claw-like hand on Jesus.

"I'm pretty sure you can't say that. Anyway, it's just the skin tone."

"I'm pretty sure I can, if I choose my spots."

"Yeah. Now you know who's who, look again."

He looks. "Are those...?"

"Jewish stars? Yeah."

"And that's...is that supposed to be Giulia?"

"Bravo."

"It's the shirt. She's wearing the same one in the self-portrait she thoughtfully put up over my bed."

"It's her favorite. She's put a ton of work into making a piece of art to say that art—the kind I like, anyway—is anti-Semitic, and implicated in the holocaust. If you pull back far enough, it basically makes me responsible for the holocaust."

"That's a little harsh, don't you think? She's just thinking things through."

"Does she think I don't know the history of the Catholic Church? And the Protestant Church? Dürer was like best friends with Martin Luther, a known anti-Semite. Not that Luther was down with the saints. There's no need for intervention when you have a direct relationship with JC. Jesus good, saints bad."

"Jesus good, Jews bad?"

"Also that."

"I missed you," he says.

I must look like I think he's crazy—I do—because there's a follow up.

"Not the right time?"

"A. B. Right now? You missed me like this?"

“Not exactly like this. Is that get-up for my benefit?”

I meant mid-rant, but... “Not entirely, but, yeah.”

“Nice.”

I should be dressed. I should be at work. I open the fridge.

“I finished the yogurt. And the bread. You guys really need to get to the store more often.”

I may kill him. I don't turn around until I'm pretty sure I've got my face under control. Fucker's smiling.

“I'm kidding. In the bag on the counter. That's what I came to tell you, but we got side tracked. Here.”

While I stand there, he pulls out a loaf of bread, cuts four slices and puts them in the toaster.

“What was yesterday about?” I say.

“I was afraid that if I told you I was coming back, you'd tell me not to.”

The next sound is the toast popping up.

“Butter? Cheese? Jam?”

“In the cabinet, behind the oil and salt and the fancy Sicilian jam my mother-in-law gives us. All the way back.”

He pulls out a jar. “This?”

“Emergency Nutella.”

He hands it to me, puts the toast on plates. When my toast is covered edge to edge, I offer him the jar.

He looks unenthused. “I'll stick with ricotta, thanks. Was I right?”

“I hadn't made any decisions, but it's possible. But it was still a dick move.”

“Hence the apology.”

“Oh, that wasn’t for suggesting the three of us go get gelato like a happy little family? Thanks for the toast, by the way.”

“I got flustered. You’re...flustering.”

“And those texts, still flustered?”

“You’re ten feet away, you’re not talking to me, I’m sleeping under a picture of your daughter, and her eyes keep following me.”

“It’s a small room, how much is there to follow?”

“It’s an expression.”

“You sure you don’t want some Nutella?”

“It’s a euphemism.”

“Really? For what?”

“You try it. You try...pleasuring yourself while the object of your fantasies’ kid is watching.”

I can’t help it. I laugh. “You’ve got some ricotta on your mouth.”

He licks his upper lip. “Here?”

“No. Other side.”

“Here?”

“Got it.”

“You’ve got some Nutella on your cheek.”

I dab at it. The napkin comes back white.

“Can’t fault a guy for trying. I brought you something from Naples. Do you want it now?”

“I have to go to work.”

“That’s not what I asked you.”

I clear the table, hand him the Nutella jar. "Put this back up there, will you?"

"What do you normally do? When I'm not here, I mean."

"Stand on a chair."

"Now I feel special. Present, yes or no? It's not a trick question."

"I know." I wipe my finger over the plate for the last remnants of Nutella.

"So?"

"So?" My plate is spotless.

"So you're stalling because I probably got you something horrible or embarrassing, but what if I didn't?"

"Then why don't I just say no?"

"You're curious. And you like me. Now would be good because you're not going to want to open it in front of Giulia. Not that it's candy underwear or anything like that."

"Hmm. Not in front of Giulia. Is that a hint? Did you get me a starter set for one of those huge Neapolitan creche scenes?"

"Creche?"

"Mary, Joseph, Jesus, oxen, sheep, manger? It goes under the Christmas tree?"

"Oh, yeah. I was on that street where that's all they sell. But they had way more than just that. There was like a whole town, including someone slaughtering a pig."

"In Naples, everyone comes to the blessed event. When Bill Clinton was there for the G7 meeting, they stuck him in, too."

"I'm not taking sides, but you do know an awful lot about Christianity."

"I've lived here a long time. But I have to admit, it started before that."

"The Christianity thing? The saint thing? Is it them you like, or the paintings, or...?"

I'm stalling, but so is he. I think he knows what's coming. "Both. The saints and the art."

"Yeah?"

Definitely stalling. "You really want to hear about this?"

"Yes. Is it sordid?"

"No."

"Too bad. Tell me anyway."

"You know Gogo did costumes for a downtown theatre company?"

He nods, sits down at the table.

"When I was 12 or so, they did *St. Joan*. By Shaw. It was her last show, actually."

"Stay on topic."

"It's about..."

"*St. Joan*?"

"She hears voices that tell her to fight for France. The voices aren't Jesus or God or anything, they're other saints. Michael, because he's a warrior angel, but also Catherine and Margaret. Not that I knew who they were. I just liked Joan. She's the perfect starter saint. Especially for teenage girls. You know, you can have an eating disorder, or a horse thing, or you can fall for a martyr. Maybe it would have been Anne Frank, but Joan got there first."

"Wait, did you actually get religion?" He looks horrified.

“God, no. I just liked how bold she was. And that there was this chain of saints talking to each other. Which isn’t how it works, but what did I know?”

Josh’s hand slides closer. I get up. “But the other thing was how she looked. Gogo was famous for cobbling together cheap stuff that looked great under stage lighting. Joan shone. I mean she was radiant.”

I haven’t thought about this in years. “At the end, when they burn her at the stake, they make her take her armor off. The way they staged it, the armor’s in a heap nearby, and the firelight hits it, and it turns orange and red, and it stands for Joan in the fire. I don’t know how they did it. I asked Gogo, but she said you never reveal stage secrets.”

“And then?”

“And then I was into Joan for a while, and Margaret, because she literally pops up out of a dragon’s stomach. There were still Botanicas on Amsterdam Ave then. You could buy saint candles and holy cards, herbs, sprays, cures.”

“Were the cards beautiful?”

“Some were. Some were tacky. Then I discovered sex, and the saint thing kind of fell away. Five years later I walked into a bunch of Roman churches and saw the saint paintings, and the gold, and the angel wings that looked like flames, and the armor...Colpo di Fulmine. A thunderclap.”

“A thunderclap. Did you ever, just for a minute, think about being Christian?”

“Are you kidding? You think I believe in the virgin birth or the resurrection? The best thing about being Jewish is that it inoculates you.”

“The best thing?” He raises his eyebrows.

“Poetic license.”

“But you believe in saints?”

“I don’t believe in them, but I don’t not believe in them, either.”

“Oh.” We sit in silence for a while.

“Can I give you your present now?”

“You’re right. It would suck if it sucked, but if it were perfect...” I shut my eyes.

“I kind of think it might be.”

“Then I definitely can’t take it.”

“Because...?”

“Because nothing’s going to happen with us.”

“It doesn’t have strings.”

“Did you hear me?”

“No. I didn’t. There’s a banana in my ear.”

“Don’t.”

“You don’t.”

“I have to. I’m not going to screw around with my daughter’s trust.”

“Your daughter thinks you’re a Nazi!”

“Self-hating Jew. Anti-Semite. Nazi-adjacent. It’s a phase.”

“You hope.”

“I do. And I’m certainly not going to do anything to make things worse.”

Silence. His hair’s dry now, and the curls have loosened up. He looks miserable and young. I look at the floor.

“Is it working?”

“What?” I say.

“Pretending I’m not here?”

“I’m pretending I’m not here. And no.”

“So stop.”

“I’m sorry. Really. You don’t even know.”

“Tell me.”

“I’m out of words.”

“Show me.”

The kitchen’s not huge, but it’s not tiny either, so I’m not sure how we’ve ended up so close. If I shift onto the balls of my feet, we’re face to face. I shift. “I really mean it,” I tell Josh’s neck.

He nods.

“And there’s no point starting something that we’ll have to stop in five minutes.”

Another nod.

“It wouldn’t be fair, to you, I mean,” I say. I move a fraction of an inch closer to him and his arms drop to circle my waist. Our mouths are still a safe distance apart, because he went to Oberlin, and I’m trying to do the right thing. But we’re close enough that I can run my tongue along the arch of his eyebrow. I weave my hands through his hair, trace the inner circles of his ears with my fingertips, rub my knuckles across his lips. I rest my mouth on his Adam’s apple, feel his swallow thrumming against my lips. Then I move back until we’re not touching, look straight at him, and tell him how sorry I am.

I back out of the kitchen, down the hall, I pick a focus point so I don’t get dizzy or lose my balance. I choose his nose.

Emotionally Time Sensitive

I let Josh have the apartment to be sad in. The Church of Saint Agatha of the Goths is a block away—a long block, but that’s a good thing about big cities: you can be as sad as you want in public. It’s always empty, which is one of the reasons it’s so quiet. The others are the old, thick stone, and the courtyard garden that separates the building from the street. It’s as close to a silent retreat as I’m going to get. The inside’s been Baroqued up, but the floors are still tiled in the typical late medieval complicated pattern, the perfect visual for going back and forth and around about how stupid I am to have said no to Josh, gotten myself in this position in the first place, let things go on this long. The fact that some of these contradict each other does not in any way impede the cycle.

I hear someone’s phone and I whip around, looking for the offender. Fucking people, ruining everything. The place is still empty; it’s my phone, a Whatsapp message from Harry. There’s an email from him, too. He’s almost certainly not a morning person, so the odds are Ma woke him. Too early or too late are not concepts that cross her mind.

The Whatsapp just says call me. The email has two photos: Gogo in the lobby handing out fliers, then the flier itself. It’s advertising an apartment sale on Saturday. In our apartment. I walk out of the church and onto the street and call Harry. Despite all the ways I suck as a mother and daughter, I will not use my phone in the sanctuary.

“Yeah,” he says, skipping hello. “Big sale. Your place.”

“She’s giving out fliers in the lobby? She couldn’t just put one up in the laundry room and maybe over the mail boxes?”

“Her first idea was a table in the lobby with some, quote, ‘teaser items from the sale.’ The super nixed that. The compromise was her giving out the fliers.”

“When did you get dragged in?”

“It’s my fault. Sort of. I dropped in to see how the cleaning was going and told her people would pay for some of her stuff. She said it was too much of a pain to put it on Ebay. Then she called to see if I could loan her a card table.”

“You could, couldn’t you?”

“It’s 2015. Who has a card table?”

“You, I’m pretty sure.”

“All right, yeah, from when I sold Lady Finger merch. I said I’d bring it down and she said I should just meet her in the lobby with it.”

“What time did she call you?”

“Maybe 7?”

“She was being restrained. Claude’s been working on her about calling too early.”

“As soon as we unfolded it, the guard jumped on us. No commercial activity allowed.”

“Didn’t we have a lemonade stand there once?”

“The building’s different now. Things get repaired, but no one says hello in the elevator. The new people only talk to the guards when they’re picking up a package.”

I can’t picture this. “What was the name of the guard, the one who wore the “Kiss Me, I’m Puerto Rican” shirt under his uniform?”

“Rogelio. I had a massive crush on him. He had another one that said “Italian Stallion.” You can’t blame a guy for advertising.”

“Wait...”

“Oh, yeah. He was full service. Come on: the building was hot-and-cold running women.”

“How do you know this?”

“He had the hots for my mother, and I think he knew I was into him. He liked telling me stuff, stories.”

“You think they were true?”

“They were pretty detailed.”

It’s a good thing no one in the building had an STD. “Everyone had the hots for your mother.”

“Yeah,” Harry says. “My mother, world’s sexiest homophobe.”

The tree in the garden of Saint Agatha of the Goths is starting to blossom, little white flowers speckling in among the leaves.

“No. Really?”

“Oh, yeah. They used to argue about it. When Irene complained about me wearing her clothes, Gogo told her gender was just a box. Irene would say, ‘if it’s just a box, you wanna be a man? No sexism, never worrying about where you walk, why not, it’s just a different box?’”

“What’d Gogo say?”

“You couldn’t pay me to be one of those sorry motherfuckers. All I’m saying is stop yelling at Harry.”

“Go, her.” There’s a noise in the background. “Where are you?”

“Where do you think? In the lobby. I mean, it’s not like I had anything planned.”

“What was that noise?”

“That was the doorman telling Gogo not to give a leaflet to the delivery guy.”

“The sale’s on Saturday?”

“Yup. But maybe no one will come. They aren’t really the apartment sale types.”

“Ha. They’ll be dying to fleece their loopy neighbor out of her antiques.”

“She has antiques?”

“No.”

“Listen, I’ll get her to go upstairs, then call you from the apartment. Okay?”

“You’re a saint. Seriously.”

“No, I’m not. I like your mom.”

On another day, maybe that wouldn’t sound like a reproach. “Talk to you soon,” I say. There’s a flowering bush in the courtyard and the leaves are fuzzier than I expect, downy like chicks. I start walking, dragging my feet like a sulky child until my phone rings again.

“Ciao, Connie,” Harry says, too cheerfully. “Why haven’t you ever invited me to Rome?”

“Is this an actual grievance or are you teasing? I can’t tell.”

“Teasing, mostly. But think about it. I could help out in your hot brother-in-law’s gelateria and flirt with Italian boys. Maybe even bring one back and gay marry him.”

"I'm a little gusted out right now, but give me a year or so and you're totally welcome. How are things in 6A?"

"Well. You know how I always think your mother is hilarious, and you never do?"

"Fuck."

"Yeah. I'm going to send you a video. I haven't seen Gogo in full whirlwind in a long time. It does not get old."

"It was born old. Thanks, Harry, I appreciate it."

"You're welcome. Tell Claude hi."

Since Harry and Claude never hung out, it's hard not to hear that as 'I know you're going to call her as soon as you hang up.'

The closer I get to the office, the slower I trudge. My phone pings. Harry.

I've done myself proud with this one.

I find a bench and hit play.

Ma's holding up her toaster: "Would you pay twenty bucks for this?" she wants to know.

"You're giving up toast?" Harry says, putting it back on the counter.

"Listen, how are you organizing things? Room by room? Or are you putting everything in the living room so they'll be corralled into one place?"

"Hmm," Ma says. "Good question."

Basic question.

"Tell me what's not for sale, and I'll move it into the bedrooms so there's more space out here. You can put similar things next to each other."

He moves away from Gogo to pan the dining table. I haven't seen it empty in years, but I've never seen it this covered: Gogo either has more tableware

than I knew, or she's planning on eating the rest of her meals out from now on. Next comes the couch, buried under clothing. I see my grandmother's Persian lamb car coat, boxy, with a peter pan collar. The camera moves on. Something yellow and white catches my eye, but the camera swerves as Ma pulls Harry into a discussion about how much to charge for the silver Claude and I refused to take.

"Ask for more," he's saying. "People like to bargain."

"Everything must go," she tells him. "This is a going out of business sale."

Harry doesn't follow up, just keeps filming while she hauls more stuff out. It's not clear what all the garbage bags were for; nothing seems to have left the house. I'm losing interest, when the camera skates back over the couch and the yellow and white material. I see the blotch of pink, and know exactly what it is. Claude's Marimekko dress. A-line, sleeveless, bright yellow and white, with a few irregular pink ovals. Ma had one, and Claude loved it so much that a woman at the theater made us matching ones. We were going to wear them as soon as it warmed up. But by then, Ma's was in a collection for a family whose house had caught fire. I wore mine on a school trip to a printing press, and it caught in the runners and got inked. Claude wore hers as long as possible; she learned to sew to let the hem out. I wonder why that dress never got handed down to Giulia. I wonder if Claude knows it still exists.

I've dialed Claude's number before I remember I'm not calling her.

"Jesus, Connie. It's eight in the morning."

"You're up."

"We've had this conversation. Being up doesn't equal wanting to talk on the phone."

“No one made you pick up,” I say.

There’s a sigh. A long one. “It kills me,” Claude says, “how much you’re like her.”

There’s no need to specify who her is. “Calling too early is different when there’s a six-hour time difference.”

“It’s still selfish.”

Finally, finally, Claude admits Ma’s selfishness, and I can’t even enjoy it. “I would have waited, but there was a time-sensitive Ma issue.”

“Is she conscious?”

“Yeah.”

“Bleeding?”

“No.”

“Doesn’t sound that time sensitive.”

“It’s emotionally time sensitive, okay?”

Claude flat out laughs.

“What?”

“Emotionally time sensitive,” she repeats, drawing it out so it sounds moronic. “Shit, Connie.”

I wait. I don’t know what for, but I know something’s coming.

“The therapist asked me and Mike who we went to when we were little and something bad happened.”

“Why?”

“Why isn’t the point. Who do you think I said?”

I start deadheading the marigold bush near the bench. Christ, our family’s small. That’s why I never moved back. In Rome, Giulia has a mother, a

grandmother who pays attention, a grandfather who adored her, two uncles, a father, and Fabiola. Plus Fabiola's dog, which is the best thing about her. There are only two possible answers, but the possibility of being wrong is paralyzing.

"Who?"

"You. Obviously. Who else was I going to say?"

"Then why are we having this conversation? If I were like her, you wouldn't have gone to me."

"We're having this conversation because..."

"Because you're mad at me."

"I'm not mad at you."

"It feels like you are."

"Okay. I'm mad at you. You stuck me with her. And you could because you're like her. Not exactly, I'm not saying that. But enough."

"What did the therapist say when you said it was me?"

"She asked Mike why he was smirking."

"And?"

"And...I said, because he's a asshole."

"What? Really?"

"You're surprised?"

"A little. I mean, aren't you saying I'm the asshole? Which, by the way, Giulia's already covered."

"Still the Jewish thing?"

"Still, plus. Do you really think Mike's an asshole?"

"Not always. But when he's talking about you and Mom and me, sometimes, yes."

“The part where I stuck you with her.” My hand smells like marigolds, peppery and herbal. I stand up before I start snapping off live ones. The begonia still hasn’t recovered.

“Yup. And the part where I let you and where I’m caught in some messed-up family history thing that, according to him, means I put my family of origin...”

Audible air quotes.

“before him and our marriage.”

“You don’t do that. Do you?”

“I don’t know.”

“If you do, maybe it’s because he’s being a jerk.”

“Watch it. Maybe it’s because none of the women in our family take men seriously.”

“You’re still on that?”

“That, as you put it, keeps coming up.”

“Because Mike keeps bringing it up.”

“It was the therapist this time. But it’s not like it’s out of thin air.”

“Thin something. Anything Mike says about me or Ma is second-hand. Third hand. It’s hearsay.”

A guy walking past me checks me out. I can’t decide if I want to kiss him or give him the finger. I keep moving.

“Therapy’s all hearsay. It’s not like the therapist can subpoena you or Mom to come testify. It’s subjective by definition.”

“Is that what your therapist says? I’m not sure about her.”

“Him.”

“You said her a minute ago. Who goes to a male therapist? Besides men, I mean. And I bet even they don’t.”

“It’s a couple.”

“A couple doing couples therapy. Well. You gotta have a gimmick.”

There’s a pause. “I heard you laugh,” I say.

“I was coughing.”

“So not convincing.”

“I really am mad, you know. Even if you make me laugh.”

“I’m funnier than Ma, that’s another way we’re different. I made G. lunch until she told me to stop because it looked babyish. I told her about periods and the pill and the day-after pill.”

“G’s having sex?”

“No. But if she were, she’d have the information she needed. Who doesn’t that sound like?”

“Maybe that’s not the way you’re like her.”

I mull that over. “I almost slept with Josh,” I hear myself say. “I really wanted to.”

“What am I supposed to do, give you a gold star? Absolve you of selfishness?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Good, because I’m not going to. I don’t care about Josh.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Screw him, don’t screw him, I don’t care. I think you can handle whatever’s going on with Ma. And if you can’t, maybe Harry can. I’ve got to go.”

She hangs up before I can mention the apartment sale. Or the yellow dress.

Family of Origin

When I cross Via Corso, I realize I've more or less recreated Josh's walk on his first day here, just up a street or two. That means I'll miss the Pantheon, which I don't care about, and Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, which I kind of do. There's a sculpture of an elephant outside it and a bright blue vaulted and starred ceiling inside that could cheer up anyone, even me. Josh must have seen the elephant that first day, but he might not have gone back to see the church, even though I put it on the list. And here I am worrying about a pointless non-thing instead of my sister. My very pissed-off sister whose marriage may be falling apart.

I'm in front of the Falconeri, but I keep walking. I didn't think this would all show up in Claude's life. Although, to be fair, the only evidence that it has is Mike's snarky little digs. He's a sociologist: he thinks in categories. "Family of origin." What a stupid expression. Like that's the only place someone comes from. Like Claude and I come from the exact same place. Four-and-a-half years is a big difference.

Point in case: you can, if you're Gogo, take a twelve-year-old to *Medea*, but not a seven-and-a-half-year-old. Best-case scenario, boredom, worst-case, terror and unending nightmares. It was already up and running; the costumes were done; there wasn't any need to go. She went because it was a benefit for a woman who'd killed her abusive husband. She took me, because, I think, she thought it would be educational. I was into it: I'd started junior high and was taking the subway by myself (stand by the door, keep your key in your hand and your fist in your pocket, and if anyone tries to grind up on you, point at him and call him a pervert at the top of your voice). I thought I was an adult.

I text Vince to say I'm checking on the banners and posters to see if they're up and how they look. Which we did talk about doing. It's on the list, lower than getting the rest of the show hung, but still important. Not unimportant. Also, it's a spectacularly beautiful day, something I've managed to miss up to now. The air is clear; everything's green. I pass Sant' Agostino, which has an amazing Caravaggio, *The Madonna of Loreto*, AKA Madonna of the Pilgrims. On the bottom stair, a woman in a hijab has a bowl and a sign. When I got here, all the beggars were Roma, then they were Albanian and Romanian. Now they're mainly refugees. I drop a euro in her bowl, keep moving.

Gogo gave me the lowdown on the way there. The husband had been a tight end for the Philadelphia Eagles. Or a receiver (we didn't know the difference. All we knew about football was all we needed to know, which was that he was the size of a refrigerator.) He'd been hitting her for years, but when she'd call the police, they'd tell him to relax, chill out, and then, Gogo said, pausing to make sure I was listening, they'd ask for his autograph.

One of our posters is up near the Museo Napoleonico. I don't think anyone ever actually goes to it, but it's on a high-traffic route just off a bridge. It looks great—the green background looks dark and a little poisonous; the gold shines in the sun. I take a picture.

The theater was in a tenement building up three flights of rickety stairs: you had to know to look, or you'd miss the sign. The top floor was probably a sweat shop: it changed its name every couple of months, but the clatter of sewing machines and tired looking Asian and Puerto Rican women stayed the same. Gogo said the inspectors must have been bribed; she'd called the city tip line twice.

The audience side of the theater smelled better: less sweat, more perfume, that was normal. But the audience was different: almost all women, mostly white, older, better dressed. They should be; they'd paid 75 bucks a ticket. Some looked nervous, like they weren't sure how they got here. Not just because it was further downtown than they usually went, but because this woman had killed someone. The others looked giddy; if they'd come here, what would they get up to next?

At first, it was just the nice ladies and a few nervous looking husbands (the only place Gogo's on time is the theater, which Claude thinks is commendable and I think is bullshit: if you know how to be on time, but you're still mostly late, it shows exactly what you care about), but then the feminists arrived. They walked in like gunslingers, like a phalanx, looking like they'd just been on television or were about to be: pure glamor. Wherever they were was where it was happening. The first one, the tip of the spear, had long, thick, silver-white-black hair: TV hair, but on TV, only grandmothers were gray. The next two, one black, one white, wore black velvet pants and what Gogo said were smoking jackets. I wanted to pet them. Gogo was good looking, absolutely, but not in a velvety way; she was somewhere between your mother wears combat boots (true: she got hers at the army-navy store on Broadway) and she doesn't always wear a bra under her men's white oxford shirt, which even then I knew was sexy, and which I was way too cool to find embarrassing—until she showed up like that for parent-teacher night and my sleazy teacher looked straight down her shirt.

I was wearing hand-me-down Danskin bell bottoms and a matching shirt: the mark of Cain of 70's girls' clothes—a petroleum spill masquerading as

clothing. When people talk about 70's style coming back, they mean flowing cotton and loose hair, platform heels, bell bottoms, but all I see are Danskins and the ruched halter tops every girl in my sixth-grade class wore. They looked good on maybe 20% of us.

Next came the tiny murderess (it wasn't murder of course: it was justified; it was self-defense. You shouldn't get yourself into that position and if you had, you should leave as fast as humanly possible, but if for some reason you had and you didn't, then, yes, if that was what it took, by all means).

"Serves him right," Gogo said.

"Because he abused her?" I said.

"Yes. But also because he kept a gun in the house, and it never occurred to him that she might use it on him. Which is just stupid. If there's a gun, it'll go off."

When I found out in college that she stole that from Chekhov, I couldn't decide if I was mad or impressed.

Behind them came two more women. "Those are the lawyers," Gogo told me. "And stop staring at that poor woman."

I'd never seen a murderer before, but then again, I wasn't sure I'd seen a woman lawyer, either. Everyone clapped when they walked in and didn't stop until they found their seats. Then the lights went down and the curtain went up on the Chorus of Corinthian women.

There's a banner near the Mausoleo di Augusto, which used to be a run-down tomb and is now a run-down tomb under reconstruction so it'll go better with the super fancy museum they built around Augustus' Altar of Peace. Since one altar doesn't really make a museum, it hosts random exhibits—David

Hockney, say, or Alex Katz, once a traveling show from the Museum of Rock and Roll. I've never taken G. there, but she's fine with that. We talked Guido into banners because we knew the mysterious gold hand and creepy dragon rippling off a streetlight in the wind would be amazing. It is.

There'd been a big fight over the costumes: No one wanted togas and robes, but they didn't want jeans and big collared shirts, either. They ended up with something half way between timeless and cat burglar for the Chorus. Jason looked like a handsome knight, because, Gogo told me and Harry, he's all about his kingship: it's a dope's idea of what an adventurer going home to be king would look like. She vetoed black, red, or purple for Medea: too obvious. Instead, her idea was that when Medea pretends to go along with Jason's demands, she'd wear nothing but Saran wrap. Then later she'd hand the outfit and all its total woman subservience to wife number two as the poisoned cloth that kills her. It wasn't subtle, Gogo admitted, but neither was Euripides.

It didn't work. The nudity wasn't a problem, but the Saran—from the restaurant supply district, two feet across and extra sturdy—was hard to get in and out of and clung to itself. When Medea handed it to Jason, it didn't look queenly or powerful; it looked like it had once covered a gigantic bowl of potato salad. Spray starch, hair spray, stiffening it in the freezer, Gogo tried them all before she gave up. In the end, Medea wore a gold cloak thing over a long dress that was high-necked and regal, but with strategic slashes that at certain angles advertised her pasties and gold, barely-there underwear.

The Saran wrap didn't end there, though, along the way, Gogo remembered it was made by Dow, which had made—was probably still making—Napalm. Why not have Medea killing the kids recall the famous photo

of the girl running down the road covered in Napalm burns? That got vetoed, and the kids were killed off stage. Almost. Gogo angled a mirror in the wings that reflected the blood and the small limp forearm (not a kid's; Harry would have done it in a hot minute, but Irene said absolutely not, he should be in bed, and who casts a kid in *Medea*?) dangling as if asleep, but we knew better.

I speed up; I have to make it to work some time. At the end, after the Chorus decides not to stop Medea and she lifts off in a God-sent, dragon-drawn chariot, the feminists came on stage, the wife in the middle, and talked about how the justice system failed women and supported their abusers and thanked the theater and the audience for contributing to the defense fund. The wife was very pretty and very small and hardly said anything; she looked like she was about to be sick.

It occurs to me that I haven't eaten anything since the toast Josh made me a lifetime ago. I stop in the next pizza a taglio place and get some, then focus on not dropping it on the ground or myself. On the subway home, Gogo told me that Medea had fucked up: you never kill the kids, she said. No, listen. Even if you think it'll kill the husband. It won't; he might have taken off anyway, and he can always have new ones. Simpler and better to kill him directly. She—the football player's wife—had done that right. We waved at the hookers, freezing in short shorts and fishnets in front of Twin Donut. We weren't friends, exactly, but Gogo conducted herself like our ten-block radius of the Upper West Side was a small town. She'd tried to give them brochures about the prostitutes' union someone she knew (or someone she knew, knew) had founded. They didn't need a pimp, she told them, they needed a bank account. They hadn't been interested, but if they weren't in the middle of something, they'd say hello.

Sometimes they waved at me when I was on my own. I loved to brag about it, but it turned out that not everyone got how cool it was.

The banners look totally different depending on the angle and how the wind is blowing. The one a few blocks down from the big H&M on Via del Corso looks sinister, the scaly claw on the lance much too reminiscent of the Dürer caricature. I'm only about ten minutes from the Falconeri now, but I detour over to Via del Tritone and snap a row of posters on a boarded-up store and send it to Vince. *On my way*, I type cheerily, pretending I'm not going over my mental map of all the places I've been to with Josh. I could be at the hill of four obelisks in ten minutes, the Barberini in six. Maybe everything people type cheerily into their phones is a lie.

On the way back to the Falconeri, I pass five more people begging and two selling fake Gucci bags and sunglasses. Back in the 90's, when the crack epidemic led to a huge rise in panhandlers, Gogo came up with the idea of rotating them around the city. They'd get a new audience and more money; we'd get to hear new spiels. I bet Josh, Mr. City-planner, would love that idea, or her other one, to help get the top floors of the Twin Towers rented out. They'd just been built, and the realtors had run into the fear factor: people didn't want to rent above a certain point. She read something about how super tall buildings were built to sway in the wind and came up with the idea of a vertically zoned bordello.

I stop at the bar before going into the Falconeri, for coffee, but also for a bathroom and a mirror. I blow my nose, rinse my face, and wish I had some kind of all-purpose makeup item: a lightener brightener, de-sagging, de-sadding cream. Someone should invent that.

I text Vince to tell him I'm back, and when he comes into my office, I've got my happy place painting, *The Garden of Paradise*, up on my screen. It's German, from the early 15th century, artist unknown. It sounds like Eden, but it's not. It's a sunny enclosed garden where the Virgin and baby JC and some of their close personal saint friends are spending a pleasant couple of hours.

The painting's tiny, but packed. Birds and flowers everywhere, and so many ripe cherries that a big basket's already half full. People are gardening, reading, and chatting; no one's being tortured or having their death foretold or defending their faith to incredulous armed pagans.

I know Vince wants to show me something, but the longer I look at the painting, the better things will go. Saints loll on the grass, and the Virgin gets a big puffy cushion. Even better, she's off to the side and in the back, finally getting a break from being the dead center of every painting she's in. Baby JC looks like a real toddler for once, and get this—he's having fun.

Vince is saying something that turns out to be my name.

Not only is the Virgin reading, but for once in her life she has a babysitter, so she can read uninterrupted. Usually when she's reading, she's one second away from having her life blown up by the annunciatory angel.

Vince lowers the screen.

"What?"

"Come on. I think I've got the *guazzabuglio* room figured out."

Guazzabuglio is hodgepodge in Italian, and I love how both words sound exactly like what they are. Usually it makes me smile. Not today.

I follow Vince upstairs. We leave our water bottles outside the room—a ritual, almost a tic, since at some point people will be milling around with white

wine—I wait while Vince goes into a mini rhapsody in front of Holbein's Sebastian. It's going in the middle of one of the long walls. Because it's five-feet by three-and-a-half feet, but also because it's insane. Sebastian's goggle eyed, and fair enough, since a group of archers, togged out like they've been jousting with Henry the Eighth, are right in his face. It's Holbein the Elder, not his more famous son, but it's pretty great. As far as I know, neither of the Holbeins painted anything anti-Semitic—but have I done due diligence? I have not.

I say hello to the Zurbarán St. Lucy, one of the few Caravaggio tribute gang Vince and I both like. She's standing against a black background wearing an elegantly plain outfit. The genius part is her face, which Zurbarán splits vertically at her nose: the left side entirely in the light, the right in shadow. It's to do with, I think, the way Lucy's eyes are simultaneously gone (lying on a plate she holds in front of herself) and here (still in her head).

Vince lays his cards out. The rule is, one person starts, then the other fixes whatever's not working. After a couple ugly scenes, we've learned to take a picture of the set up before we touch anything.

"Okay," he says.

He's done sooner than I expect. Sebastian and Lucy stare at each other at the center of the two long walls. They're each bracketed by saints of the opposite sex, and the pattern continues, girl-boy-girl, boy-girl-boy down the line. The doubles are about four away from each other, on opposite walls. When there's a little canvas, like the Sieneese Saint Nick, they go up two for the price of one, offset diagonally.

I walk down one side and up the other. Our tall, narrow St. Maurice, a contemporary copy of a Cranach, is on the left, looking right, his glance crossing

with St. George's, also a knight, who looks left. Maurice is black. And beautiful. And possibly the best-dressed saint in the show. His armor is gilded and trimmed with jewels; his hat, my God, his hat. It's bright red, sort of triangular, and trimmed with enough white curling feathers to make a Pomeranian. Augustine's black too, what with being from Egypt, but he's almost never shown that way. St. Mark the Evangelist, probably black, never shown that way. The point isn't that they erased all this history, although it's good to remember that, the point is that with St. Maurice, they didn't. He was the Theban commander of a Roman legion, martyred for refusing to slaughter Christians. He was the patron saint of entire Holy Roman Empire. We broke the double rule for him, partly because we ran out of time, mostly because after this painting, anything else would be anti-climactic.

"What about the short walls?"

"I haven't gotten there yet."

"Who's left?" We spread out the remaining cards to see them better. I pick up the Saint Francis we finally agreed on. Vince loves it. I hate it. He thinks he found it, but I'd seen it already, I just hadn't mentioned it. Francis is on the threshold of his grotto, faithful sidekick Brother Leo looking on, while a being enrobed in light sends the stigmata-giving darts down through a blue-black-purple sky. Francis and the celestial being are at the right; Leo's at the far left: the center's basically all night and fog and atmospheric effects. It's super corny; it's not my taste, and it's perfect. Our other St. Francis shows him negotiating with a wolf to get him to stop eating people's sheep: it's humble and adorable and we found it in our storage room. Way too unassuming for the Falconeri

family. I put the big Francis on one of the short walls, giving its purple glory all the white space it needs.

“Bello,” Vince says. “Grazie.” For not being a pill, he means.

I put St. Agnes on the other short end at first, then swap her out for St. Margaret. She deserves the extra white space: not only did she make it out of a dragon’s stomach alive, she’s the patron saint of childbirth.

Supposed to Be Smart

The Jerome room turned out to be a bust. All those Jeromes in a small space was like being in a dull hall of mirrors. I copped to it right away, didn't wait for Vince to point it out.

"Why didn't Guido make me justify this room? Why pick on the Magdalene?"

"Yeah. That's really the question we need to think about. We're fucked."

"No, we're not. This is totally fixable. We'd be fucked if we'd printed a catalog or printed up the labels."

"You mean if we operated like a normal, rational gallery?"

"Exactly."

We ditched most of the Jeromes and went with a low-key Desert Father/Doctor of the Church theme. Augustine, Anthony, which is a total upgrade, because it lets us use the Falconeri's best print. If you've seen Michelangelo's painting of Anthony being clusterfucked in mid-air by a bunch of demons Hieronymous Bosch would be happy to claim, it's based on a print by a guy named Schonaguer. The Met has one, the National Gallery in London has one, and, amazingly, we have one. Guido claimed it was off limits because of lighting conditions, but really it's because he thought a print would cheapen the brand.

Getting that organized took time we didn't have, so now I'm further behind on Magdalene. I'm down in the storage area waiting to be inspired.

“Hey,” Josh says. “Vince said you’d be down here.” He looks around. “Wow, this is amazing. Like someone can’t decide what to wear so all their clothes are spread out everywhere, only the clothes are paintings.”

That’s exactly what it’s like. It’d be easier if he’d gotten stupid after I said we couldn’t do this. Or developed a sudden desire to go to Torino. Or anywhere. But it’s fine. He’s mostly out these days; I’m mostly here. But now so is he, because, since real art handlers are expensive, he’s going to help us move heavy objects very, very carefully. This violates insurance regs, but aside from things he can wear or own, Guido’s cheap as dirt.

“You never got the tour I promised you,” I say. “I’m still working things out, so if Vince doesn’t need you, why not do a walk around?”

“Out of your hair, you mean? Come on. If we’re going to be friends, you need to be friendly. And not just because you’re paying me in coffee and sandwiches.”

“Or pizza. We can do pizza.”

He looks at me.

“You’re right. Sorry.”

“Also, Vince said to give you these.” He hands me colored printouts of all the Magdalenes. “He said something about not getting lost in the paintings?”

Right, again. The printouts are nothing like the paintings, but you can shuffle them to your heart’s content. It’s not just that the real things are heavy and fragile: they’re too much. If you look at them as much as you need to to decide what goes where, you’ll fall into them. We don’t have time for that.

“Thanks.”

"I know I'm here as muscle, but maybe you could actually use me. I'm your public. What do you want me to see?"

He's wearing black jeans and a white t-shirt. If we're going to be friends, he could at least have turned into a toad when I un-kissed him. "Sorry, say again?"

"I'll be your guinea pig. Set them up, I'll tell you what I see, what I notice, and if you don't like what you hear, you'll rearrange them."

Being my own guinea pig has gotten me nowhere, and Vince is finishing up the desert fathers. "Deal. Do you know anything about Mary Magdalene?"

"Dude. *Godspell*, remember? I know my way around *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, too."

"How could I forget?" It's supposed to be sarcastic, but as I say it, all kinds of things I have no business remembering come back, and I'm pretty sure it doesn't sound that way. "Okay. Go next door and ask Jacopo to give you the lowdown on how to move art without doing any damage. I'll come get you when I'm done."

He nods. "I like your hair up, by the way."

"Jacopo. You'll have to wear hospital booties."

I hate to waste my limited time going to my office, but there's no choice: I can't 86 any of the Marys when they're all around me.

I've thought about this long enough. I should know what I want and what I don't. Go.

A baseline Mary, late Middle Ages, all gold and red, the top of her unguent jar like a miniature church tower.

One Renaissance courtesan Mary, her dress and jewelery super elaborate, even the jar patterned. I love high-fashion prostitute Mary. She's not the patron saint of prostitutes—that's Nicholas, who's the patron of half of everything, including New York—but she should be. If sex work were legal, prostitutes might look perfectly calm, cool, and collected like Mary does, and if there weren't any pimps raking their earnings, they could buy some seriously fancy clothing.

One lamentation at the cross. This is a tough one. We've got a Tintoretto where Mary's indistinct halo looks like a Mohawk and the Virgin, her eyes bruised wells, is in a dead faint, but in the end I go for the Carracci. Mary's got her hands up, but she's not the focal point. You can do that when you've got a room full of Magdalenes. She's kneeling on the right; Jesus is on his back at her lower left, his head in the Virgin's lap. She's in a semi faint, so a woman behind her is holding them both up. They're a backward-moving diagonal, a geometry of grief. The last woman, probably another Mary, is the only person in the painting who's not on her knees or prone. She looks ready to catch the Virgin if the other woman can't bear her weight. JC's not incidental, not by a long shot, but the women make the painting. Sisterhood may not be powerful here—they're too devastated for that—but it's palpable.

I circle my desk, look at the clock.

One *Noli Me Tangere*, touch me not, which is what Jesus says to Mary when he finds her at the tomb. It's the Bronzino Guido lucked into at the beginning, the one that made me and Vince giggle with pleasure, that made Guido think he could get anything he wanted, that began the insanity that doubled the size of the exhibition and delayed its opening for three months.

The conflation gets confusing, I know, but Mary at the tomb is the real Mary Magdalene. In fact, her importance at the end of the story is partly what leads to her conflation. They read her back any place she could possibly be to make her prominence at the end make more sense. The sinner washing JC's feet with her tears? Magdalene. The Mary whose brother was raised from the dead and who won't help her sister clean and cook? Her, too. And then Pope Gregory says oh, yeah, Mary Magdalene, Mary of the Seven Devils, must be the sinful woman, and easy as that: Mary Magdalene was a prostitute.

One (the only one I've ever seen) Mary embarking for Provence and all her post-Gospels adventures. An easy loan to get: it's a pretty ordinary painting.

One preaching Mary. Suck it, anti-women Church fathers.

One hairy Mary, after she moved into the woods. This is probably another conflation with yet another Mary, Mary of Egypt, an actual repentant prostitute turned hermit. When Mary Mag's clothes turned to rags, her hair miraculously grew down to her toes to preserve her modesty. Usually she's wearing a sort of floor-length hair caftan, but in this one, the hair on her head is normal, and her body's entirely covered in fur. It's excellent.

And because it's how the story ends, goofy ascending Mary.

I think I'm done, until I realize I've left out penitent Mary. Every omission a truth, Freud said, or should have. I can't prove it, but I'm pretty convinced penitent Magdalene gets painted more than the other versions. There are theological reasons, but she's also one of maybe three women you can paint half naked and still get bible points. (See also: Susanna and the pervy Elders.) If there's one place I've tried to look out for the Magdalene—not that she needs me; she's withstood plenty—it's here.

There are, no exaggeration, seven penitent Marys at the Pamphilj; only the Caravaggio makes the audio guide. The Falconeri has two generic versions—skull, candle, book, boobs. Neither's in the show. If I had my way, we'd have a de la Tour. He did at least four versions, all candle lit, the light on Mary's face, not her breasts. I wouldn't turn the Caravaggio down, but it's not one of my favorites. What I like best about it is how obvious it is that he used the same model for Magdalene and the Virgin. (And she was probably an actual, real-life prostitute. Sex worker.)

I'm not anti-breast. I'm pretty pro, actually. It's just that penitent Magdalene is a hypocrisy fest, repenting her carnal sins so viewers can enact another. Adding the missing painting's easy, though, since I've had my penitent Magdalene on hand for ages. She's full on topless in it, but somehow it's much less soft-core porny than the ones with one boob in and the other peeking out shyly. And she's reading, which means no icky come hither looks up to heaven or out toward us. It's a Giampietrino. He was part of Leonardo's workshop, and he gets dismissed as just an imitator, but he's way stranger than that.

I go get Josh.

"I know everything," he tells me.

"Fantastic."

"And it turns out I have dexterous hands. Also soft. If the doctor thing doesn't work out, Jacopo thinks I could have a career in art handling."

"Good to know. I can hear your mother: 'help, help, my son the art handler is drowning!'" I turn around before he smiles.

In the room, a big squareish rectangle, I lay out the printouts on chairs in front of the walls they'll be on to give a sense of their progression. Josh circles

them slowly. He stands longest at courtesan Mary, the Bronzino, and the Carracci.

“So?”

“These are all the same person?”

“Cool, hunh?”

He nods. He does another walk through, quicker this time. “She was a prostitute, right?”

“It’s complicated, but for our purposes, yes.”

“That’s why they can paint her topless?”

“Sort of, but actually, the prostitute picture is the one with the fancy clothes. In the topless one, she’s repented. She’s naked because she’s cast aside the wicked garments of her profession.”

“Okay.”

“Trust me, that painting’s the best of a bad bunch. Anyway, any thoughts?
Comments? Suggestions?”

“Is she flying in the last one?”

“Ascending. Assisted by angels.”

“Hunh.”

“Yeah.”

“And she’s furry? What’s going on there?”

“When she became a hermit, her hair miraculously grew to cover her nakedness. Angels brought her food every day for thirty years.” I pause to make sure he’s taking that in. “She’s a big deal. That’s why she gets a room to herself.”

“She’s really photogenic. It’s going to be a great room.”

“You’re supposed to find a flaw and fix it.”

“Okay. The flaw is that you won’t go out with me.”

“Go out with you? Like to the movies? I’m pretty sure that if there’s no phrase to describe something, it probably wasn’t meant to be.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be smart?”

I look at him.

“Wow. Sorry. That sounds way worse out loud than it did in my head.”

“Go on.”

“I just mean: there’s a million words for everything. They imported privacy into Italian and poof, there’s a word for it. How about beshert?”

“Beshert? Really? You believe in that? Fate? Destiny?”

“I don’t believe in it, but I don’t not believe in it either. It happens. It happened to my grandmother and Josie.”

“Josie?”

“Ms. Di Nardo, to you.”

“If the universe was working to make that happen, wouldn’t it have done it more neatly? Never mind. If that’s the only flaw, we can start moving the paintings. Jacopo’s already cleared the route.”

I collect the printouts, and we move the chairs out of the way.

“Are you going to watch?” Josh asks.

“I was going to go back downstairs and double check the spacing, but I can...”

“No. Jacopo and I were discussing it, and we don’t think you’ve got the calm a good art handler needs.”

“Did he tell you about centering down and being quiet so you can move the paintings without jarring them?”

“He did. He knows a ton. And he’s good looking. Did you two ever have a thing?”

“What is your damage? You think I have a thing with everyone I meet?”
Too late, I see the trap. “Just do what he says.”

“On my way.”

Jacopo’s right: I hate watching paintings being moved. It’s like seeing a child endlessly on the verge of running into traffic. Add Josh to the picture, and I can feel my skin prickling. I go to the bathroom and run cold water on my wrists and elbow creases, then come back and inhale and exhale a couple times. Then I go back and measure everything one more time. In a just world, the Bronzino would have a wall to itself, but it’s only sharing with the Carracci, so it’ll still have space to breathe.

They get the paintings upstairs, the smaller ones first, then the Bronzino, the Departure, and the Ascension. Because God is an asshole, Josh turns out to be one of those people who whistles while he works. Not while he’s actually holding a painting, probably because he’s afraid of Jacopo, but when the painting’s leaning against the wall, edges safely on foam blocks, he breaks into a happy tune.

After lunch, Vince and I choreograph the placement, and Josh and Jacopo do the lifting. I know I’ve heard whatever Josh is whistling, but I can’t think what it is.

Normally, we’d never hang a whole room in one day, but these are not normal times. If it doesn’t work, I may cry. But they look great. Preaching Mary looks across at penitent Mary; furry Mary and prostitute Mary stare calmly at each other, unsurprised. When Vince and Jacopo go out for a cigarette break

before the last painting, I keep walking around the room, looking. I don't even know I'm whistling until Josh looks up from his phone and starts whistling along with me.

"What is it?"

"You don't recognize it?" He looks suspiciously happy.

"Nope."

"It's from *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Mary Magdalene's singing about Jesus. You know the words?"

Of course I do. I can't believe I didn't recognize it. Not that it matters. He's already telling me them.

"I don't know how to love him, what to do, how to move him..."

He's more reciting than singing, but you can still hear the rhythm. How much could it cost to hire a real art handler for a day?

"You know, no credible historian or theologian thinks Jesus and Mary Magdalene were romantically involved. And she knew how to love him just fine, by the way. It's the disciples who kept screwing up." Vince walks in, thank God.

"No singing till all the paintings are on the wall."

I always forget Vince speaks English, but he's better than I remember.

Jacopo comes back in. He's washed his hands, I'm sure, but there's still a faint whiff of cigarette. He and Josh position themselves at the painting. I shut my eyes.

"Okay, men," Vince says. "On my count."

The Ascension's up. They even it out, then Jacopo walks around to triple check that everything's stable. Baseline Mary and Ascending Mary are on either

side of the door: the story unfurls left to right, and as she leaves the earth, we leave the room.

“It’s really good,” Vince says.

“It’s done,” Jacopo says.

“I still have to get the wall texts up. But, yeah. It’s done.”

“It’s amazing,” Josh says. “Really.”

“Now you can sing,” Vince says, slapping him on the back. “But something good, okay? Drinks, everyone? I’m buying,” he says in English and Italian.

Jacopo begs off; he wants to see his kid before he goes to bed. Vince and Josh saunter off like they’re best friends.

I turn back to see the room one last time. The paintings look like they’re meant to be together, but that’s just good curating. I can easily imagine different paintings in a different order working just as well. I’d keep preaching Mary and Going-to-Provence Mary because there are hardly any other versions, and the Giampietrino penitent Mary, because I haven’t found anything better. I’d love to have a different ascension, and even though the Bronzino’s crazy beautiful, I’d be pretty happy with the enormous, regal de Sustris *Noli me Tangere* Guido almost got. Throw in the mid-fifteenth-century German courtesan Mary where she looks smart and impish, the insane crucifixion where she’s practically shinnying up the cross, and the Crivelli triptych where her puffed sleeves are decorated with embroidered dragons and her unguent jar is translucent, and we’d be all set.

I love Crivelli. He’s the John Waters of the early Renaissance: instantly recognizable, always willing to go the extra mile: more jewels, bigger jewels, 3-D jewels, more fruit, more vegetables, more everything. If he could have painted in

smell-o-vision, he would have. I wanted his Thomas Aquinas where he went to the trouble of writing in every page of Thomas' book, but Guido and Vince like to limit their baroque overkill to the actual baroque. The room's pretty damn satisfying as is, but my alternate version would be just as good. Beshert, my ass.

Emergency Nutella

When I get up, I find Giulia in the kitchen. “Morning,” I say, like this is normal, just one of our frequent mother-daughter breakfast chats. “Is Josh up?”

She shrugs. “He’s not here.”

“Have you eaten?”

“No.”

“Want some toast?”

“No.”

“Coffee?”

“No.”

I make extra anyway. Despite the monosyllables, I’m pretty sure she’s not here just to get in some extra sulking. She could still be waiting for a fight about the Dürer piece, but I don’t have the energy.

“Maybe he didn’t come back last night,” she says.

“What? Where would he go?” Aside from the other day at the Falconeri, we’ve got the whole avoiding each other thing down—there’s no need for extremes.

“Maybe he’s at his girlfriend’s.”

I stop slicing. “He has a girlfriend? Here?”

“Here.”

She stares off to the side, then, in case I can divine something from a nose and one eye, she opens the fridge and stares into it.

“He told you this?”

“He didn’t have to,” G. says, slamming the fridge door.

It's not satisfying. I've tried. Barely a thunk.

"I saw her."

I swallow what did she look like and how old was she. I'm calm. "If you only saw her, what makes you think they were going out? He's a personable guy. I'm sure he's made friends." Beshert: Santa Claus and the tooth fairy for grownups.

"They were pretty touchy-feely for friends. Not quite hand holding, but nearly."

I shut my eyes, just for a second, let myself fall into the pit of remembering how it feels to hold Josh's hand.

Giulia sits down. I butter the toast, put it on two plates, pass one to her. I pour us both coffee.

I sit down. We look at our cups. "Dimmi. When was this?"

"Yesterday. At Monica's game." She breaks off pieces of toast and moves them around on the plate.

How was the game? Did they win? Did Monica score? He brought her to the game? How was he even at the game? By an act of miraculous grace, I say none of these things. I drink my coffee.

"I told Monica I'd barely seen him, he was always out, and she said, well, he can't leave Rome without seeing calcio, so she invited him. I didn't think he'd come, but he got there for the second half."

Now she's rolling the saltshaker across the table, leaving little salt trails in its wake. When it comes my way, I take it. It's nice and smooth. I put it out of both of our reaches.

"I know it was stupid, but I really liked him."

“Oh, hon. It wasn’t stupid.”

“It wasn’t? “

“It wasn’t realistic, but that doesn’t make it stupid. I can see why you liked him.”

“I didn’t think he’d want to go out with me, but...”

But did he have to take the trouble to bring his beautiful (it’s Italy, I’ll just assume she’s beautiful) girlfriend (or hook up, or whatever she is) to Monica’s soccer game? “Yeah. Bringing her to the match is...” the act of a self-satisfied immature jerk? “kind of thoughtless.”

“Maybe he didn’t know how I felt,” Giulia says.

This breaks my heart, even though it’s probably the best possible spin.

“Did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Could you tell?”

“Oh. Yes. But I know you a lot better than he does. And men are idiots. They see maybe 40% of what’s happening.” Not only is this true, it might get G. onto her anti-generalization high horse, which would cheer her up.

“He didn’t seem like an idiot,” she says.

“No. He didn’t. Just thoughtless, then.” The toast is lukewarm; the butter tastes of refrigerator. I finish it anyway.

“It was nice of him to come to the game,” I say, then wonder why. It was nice of him to come when he obviously did it so I’d know he was seeing someone? After he spent a good chunk of the day before flirting with me? Nice not to care about hurting G? Why am I defending him? “Are you really not drinking your coffee?”

She pushes the cup toward me. I don't want her to feel like she made a huge mistake liking him, that's why. "Did Monica have a good game?"

"She made some amazing passes, but it was zero-zero most of the way. The other team scored right at the end. And the girl, whatever, woman, she's straight off a Pirelli calendar. Olive skin, dark hair, blue eyes..."

And now we know what it takes to get Giulia to talk about other women's bodies. Pirelli calendar doesn't just mean pretty, it means stacked. It means my best look is nearly nude and oiled. It's hard to be pure when you're heartbroken.

I pull a chair over and get out the emergency Nutella, push it over to G.

"Did he say how they'd met?" I will kill Vince.

"He worked with her cousin or something. She was out of town when he first got here."

Maybe she's dumb, I think. Which only makes me dislike myself along with Josh. More, I mean. "Did you talk to her? "

"A little, after the game was over. She said she'd heard about how great we were. She wanted to know about school, what I was studying." Her voice has moved from sounding like she might cry to sounding pissed off. This is the salt in the wound, that this woman treated G. like a school kid.

"She kept saying how they didn't even have woman's teams when she was our age, how fast and strong the players were. I said I couldn't stay, that I had to go meet Monica."

A lie. When they win, it takes forever for the coach to let them out, and when they lose, it's worse. Monica's parents wait, but only, her mother told me, so the other parents don't talk about them. G's drawing patterns in the salt; she hasn't touched the Nutella.

“Good for you,” I say, then wonder if that’s what I mean. Yes. Why should she stand around being patronized by Josh’s hot, age-appropriate girlfriend?

“What does she do?” I say, wishing I hadn’t.

“She’s getting her PhD in classics and archaeology. She was away on a dig.”

Of course she was. I haul my sorry non-post-graduate ass out of my chair and clear the plates before I start eating G’s abandoned toast scraps.

“Bringing her wasn’t his best moment, but at least you know he likes women who are smart and ambitious. That’s what you want in a guy, just closer to your age.” Giulia puts all her eggs in one basket, always has. When I was 17, I kept my diaphragm in my backpack, was on my second boyfriend, and wasn’t more than half in love with either of them. Not better, but probably easier. “You have good taste, and trust me, lots of women don’t. It’ll save you a lot of heartache.”

“Did you?”

Note past tense. “It got better. It picked up by the end of college”

“And it kept getting better?”

“Of course. Look at your father.” I start washing the plates and cups.

“What are you up to today?”

“I don’t know. Monica’s going to the match with her father.”

Rome has two football teams. One is fascist—literally. Oh, that’s the fascist team, Ric said about Lazio, the way Mets fans make sure you know that the Yankees are soulless and corporate. The other, Roma, which Ric, like 70% of Prati, roots for, and where Monica’s going, is just slightly fascist, and that’s only in the last fifteen years or so, not a deeply rooted, three-plus-generations, Anne-

Frank-jokes-at-matches kind of thing. Nothing to worry about. Just like there's no reason to feel like I need to lie down, need someone to put a cool washcloth over my eyes while saying soothing things. They don't have to be words; the kind of noises you make at babies and dogs would do fine.

"She's lucky," G goes on.

"Really? Do you want to go to the match?"

"God, no. Because she's gay. She doesn't have to deal with guys." There's a pause. "Shit, I wasn't supposed to tell you that. You can't tell her you know, okay? And you can't say anything to her parents. Promise."

"Monica's gay? Good for her. Why would I tell her parents? Jeez, kid, give me some credit."

"What are you doing today?" my daughter asks me, for the first time in how long?

"I'll tell you what I'm not doing," I say. "I'm not going to the gallery. The show's hung, and I'm done." The wall texts have been written, read, and re-written, and someone else can put them up. Guido's planning the opening party, which is right up his alley.

It occurs to me that I don't have to keep standing here. I've comforted my kid. I can go to the bathroom. Take a shower. Go for a walk and count my blessings that I didn't do something dumb with someone stupid. Email Betse and tell her that her grandson's not the mensch she thinks he is. It's visciolate season: I could do worse than eat some sour cherry gelato. I turn off the water and hear a whimpering noise. I double check that it's not me, then turn around. Giulia's shoulders are shaking.

“Oh, hon. I know it sucks now, but he’ll be gone soon, and...” I get stuck after that because the things I think of saying, like it was just a crush, you knew it was never going to happen, though true, seem mean. I make soothing noises.

“It’s not that,” she says, licking tears off her fingers.

“It’s not?”

“No, it is, but not just. It’s everything. Everything sucks.”

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

“No. Maybe. If I do, you can’t talk, okay? You can’t say anything.”

“You mean to other people? Your father?”

“Right now, to me. No advice, no I told you so, nothing.”

“Why would I say I told you so?”

“You’ll see. Promise?”

“Promise. Can I ask questions?”

“At the end. Maybe.”

When she was little, she made up games with elaborate rules that I could never follow. No, she’d say. You have to put your hands up *before* you walk backward. “Okay. I’m listening.”

She glares at me.

“Sorry. No talking.”

“I went to the synagogue. The Tempio Maggiore.”

The main one. From here, take it as read that I’m not saying anything.

“Again, I mean. It’s really pretty.”

Even I think it’s pretty. Liberty style. The eternal flame design in the dome looks suspiciously like the way angel wings were painted for hundreds of

years, but there weren't any Jewish architects in Italy; the guys who designed it had only ever built churches.

"Did you know you have to bring a passport or identity card to go to services? And there are extra guards on duty."

Shooting, 1980 something. God, so much mothersplaining going on in here. Wait, she went to services?

"I went Friday."

Questions explode in my head—How was it, were you bored, did you like it, who was there, do you want to go again?—and bounce off my teeth.

"The women sit upstairs in the balcony. Did you know that? Don't answer. I sat in the front row, right behind the grille. It's metal, really thin, and when you move, it shakes, and it feels like it could snap and you'd topple down into where the men sit."

That'd show them. Ric thought we should go once so he could learn about my heritage. I told him my heritage didn't live in a synagogue, especially not one where men and women sit separately. I said, come to New York, and I'll take you to Barney Greengrass, the Sturgeon King.

"I saw the balcony on the tour, but I didn't think sitting there would be so weird. It's really high, so it's hard to tell what's going on. And you don't get a good view of the dome because of the angle." She's mostly looking at the table, sometimes past me into the living room.

Did you cover your head? Did you get in trouble for not covering your head?

“There weren’t many women, and they talked a lot. You can’t blame them; no one’s paying attention to them and it’s hard to hear up there. Except once the usher guy, he had a top hat,”

Usher guy must help out cantor guy and rabbi guy. It would do my heart good if she called them that.

“looked up at the balcony and shook his finger at us like we were bad. Meanwhile, the men were milling around and talking and shaking hands like it was some big meet and greet.”

Never have I been so happy to hear about the patriarchy. I keep my face completely still—I haven’t been read my rights, but I’m pretty sure my expression can and will be held against me.

She runs down now, quiet, but I don’t say anything. I’ve been struck into silence and I’ll stay like that until she lifts the spell. The problem is that I’m hungry. Jewish sexism (no better or worse, I’m sure, than Christian or Islamic sexism, but more galling because closer to home) has restored my appetite. I try to visualize what’s in the fridge. I get up and pour myself some water—being quiet’s thirsty work—ask Giulia (gestures only) if she wants some. She does, which I take as a positive sign. There’s prosciutto and provolone in the fridge: I go for the cheese; no need to be insensitive.

I make an improvised sandwich, down it in three bites, come back to the table. We haven’t even gotten to the service. I sit quietly, wait for whatever’s coming next. To banish La Pirelli and the shame of thinking about her when I should be thinking about my kid, I think about what Daniele told Ric, how the new Rabbi’s strict about children of mixed marriages. Since the old one wasn’t, there’s a family with one kid who’s counted as a member and one, born after the

switchover, who isn't. Cittadini Serie A and Serie B, Ric said. In Italian football, B teams try to win enough games to get into Serie A; A teams live in fear of being demoted to Serie B.

"It was weird," Giulia says, like a clock only she can see has counted down. "The service just started. No announcement, no nothing. The rabbis were still just sitting there, wearing these robes and fancy hats. The cantor got up and started singing—he had on a suit and regular yarmulke. Then a bunch of guys in the pews got up and headed onto the stage..."

That was no stage, that was the Bima. If I learned the word at someone's bar mitzvah, does that mean it doesn't count?

"behind this big metal screen, and started singing. It all seemed random, and the singing was really loud and kind of terrible. When the men stood up, I did too, but most of the women didn't, so then I wasn't sure what to do. The cantor had his back to us the whole time. I thought..."

She thought it'd be welcoming. She wanted it to be familiar. It's true, at least in theory, that every Jew who knows Hebrew should be able to walk into a Synagogue anywhere in the world and know what's going on. If she knew some Hebrew, it'd have been a lot better...Except. But. Even a Roman-born Jew whose parents want him to be part of the synagogue can't count on being welcome.

"Then they stopped singing and the men all stood up for a really long time. I don't know, maybe they were praying on their own. Then the usher guy went around shaking all their hands, like they were in a club or something."

They are.

"After that there was more singing and the rabbi blessed the wine and the choir sat back down in the pews and it was over. Just like that. Everyone left,

and the guards said Shabbat Shalom, which was nice, but they can't be Jewish, right? If they're working?"

I nod. They're Sabbath Security Goys. Instead of pressing the elevator button or turning on the lights, they scan the perimeter.

"No one else says anything to me, they think I'm a tourist or something, even though I'm wearing long sleeves and the tourists just have a scarf over their shoulders. It's 9:15 on Friday night in the ghetto, and I don't know what to do."

She's twisting her hair around her finger, which makes her look about ten. When she was talking about Josh she looked sad and angry and grown up. Now she looks like a kid whose best friend stopped talking to her, which actually happened for one awful week in 2008.

I look to see if I'm allowed to talk, decide I don't care. "Hon, I'm sorry you were disappointed." When I put my hand on her shoulder, she's stiff, but I'm not put off. "And I'm sorry you've had such a lousy couple of days." A slight softening across her shoulder blades. "None of it's about you. One's about Josh being a jerk; the other's about a community that, for a lot of historical reasons, isn't set up to welcome outsiders."

She shrugs my arm away like it's treif. "I knew I shouldn't have told you. You're fine with Monica being gay, but you're such an asshole about this." Loud and getting louder.

"Excuse me?"

"I said, you're an asshole. 'They're not set up to welcome outsiders.' You made me an outsider! I've lived here my whole life, that's the main synagogue here, it's where Roman Jews go."

“Some of...”

“Most of them. I finally go, and I don’t understand anything.”

“I made you an outsider?” Loud, unfortunately, and getting louder. “I’m the one who stuck you up in the balcony and told you to be quiet? I’m sorry it wasn’t the warm fuzzy you were imagining, but it’s not like I’m in charge down there.”

“You could have made sure I learned Hebrew. You could have sent me to....” She can’t think of the word. I bet she’s this close to saying catechism class, which Monica was subjected to for years.

“To learn. That way I’d know if I liked it or I could try out another place, or...”

Chabad looms in all its black-hatted, black-robed glory. They’d welcome her with open arms; that’s what they do, take bad Jews and make them good, one ritual bath at time. “I’m sorry. Was I supposed to tell you you’re equal to boys Sunday through Thursday, then on Friday and Saturday up we go to the balcony? That doesn’t seem problematic to you?”

“Would you have sent me to Hebrew School in the US?”

At least she found the words. “No.” But she’d have had Jewish friends; she’d have gone to Bat and Bar Mitzvahs.

“There are synagogues there where men and women sit together.”

Bully for them. Which I don’t say. “Which is great. But has nothing to do with how you were raised.”

“By you. According to your choices.”

“Yes. I’m sorry I let you eat pancetta and prosciutto and arista and guanciale... Bad mother.”

This is not only stupid—it’s entirely possible to eat pork and go to synagogue, for one thing—but mean, and it doesn’t address the question of why we couldn’t have checked out Betse’s synagogue for some Queer Jewish Realness. Or Mike’s ordinary old shul so G. could hear what Hebrew sounds like with an actual singer on hand. A woman, no less. There’s a lot of space between being an enrolled member of the Jewish community and being totally divorced from it. Especially since being Jewish, as Daniele pointed out, is basically the Hotel California: you can check out anytime, but you can never leave.

“Any other pork products you want to mention?”

“No.” I’m about to say something; I’m just waiting till I figure out what it is. It doesn’t matter: she’s looking at me like we couldn’t possibly have anything to say to each other. There is, of course, a joke for just this occasion. A couple’s arguing back and forth, getting nowhere, and one turns to a bystander and says, “a *person* can’t talk to her; *you* talk to her.” I don’t say a word. It would piss her off more, and make me miss Josh. He may be a putz; Jesus, what a putz, but he knows a good joke when he hears one.

There’s a thud: we’ve entered the door-slamming part of the conversation. I walk to my room and close the door in a civilized, adult manner. Then I land on my bed and fall quietly to pieces.

That'll Learn You

I only get a few minutes of full-on sniffing, salty-tear-licking, head-burrowed-in-pillow self-pity before guilt elbows its way in. For the Josh part, not for how lousy the choir at the Roman Synagogue is. G. would be feeling a lot less bad if he hadn't wanted to send me a message. And while it puts him straight in the jackass column, it doesn't leave me anywhere great. I turn over and stare at the ceiling. As a distraction, it's not much.

Claude thinks Gogo was irresponsible to have us, especially her (one may be misfortune, but two looks like carelessness). I don't. I think we were both planned, at least to the limited extent Gogo plans. Me for whatever reason, Claude for me. I can't prove it; I'd feel silly saying it, and I don't think I'd know what to do if Gogo confirmed it, but that's what I think. What do you call it when a story you've told yourself has lasted so long, been so convincing, that it's essentially fact? Life? Is that what you call it?

A friend once told me that having a kid was what let her forgive her mother. On one hand, I hope I don't have to wait that long with G. On the other, it's not automatic. Take it from me. The whole forgiving your mother thing once you are one has to do with you experiencing maternal guilt and knowing they have, too. The problem is, I don't think Gogo ever has. You want to know why hypomaniacs don't like their meds? It's not just that meds slow them down, it's that they ruin that golden moment when the speed of thought and the speed of the world are identical. No time or need for second guessing when thought and deed are one.

I play a quick round of ‘what would I do if I were Ma?’ It’s easy. I wouldn’t just fantasize about kicking Josh out, I’d do it. The text writes itself. I finish it by asking, first in English, then in Italian, whether everything is clear, tutto chiaro? Chiara is Pirelli girl’s name. I crack myself up.

Next I knock on G’s door: by now she should have finished weeping and moved on to moping.

“What?” she says, through the door.

“If you’re not doing anything today, how about going over to see your grandmother? You know she loves to see you.”

There’s mumbling, but we both know she’ll go. I’ve played the widowed grandmother card, and once G’s there, she can complain as much as she wants about Josh and almost as much as she wants about me (Marianna draws the line at obscenity and the word *never*) while being served fresh coffee and the Mulino Bianco cookies all Italian kids grow up on. They’re no Oreo, that’s for sure, but if you’re Italian, they’re childhood in a bag. I beat it out of the hallway so she can get to the shower without having to see me. I don’t blame her; it’s not like I want to see me. I text Marianna to let her know Giulia’s coming by.

It’s too early to call Claude. I could call Gogo; she’s probably getting ready for the apartment sale, but there’s literally nothing I want to say to her.

On Sundays, stores—the good ones at least—close around one, and even if G.’s too sad to eat now, sooner or later she’ll be hungry again. I can at least go shopping. I look like five miles of un-showered road, but I don’t care. Back in the Ric days, I would no more have gone out like this than flown. To be seen by the fruttivendola or the butcher in a t-shirt or Ric’s button-down over leggings, hair held up with a pen? Scandalo! Nowadays? The fruttivendola has aged right along

with me, and the butcher's son took the place over and wouldn't notice if I wore a paper bag.

You know you've made it in Italy when the people in the shops not only greet you and know what you want, they hold things to the side for you because they know you'll come in later. At the fruit store, Veronica and I discuss the weather and our families' health. She offers me a cherry, warns me off the cantaloupe. I get plums and eggs and bread and yogurt and decide that if G. and I are both home for dinner, we'll get pizza. It's not a bribe, unless she wants it to be. And, if she's still not talking to me, which she probably won't be, it's just as good cold.

She's gone when I get back. It's not dignified to be seen to be doing what I've asked, but seeing Marianna will make them both happy. Happier. I skip showering, have a plum or two, text Josh to tell him he's got a three-hour window to get his stuff, then burst into tears again. I don't howl; at the end, after maybe ten minutes, when I rub snot on my t-shirt and dry my eyes, there's that to be thankful for. No howling. I want, in no particular order, my mother (not the real one), my sister, my grandparents, Ric (but not Ric now), Josh (of two weeks ago).

I put on my shoes and get the hell out of dodge before Josh shows up. There's nowhere I want to go, but that's what happens when you use Gogo as a model. At least it's not raining. I head south into the less touristed part of Rome, starting to pay attention to my surroundings in time not to miss the fascist post office on Via Marmorata, which I secretly love. I don't think I have a destination in mind, but at the Pyramid, I give into the obvious and take myself to Protestant Cemetery, which isn't really Protestant so much as not Catholic. The headliners

are Keats and Shelley, and the old section, where they are, is beautiful, a serene green melancholy. The working cemetery, on the other side, has a crazy diversity of tombstones crammed together amid tall Cypress trees, Greeks next to the Chinese ambassador to Rome next to beat poets next to Goethe's nephew and an Iranian chemist, endless Brits and Germans—minor nobility, archeologists, painters, sculptors—and the odd American, including one Lynn Sbiroli, nata Salkin in Los Angeles in 1942.

Communist hero Gramsci is here, too. There are pebbles and small rocks piled on top of his tombstone, which I know is a Jewish thing, although I'm pretty sure he wasn't Jewish. (If he were, Marianna would have said.) I imagine G. asking me what the stones mean, realize I'm not sure, feel bad all over again.

The place is reeling with cats, fat and sleek. Rome is a cat lady; the feral cats who dominate the ruins in the Largo Argentina, near one of Rome's biggest bus stops, are proverbially well fed. There's even a web site, if you want to make a donation. When I get kicked out of the cemetery—it's run by volunteers and keeps weird and short hours—I walk down into Garbatella and admire San Paolo outside the walls, not to be confused with San Paolo inside the walls, which is Rome's one Anglican church. This one is gigantic, ancient, owned by the Holy See even though it's not in Vatican City. It features Paul's tomb. It's probably about 75% reconstructed, but the mosaic in the apse is spectacular.

Garbatella's other claim to fame (beside being the official working class part of town since Testaccio and Trastevere got gentrified) is its beautiful old gasworks, which was turned into a museum of Greek and Roman sculpture. Not my thing, but Josh would love it. I can't remember if I told him about it, but if Chiara's a classicist, she'll be all over it. I hate everyone.

I could start heading home now, but I can't see any reason to. When G., no doubt prodded by Marianna, texts to say that she's meeting up with Monica, I realize I can take her place. I call Marianna and when she answers the phone with *Ciao, Tesoro*, I have to swallow hard. Of course, come, she tells me.

I get on the subway: it's maybe a twentieth the size of New York's subway, but it still reminds me of New York. Maybe because it's so graffitied and dumpy and under-funded. Normally, I like it. Today though, it's hard to remember why. A fat man jostles me, and I'm too tired to turn on the *Giulia* switch to ask why I need to label him that way.

Marianna greets me at the door, takes one look, and tells me to sit down. Her apartment smells clean and piney, and looks even neater than usual.

"Coffee? Water? Wine?"

"Water, then coffee. And thank you."

"*Di niente*," she says, it's nothing. She has no idea.

"Better?" Marianna says.

"A little."

She puts a bowl of grapes and another of nuts on the table.

"Your daughter's not very happy right now."

"I know. Thanks for spending time with her."

"Of course. She's worried about me, she says."

"About what?"

"That I'm sad. Because of *Fede*."

"She loves you. She wants you to be happy." The grapes taste like I've never had one before, cool and wet and sweet.

Marianna waggles her index finger from side to side. Not so fast. “That’s true, but it’s not just that. Worrying about me makes her feel good. Dutiful.”

I’m not quite following, which is probably evident on my face, a grape bulging in each cheek like an idiot chipmunk.

“If she’s worried about me, she’s a good granddaughter, and she doesn’t have to feel bad about being mad at you.”

It’s news to me that she feels bad about that, but okay. I can tell Marianna’s not done. “And?”

“And she can rationalize staying nearby for university.”

“Nearby? How nearby?”

“She said she’s going to apply here—to Sapienza.”

“No, she isn’t,” I blurt. A lot of Italians go to the nearest university, and even if they don’t, they go home most weekends. To be fair, most of Italy’s a few hours on the train from the rest of Italy, but if she’s set on staying in Italy, I want her to see some place new, Venice maybe, Milan, Palermo. And I can’t see any reason why she’d want or need to come home every weekend. Maybe if Monica were here, but she’s planning to go to Padua because of their psychology department.

“I agree. No more campanilismo in this family.” There’s a pause. “If you ask me, she should go to the U.S.”

“She doesn’t want to,” I say. “We’ve talked about it.”

“She doesn’t want to, or she thinks she can’t because of...”

“Of what?”

“Of me. And you. And your mother.”

“She’s staying here to take care of Gogo?”

If the look Marianna gives me were captioned, it would sound pretty much like Josh telling me he thought I was smarter than that. I roll a cool grape—I think Marianna puts them in the freezer for a few minutes—along my cheekbones, which Marianna pretends not to notice. That she doesn't police my manners doesn't mean she doesn't see them. "Why do you think she should go to the U.S.?"

"Because Italy's too small, and it's run by idiots, and no one under twenty-five has a job. And the U.S. might have a woman president."

"You think Hillary's a corporate lackey."

"True. But if it's business as usual, at least she's a woman."

This is rank hypocrisy; I've heard her on Maggie Thatcher.

"You're sure you don't want some wine?"

"Very. Do you think I should have moved back after the divorce?"

"What? No. I just don't think you should let Giulia make decisions out of guilt and worry."

"I'm not sure how much letting there is. She's not listening to me much lately." God I'm tired. Marianna pats me. First on the shoulder, then, when I don't move, on the head. Clearly, this is why I'm here.

"It's not just Giulia," Marianna says.

"That's upsetting me? No."

"That's upset, I meant, but yes. Do you want to tell me?"

I shake my head. "No. But thanks for asking. Really."

She keeps patting me, and I keep pretending I'm a dog and have no notion of duration or appropriateness.

"Basta," she says, finally.

I blink back into the present. Massive letdown.

“Still don’t want to tell me?”

“It’s too long and complicated, and I come out really badly.”

“Are you mostly angry or mostly sad?”

“50-50. Plus 50 more for guilt. What about you? Is Giulia right? Are you sad?”

“Certo. But not just. What do you think I did with the stuff that was here?”

“Gave it away?”

“Some. I tried to get Mimmo to take the glasses for the bar, but he said they were too fragile. He said I should sell them at the flea market.”

“That’d be fun. G. would love it.”

Marianna shakes her head. “I have a better idea. I was waiting for the right moment. Vieni.”

“The right moment’s now?”

“Esatto.”

She leads me to the spare room. The carpet’s gone, along with most of the knickknacks. The desk is empty. It’d be as close to minimalist as Marianna’s apartment could possibly be if it weren’t for the flotilla of glasses. I didn’t know wine glasses came in so many shapes and sizes, plus there are glasses for highballs, cordials, champagne. “Man. That’s a lot of glasses.”

She gives me a “No shit, Sherlock” look. “If you want any, take them.”

I shake my head. “Is someone coming to pick them up?”

Marianna smiles. “Take down the sturdiest, we’ll start there.”

I reach the highballs down from the shelf. Fede once explained why they're so weighty, why the hand feel matters. It was early on, early enough that I couldn't get up and say, oh, let me see if Marianna needs help, oh, I think I heard Giulia. Everyone else milled around, drinking Fede's good whiskey and enjoying their liberty.

I put the first six on the desk; Marianna arranges them in a circle, then sets the next four around it in a square. "Keep them coming," she tells me—like a high roller in a casino.

She hefts each glass, sets aside any she thinks aren't up to the task and begins building up, first the circle, and then what's becoming the four guard towers around it.

"Bring them all down," she says, "so we can see what we have." The circular building gets higher, glass by glass, then narrows at the top. The guard towers are about the same height until Marianna balances a champagne flute on each. I think she's done, but no. The thimble-sized grappa glasses hand blown in Venice ("Wedding gift, Marianna says, "Fede's awful aunt Lidia.") are the final layer, some turned up, some down, so the building, but it's more than that, the complex, has both minarets and rain barrels.

Outside, the sun's starting to set, and the pinkish light catches on the towers and bounces off the minarets, and I'm smiling, because it's beautiful and because Marianna's so clearly pleased with herself and her creation.

We stand to one side, staring at it. "Is there a patron saint of towers?" Marianna wants to know.

“There’s one of builders, Barbara. She was walled up in a tower, so that’s pretty close. This is beautiful, Marianna. Are you going to leave it up? Giulia would love it. Mimmo, too.”

She shakes her head. “That’s not the plan. Aspetta.”

I wait, watching the light bend and swirl and splinter.

Marianna comes back with a broom, a dustpan, the kind of plastic gloves you wear to clean your toilet, and two pairs of goggles. “They’re for swimming,” she says, handing me a pair, “but they should work. Put them on.”

Bug-eyed, I stare at my mother-in-law.

“You don’t get it?”

I shake my head.

“That woman, Marie Kondo, she says to only keep things that spark joy.”

“And you’re doing that?”

“I tried. But you know how many things spark joy? That black sweater. Some of Giulia’s drawings. Photos of Ric and Paolo when they were little. That hat Fede wore all the time. Hardly anything else. Do you know how much stuff is in this house?”

I nod. She points to a chair. “Up. Vai.”

I stand on the chair. She stands on the other one. “You know what really doesn’t spark joy?”

“What?”

“These. Fede’s stupid glasses. He’s been dead two years now. Am I supposed to keep them forever like some sort of memorial?”

“No. No. Of course not.” Why are we standing on these chairs? I don’t ask. “Do they make you sad?”

“Angry. So much time spent listening to Fede talk about wine. Oh, and spirits. He couldn’t just say alcohol; always spirits.”

All true.

Marianna picks up a glass and throws it on the floor. It thuds and rolls. “Cazzo.” She picks up another, aims it at the far wall, cheers as it shatters. “Una,” she says. “Your turn.”

I grab a mid-sized glass. “You’re angry at Fede?”

“Yes. For being an idiot. And for dying. Especially for dying. Throw it.”

I throw it at the wall. The stem snaps, but that’s it.

“First one’s free,” Marianna says, transformed into a barker. She cheers as the next one breaks, then the next one, and the next. We’re both throwing, and the glass scatters below us, each new glass smashing as it lands. The breakage’s fractal now, and the clinking cascades, the first crack followed by smaller echoes. The light’s insane, frazzled; spun around and blindfolded till it’s dizzy. Incredibly, the tower’s still standing: we’ve been aiming away from it.

“You think Barbara’s watching out for it?” Marianna says.

“Maybe Lucy. She’s the patron saint of glassworkers. And light. And eye disease.”

The goggles make it hard to catch each other’s eye, but we look at each other and nod, first her, then me. We’re out of glasses but there’s a glass fruit arrangement—oranges, apples, pears, even a pineapple.

“Twenty-fifth wedding anniversary,” Marianna says.

“Aunt Lidia?”

“Her daughter. She married into a glass family.”

I pick up an apple, red, solid. Marianna has an orange.

“Uno, due, tre,” she says, and we hurl them at our beautiful tower, watch it topple and crash, the glass heaping up. The grappa glasses shatter on contact. The apple stays intact; the orange splinters and the shards mix with the rest of pile, bright and pointy and refreshing, like a garnish on an icy gin and tonic. In the end it takes the pineapple to dislodge the highball layers, which skitter off the desk and slam onto the heap of glass. We take off our goggles and look at our work.

“Better?” Marianna says to me.

“Better. You?”

“Much.”

She makes me take my shoes off at the door; you don’t track glass or anything else through Marianna’s house.

I put on Lotte Lenya singing “Pirate Jenny” and cook spaghetti with oil and red pepper and garlic so brown it’s almost burned. We load it with parmesan and toasted bread crumbs, turn Lotte up so we can hear her over the crunching. We’re almost done when I remember to ask Marianna about stones on graves. She knows of course: it features in the Singer stories she’s been reading. The stones show that the grave has been visited, that the dead person was beloved, she tells me. And, of course, if you’re superstitious, they keep spirits from getting out and causing trouble.

We switch over to the Nina Simone version while we do the dishes and drink Fede’s excellent grappa out of espresso cups.

I sing it the whole way home, especially the part when the black freighter’s crew asks Jenny if they should kill the captives now or later. “Noon by the clock/And so still on the dock/You can hear the foghorn miles away/In that

quiet of death/ I'll say, "Right now/Then they'll pile up the bodies/And I'll say,
"That'll learn ya."

I growl the last line of each verse like Lotte and Nina. It gets me across town and home, reminds me to drink a ton of water and take some aspirin before I go to bed, makes me feel fierce and righteous. "I Will Survive" and "Papa Don't Preach" had the same effect in my teens and twenties ("Papa's" problematic abortion politics notwithstanding). If G. were up, I'd play it for her; although she'd probably think Jenny needs anger management classes and a self-defense course.

In the morning, I send Harry links to both versions, because Lady Finger still performs now and then, and her range is basically the same as Lotte's and Nina's.

Mean When You're Mean

The opening party starts at 6.00. Everybody at the Falconeri hates Vince, me, and Guido, and we hate each other. Guido's just realized that one of the loans he got isn't in the show, and he wants us to stick it in now. Where? Wherever. If the director he borrowed it from shows up, the painting should be on display.

"Did she RSVP?" I ask. We're in the lobby, which looks great. Six St. Georges flutter along the length of the information and the book stall. No one answers.

"Even if she's not here," Vince says, "the condition report will tell her if it was up and for how long."

"I don't care about that," Guido hisses. "That's paper work. I care that it's not here after I personally convinced her to loan it." He goes upstairs to make his secretary check and recheck the RSVPs, muttering all the while about losing face.

She probably hates us now, too. Which is sad for Vince, since she's newish and he's got his eye on her. As for me, well. My daughter's broken hearted, which isn't my fault, except it kind of is, and for extra bonus fury, she's convinced I stole her birthright. No matter that it can't be stolen. My sister's mad at me, also for existential reasons that aren't going to get fixed any time soon. There's a present from Josh stashed under my bed. He left it there when he picked up his stuff, along with a note that says "this is still for you, xj." I haven't opened it. But neither have I donated it to the poor or earmarked it for some

kind of secret Santa situation. If I knew it sucked, if I could guarantee that it was tourist art or novelty pasta shapes, I'd open it in a second. But I don't trust him.

He's been paling around with Vince, which pisses me off, and which Vince has time for because he hasn't done a damn thing since we finished hanging. I haven't done much, admittedly, besides checking to make sure all the wall texts are up in the right places, but that's something. He's already changed into his nicer black linen jacket, even though he claims he doesn't approve of art parties, which is bullshit. He only doesn't approve of the ones that let Guido swan around like he owns the place.

I straighten the brochures in the rack. G's coming, despite everything. Largely because her grandmother and father told her she had to. She's bringing Monica for moral support. Ric and Fabiola are coming, which is nice of them, I suppose. I haven't officially uninvited Josh, but if I had, Vince would have re-invited him. After that, it's Falconeri regulars—we have a few—museum staff, all the staff at the coffee bar everyone at the gallery frequents, Vince's current rotation of women, everyone he's ever worked with, everyone I've ever worked with once I stopped working shit jobs, Guido's massive list, the remnants of the Falconeri family, which means whoever's still alive in the older generation and anyone in the younger one who's in Italy instead of some island tax haven. The clothes should be amazing: the last opening I went to, at the Barberini, was style for days.

In light of which, I've been shopping. There are lots of things you shouldn't do angry: drive, eat, put up wall paper, nurse (Marianna says it makes babies terrors—I don't put much stock in that, largely because I'd have to think about other moods or conditions that could spread that way), but shopping isn't

one of them. It improves the eye, and opens the wallet. I'll be wearing a sleeveless linen dress in an ochre yellow that looks like someone's Sienese apprentice mixed it up in 1428.

Considering how far behind schedule we are, it's astonishing how proud of ourselves Vince and I (and presumably Guido) feel about getting the show up. The pilgrimage, the whole reason Guido wanted to do the show in the first place, has been on since December. All the people moaning about how the city will be inundated with tourists, all the shopkeepers counting their extra money, all Marianna's dark claims about the church profiting off simple people who don't know any better were vindicated or disappointed months ago.

There are maps marking out the jubilee itinerary and super-bored soldiers checking bags before you go into the bigger churches. They put up signs telling people it's okay to cross at a yellow light, because too many Germans were getting stuck eternally at the crosswalks. Rome's been falling apart for years, so now all anyone talks about is how wasteful it is to spend money on stuff like this, how the Vatican should be paying for it all. They're not wrong, it's just that the conversations are so dull. And I like a slightly ruined city; it's the template I grew up with.

I pay my respects to the saints in the di Cione tryptich, then get clobbered by St. Peter wallowing in guilt till the end of time.

According to Harry, Gogo did pretty well at the apartment sale. She's quite the bargainer, apparently, all about moving the merchandise. He put Claude's yellow dress away, and stopped Ma from selling the coffee table. Some of the neighbors, he said, were, you know, okay.

I blow a bit of dust off St. Lucy's frame.

“There you are,” Vince says.

“Eccomi.” Here I am. But really, behold me. “What?”

“It’s 5:30. You’re going to change, aren’t you?”

For a second, I consider saying no. That I’ve opted to wear leggings under a big linen shirt and my hair tied up for what’s probably the biggest thing the Falconeri’s done in fifty years. Just to fuck with him. “Already? Yes. But no one will show up at 6. It’s Italy.”

“Doesn’t matter: Guido wants us standing at the door in a united front.”

“You’re talking to Guido?”

“Go.”

I go. I sponge down with the washcloth I brought and put on the ochre dress, which has a slightly vintage vibe, like something Anita would wear to meet Bernardo. My sandals are black patent, my toenails and eyelids are gold. I spray my hair into a semblance of sleekness and swirl it into a chignon. The party’s only two hours, so the curliness will reappear roughly around when the stragglers leave. I look great. I don’t remember the last time I looked this good. Which would be depressing if I had time to think about it, but I don’t. I’m back at the main entrance at 5:58.

Vince winks. Guido looks me up and down, says, “Sei bella!” It’s somewhere between repellent and adorable; proud dad can’t quite overcome habitual lech, but he’s trying. The Gallery’s photographer/PR person/border-line unemployable dimwit Falconeri in-law snaps our photo.

Guido wanders off; Vince and I grin maniacally at each other. “Don’t get drunk,” I tell him.

“Altretanto.”

Vince wants a new job; I want Vince's old one; it would be nice if a lot of people really like the show.

Suddenly people are everywhere. I meet the director of the small Dutch museum that loaned us the apostle twelvetyrch and the one looking forward to seeing what we've done with his Magdalene sailing to Provence. Vince is talking to his old boss who's also my old boss, but at a different time and place. Rome's small like that. People are everywhere, either holding a glass of wine or waiting for one. Jacopo's hiding out downstairs; watching people drinking near paintings makes him queasy.

A beautiful woman hugs Vince, then another, then another.

Guido hands off someone from a museum in Brussels to me. "Take him upstairs and show him the *Noli Me Tangere*; he bet me I couldn't get it." I feel like Eliza in *My Fair Lady*; she thinks it's all been about her, when it's really just a stupid bet between two old men. I follow orders and forgive him everything when he tells me how satisfying it is to see the Magdalene's life unfolding.

When I drop him off at the Desert Fathers and Friends room, I see someone who looks familiar. He's checking out Aquinas and Augustine. My favorite Augustine is by Carpaccio, and it never leaves Venice; our version's okay, nothing amazing. I know the guy, but how? It's when I see the pack of cigarettes poking out of his jacket pocket that I realize. It's the man from the Ghetto. Anti-Semitic until proven otherwise, and even if he's not, as far as he knows, I'm a crazy person. I look nothing like the rain-soaked mess I was that night; I'm a seasoned, elegant museum professional. Still, I shrink into the space next to the door until he passes.

He's gone into the Magdalene room. I move toward the big staircase, the grand one supposedly designed by one of Borromini's students (when Guido tells the story, it's Borromini's favorite student and heir apparent). It's on a ten-best-places-to-kiss-in-Rome list, and we pop up on Instagram every so often. It's ideal for watching people kaleidoscoping in the lobby, clumps forming and reforming. A tiny old lady dressed in a cardinal's robe topped with a doge hat is air kissing a woman wearing striped palazzo pants and a sports bra meets bustier top. Vince, balder on top than I realized, is talking to a woman I don't know, but she must be in the art world—nothing she's wearing is symmetrical, the square heels of her black shoes are lucite, and her un-dyed hair (a rarity here) is cut into a spiky Laurie Anderson do. I should be mingling, bringing people through to see the works they loaned, making nice, sucking up, but I look a little longer. When I realize that this time the familiar-looking man I'm seeing is Ric, I head down to say hello.

I never get there: Guido grabs me and introduces me to about seven people I've never seen before, telling them what a good eye I have; then I bump into the Vatican curator who uses me to translate and punch up audio scripts. My job is to make the English version more approachable, less condescending. Italian audio guides work on the same principle high-end Italian menswear stores do: out British the British.

Ric and Fabiola have disappeared into the swirl, but here come Marianna and the girls, hugging and congratulating me. I take advantage of the situation to hug G.; she can't make a fuss in front of her granny.

"You look amazing, all of you." G's wearing the floaty polka-dot dress she got from me: the black beaded sweater has migrated back to Marianna, who

looks great. Monica's adorable in a pair of pink cigarette pants, white shirt, and Greek sandals.

"Thanks for coming," I say.

"Don't be silly. Of course we came," Marianna says.

"What's your favorite thing in the show?" Monica wants to know.

I'm thinking about that when Giulia says, "Look, there's Josh."

We look.

I didn't know he had a jacket, I think, before I realize it's Ric's old one, but tailored. "It's the lobby," I say. "The proportions are really good. It makes everyone look better."

As we're watching, a woman comes over to him and hands him a glass of wine. The Falconeri doesn't run to waitresses: it's the girlfriend. G's face falls; Monica's body language shifts—because she loves G., because she's going to be a psychologist, or because the woman is ridiculously beautiful. Like stupid beautiful.

"She looks like Monica Belluci," Marianna says.

This means nothing to the girls, but Marianna's right. She's got the luminous oval face, the black hair and big eyes, the old school va-va-voom body. I pick imaginary lint off my dress, swallow hard, put my arm around Giulia, who allows it for a second before pulling away. I am not a woman scorned; I am a solicitous mother.

She hands him the glass and they clink like they're a prosecco ad. A second later, Vince shows up, ruining the effect. I swear he can smell beauty; I've seen him turn when a woman he can't have seen is in the vicinity; it's like he's phototropic.

"Vince is a pig," Giulia says. "She's way too young for him."

Ouch.

"And she's with someone else," Marianna points out.

"Yeah, and it's Josh," Monica says. "How do you explain that?"

G. opens her mouth, closes it. I take Marianna's glass from her hand, drink down her wine. "I've been running around all day," I say. "I haven't had anything."

"Giulia, can you get your mother some water, and some wine for me, please," Marianna says.

"You can't explain it, can you," Monica says. "Not with the facts at hand. I'm going to ask him."

G. eyes get big. "You can't."

"What do you care? He's leaving soon, right?"

"It's probably that he's exotic," I say. He's a very good kisser, but that is not one of the facts on hand.

"Maybe he's nice to her," Marianna says.

"Promise you won't ask him anything," Giulia says. Only after Monica promises does G. pick up her feet and march them to the wine table furthest from Josh and, what's her name, Chiara.

"I'm not sure which is my favorite," I tell Monica, "but check out St. Lucy in the narrow room. I bet you'll like her. And Marianna, in the first room, there's one of all the apostles being tortured. I'll send Giulia up with the wine when she gets it."

"Andiamo," Marianna says.

Once G's back with my water, I move through the crowd, trying to keep tabs on Josh and Ghetto man. Feel your back body, my yoga teacher says, or used to; I haven't been in a while. I may take up kick boxing.

I find a clear bit of wall and scan the room.

"Connie," someone too near me to see says, "I've been looking for you."

It's Guido.

"The Monsignor was wondering about some of the points you made about Maria Maddalena. He's over there," Guido says, pointing to the man in the white stole and the black robe.

He's in spitting distance of Josh. Naturally. "What am I supposed to tell him?"

"Just nod," Guido says. "Look sympathetic. It's not easy for the church these days."

"Yeah well, maybe vocations would be up if they let women be priests, or if they, I don't know, stopped molesting kids."

Guido takes my glass.

"It's water."

"Just smile and nod."

I nod, practicing. It's good advice; I'm supposed to be ingratiating myself, not hiding out and dissing the church. But Jeez. Pope Francis can wash as many immigrants' feet as he wants: St. Peter's, all white marble and power, is still a big old tell.

I pass a man wearing a beautiful kimono and another wearing, I think, the same palazzo pants I saw before. It's bold, but it works. To my right, a young guy is showing another guy his St. Sebastian tattoo, complete with sexy slipping

loincloth and arrow wounds. To my left are Ric and Fab: I keep walking, waving in a way that's meant to convey that I'll be over in a sec. I gird my loins, oil my neck with a few yesses and nos, and here's the Monsignor.

I can't wait to hear what his problem is with the Magdalene room. The church officially disaggregated Mary Magdalene in 1969, but it's not like they could relabel all the paintings (it's not like they tried), so functionally she's still a prostitute. When you Google Mary Magdalene (and I know this part isn't really Gregory the Great's fault, and probably the church isn't any happier than I am about it, but still), you're never more than a few clicks away from being able to buy a T-shirt that says "Mary on the Streets, Magdalene in the sheets."

The Monsignor, it turns out, isn't angry so much as concerned. Am I sending the right message? Should I be sending any message at all, since I'm a curator, not a priest or theologian? (Not only am I neither, I'm also a woman. He doesn't mention that; he doesn't have to.) I smile and nod, take a leaf from Monica. What Magdalene did he like best? I'm hoping he'll say flying Mary, so I can convict him of bad taste, or topless Mary, so I can convict him of hypocrisy and creepiness. He chooses the Lamentation at the Cross: sly.

A minor Falconeri I should be schmoozing with passes us, but I can't extract myself in time. I straighten up and turn slightly away so that when the priestsplaining about the church's position on imagery and how it's evolved since 400 starts, I'm near escape velocity.

I don't stop until I've crossed the lobby and found Ric. No sign of Fab; she must be getting a drink. He walks me into a corner to talk about G.

"She looks sad," he says.

“She’s had a lousy couple of days.” I’m filling him in on Josh and the synagogue, when I see Fab heading back. She’s wearing her listening face, last seen when Fede was alive. Someone must be telling her a story. I look to her right and there he is. Signor Ghetto. What are the odds? No, really. I want to know.

Any minute now, Fab will see us and call us over. I stop listening to Ric and try to block out the ambient noise so I can isolate Fab and friend. Her mouth’s moving, but I can’t hear anything. Signor Ghetto is louder. “America,” he says. “Originally. But now they’re everywhere.”

Fab looks like she’s asking something.

“They mean well, but some people really hate them. I saw a woman in the ghetto, perfectly normal looking, get so frustrated with them...”

Them. Them is the Mitzvah Mobilers. And that perfectly normal looking woman is...I shut my eyes, click my fancy black heels, fail to disappear.

“When is this Josh leaving?”

“Sorry, what? Soon. And he’s not staying with us anymore.”

I can’t hear the next piece of their conversation. I don’t have to, because Signor Ghetto has leaned over and grabbed Fab’s arm: he’s acting it out. Fab breaks into laughter. “Ric, can we talk tomorrow? Guido really wants me and Vince to mingle.”

“Sure, okay.”

It’s a delicate maneuver: I need to feint right so I’m behind Ric before he turns and sees Fab.

If I were wearing flats, I’d have made it.

"Fabiola's back. And I want to introduce you to someone. It'll just take a minute. Let Vince mingle."

I let him tow me toward certain humiliation.

Fab hugs and kisses me, then says to Ric, "Daniele just told me an amazing story."

"Dimmi," Ric says. "But first, let me introduce you two. Connie, Daniele, Daniele, Connie. You've talked, yes, but not met?"

"Piacere," Daniele says, looking at me, head tilted in trying-to-place-someone mode.

"Piacere," I say. My face is frozen, but my vocal cords work. There are no odds. This is a bizarro-world hell-scape where anything can happen.

I do my pillar of salt impression while Daniele repeats the story. He doesn't act anything out this time, except for a twitch when he gets to the Mitzvaher's reaction.

"Assurdo," Ric says. "Are they really that annoying?"

"Yes," I say. "They are. How is anyone's Jewishness their business?"

"They see it as a mitzvah," Daniele says, "a good deed," he translates for Ric and Fab. "A chance for Jews to connect, be recognized. And pray, if they desire."

He's got his rational man and good Jewish citizen hat on. He was singing a different tune in the ghetto.

"She sounds a bit crazy, that woman," Ric says. "See," he adds, gesturing to Daniele. "I told you he knows everything. He should be a professor."

"It is intrusive," Daniele says. "I felt for the woman a little; she was just acting on impulse, I'm sure, and her daughter took it so badly."

I swallow. Loudly. I've never had a hot flash, but if they feel like they sound, I am now.

"Are you all right, Connie?" Fab says "You've been working so hard lately. And then these problems with Giulia on top of it."

Daniele's shoes are lovely. Not as nice as Guido's, but he probably doesn't go to Florence for them.

When I look up, he's staring straight at me. "I'm going to step out for a cigarette before I see the rest of the show. Nice talking to you again, Connie."

"It's always nice to meet in person, no?" Ric says bromidefully.

"Always," Daniele says. "On the phone you might have one picture in your head, but things are different in person, no?"

He's grinning. I will not tell him to fuck himself. I will not demand one of his cigarettes. "It was nice of you to come," I tell him, arms tight to my sides so I don't drag a hand across my sweaty neck. "And to take the time you have with Ric and me. Really kind."

"A pleasure," he says, still grinning.

"Enjoy your cigarette," I say. "Fabiola, good night. Ric, I'll talk to you soon."

"Oh look," Ric says, "there's Giulia." He waves her over.

"Ciao a tutti," I say, getting the hell out before everything's confirmed, not that Daniele has any doubts. I sweep up the stairs as quickly as I can without colliding with someone or looking like I'm fleeing.

Upstairs, three women are in line for our usually adequate women's room. I don't regret commandeering the men's room, but I do regret looking in the mirror: I'm wild-eyed, red faced, damp. And way closer to the urinal than

seems advisable, especially with a wet floor. I back away. I—what’s the opposite of counting your blessings?—rehearse my grievances: a too-small world; an idiot ex-husband; a smirking know-it-all; religious orthodoxy; Josh, Guido, the monsignor; the moron who can’t pee straight.

Someone knocks, not for the first time. I smooth my hair, which is working hard to escape the confines of the chignon, then send up a quick prayer that the man standing outside isn’t anyone on my grievance list. It’s a stranger, thank god.

“Scusa,” I say, because the party only has about 45 minutes left, and I’m keeping it together, and by now surely Josh and Chiara and Daniele will be gone.

I walk out, and stick my head into the Apostle room, stick it back out again when I see Monica and Chiara in front of ripped John the Baptist. I see Vince as I pass the Desert Fathers. He’s standing in front of St. Anthony the Great, giggling.

“Are you drunk?”

“Drunk, no. Brillo, si.”

Brillo means tipsy. Also, which I love, shiny.

“But even sober, the devils make me laugh. Look at this one.” He points at the muscular furry one in the upper right corner, the one with bat ears and a big club.

“I like the elephant-fish one.” I wish I were drunk.

“Yeah, but he’s basically just looming and leering: this one’s about to choke Anthony with his scarf. But Anthony doesn’t care. It’s like in the song.”

“What song?”

“You didn’t sing it when you were a kid?”

“When I was a kid on the Upper West Side? No, I didn’t.”

“Ric should have taught you. There are a million versions, but basically, the devil’s screwing with Anthony and Anthony just ignores him and gets on with things. Like Anthony’s repairing his pants, and the devil steals the buttons he was going to sew on. Anthony doesn’t get upset, he just ties them with a string.”

He starts to sing: “Sant’Antonio nel deserto se mangiava i tagliolini Satanasso per dispetto gli rubò la forchetta Sant’Antonio non si lagna, con le mani se li mangia... Sant’Antonio Sant’Antonio il nemico del demonio.”

Anthony’s in the desert eating spaghetti when Satan steals his fork. But St. Anthony doesn’t complain: he eats it with his hands. Saint Anthony, Saint Anthony, the enemy of the devil.

“No matter what Satan does, Anthony finds a way,” Vince says. “He doesn’t give a fuck.”

The devils besetting poor Anthony are really something. The one pulling his scarf is part Sneetch, part gorilla, part lizard, all huge-winged scary; the lizard-snake guy on the other side isn’t as creepy, but he has a knife.

“In the last verse,” Vince says, “St. Anthony stops being so Zen. He grabs his big scissors and castrates Satan. So the moral of the story is don’t screw with St. Anthony.”

“Did you talk to all the directors? The one Guido’s worried about, is she here?”

“I told her how hard I’d fought for her painting, and how upset I was when Guido changed his mind.”

“Nice. Did you tell her you’ve been feeling restless, and how much you’d love to work in a real team environment?”

“Nah. I’m not moving to Brussels. You? Multiple Falconeris under your thumb?”

I shake my head. “No. Next time, remind me not to invite my family. Jesus.”

“I talked you up to Guido’s mother. She liked how the Magdalene room told a story.”

“Thanks. Too bad the Monsignor didn’t feel that way. How does Guido know him, anyway?”

“They go to the same cigar club.”

I look at him.

“Don’t kill me; I didn’t make the world.”

“I hate everybody.”

“Come on.” He pulls me toward the stairs. “Look, the crowd’s emptying out. We’ll take one more gracious spin to accept any last-minute compliments, then I’ll snag a bottle and meet you in your office. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Gracious.”

“I can do gracious. Strangers are fine. It’s the people I know I hate.”

“Let’s synchronize our watches: I’m heading over to the pack of Barberini people. You’re going over to the wine table on the other side,” he says, nodding toward the spot where half the Falconeri board is gossiping about, I don’t know, the Seychelles, or how hard it is to find good help.

I look over there: no sign of anyone I’m avoiding. “Certo. Andiamo.”

Monica passes us, still with Chiara. She gives me a cheerful wave, keeps moving. Good instincts, that Monica. I'm surprised G. let her out of her sight, but then I see Ric and Fab still have her pinned down. Thank God, Daniele's left the scene.

"Ci vediamo. In bocca al lupo," Vince says.

"Crepi."

We head in opposite directions. I nod and smile and answer questions that the wall texts have already answered. I should have just gone with emojis—which actually would have been kind of perfect. Saint emojis should be a thing. A set of attributes; some torture implements for Vince and the other ten-year-olds; Lucy's eyes on a dish. St. Denis, the Patron Saint of France, is a Cephalophore: a beheaded saint who catches his own head as it falls. He's begging to be an emoji, and so's Margaret busting out of the dragon.

When my brain is trippiting away like this, it means I need to slow down. I pause for a second, roll my shoulders, breathe, which keeps me from telling minor Falconeris about this brilliant and possibly profitable idea. Stuff like this doesn't happen to Claude, by the way. Why? Because I limited her exposure, took the hit for both of us. I adjusted her oxygen mask before putting on mine.

Guido's escorting the tiny old woman in the doge's hat to the door. Vince is waving off the Barberini squad, with a special smirk for their super hot publicist. I take some photos—the dark green and red banners hanging all along the back wall; the people leaving, including a woman wearing a dress made of a crimped silk Gogo would love. I take one of the staircase and one of Ric and Giulia talking, and send them all to her.

I have a couple texts from a number I don't recognize.

I'm sorry. I had no idea. Anyway, you see why I can't be incognito. You probably thought I was an anti-Semite.

I turn my phone off before I say anything I might regret. Guido's at the front door, shaking hands, thanking everyone for coming. I leave him to it. Never have I been more ready for a glass of wine.

The drab, stuffy basement feels like home base after a horrible game of tag. I open my office door, and there's Josh, large as life and sitting at my desk.

"Hey," he says. "I didn't mean to scare you."

If tonight's about karma, I must have been a horror.

"Are you happy with the show? You should be. The crowd seemed to really like it."

"What are you doing here? It's ungentlemanly to abandon your date."

"Chiara? She's fine. You look beautiful, by the way."

"Oh, screw you. I don't, first of all, and second of all, what are you doing here? They taught you to ask before kissing someone but not before making yourself at home in their office?" He looks good. Unfrazzled, un-sweaty, un-miserable, which makes me angrier. "Why'd you even come tonight?"

"Vince invited me. And I wanted to see how it looked with people here, if it'd be different."

"Yeah," I say, taking my shoes off and putting them on my desk. They look like a sexy still-life, black patent against a block of post-its and a pair of scissors. I drop them on the floor. "Well."

"It looks really good. Every time I look, I see something new, something I didn't notice before. It's cool."

“That wasn’t a well, what’d you think? I don’t care what you think. It was a well, okay, you saw what you wanted to see, time to move on.”

He smiles. At me. “I missed you.”

“Really.”

“That’s another reason I came tonight.”

I pick up the cup on my desk. It’s full of filmed-over tea. “Shit.”

Josh stands up and pulls a clean one off the shelf he can reach and I can’t, since he’s blocking my way. “Here.”

I don’t take it. “Aren’t you helpful. Do you even know what I’m mad about?”

“Um...yes?” For the first time, he looks nervous.

“Tell me.”

“Well...I mean...I don’t want to assume anything, but since you kicked me out right after Giulia met Chiara...” Not quite cocky enough to come out and say what he thinks, which is that I’m jealous he got over me in two days and started dating a Monica Bellucci lookalike.

“Nope. You were a free agent. You can date anyone in Rome, and you should. It’s the best way to learn Italian and see the city.”

“Better than a Vespa?”

“Doesn’t she have a Vespa? Too bad. I don’t care what you do”—half true at best, but the next part’s 100% accurate. “I care that you dragged G. into this. You want to parade your girlfriend in front of me, fine, whatever. It makes you less attractive, not more, but you didn’t even think about Giulia. Do you know how upset she was?”

He’s looking down at his hands. “Some? Pretty? A lot?”

“A lot.”

“There was never...”

“I know that. And she knows that. But seeing you with someone age appropriate and gorgeous was a huge bummer.”

“That’s why you kicked me out?”

“Yup.”

Turns out I’m not done. “I know you think you’re a good guy, a mensch, but if you were, you wouldn’t have dragged G. into this.” Why stop now? “And you know what? Since you were already seeing Chiara, flirting with me when we hung the show isn’t really a good look either.”

Josh’s face falls. Has fallen. Felled. I take the cup. “I have to go. Vince and I have drinking to do.”

Right on cue, Vince walks in. “Josh! Do you want a drink?”

“He’s leaving.”

Josh stands up, shakes Vince’s hand. “The show looks great, man. Thanks for letting me help out.”

Man, I hate a bromance. “Bye, Josh,” I say. “Tell Betse she’s welcome in Rome anytime.” I stand at the door until he walks through it.

“You’re mean when you’re mean,” Vince says.

“Where’s the corkscrew?”

This Is Your Life

When I wake up, it's 1:00 in the afternoon, and Claude's calling.

"You sent Mom pictures of the show?" she asks.

"Apparently."

"Are you mad?"

Mainly what I am is hung over. And I hate fighting with Claude in the best of times. "Aren't you?"

"Yes. But big picture mad, not little picture mad. Are there more photos?"

It's eight am there. She sounds wide awake. "You're mad about something gigantic that's about the shape of our whole lives, all my choices, etc., but not so mad you don't want to see photos of the opening?"

"Right. How was it?"

"It sucked." If I keep my eyes closed, it's a little better.

"What? Why?"

"Okay. It didn't suck. Everything looked great. We had a good crowd. Guido was happy, except when he made me placate a monsignor."

"He made you fellate a monsignor?"

I don't know if she's joking or really didn't hear me, but it makes me laugh. Which makes my head hurt. More.

"People liked it?"

"Seemed like."

"Then how did it suck? Zeppo, no!"

She's talking to him in that specially pitched dog voice, and it feels like an air raid. "It was like this is your life, but in hell." I go over the highlights, and Claude keeps it together until I describe Daniele imitating me for Fab.

"I'm sorry," she says, then starts laughing again.

"I can tell."

"Well, at least G. wasn't there for that part, right?"

"There you go again with the silver lining." I've rolled over without getting nauseous, so I try sitting up. Big mistake. "Ow."

"What?"

"Lightening flash in my frontal lobe."

"Zeppo, out! Hunh?"

"Shhh. Vince and I got drunk afterward. Massively drunk. Flailing limb paralytic British drunk." I push off from the bed and look, I'm standing.

"Yuck."

"Yeah. I look like a Francis Bacon."

"Nice. Mom forwarded the pictures. The banners are great."

It occurs to me, sludgily, the idea pushing its way along synapses that just want to lie very quietly, that Claude may not know about the apartment sale.

"What else did she say?"

"Yes," Claude says. "I know about the sale. She made four hundred bucks. You think she'd keep that to herself?"

"No."

"She said Harry helped. That's how you knew, right? That's why you called?"

I nod. Big mistake. My teeth clank. "Yeah."

“And...” Claude starts

Seriously, there’s an *and*? In the 80’s, there was a fad for idiot games where you’d have to say what animal or flower you’d like to be. Claude and I made up even dumber ones, like what form of punctuation, or, Claude’s idea, what conjunction would you be? If Gogo were a punctuation mark, she’d be an exclamation point (too easy). If she were a conjunction, she’d be an *and*. I’d be a *but*. “And what?”

“One of the neighbors was a fan.”

“Of what?”

“Mom.”

“Mom’s what?”

“The downtown theater stuff. Get this: the neighbor—she’s like twelve—learned about it at NYU. House of Wow is on the syllabus!”

Eyes closed, I grope my way to the terrace in case there’s a breeze. “How does the twelve-year-old afford the rent? “

“She splits it with three other twelve-year-olds. Come on, don’t you think it’s cool?”

“That one of them sleeps in the living room? It’s horrible. High rents and chain stores are ruining New York.”

“Not what I meant. “

It’s too sticky outside to breathe and talk. Back to the kitchen. “Ma must have been thrilled. Did she show her the photo album and the scrap book?”

“What photo album? She has a scrap book?”

“Did she tell you she has your old yellow dress? The Marimekko one?”

Don’t worry. I told Harry to hide it so no one could buy it.”

"I'm still on the scrap book and photo album. She kept photos from the shows and put them somewhere safe and labelled them? She collected programs and reviews and, I don't know, costume sketches and saved them? Aren't you the one who likes to point out all the ways she'd never do something like that?"

"Yes. That's me. I do like to point that out." I start getting out stuff for coffee, putting each piece of the Moka down carefully so it doesn't make a sound. "I did it."

"Did, like you've stopped. Wait. Did, like you made them?"

"Unh hunh."

"You're not screwing with me?"

"I couldn't screw with anyone right now. My brain hurts."

"Does she still have them?"

"I assume. I didn't see them in the run-up to the sale. Why?"

"I want to see them. You got to hang out backstage and see some of the shows. I was watching TV at grandma and grandpa's."

"You saw some of them, didn't you? I can picture us there together."

"Maybe some dress rehearsals? I remember sparkly costumes and masks, and not being able to tell who was a man and who was a woman. And the way it smelled backstage."

"How'd it smell?"

"Like melted crayons and hot sauce and sweat."

I put up my arm and sniff. I don't smell much better. "The last time I saw them, they were in the hall closet. Near the Christmas ornaments. If you go looking for them, can you get rid of the ornaments while you're at it? No need for G. to know about those."

“Like me and the albums?”

“I don’t have the energy for you to be paranoid.”

“I’m not being paranoid. I’m just asking how in thirty-some years, no one’s mentioned them?”

“It’s a bunch of snapshots and some clippings. Arranged by a ten-year-old. It’s not the fucking Rosetta stone.” I stare at the coffee praying for it to be ready.

“No. It’s our mother, who you spent years making sure I never expected anything from, doing this cool thing she loved that I wasn’t old enough to understand. And that maybe I’d like to know about. You can throw the ornaments away yourself the next time you’re in New York. Whenever that is. Don’t bother sending the photos.”

There’s a loud thwack, which makes me jump, and the line goes dead.

FUCKFUCKFUCK. FUCK. Fuck. Fuck. Shouldn’t there be some law of physics that says that today couldn’t be worse than yesterday? I’m done standing up. I’m done talking to people. I pour the coffee, find some aspirin, scrape myself into the tub.

Claude was on her cell, so how did she make the thwack so loud? This is as far as I’ve gotten in thinking all of this through when a text comes in from her.

Mom loved the show pictures. In fact, she’s thinking of coming to Italy. I told her you’d be thrilled.

I slide further into the tub. In an hour, my phone will buzz to remind me to go to the Gallery for the victory summit and strategy meeting Guido scheduled. It’s the last thing he said before getting into a cab with the woman in the striped palazzo pants.

It takes me forever and another dose of aspirin to get to the office. On the way, I have a brain wave: an app that makes a phone-slammng sound when you press it, then automatically ends the call.

Vince looks like hell. I look like hell. Guido's dapper as ever, and as happy as I've ever seen him. When he sends the secretary for a bottle of prosecco to celebrate, Vince smiles for the first time. I go to the bathroom to see if gargling will make my mouth taste less disgusting.

Apparently not. I'm back in time for the toast.

"Ai Santi!" Guido says. "A noi!"

To the saints. To us. I let the bubbles touch my lips, return the glass to its upright position.

I know Claude's screwing with me. Ma's not getting on a plane and flying to Italy. She's not a fan of flying. Which is why I told Claude to only apply to colleges west of Ohio. We went to the airport to wave her off for Berkeley, her and a throng of other college-bound kids.

Suddenly attentive, Ma had insisted on coming with me to Philadelphia. My roommate was mortified that her parents wouldn't go away; her father was measuring the room to see if he could build a bookcase; her mother wanted to go on one last mother-daughter shopping trip. My mother, on the other hand, was over at the library's special collections office trying to get them to acquire the archive (a couple of boxes of ratty costumes, plus, you guessed it, the famous scrapbook and album) of House of Wow's glory days. The director's complete lack of interest didn't faze her. You're here four years, Ma told me. I can play the long game.

They never bit, which is why everything's still in the closet, lodged between the Christmas tree stand and the ornaments. Gogo's not coming to Rome, but if Claude's using her as a weapon, she's really angry.

As soon as Guido lets us go, I head home, still hung over, a little nauseous. But even in my condition, it's hard not to notice the obvious. I'm not the undertipped waitress groped by every man who passes through her shitty port town. A little, maybe if I put Josh and Daniele together and throw in the Monsignor. But when it comes to G. and Claude, I'm the undertipping groper Jenny has in her sights. Forget the poor, it's me I'll have always with me, which feels pretty fucking untenable.

I turned the sound off on my phone, so I've missed a message from Daniele.

Ric told me Giulia had a bad time at the synagogue. I'm sorry.

She says the singing's terrible.

Si. It's a feature. She should come to Livorno. Uglier synagogue, better singing.

But she'd still have to sit upstairs?

I'm afraid so.

And downstairs the men are milling around and chatting?

We're a stiff-necked people. And the service is dull.

So what do you like about it?

Who said I did? Like barely comes into it

I think about that. Slowly, because my brain's still limping. As I pass bakeries and pizza places, the smell moves from sickening to okay to enticing. I get a loaf of bread, find a bench, start tearing hunks off.

Daniele again. *Do you mean what do I get out of it?*

Yes.

I only go to synagogue on high holy days and in Livorno.

That doesn't answer the question.

No. Familiarity, connection, history, family. Which might be foreign to you.

For a second, I think I've hallucinated the last sentence, but when I re-read it, it says the same thing. *Foreign?* I know he can't have talked to Claude, but that's what it feels like. What could Ric or Giulia have told him, for Crissakes?

In this context, I mean.

The context of you in Livorno where you're from? I think I can puzzle that out.

Me going to synagogue there. Where my grandfather prayed, and his father before him, and so on.

I don't respond.

It's a burden, the next text says. But also beautiful.

The next day, sodden with remorse, I give money to everyone with a hand or a cup out. I don't feel any better: I know a cheap bid for forgiveness when I see it. Paying for a couple of caffè sospesi at one of the few places in Rome where they do it helps a little, because helping someone get coffee is one of the clearest acts of charity I can imagine. If there were a way to prepay someone's cigarettes, I'd do it.

I get a box of candy for the women who work at the front desk and another for Guido's secretary; half thank you, half apology. Once I'm upstairs, I shut my eyes, turn around a few times and see where my eye lands: I don't

believe in tarot or the I-Ching, but in museums I play pin the tail on the donkey. It's Saint Eustace, the namesake of the place I added to Josh's map. I don't even know if he's still making it—how did I not find that out? The painting's small, and I get close enough to see the shocked look on the Roman general's face when he realizes the stag he's about to kill has a crucified Jesus between his horns. The forest is filled with birds and rabbits and the saint's retinue, and there's something so surreal and tender about the pagan soldier not killing the stag because it's also the murdered saviour that it makes me, no fan of JC, slightly weepy.

It turns out most everything makes me feel that way: Vince coming by with aspirin. Cutting and pasting a curator talking about haiku for a guide to an exhibit of Japanese prints that I should have finished a week ago. Guido introducing me to someone as the person who convinced him that Maria Maddalena needed a room of her own.

Vince and I talk to the arts reporter for *La Repubblica*—who is this show for, she wants to know, just pilgrims? No, I say. Romans. We've gotten so used to seeing saints where we expect them to be, Matthew being called at San Luigi dei Francesi, the Empress visiting Catherine in jail at San Clemente, that we don't see them anymore. They've gotten static, I tell the reporter, which is exactly what saints weren't. We've forgotten how strange they are. I'm not done, apparently. We invite Rome to the Falconeri to be reacquainted with the saints in all their holy oddness, I say. Vince gives me a look that's half wow and half calm right down. And, he says, because there are some amazing loans here, paintings that haven't been shown in Rome in decades, if ever.

After she's gone, Vince starts complaining about Guido taking a week off to go to England for the start of racing season.

"He's out of our hair, who cares where he is?" Given the zero work we're about to be doing, it's hard to get exercised about Guido taking off.

"Horse racing? It's such a cliché. Rich people are ridiculous."

"They are," I say, "but you don't have to be rich to go to the track."

"Sure, but that's like poor people playing the lottery; it's false consciousness."

I shrug. Gogo used to take me to the track. Belmont sometimes, nicer, further away, a big green park that just happened to have a race track in it, but mostly Aqueduct, smaller, grimmer, accessible by subway. It had a special subway stop that only operated on race days, and as soon as you pushed through the turnstiles you were in the hall behind the stands. It could have been anywhere dilapidated and official, a DMV, a bus station, anything with ticket windows and big, electronic signs. But aside from that generic resemblance, everything there was off, different. Instead of first, second, and third, you had win, place, show. There were special bets, the daily double, the exacta, the trifecta, made-up words that crackled when you said them. The track was my first foreign language, and I loved it.

All of it: how Gogo always saw someone she knew, how she explained the racing form, the way they figured the odds, what *out of* and *by* meant in a horse's parentage. I loved how the gates they marched the horses into moved depending on how long the race was. That the jockeys were about my size, that they wore orange and sky blue or emerald green and black or teal and red. I liked how there were a million ways you could watch the race: in the hall on TV;

from the glassed-in high roller room if Gogo had dressed a certain way; leaning over the fence to get as close to the horses as possible; in the stands, high or low; sitting or standing; how you could change your mind again and again—nine races, nine do-overs.

There was so much to see, even before the horses started running: the old men who never left the betting hall; the men at the front of the stands, meatily handsome, their girlfriends in enormous sunglasses and wide-legged pants with chain belts slung around their waists; the ones who prowled the stands, eyes down, looking for uncashed tickets. And to hear, the announcer (more language: *by a head, by a nose, coming up on the inside*), calling the race, and then the moment the horses came into sight and the grandstand rose as one, drowning out the announcer with their screams. Even watching as carefully as possible, I could never keep our horse in my sights for the whole race. Everything happened in flashes. Even the adults, I was pretty sure, didn't always know who'd won until the announcer said it, because the thing everyone was watching for couldn't always be seen.

Claude wasn't there. Four and five and six was too young for the track, Gogo said, even though I'd been six probably, when we started. Keeping an eye on two of us would be harder, and Claude couldn't read the form, couldn't read at all. It just didn't make sense, Gogo said, and I agreed. Did we win? Usually, a little. Once Gogo won the trifecta, and it took the man behind the window ages to count it out, 900 dollars, and she had to fill out a tax form. We took the subway home like always, but we were carrying all that money, more than I'd ever seen. Back in the city, she called some friends and told them to meet us at a restaurant, not the kind we usually went to, brightly lit diners or Cuban-

Chinese, but dark and fancy, with men buying Gogo and her friends drinks. They said I was beautiful like my mother and patted me on the head, which was gross, but also not.

On the way home, we got Claude a stuffed bear to go with the piece of cake the restaurant put in a box. Claude thought it was amazing, the bear, the cake, the money, green and white and covering the table, but I didn't tell her the rest, how the horses' sides heaved with effort that was beautiful and terrifying; how huge they were under the tiny jockeys; how speedy it was, everything flying by; how Ma was the only woman who wasn't there with a man. It could have been scary but it wasn't, not even when a man exposed himself to me (not for the last time, either, the 70's were a festival of flashing and public masturbation) and she grabbed me with one hand and pointed at him with the other. She laughed, loud, and he blinked and coughed and stuffed himself back in his pants. Afterward, Ma told me that if it ever happened again, I should do what she did, because that was what men couldn't stand, being laughed at. That part, I told Claude, because she might need it.

Like Your Mother

Vince and I hang around a little watching people—not a ton, but definitely more than usual—come through the gallery, then ditch out early. He’s getting a haircut; I want a nap, but as soon as he turns off, I realize that a nap’s impossible—my brain’s too busy. Clinkity clinkity, click click, picking up every rock, turning them over, replacing them, then picking them up again in case something new has sidled in. It’s like concentration, but instead of looking for pairs, I’m trying to keep justification in my eyeline long enough to find it again. Rationalization I can manage, at least for a block or two. I was a kid; I was doing my best; I wanted Claude to feel safe, sure, but rationalization is just guilt’s cover story, and there’s plenty to feel guilty about. I duck into the Neapolitan place Vince and I frequent.

As soon as the waitress leads me to a table, I see how different it is here without him. When it’s both of us, it doesn’t matter that most of the customers are a certain kind of Italian woman. She’s younger than Marianna, older than me; usually out with her mother (older than God, but still perfectly kept up, with a Romanian or Sri Lankan aide who plucks her chin hair, makes her lunch, waters her plants), or her friends or sister. Often they have shopping bags. They live on the Aventine (If Fab’s not careful, or maybe if she is, she’ll be one of them once she retires).

I stand out amid the matrons wearing good jewelry, sipping their coffee, daintily deploying silverware like it would never occur to them to pick up a crumb or a sugar cube with their fingers, which it wouldn’t. Even if I looked right, I’d still feel wrong, my head buzzing with between-station static in this

place that's all about a quiet midday pause. They'd never hurry you here, but if I get coffee, I'll suck it down in an instant, whereas tea is more of a sipping drink. Do I want something with it? I do, of course, but deciding seems impossible, and anyway, I don't deserve it.

Just the tea, I say, but instead of their menu, I'm staring at the list of flavors I know by heart in the Haagen Dazs place on Broadway. As soon as it opened, it was the place to be. The kids who worked there, kids I knew or knew of, just a little older, were all good looking, able to make scooping ice cream look simultaneously effortless and genuinely difficult—something they'd mastered, but you might not.

Lisa and I weren't hanging out much then; we'd gone to different middle schools and high schools, but her working there was a plus, a connection. As I dithered between Swiss Almond Chip and Mint Chocolate Chip, standing there with a friend from school, Lisa said, "There's a line."

There was, but no one cared. The line was for hanging out and seeing who was there: now, near closing, it was mostly kids we knew. No one was in a hurry.

"Okay," I said. "Mint Chocolate Chip."

She handed me a sloppy cone, the top scoop already slipping to one side. When I gave her a five, she put the change straight into tip jar.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey, what?"

Lisa had been cooler than me for a while, but she was a year older; it wasn't birthright, it was time. Now, though, she was the whole ice cream

place cooler than me. Still we were friends, weren't we? "Hey, I wasn't going to put all that in."

"Why not?" Lisa said. "Are you a bitch like your mother?"

My friend from school stared. I stared.

"Well, are you?"

She turned to my friend. "What do you want?"

"Nothing. I'm not giving you any money." She grabbed my arm. "Come on."

"Next?" Lisa said.

My friend pulled me past everyone and out the door. "What was that?"

"I don't know. I thought we were friends." That was one confusing thing; the other was that Ma wasn't a bitch. She was a pain in the ass; she was unreliable; when she was on a jag she could easily stay up 36 hours making an enormous papier-mache rat for the striking musicians' local. That big blow-up rubber one that you've seen, the one all the unions use now? That came later, a knock off. Less eye catching, better in the rain.

"Are you going to let her talk about your mother like that?"

"I talk about her like that," I said. "Sometimes." I passed Helen the cone: she deserved it.

"Thanks. You're allowed: she's your mother." She licked the ice cream, neatly pushing the top scoop back into the center. "It sucks to be all public like that, but mainly it's weird. Like, what does she care about your mother? Are you that interested in anyone's mother?"

Helen was smart, and nice, too. Her house was the first place I'd been that made me think that manners might be more than just something my grandmother demanded and my mother laughed at. I shook my head.

"Would your mother ever rat her out to her parents?"

"Not on purpose. If she bumped into her cutting school she might forget and mention it, but otherwise, no." She didn't care about that stuff. Plenty of other mothers did; they'd not only tell Ma, they'd get in your face and start asking awkward questions.

"It's weird. You want this back?"

"No, finish it."

Helen went home, and I waited under the construction shed that had gone up on our building—it was the early 80's, and the endless renovations had begun. In retrospect, the Haagen Dazs place, with its higher prices, fancier sundaes, and hip teenage employees, was the first sign of what was going to happen to the Upper West Side. Before that, there'd just been Carvel and its soft-serve, bad cakes, and the round ice cream sandwiches they called flying saucers. From Haagen Dazs to Barnes and Noble to, although I didn't believe Claude when she told me, Brooks Brothers, with innumerable fern bars and dueling high-end ice cream places in between.

They bring me the tea, which involves lots of busy work: I deal with the pot, the leaves, all of it. It's like smoking, but less satisfying.

Lisa rolled in about half an hour later, still wearing her Haagen Dazs T-shirt—they all had them, each with a different flavor printed on the back. The colors were washed out, dark rose instead of hot pink, mustard instead of bright

yellow, and instead of making them seem like employees, the shirts, even stained and sticky looking like Lisa's, made them look like a club.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey," she said.

"Why'd you say that about my mother?"

"Because it's true.

"Men invented the word bitch to put women down."

"Fine. She's a ho."

It was Lisa, probably when she was in sixth grade and I was in fifth, who'd explained to me why words like Idaho and Navajo, accent on the last syllable, were suddenly hilarious. She'd have done it on the way home from school, because those weren't things you could say in front of our mothers. That was one of the rules, rules Lisa knew as well as I did, which made this all even weirder. There weren't many, but they were firm. Cursing was fine; sexism and bigotry weren't. You couldn't say *ho* or *slut*. *Bitch* was problematic. *Fag* was beyond the pale. There wasn't an explicit rule about the N word: it went without saying, and if you were white and went to public school in New York and said it, you deserved whatever you got.

"You can't call her that," I said.

"I just did."

If this conversation had been happening in the playground at my old middle school, there'd have been a circle around us by now yelling "fight, fight." Luckily, it was just us. She looked tired and tough and, maybe, except it didn't make sense, sad. We hadn't seen each other much lately, but that was because we went to different schools. Wasn't it?

I've taken the infuser out of the pot, poured the steeped tea into the lady-like cup (no mugs here) they gave me. After all that, it's too boring to drink. I get up and check out the sweet case instead. I know what's in it—Vince and I have eaten our way through it—but the precision of the chocolate square perched on the opera cake, the neat rows of cannoli dotted with chocolate bits or candied orange pieces or green edged pistachios, is soothing. I'll never be neat or a minimalist, but I can appreciate it when I see it: the lines, the white space, the emptiness.

“Signora?”

“Niente,” I tell her, before changing my mind and getting a mini cannoli. Cannolo, actually, singular. I say it correctly, but I still think of it in the bastardized English version. Mignon, Italians call the little ones, not just cannoli: all things miniature and dear. “And a macchiato.”

The cannoli, two, the pistachio I ordered and a freebie orange one, because Vince flirts hard with the staff and we tip well, arrive, along with the macchiato.

“Why?” I asked. Why call Gogo that.

“Because she's sleeping with my father.”

Lisa's parents had been splitting up for years, but they could never pull the trigger. Her father had moved in and out a couple times: they were always forgiving the other and agreeing to try again. It probably sucked for them, but it really sucked for Lisa. She was an only child, for one thing.

“She wouldn't,” I said. Never. I wasn't Gogo's biggest fan, but here, too, rules applied. You didn't ditch your female friends because a guy had asked you out. You didn't play dumb to impress a guy. You didn't judge women more

harshly than men for what they did sexually or blame them for a break-up like the man had just been standing there minding his business. Lisa was currently breaking that rule, but maybe that was okay if Gogo had already broken another?

“Yeah? So I didn’t see them coming out of my father’s building sucking face right on the street?”

If anyone knew what constituted sucking face, it was Lisa. She knew stuff, or made it sound like she did. I had questions I’d been wanting to ask, things I wanted to know before not having the knowledge became critical. When did you open your mouths when you were kissing? Did you start with them open, or was it a separate event? Did the two of you move your tongues at the same time or did you take turns, and if you didn’t, wouldn’t it be kind of bumper-car-y? I’d been reading Gogo’s copy of *Our Bodies, Our Selves* for years; I knew how to use a flashlight and mirror to find my cervix, but it hadn’t turned out to be nearly as useful or pressing as they made it sound.

“They’re still married,” Lisa said, like I didn’t know. We were still under the construction shed, leaning against the building.

“Marriage is bourgeois,” I said.

“And that means she can sleep with my father?”

It didn’t mean that. I didn’t actually know what it meant. It was something I’d heard around. I shrugged. “Just saying.” I wasn’t sure why I was saying: lots of things were optional, but not not selling out another woman. That was a commandment. Thou shalt not. No matter how much you wanted to. And Gogo had. Lisa exaggerated, but she didn’t lie.

“Maybe it wasn’t her,” I said, staring at the ground.

I looked up for the answer, a mistake. Lisa was looking at me like my grandmother looked at the moldy jars she threw out of our fridge.

“Have you seen her lately?”

I had. She was plenty recognizable. She’d been growing out her hair, but a few weeks ago she’d gotten sick of it and cut it short and spiky, with lots of little jags and snips. Of course, she didn’t cut it: Lisa’s mother did.

“Maybe,” I said, “she kissed him to see what he’d do, so she could tell your mother, so she’d stop taking him back.”

“It’s not anyone’s business whether she takes him back. Maybe she should. Maybe they love each other.”

“If he loves her, why’s he sleeping with my mother?” I said “If he is. Which I still don’t think he has to be.”

The kitchen consensus—Lisa’s parents had dragged it out so long that I’d been around for some of the conversations—was that she should kick him out and never look back. The kitchen women liked to talk about pulling off the Band-Aid, congratulating themselves on getting out clean. I did the same with Ric, proud of our amicable divorce. It wasn’t a lie, which didn’t make it true. With everyone but Claude, I had a standard line about how neither of us had done anything bad, we’d just realized we were better parents than spouses. Years later, when the Italian tabloids, which usually stick to game show hosts, soccer wives, and minor royalty, ran articles about Gwyneth Paltrow’s “conscious uncoupling,” I laughed like everyone else, but it rang a faint, sanctimonious bell. We’d both done something bad, or one of us had, although which one depended on your point of view: Ric had cheated, but I’d stopped being able to hide—was no longer interested in hiding—the fact that I found

him dull. "Why did you marry him then?" Claude wanted to know. "He blinded you with what, science?" I didn't bother answering. Who wants to admit they're just another American rube, mixing up love for a place with love for a person in it?

I Googled Lisa about ten years ago: She's a psychotherapist. I bet she's good.

"Did you tell your mother?" I asked.

Lisa had her keys out and was spinning them on her index finger. "Not yet. I can't decide. I think she should know, but it'll make her sad, so I keep not telling her."

I wished she'd had the same policy with me. It was making me sad, too. "She might, maybe she didn't think it through," I said. "Sometimes she acts on impulse." I wasn't sure if this was really a defense, but then I wasn't sure how interested I was in defending her.

"Well, that totally excuses it. I'm sure it'll make my mother feel better."

It didn't; it wouldn't. It wasn't doing anything for me. "It's his fault, too," I said. "You can't just blame her."

"No shit," Lisa said. "he's a jackhole. I blame him for sleeping with her, and I blame her for sleeping with her friend's husband, which everyone knows is bullshit, you know it, she knows it, the only one who doesn't is him, because he doesn't care, so there we are." She blew her nose on some Haagen Dazs napkins, wadded them up and, in the absence of a garbage can, stuck them into her pocket.

I stop gulping my macchiato and take a look at the Italian matrons. They're much more civilized. One packet of sugar, a delicate stir, the pause to

appreciate the aroma before lifting the cup all the way to the mouth. Too late for that, but the cannoli can still be saved. No one I can see directly has any, but there's someone reflected in the mirror. She's not using a fork, which is good, because if the shell is crisp enough, which it is here, because soggy cannoli is a sin—it'll just shatter.

I watch her bring it to her mouth. She takes a bite, not a bite really, a nibble, and here's the key, on the side, not the center. Then she takes a matching bite on the other side. No crumbs, no ricotta drip. It's like cutting a ribbon on the diagonal to keep it from fraying. I pick mine up and for the first time ever, don't put it into my mouth and clamp my front teeth down on it. I mimic her rabbit bites, one side, then the other.

We all knew everyone's mothers: which ones kept cookies in the house, who left loose change lying around; whose dinners were worth sticking around and trying to get invited for. Fathers were blurrier, even before they left. Every so often they'd take your friend and you to the ball game or bowling; they had a dish they always made, pancakes and bacon or burgers with fried onions. Lisa's father made elaborate tacos that were nothing like the hard, curved ones that came in a box along with special powder to mix into the ground beef. They were good, too, just different. Some of the fathers were mean, jelly; they were the first victims of the divorce wave.

"If he's a jackhole, why do you care what he does?"

"Because he's my father," she said, keys now poking menacingly out from between her fingers. "He's married to her, not me."

I wasn't convinced that made a difference, but what did I know? I thought a jackhole was a jackhole; I thought nuance was another word for hypocrisy,

even as I tried, sort of, to defend Gogo. It wasn't that I was sure she hadn't done it. It was because if she had, there was no coming back.

My mirror friend inspects her cannolo before taking another bite to make sure she isn't going to dislodge a whole pistachio.

I think of G. as being much younger than I was when I was her age, but now I'm not so sure. I may have been more street smart (or thought I was; I was probably just lucky), but the certainty about right and wrong seem equally adolescent. I shut my eyes, imagine if I'd let more happen with Josh. Not the way I usually do, an unfurling ribbon of me making him laugh, him making me laugh, him doing that ludicrous stealth walk into my airspace and kissing me, and then, and then, us moving well past the audible consent stage. Now I picture G. looking at me like I looked at Gogo for years, all the way till I left for college. Like I had the goods on her; like everyone else might buy her shtick, but not me; like it was always just a matter of time till her next fuck up. I was never sure how much she took it in, but if she didn't, that made one more thing to hold against her. I don't think I could come back from G. looking at me like that.

Fuck the matrons. I jam the last half in my mouth, crunch loudly. I'm high on sugar and relief, and instead of napping, I'm going to buy food for dinner and cook it for my kid. Shrimp maybe, she likes that; I'll go to the better but farther away fish store. I text her to let her know, and when she says, oh, but it's Friday and she was planning on staying over at Monica's, didn't she tell me—she didn't, but maybe she told Ric—I text back, dangling the shrimp shamelessly. Why not go to Monica's after dinner, I say. I don't mind when the yes comes along with the information that actually it turns out Monica has something to do, too, that they'll meet up later. I'm not proud.

Jewish Catnip

I hear music playing in the apartment, but since it's not Leonard Cohen reciting the litany of ways to die, I'm fine with it. Expecting G., I get Josh, his arm halfway up a chicken. It's déjà vu all over again, but with raw meat. And guilt.

He pulls out the neck and kidneys. "Do you guys eat these or should I toss them?"

"Toss 'em."

He walks them over to the garbage, then rinses the chicken and begins patting it dry.

"Hi," he says. "Sorry for not hugging you, but I don't want to get chicken gunk all over. I mean, it's organic, but still."

"What?"

"You don't happen to have a lemon in one of those bags, do you?"

"Sorry, what?"

"A lemon," he says, louder, which is apparently what I need to break the spell.

"I heard you the first time. What are you doing here? And stop patting that chicken; it's disgusting."

"That's what I'm doing here. I'm roasting a chicken for you and Giulia."

"Did you hear anything I said on Wednesday? You can't be here."

"Every word. You were right; I was parading Chiara in front of Giulia so it'd get back to you, and I didn't think about how she'd feel."

"Excellent. A+. Now tell me how that explains the chicken?" Even pissed off, it seems perfectly natural to be talking to him.

“Do you know what day it is?” Josh says, stuffing parsley and garlic where the giblets were.

“Friday,” I say, like this conversation makes sense.

“Exactly. Sure you don’t have a lemon?”

I find one in the bag and throw it at him. “Heads up!” I say, slightly too late.

“Thanks. Friday’s Shabbat. And on Shabbat you roast a chicken.”

“You’re making Shabbat dinner?”

“Exactly.”

“It didn’t occur to you to ask? Because I’m pretty sure breaking into someone’s house to make Shabbat dinner isn’t on the big list of mitzvahs.”

“It’s not breaking in if you have a key,” Josh says. “Not to get all Talmudic on you.”

I put the groceries down and cross my arms. “Explain how you realizing you were a dick lets you stand in my kitchen stuffing things up a chicken. Walk me through it, step by step.”

“Like if you were a child?”

“Like if I were a golden fucking retriever.”

“Man, I’ve missed you.” He must see my expression, because he stops.

“Let me just preheat the oven, and...shit: what’s 425 in Celsius?”

“Low side of 200.” Why is this conversation still happening? Am I being punished? I must be being punished.

“I’m impressed.”

“Don’t be. I still count in English. Now tell me what’s going on before I kill you.”

“Okay.” He puts the chicken in a cast iron pan filled with sliced potatoes and carrots and brings it to the table, where it sits between us. It’s hideous.

“After you pointed out my dickitude, I felt bad, but I didn’t know what to do—I didn’t think I could do anything. I can’t apologize, right, because technically I never knew she was into me. But then... Shit, I forgot the salt.” He pours a handful of my good sea salt into his palm and starts massaging it into the flabby yellow skin. I’ve cooked chicken a million times: how have I never noticed how repulsive it is?

“But then what?”

“Then Chiara told me about the synagogue, and ...”

“Chiara told you about the synagogue. Told you what, that it existed?”

“About Giulia going and it being disappointing...”

This is not how I expected to lose my mind. I imagined it more like a blowout, not this slow ebbing of all sense. “How would Chiara know that?” I want a glass of wine, but I’m not sure it’s a good idea, considering.

“Wow, okay. Chiara and Monica hit it off at the show. Monica told Chiara and Chiara told me.”

I have nothing to say. I get the wine bottle and a glass.

“Presumably she wanted me to feel bad, which I’m sure you can get with.”

“She which?”

“Monica? But maybe Chiara, too.”

Interesting. “Okay, so you heard Giulia was disappointed in the synagogue and you thought, you know what’ll fix this? A nice roast chicken.”

“You really know nothing about this stuff, do you? Sorry. The chicken isn’t the point, although it’ll be delicious. The chicken keeps you here, but it’s sabbath that gets you here. It seemed like the one thing I could do for Giulia.”

“They have sabbath dinner in Italy without you,” I say, fixated on the hairs poking out under the wing.

“They do,” Josh says, “but do you? Would you know where to find one, and would it be groovy and accessible and inclusive?”

I flash on us showing up in Livorno at Daniele’s mother’s dining table.
“No.”

“Okay, then.”

“Have you talked to Giulia?”

“I did. She was here. She’s out walking what’s their face’s dog.”

“Ric and Fab. Marigold.”

“Marigold,” Josh says.

“It’s not the dog’s fault.”

“No, absolutely not. Why....? Never mind.”

“Giulia was okay with it? With this?”

He nods.

“I’ll just check,” I say.

“Of course. I’ll be here.”

I go into my bedroom and dial Giulia’s number. “Josh is here. You’re okay with all this? I’m happy to kick him out.”

“Yeah. I don’t want that last conversation to be the last time I talk to him. And I’ve never had Shabbat dinner.”

“You’ve been to Sunday lunch at your grandmother’s a million times. It’s like that, but with less pasta.”

“Have you ever been to one?”

“No.”

“Then shut up.” But she sounds friendly, not mad. “Come on. Aren’t you curious?”

“Yes.”

“So there’s no problem.”

“You’re totally fine with him now?”

“No. He’s still an idiot. But he’s trying to be less of one. That’s good, right?”

What can I say? Either I’ve raised her to be better than me, or I stay in my vindictive lane and say not always, no, sometimes it’s just window dressing or worse, and prove Mike right. “Yes. Yes, it is.”

“I’ll be home in twenty minutes.”

“Okay, text me if you need me.”

“Why would I need you?”

Why indeed? “See you soon.”

I come back into the kitchen. “Okay. Lots of Italian dogs have English names. It’s a thing.”

We pass the twenty minutes setting the table—put your nice stuff out, Josh tells me; arranging the flowers he brought; finding candles, putting out the challah. He paws through the drawer where we keep the dishcloths. “Don’t you have any nice ones?”

We do, of course: Marianna constantly gives us stuff. I throw away the frayed and stained one he's rejected and get out a couple nice linen ones.

"Perfect." He puts one under the challah, another over it, then finds one of the super jumbo wine glasses Ric liked and fills it with red wine. "This all looks familiar, right?"

I shake my head. I could maybe put together a Passover dinner, but that was a special occasion with an interesting back story that was endlessly connectable to current injustices. The regularity of Friday night dinner wasn't anything anyone I knew was interested in.

"You might want to change," he tells me. "I mean, you look fine, but..."

I take his point. I brush my hair, change my shirt, put on earrings, and what the hell, eye makeup. When I come back, he's got a white button down on over the white tee he was cooking in. It looks good against his Italian tan. Suddenly it's awkward, datey.

I hold out my hand. "Key, please?"

"Eccolo."

"Eccola. Feminine. You leave when?"

"Sunday," he says, leaning against the counter like it's old home week.

"Where've you been staying? I mean, what neighborhood?"

"Pigneto."

"Oh, Hipsterville. Do you like it?"

"I should, I know. It's cool and less touristy..." he trails off.

"It's kind of ugly," I say.

"Yeah."

When G. comes in, we both look relieved. "Shabbat Shalom!" Josh says.

“Shabbat Shalom!” Giulia echoes. She looks at us. “Give me a second to change.”

Quick study, my kid. While she’s gone, I whisper, “Don’t screw this up.”

As soon as she’s back, Josh moves into MC mode. “Okay. This is going to be a bit informal, and it’s definitely a reform Shabbat. If we were orthodox, that chicken would have been roasted hours ago. But I’ll try to give you the highlights.”

We nod.

He hands me a box of matches. “Can you each light a candle?” I light one and pass the match to G, who lights the other.

“Traditionally women say this prayer, but for tonight...But you can do this.” He circles his hands, palms down, toward the candles and then back toward his chest three times. G. picks it up immediately. I do it backward the first time—right-left problems, not orneriness, I don’t think.

“This part,” Josh says, “isn’t in the Torah. It’s tradition. Traditions. My grandmother says we’re greeting the Sabbath. My father says we’re preparing ourselves to welcome it into our innermost soul. We make three circles because according to Kabbalah our soul has three layers. Now shut your eyes, please.”

We do—I peek to make sure.

“Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who has sanctified us through Your mitzvot and commanded us to kindle the Shabbat candles.” When he adds an Amen, we echo it, hastily.

“You can open your eyes.” Maybe it’s the candle light, maybe we really did open our souls, but G’s glowing. Already.

“Stay standing. Now there are a bunch more blessings. The first one’s from Genesis. I used to know the Hebrew, but the nice thing about English is that we all speak it.”

His voice drops a few tones. Who knew he had a special blessing voice?

“And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. The heaven and the earth were finished, and all their array. On the seventh day God finished the work He had been doing, and He ceased on the seventh day from all the work He had done. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it God ceased from all the work of creation He had done.”

This time we get our Amens in on time.

“They say that the reason we need to celebrate the sabbath and declare it holy, even though God already did, is because we’re co-creating the sabbath with him. And not just the sabbath, the whole world.”

He’s back to his regular voice. I picture all those medieval artists painting in their cities as backdrops for Mary and the saints, imagining the city from the air in a way they would never be able to see it. Jesus: when will the weepiness stop?

“Do you just know all this?” Giulia asks.

“Ish,” Josh says. “I semi know it. When I looked it up, it was super familiar, but no way I could do it without double checking. And I have a cheat sheet,” he says, pulling a piece of paper from under his plate.

I’m still not sure what I think about all of this, but he clearly went to some trouble. I note it on a mental score sheet, then crumple it up.

“Now we bless the wine: ‘Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of all, Creator of the fruit of the vine.’”

“Amen,” we say.

“The next blessing is for the Sabbath itself. This one I have to read: ‘Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the all, who finding favor with us, sanctified us with mitzvot. In love and favor, you made the holy Shabbat our heritage as a reminder of the work of Creation.’”

Amen again. I’m kind of getting into it. Who doesn’t like a call and response? He sits down. We sit down.

“Now we can drink, he says, chugging half the glass before he passes it to me. I take a hefty glug and pass it to G., who finishes it off.

“Now the bread.” He unwraps the challah from Marianna’s beautiful linen towel.

“Why’s it covered?” G. wants to know.

“I was hoping you’d ask,” Josh says. “The rabbis were worried that the challah would be lonely once the wine was gone. Not only that. They thought it might get a complex, because the candles are in their beautiful candlesticks, and the wine’s in a special Kiddush cup (hypothetically), and what’s the challah, chopped liver?”

I smile. G doesn’t get it, further proof of all I haven’t passed on to her. She just wants to hear the end of the story.

“They covered the challah so it wouldn’t feel bad. The idea is that if we remember that even inanimate things have feelings, we’ll be that much more careful about other people’s feelings.”

G. looks like someone just gave her a present. It’s so meant for her, so beshert, that I almost wonder if he made it up. I look at him. His eyes widen, his palms half turn up. What do you want, he’s saying. It’s true.

"Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who brings forth bread out of the earth." He tears off a piece of challah and passes the loaf to me. I tear and pass it to Giulia. "What are you waiting for," Josh says. "Eat!"

There's no bread I don't like, but this is not the challah of my or anyone's dreams. "You got it at the bakery in the ghetto, didn't you, the one where they burn everything?" That's one piece of Yiddishkeit G. can't say she was denied: Marianna, like all good Romans, loves the place. She took G. there all the time for their ricotta cherry pie.

"I did," Josh says.

"It's delicious," G. says. Of course.

"Try it with salt," he says, passing me another chunk.

"Feh."

"We're just about done," he says, "but there's an optional part—and when I read up, it turns out where Betse does it is maybe wrong, but lots of this stuff is family to family. The way I learned it, it's here, at the end. It's kind of like that joke about the pot roast...never mind. Do you want to do it?"

I want to know what it is before I decide. I also want to hear the pot roast joke. G. has no such qualms.

"Yes," she says.

"It's when the parents bless the children," Josh says. He looks at me, gives another half shrug. "I wrote it out for you," he says, pulling a piece of paper out of his pocket and handing it to me. It's warm to the touch.

I unfold it, scan it, start reading before I talk myself out of it. "May God make you as Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah. May Adonai bless you and care for you. May the light of Adonai's countenance shine upon you and be gracious

unto you. May Adonai's countenance be lifted upon you and give you peace.” It does not escape my notice that the only models for girl children are women, but I can't help it: I run my hand over G's cheek, and she lets me. What I've just said is so unlike anything I ever imagined saying that I don't know what to do. I buy time by closing my eyes for a second; when I reopen them, G.'s glow has moved into full-on burning bush, impossible to look at. I fold the paper and put it under my plate.

“Now what? G. says.

“Now we eat a delicious meal with our cell phones turned off, talking to each other and enjoying our newfound openness of soul,” Josh says.

“Which means?” I say.

“Which means I'll check on the chicken if you make a salad.”

G. goes to the bathroom, presumably to commune with her phone before turning it off. Monica may be busy, but she needs to be kept up to date

Josh winks. At me. And I think, what am I doing? Do I have Stockholm syndrome? It's one thing for G. to love this, another thing for me to fall for it.

“Don't wink at me.” I'm rinsing the tomatoes, so I don't bother to whisper.

“I'm going to interpret that as thank you,” he says.

I cook my chicken low and slow, but it turns out high and hot works, too. Ten points to his old girlfriend.

It's got to sit for a bit, but I assume Giuiia's talking to Monica?”

I nod.

“Do you have a carving knife?”

I reach over to get one, and he puts a hand on my arm. “Just point, I'll get it.”

“Paw, paw, paw.”

“A wise man knows what to fear.”

“Is that from the Bible?”

“It was on my tea bag this morning.”

“Tea? Chiara doesn’t drink coffee?”

“Not only that, she’s vegan.”

“Coffee’s an animal product?”

“Caffeine’s bad for you.”

“You reap what you sow, I guess. That’s from the Bible.”

“Is it?”

“Definitely.”

He gets out his phone to check. “It is.”

“HA!”

“The New Testament.”

“Shit.”

“No swearing on the sabbath.”

The chicken is delicious, the potatoes even better. The carrots are carrots. I make a mean salad, but it’s not like it’s the main event.

“What do people talk about at Shabbat dinner?” Giulia wants to know.

“Whatever they want,” Josh says.

“Okay, tell me about going to temple. You go, right?”

“Not regularly, but sometimes, yeah.”

“And men and women sit together?”

He laughs. “Men, women, gay, lesbian, trans, who even knows...everyone sits where they want.”

I'd get busted for that "who even knows," but one Sabbath dinner and he's got a free pass for life. Talk about privilege.

"You go to your Grandmother's synagogue?"

"When I go, I go there. I haven't been to my parents' since my Bar Mitzvah. And they only go on high holy days."

"Did you have one of those powder blue tuxes?" I ask.

"Are you asking if my Bar Mitzvah was an '80's wedding?"

"Did you invite girls?"

"Now you want to know if 13-year-old me was cool? Who holds a man's Bar Mitzvah choices over his head?"

"That's a rhetorical question, right?"

He points to the salad bowl. "You guys want any more? If not, can I finish it?"

Giulia waits till he's got a huge forkful of lettuce heading toward his mouth. "Would you marry a woman who isn't Jewish?"

"Um..."

"Aren't you all about Freedom to Love?" I say.

She gives me her don't-be-stupid look. Which I almost don't mind, given the you-probably-kill-stray-dogs looks I've been getting lately.

"If he were gay, I'd ask him if he'd marry a non-Jewish man."

"If he were gay, it'd be irrelevant. All the rabbis care about is babies, which means all they care about is the baby's mother. Besides, half the Jews in Italy intermarry." (I think Ric passed along a Daniele factoid about that, but I can't remember the details.)

“That’s because there aren’t very many of them. What choice do they have?” G. says, suddenly Grand Rebbe for dispensations.

“As Gogo likes to say, consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds,” I say.

“What about it, Josh, would you?”

He starts to laugh, then choke, then cough. “I haven’t really thought about it,” he finally gets out.

“How old are you?” Giulia asks.

“27,” he says. “You know that.”

“You need a policy. What if you think you’re just dating, but it turns serious and it’s too late to think about it?”

“How would it be too late?”

“Like if you’re already in love.”

Jesus Christ. “You know why the Baptists forbid premarital sex?” I ask.

“No, why?”

“Because it leads to dancing.”

No one laughs.

“I don’t have a policy. But once I get that MD, I’m basically Jewish catnip.”

G. looks perturbed, but whether because of the joke or because he’s dating Gentiles and God knows who else, pagans and Buddhists, snake handlers and vegans, I’m not sure.

“Why are you so hot on this, anyway?” I ask. “You know it’s fascist, right? The people who get crazed about intermarriage are down on Betse’s synagogue. They’re down on Palestinian statehood. They’re down on men and women sitting together, and forget about including women in the Minyan. You can be a

Jew all you want, Kiddo—you already are, so knock yourself out, but not that kind.” I smack my spoon on the table for emphasis.

“You said I could be anything I wanted,” G. says

“Except right wing. I’m sure that was mentioned. And besides, if you line up with those guys, you’ll be having fights with yourself all day, every day. You’ll be black and blue.”

“Why are there so many different kinds of Jews, then?”

“Why are there so many different kinds of Italians?”

“Because they’ve only been a country for 150 years and they were ruled by half of Europe.”

“Okay, but think about Americans. There are what, 200 million—

“300 actually,” Josh interrupts to say.

“—ways of being American.”

“That’s because we’re huge and ethnically and geographically diverse.”

“Why would Jews be alike? Why should they be?”

“Because...because...” She’s stymied, not because she doesn’t have an answer but because she doesn’t want to say it out loud. If she did, I’m sure, it would be something like ‘because then I’d know what you had to do to be one and I could do it, and everything would be simple.’

“Jews are supposed to be different from each other. It’s practically our brand. You should go to New York,” Josh says. “It has everything. Everybody. All the Jews you can imagine.”

“Come for the Jews, stay for the diversity,” I say.

“Come for some Jews, stay for the other Jews,” Josh says.

“Come for the bialys, stay for the Chinese food,” I add.

“Come for bialys and Chinese food, stay for Vietnamese and Ethiopian and Thai and Korean and Polish, and everything else,” Josh says.

“Polish?”

“Greenpoint. Out of the way, but very tasty. Come for a visit,” he says to G., “stay for college.”

I look at him. Giulia looks at him, then at me. Josh looks at me, then her. The pause drags on.

“It’s something to think about, G.”

She doesn’t say anything.

I pour us all more wine.

“Is there an after-dinner part of Shabbat?” I ask Josh.

“Like a mint?”

“Sure.”

“Dessert. Although the quality of dessert is pretty much inversely related to its kosherness. There are some songs and prayers. It’s a little endless, to tell you the truth.”

“What are the prayers?” Giulia says.

“You tell God again what a great guy he is for giving us the food and the Sabbath. You ask him to keep protecting us, keep our special relationship in mind, protect Israel, send the Messiah, like that.”

I make a face.

“There is one thing...” Josh starts to say.

“What?” G. says.

“Should we clear the table?” I ask.

“Yes, definitely.”

G. and I spring into action, although surely this counts as work? And if not, why not? Is there a sneaky workaround, like the Sabbath elevators that stop on every floor? (The elevator can work all it wants, but God forbid a Jew presses the elevator button.) I'd tell G. about Elvis Presley being a Sabbath Goy for his Memphis neighbors, but I'm not 100% sure she knows who he is.

The kitchen is less trashed than it could be: Josh cleaned as he went. We stack the plates in the sink, and I do some general tidying while G. checks her phone. Josh has disappeared, but there are humming sounds coming from the far end of the living room.

"You know what?" G. says.

"What?"

"If we went to New York, I could take Monica to Betse's synagogue."

Josh walks into the kitchen carrying the remains of the chicken.

"Monica's Jewish now, too?"

"She's gay," I tell him.

"Mom!"

"What? You practically told him. Anyway, who cares? He's leaving tomorrow."

"Sunday. Monica's gay? Good for her." He puts the chicken down. "You can come back out, but don't get your hopes up. This is...improvised."

We follow him to the table. "Sit," he tells us. "Okay: this is highly unorthodox. You don't usually do this at home; you do it at temple at the beginning of the service. But it's my favorite part, so...I mean, we're kind of rolling our own here, right?"

We nod solemnly.

“Don’t laugh, okay?” He starts to sing. In Hebrew. It’s energetic, the kind of song that makes you tap your foot. The second time around, I make out distinct words, although the only one I recognize is Shabbat.

“It’s called Lecha Dodi,” he tells us.

“What’s it saying about the Shabbat?” G. wants to know.

“Come, beloved to welcome the Bride/Welcome the face of Shabbat.”

“Wait, who’s the bride?”

“The Sabbath,” Josh says.

“Who’s she marrying?”

“Us.”

“Us, us?”

“The Jewish community, anyone observing the Sabbath, anyone singing the song. So yeah, us, us.”

“Sing it again,” G. says.

He does. He’s clapping now, and we join in.

“I don’t know all the verses, and some synagogues sing some and not others—this is the next one I know.” He sings, then translates. “It means: Let’s go travel to meet the Shabbat, she who is the source of all blessings. Known from the beginning, from ancient times. Last made, but first planned.”

“What does the part at the end mean?” G. says.

“That even though she’s the last thing God made, he always intended to make her,” I say.

G. looks at me like I birthed Athena out of my head. “You know that?”

“Not the song. But I know that on the seventh day God rested. And he has foreknowledge of everything presumably, although that’s problematic....”

“Sing it again,” she says to Josh, who does. He sings that verse, then the chorus, another verse, then the chorus again. His singing isn’t as low as his prayer voice, but it’s richer than his speaking voice. G. watches him; I watch her. Would it kill me if she went to synagogue? If this were more than a phase or the crush on a handsome MOT she’d have had years ago if she’d grown up in New York?

One more chorus, one more verse, then he stops. “That’s the last one,” he says. “It’s about how the Sabbath comes in happiness and song to her husband, the faithful people. When you sing this part, everyone turns toward the west, to the synagogue door, to greet her. She’s probably here already, but what the hell...” He hands me his phone with the chorus lyrics in transliterated Hebrew.

It takes a second to figure out which way is west, but I point toward the back of the apartment, and we all turn. Josh sings the last verse again, then the chorus, Giulia and I singing as best we can. He sings the chorus one last time, faster, and with some humming and fudging, we keep up. It’s like the Saint Anthony song or I know an old lady who swallowed a fly: the more you sing it, the happier you get.

“Shabbat Shalom!” Josh says, and there’s so much energy it feels like we should be stomping a glass or something. Instead, there’s hugging all around.

“Shabbat Shalom!,” G. says. “Thank you!!!”

“You’re welcome,” Josh says.

“Thanks,” I say.

“My pleasure.”

G. disappears to get her stuff for tomorrow. On her way out, she hugs Josh again, and then, why not, me, too. I kept all this from her, it’s true, but I’m

also the indirect reason she has it now. When she whirls out of the door humming the chorus, the silence that follows is extra loud.

“Wow,” Josh says. “I’m tired.” He slumps down on the couch.

I hand him his wine glass. “Here. I’ll do the dishes.”

“I’ll help,” he says.

“You cooked.”

In the kitchen, I cut the leftover chicken off the bone, throw the bones and some onions in a pot to make stock. I’m humming the damn thing, too.

“It’s kind of an ear worm,” Josh says from behind me.

I nod.

“So Monica’s gay, hmm?”

“Apparently.”

“If they go to New York, they can stay with Betse. She’d love them.”

“If they go to New York, they can stay with Gogo. But it’d be good to have Betse as back up.”

“Is the apartment clean?”

“No. But she made 400 bucks, and her neighbor’s going to bring his drag show back.”

“What do those...never mind.”

I lower the heat under the stock.

“Hey, remember you said that if I started looking at paintings here, I’d start seeing those faces on the street?”

I nod.

“On the way here, I saw a woman with a perfect oval face, reddish-blond hair, and pale, pale skin. She was carrying a baby, and she looked just like the Madonna.”

“What about the baby?”

“What about him?”

“Did he look like JC?”

“He looked like a baby, so, yes?”

I make a gameshow buzzing sound.

“Why’s that wrong?”

“JC never looks like a baby. He’s got a lot on his plate. It wears on him.”

“Plus, the red hair,” Josh says. “I mean the saviour can’t be a redhead, can he?”

“Don’t flirt.”

“I’m not. But why shouldn’t I?”

“Let’s see: my daughter, your girlfriend, you’re leaving....”

“Can I apologize then?”

“Don’t bother.”

He looks hurt.

“No, I mean, there’s no need.”

“I’m not sure about that.”

“You’ve totally made up for it; you made G’s week. Her month. Who knows how long.”

I wash the chicken pan and sponge off the counter.

He takes the sponge, smells it, tosses it in the garbage, pivots back to me.

“So you’re not mad about the whole Shabbat thing?”

“Are you kidding?”

“Are you happy about it?” He sounds cautiously optimistic. It’s adorable.

“What are you doing tomorrow?”

“Going to Ostia to see the Roman ruins. The tepidarium there is perfectly preserved. There’s a synagogue there, too. It’s the oldest one outside Israel. And wait, something else...” He googles something. “Right. A saint’s buried there. Saint Monica. Is she a big deal?”

“She’s Augustine’s mother; he’s a big deal.”

The stock’s boiling a little too energetically; I squeeze past him to get to the stove to turn it down.

“I’m in your way,” he says. “Sorry.”

“I’m not sorry,” I say, and mean it. I might be sorry later, that’s likely, probable even, but right now, no. For the first time since this whole whatever it is began, I kiss him first.

A long time later—or maybe it just feels that way, I can’t tell, I say, “Sorry, I should have asked.” I shift backward so I’m not touching him.

I can see him zoning back in—it’s hot to see how hot and bothered he is already.

“You should have. Maybe we should talk first?”

What a terrible idea that is. “No. But let’s start again. Is it alright if I kiss you? Again? If I touch you? With my hands? What about my tongue? My breasts? I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

He opens his mouth.

“Shhh. What if I rub my body all over yours? Put my mouth all over it? Would that be okay?”

He nods.

“To save time, I’ll just tell you: I’m okay if you want to do any of that to me. With me. What do you think? Should we go for it?”

“Jesus, Connie.”

“I’m going to need audible consent,” I say, leaning in to lick his ear, which puts my ear near his mouth.

“Yes,” he says into it. “Yes. And this is the after-dinner part of Shabbat. On the Sabbath, sex is a mitzvah.”

Seven Acrobats

"Jesus," I say, after the third round. "It's like that joke."

"What joke?" Josh says.

We're out of bed, getting water, then more water, then, what the hell, some granola and yogurt, after which Josh breaks out the leftover chicken. "You know, the one with the couple?"

"The couple with the freshly made kugel? The one that's waiting to get divorced till their kids are dead? You've got to be more specific." He's leaning against the counter wearing just his briefs. I take a mental picture: I've read novels. I know photos inevitably fall into someone else's hands.

"The one where Mort remarries a younger woman."

"No. Tell me,"

"After Mort's wife died, he remarries a younger woman." I hold up my hand. "Don't worry. He waited an appropriate time, she's a synagogue member, and she's not younger than his kids."

"Noted."

"But he can't make her come. No matter what he tries, and he tries."

"You're telling me dirty Jewish jokes?"

"Only the set-up's dirty. I should have warned you ahead of time. Is this triggering for you?"

"I don't know: am I Mort?"

"Sorry, were you not in the same bed I was?"

"Just checking. Go on."

"A Jewish man should give his wife sexual pleasure, so they go to the

Rabbi. 'Rabbi,' Mort says. 'Can the Torah help with this?' 'The Torah, no,' the Rabbi says. 'Me, yes. Your house is probably overheated. Your wife needs air. Get someone to fan her while you're making love. And not some schmo, either. Someone handsome. Give her something to think about.'"

"Mort's wife Adele says, 'Maybe Johnny down at the market would do it. He's saving for college.'"

"You're stretching the joke out, aren't you?"

"Some people call that foreplay. Do you want me to speed it up?"

"Take your time," Josh says. "I got nowhere to be."

"Mort talks to Johnny, and the next night, Johnny comes over. 'What you need to do,' Mort says, 'is flap this towel over us while we're having sex. And take your shirt off.' Shirtless, Johnny waves the towel back and forth, but still no orgasm. They go back to the Rabbi.

'Okay. In extreme circumstances,' the Rabbi says, 'you can switch over. Get the boy back, but this time, he makes love, you're on towel duty.' Mort's skeptical, but he loves his wife. Johnny comes back. He and Adele start going at it. Mort's waves the towel up and down, up and down, and Jesus, Adele's orgasm could wake the dead. Mort puts the towel down, looks at Johnny, and says 'And that, young man, is how you flap a towel!'"

"You're telling me ageist, dirty Jewish jokes. And they say you can't have it all." He pulls me closer.

I kiss him. "You're covered in chicken fat."

"Everything's better with schmaltz. Even you, raised by the slightly hippie, slightly glamorous, semi batshit Gogo, know that."

"Speaking of which, you know you can't tell Betse about this, right?"

“Speaking of schmaltz?”

“Elderly relatives.”

“I’m close to Betse, but I don’t tell her about my sex life.”

I raise an eyebrow.

“Fine, yes, I tell her about my love life.”

“So, Chiara no, me yes?”

“About that...”

“I don’t care. Really.” I lick his collarbone: schmaltz-free. “Those are the rules. No Betse, because she might tell Gogo and I can’t have G. around them if they know.”

“Can I tell anyone? I mean, not that I need to. I’m not bragging or anything.”

“Why not?”

“Well, I do know how to flap a towel.”

“You can tell your wife. If you still want to.”

“Deal. What time’s Giulia due back?”

“She’s going to Monica’s game. What time is it now?”

“Around 8:00?”

“A couple of hours. I’m making some coffee, then I’m going back to bed. You’re welcome to join me and by noon, you’re out of here. You’ll have plenty of time to get to Ostia.”

“I can make the coffee.”

“No. No you can’t.” I put it on, then find my phone, which hasn’t peeped since dinner. Which, it turns out, is because I never turned it back on. There are five, no six, texts from Giulia. Mostly exclamation marks and random emojis—

lipsticks, hearts, stars. She's definitely not dead. Has she fallen in love? I'm pretty sure, even post-Shabbat, that I wouldn't be the first person she'd tell.

"What?" Josh says.

"Wait," I say, scrolling till I find the text with words in it. "Holy fuck!" I can't stop laughing. *Monica was busy at dinner time.*

"Is someone else telling you jokes? Should I kill him? I could. I could kill him."

I pass him my phone, put the milk on to heat.

"Wow. Go Monica."

"That's it? You're not jealous? That's your girlfriend she seduced."

"I think it was the other way around, but hey, I wasn't there. Also, I wouldn't call her my girlfriend."

I put up my hand. "It's fine. I don't care."

He shakes his head. "Maybe Monica does."

"Not my problem," I tell him.

"I just mean..."

"Shhh."

I pour us coffee, take my phone back. "Chiara's going to the game," I tell Josh.

"I should hope so. Jesus, this is good."

I take a sip. "It really is."

"Are you going to tell anyone?"

"Claude. But not for a long time."

We skip bed and get into the shower instead.

At noon, I get ready to kick him out. The game's ending, and G. might be feeling like a third wheel, or Monica might be trying to get rid of Chiara, and they'll be pinballing around Rome. Josh needs to be gone. I need to do laundry, air out my sex-drenched bedroom, take a real shower, put some of G's fancy French repair cream over some bite marks. Then when G.'s back, I'll listen to whatever she wants to pass along about Monica's evening of passion, and we'll talk about visiting New York and maybe looking at some colleges while we're there.

"I don't have to go to Ostia," he says.

"I won't have it on my head that you didn't see the bath complex and Europe's oldest synagogue. The mosaics are good, too."

"My flight's not till tomorrow afternoon."

"I'm going to the gallery tomorrow morning. If the pilgrims hit mass and then decide to go to a museum, we could be packed. I want to see how it holds up. And I need to update my resume."

"Are you washing your hair and re-arranging your sock drawer, too?"

He's dressed now, jeans and the t-shirt he was cooking in. I'm wearing something I picked up off the floor when I realized that what I wanted to put on was, if not the tee, at least the button down, to be wearing his clothes and smelling his smell. "Are you ... hurt?"

"No. Just sad. In advance."

"Think about that hot-shot medical job you're going back to."

"The epidemiology job?"

"That's what I said. And getting to see Betse, and starting school..."

“Are you about to tell me about all the new friends I’ll make? How much I’ll learn?”

“No?”

“No.”

“Okay.” We stare at each other, back in the kitchen, his toes just touching my calf.

“What are you bringing back for Betse?”

“Stop making conversation.”

There’s another minute of silence, broken when I stand up. “Come on,” I tell him. “I want you to stay, but I need you to leave.” I take his hand and lead him to the door.

“You know,” he says, “I...”

“Me, too.”

He brings my hand to his mouth, kisses my palm and fingers, where it all started.

“Tell me a joke,” I say. Also where it all started.

“I can’t think of any.”

I look at him.

“Okay, okay. This one’s from my father’s side. They’re Russian.”

“Goodman?”

“They changed it.”

“A Russian joke. Are there food lines?”

“It’s not technically a Russian joke, but it has that vibe. Dark, you know?”

“Perfect.” I take my hand out of his and tuck it under his shirt to feel his smooth, warm skin.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

“Goldberg’s in a coffee shop, and he notices the guy at the next table. He’s muttering to himself, writing on a pile of messy papers, his hair’s standing up. He looks crazy, but Goldberg can’t tell if it’s crazy smart or crazy crazy.”

“Half the Upper West Side used to look like that,” I say. “Europeans from places that didn’t exist anymore, drinking coffee at the Éclair bakery. The women were stylish, you know, hair done, handbags, nylons. The men all looked like IB Singer.”

“Exactly. When the muttering gets louder, Goldberg realizes he’s talking about the holocaust. He puts down his coffee and listens. The man, call him Murray, says, ‘I see you staring. Don’t be shy. I’m happy to share my ideas.’ He waves Goldberg over.”

“Are you drawing this out?”

“Some people call it endplay,” he says. Jesus, I’m going to miss him.

“Goldberg sits down, and Murray says, ‘I’ve been thinking about Hitler, and I’ve figured out where he went wrong.’”

“‘Where he went wrong,’” Goldberg says. ‘You mean morally?’ ‘No. Strategically.’ ‘Right. Okay. I’m listening.’ ‘Hitler’s mistake wasn’t killing six million Jews. It’s what he didn’t do that got him in trouble.’ ‘What he didn’t do?’ Goldberg says.”

“Goldberg’s a great conversationalist.”

“Shhh. ‘Exactly,’ Murray says. ‘Listen: What he should have done is kill all the Jews, and then, on top of that, he should have killed seven acrobats.’”

Goldberg stares at him. 'What acrobats? Why seven?' And Murray, says, 'see? Already you've forgotten the Jews.'"

I let out a barking sound, halfway between a sob and a laugh, and hug him, burying my face in his chest.

We stand like that a minute. "What happens when Shabbat's over?"

"There's a good seven hours till sundown."

"I promise not to jump the gun," I tell him, "but it's good to know, right?"

"We didn't do it very often. It's kind of the extra mile. But after sundown, there's wine and prayers, you sniff spices, light the candles. It's called Havdalah."

"And you're doing what?"

"You're marking the separation between holy time and ordinary time. Havdalah means separation."

"What are the spices for?"

"It has to do with...you're revivifying your soul, or consoling it, for having to go back to ordinary life."

"Like smoking. That's exactly what smoking does." I move further away from him, far enough that I have to lean in to kiss him. I mostly get his nose. I open the door. "In bocca al lupo."

"What do I say?"

"Crepì."

"Crepì. Don't forget the Jews."

"Not possible. G. wouldn't let me."

"And your present, don't forget that either," he says, half in and half out of the apartment.

"Is it good?"

“You tell me.”

“I won’t, you know.”

“I know. So, yeah. It is.”

I wave him out, not quite pushing him, but close. “Shabbat shalom.”

“Back at you,” he says, and then he’s in the hallway, and I’m shutting the door, and if he says anything, I can’t hear it, and if I do, neither can he. I stare at the door for a while, wish the glass tower was up so I could knock it down. Then I march myself to the sink and wash the coffee cups. I strip the bed, put the towels and everything I wore last night in the washing machine. It’s not till I’ve added the soap that I realize I have to take off everything I’m wearing now, too. I pull the shirt off, lingering for a second while it’s over my head, breathing in the tented smells of me and Josh. I chuck the pajama bottoms and underwear in quickly so I don’t smell them, don’t put them over my face like those guys who pay women to send them their underthings. “Panties, on my lovely body one day, in the mail to you the next!” the ads in the *Village Voice* said.

I head back to my bedroom, pull the curtains, open the windows, turn on the fan. If we had some kind of room freshener, I’d use it, but we don’t. We never do: it’s in the category of products Gogo considered a scam. They were bad, but not as bad as the ones she considered a crime against humanity. Douche, for instance. You’re supposed to smell like yourself, she’d say, none too softly, in the feminine product aisle, and I’m pretty sure you don’t smell like summer cherries.

I pick up the rug and head out to the balcony, beat it over the railing and leave it to air in the sun. When Signora Sardinia sticks her head out, I give her a neighborly wave. Italian women love talking about how prudish Americans are,

and they're not wrong. In Italy, you're never too old to wear a bikini or go topless, so why wait for the beach?

I vacuum, pick stuff off the floor. Spring cleaning, I'll tell Giulia. Inspired by Marianna, I'll say, and tell her about the tower. I make the bed.

There's a text—from Josh, not Giulia:

Texting?

No. Leads to dancing.

I mop the kitchen floor. When I was a kid, I read a story about a pioneer mother alone with her kids miles from anywhere. Her husband's off hunting, and she's bitten by a rattlesnake. She doesn't tell the kids—they're little—she spends the night cooking, getting water from the well, back and forth until she's filled every pot in the house. It could be days till her husband gets back, and by then she'll be dead. She works all night, makes bread and stew and pie, puts the laundry through the mangle—I wish I had a mangle; my washing machine's slow, but it does all the work. At dawn, tired and sore, but knowing everything's in order, she kisses her children and lies down to die. When she's woken hours later by her children's voices, she thinks she's in heaven. It turns out that by staying awake and in constant motion, she defeated the venom.

Eventually, I get in the shower. My timing is perfect: I've been in for about fifteen minutes when G. yells hello. Enough time to smell like, if not summer cherries, my innocent post-shower self; not enough time to fall apart under the spray.

I get dressed and come out. "Did they win?"

"Did you see my texts?"

"Amazing. So she's bi? Chiara?"

“Apparently. And she told Monica that Josh wasn’t even that good.”

I kvell inwardly: he was just going through the motions.

“Is that why you’re so cheerful?”

“Not just. They won. Monica made an amazing shot. Look at this picture.”

She passes me her phone.

“Wow. She looks...radiant.”

“I know. Here’s one she took of me.”

“You look good, too. Happy.”

She hands me a bag. “I got some nuts and dried fruit from the place by the stadium. Try the dates. I’m glad Josh isn’t an idiot. He might even have a point about college. Except...”

“He might. And if that except has to do with your grandmother, I was talking to her the other day, and she said the same thing. More or less.”

“Really?”

“Yup.”

“Really?”

“She said that if you make your decision about her, she’ll drop dead and then she’ll haunt you.”

“Wow.” She bites into a date, tells me the rest of the story. “Chiara brought her cousin.” G. hands me the phone again.

I’m looking at a pretty good knock off of Alain Delon. Dark hair, dark eyes, narrow, tubercularly handsome face. “Wow. That’s a good-looking family.”

She’s far enough gone that she doesn’t tell me I’m shallow. “He’s really nice. His name’s Alessio. He has a Vespa.”

“Tell him you can’t get on it unless he brings an extra helmet,” I say.

She nods, starry-eyed.

“And Monica’s happy?”

“So happy. She’s coming out to her family tonight.”

“Wow. That’s huge. Is she sure? I mean, okay, there’s Chiara, but....

“It’s not about Chiara. Or only a little. Chiara’s the...the cherry on top.”

And even though I didn’t think I’d ever laugh again, I do. Cherry no more.

“What?”

“It’s a funny expression.”

“She thinks it’ll be okay. But if not, I told her she could come here.”

“For the night?”

G. looks a little abashed. “Yeah. And then for as long as she needs to until we go to college.”

I raise my eyebrows.

“I’m sorry I called you an asshole.”

I hear Josh saying ‘I’ll take that as thank you.’ “Thanks, kiddo. I hope she won’t need to, but if it comes to that, she can stay here.”

“Thanks. Really.”

“You’re welcome. Really.”

It ends up being an okay day. I tell G. about Marianna’s tower and show her the breakage picture. She doesn’t believe me, but hey, photos don’t lie. She, get this, asks about when I first came to Rome, how I decided to stay, what I liked, what was hard. When my head tilts quizzically, she tells me Josh was talking about how bold it was to move here, something that clearly had never crossed her mind. So I tell her. About my first couple of jobs; sitting in on art history classes in the big Aula on the Sapienza campus; my first Italian

boyfriend; how I met Ric, which she knows; the first time I met Marianna, which she doesn't. She makes us coffee, listens, ask questions.

Our phones ping at the same time: it's Ric inviting us for dinner. Fab's away; he's cooking. It's five pm, which makes this a typical Roman dinner invite. G. looks at me.

"I'm exhausted...I think my body just realized that the show's up. I'm going to go to bed early. You go."

"You sure?"

I'm 100% sure. 500%. I would rather stick a needle in my eye. Our phones ping again.

You're coming right? Marianna invited Paolo and Mimmo. Bring Monica, if you want.

Ric isn't Paolo's biggest fan. "You heard him. You have to go talk to your uncle. Plus, Mimmo will bring gelato."

"Okay."

As soon as I'm alone, I wish I weren't. I hang the laundry up to dry. The towels make me laugh, which makes me cry. Towels ruined. Acrobats ruined. Jews...well, okay, net plus there, not that I'm going to synagogue anytime soon.

On the terrace, I count all the windows I can see, imagine a future when my kid and mother live in New York with my sister two hours away. I spare a thought for Monica. Her mother runs the show over there, so it'll be okay. I hope. I look up tepidarium: it's the room in the bath complex before the caldarium, the hot room, which is opposite the library. Who knew Roman bath complexes had libraries? I try not to think about Gogo coming to Italy, which doesn't completely work. Not that it matters: Monica's favorite concept in

psychology is the idea that nothing is negated. What this means, apparently, is that if I tell you I don't care about X, the fact that I've brought it up proves I do, so really what I'm doing is announcing just how much I care. I seem to have transferred from the university of Lisa to the university of Monica, which may or may not be an upgrade.

Since I'm already thinking about it anyway, I think about how, maybe, possibly, even if it's just in a multi-verse, wings flapping here, clover growing over there, volcano averted in some other place altogether way, Gogo coming might actually help the refugee situation. She really is good at talking people into things. And if we somehow got Marianna involved—Italians are used to listening to their mothers and grandmothers. According to the papers, right now, on the Greek Islands, regular people, civilians, what Gogo would call the citizenry, are housing and feeding and who knows what all, teaching Greek to and filling out forms for dozens and hundreds of refugees who've landed on their beaches. Maybe we shouldn't have tossed all those perfectly good glasses.

I'm in bed by 9; the sheets are clean and crisp and smell like nothing. They're perfect, and they make me cry. I sleep in chunks, waking up in jolts in between. In a lucid moment, I realize G. wasn't just interested in the what of my moving here, but the how. How did I transplant myself across an ocean, make a new life? Could she? Of course, she could. She's a citizen; she speaks the language, has family there. I had...well. No reason not to. The chutzpah that comes from having survived an under-supervised 70's childhood. And, I suppose, a model.

At some point after the fountain but before I started getting my period, Gogo and I went to New Haven. A friend of hers was in a show, and since Claude

had a sleep over, Gogo brought me with. We were early. Mostly we were late, but if Gogo got bored with where she was and decided it was time to be somewhere else, we were early. On time wasn't really our thing. The show was at 8:00. We got there at 3:00. Gogo liked a little unstructured time in a city. So do I, although New Haven in the early 80's didn't have much going for it, judging by the run-down train station and the sad sack cabs.

Gogo was gathering her forces—during the Leonard Cohen onslaught, every time he sang “First we take Manhattan, then we take Berlin,” I thought of her—when a woman came up to her. Was she Ms. Miller, here for the sex ed talk? “We're so excited,” the woman said, “we all think it's such an important issue.” Even with me in tow, Gogo was the best candidate for Ms. Millerdom. Her silver-brown hair was up, she had on a skirt and blouse. As long as no one noticed that the lovely pin on her jacket also held her shirt together, she could pass.

Gogo held out her hand to shake. “Oh dear. I thought our secretary would have called. Ms. Miller was doing a training in Mexico City and with the airline strike there... I'm Dr. Singer.”

“Oh my!” said the nice lady. “Well, I guess you must just look like a family therapist and sex educator.”

Gogo smiled. “I'll take that as a compliment.” She turned to me, winked, then turned back to introduce me. “It's so helpful,” she said, “to have a built-in audience to reality test things on.” We got in the car and while Mrs. Hammond—Sally—drove us to a pretty green suburb, she told us about the school district, what the parents wanted, how ridiculous it was in this day and age that they had to fight for a sex-ed program.

Dr. Singer nodded. By the time we got there, she knew everything. She talked for an hour and a half. She used the blackboard to show how much dirtier uninformed drawings were than accurate diagrams. She made a passionate case for teaching children the real names of body parts. We had to start as we meant to go on, she said, so ten-year-olds didn't call their vaginas their frou frous. (I know that's what your grandmother says, she'd told me and then Claude, but it's wrong.) Also crucial: boys and girls shouldn't be surprised by the changes of adolescence. By age ten, eleven tops, they should know what to expect. This was interesting, if not, strictly speaking, my experience. Aside from *Our Bodies Our Selves*, most of what I knew came from Lisa or the dirty books we read at the drugstore. *The Happy Hooker* had been particularly eye opening.

I watched, waiting for Gogo to be unmasked. Surely Ms. Miller was on the next train, surely there was a pay phone in the station...

Gogo fielded questions about homosexuality, masturbation, bestiality. Natural, natural, but she drew the line at bestiality: it was nothing that children, with their intuitive love of animals, needed to know about. It wasn't that it was perverse, per se, she said, what bothered her was the fact that animals couldn't consent. I watched the school board members—identifiable by their suits—chew on that. I was pretty sure that the Great Dane in *The Happy Hooker* had gotten things started, but I'd been skimming, an ear cocked for the pharmacist, and anyway, it was made up. I hoped.

When she saw the suits looking perturbed, Gogo looked at her watch and said they should refer to the materials Ms. Miller had sent. Unfortunately, she had to get back to New York to catch a plane. It was a forward-thinking

program, to be sure, but the fact that they'd contacted her and Ms. Miller meant they were ready for it.

She went on. We want our children to grow up literate—not just in reading and writing, but in all ways, and in today's complex world, them being sexually literate could make the difference between their parents telling them what to do, which might make them rebellious, and them making those decisions safely, on their own. As much as we might wish we could just tell our children what to do, she said, gesturing toward me, we had to realize that it just wasn't always possible. And that meant we had to think about what doing the best for our children really looked like. Applause broke out. Sally and a few others even stood up. I tried to look sexually literate and empowered, with exactly as much information as I needed to make me want to do exactly what my parents (ha!) thought was for the best.

We'll be in touch, the school board said, and Gogo said a cab would be fine, no need to drive us back to the station. We legged it out of there and got pizza before meeting Gogo's friend. Gogo checked all the seams in her costume, reinforcing when necessary with needle and thread and, here and there, staples. Staples look great under stage lights, she said. The audience just sees the sparkle.

"Why didn't she call," I asked.

"Who?"

"Ms. Miller."

Gogo shrugged. "Stuff happens. Maybe she was at the bus stop instead of the train station and the pay phone was broken. Maybe she was sick of suburban mothers and was on the couch with a bottle of schnapps."

Gogo's friend looked a little appalled. "Maybe she knew that Gogo was doing her job better than she ever could," she said. She was togged out in full fairy regalia for *Midsummer's Night Dream*, which gave her a certain authority.

A couple months later, I got my period, and put off telling Gogo. A few months after that, I was tucked in a corner of someone's kitchen listening to the women talk about what their daughters got up to. It was Lisa, stuck at home once on a haircutting night, who first realized that they talked about us. It was pot luck: sometimes humdrum, sometimes riveting. When talk turned to adolescence, Gogo told the assembled that I didn't have my period yet.

"Yes I do," I said. "I got it months ago. I know how to use tampons, too."

Lisa's mother high-fived me. Harry's mother, home from touring, said, welcome to the club, kiddo. My mother didn't say a word. Serves you right, Dr. Singer. A year or so later, she showed me an article in *The Times*: apparently New Haven and environs had won praise for its sex-ed program. I might have felt bad, eventually, but then came Lisa and her father, and that was it. I'm lucky Giulia doesn't hold grudges the way I do. Did.

I fall asleep and wake up again, like you do when you're sick. At one point, I text Claude to apologize. I'm awake and out of bed when Giulia gets home, a container of Ric's version of Marianna's lasagna in hand. I've never turned down any version of that lasagna, but tonight it goes straight into the fridge. I let her make me a cup of tea and put me back to bed. At around 12:30, my phone wakes me up, which sucks, because it's not Claude or Josh, it's Daniele. He's sent a picture of a building that's a cross between the colony the new settlers build on planet T-12 and the spaceship that brought them there. When I wake up later to pee, I see the text that goes with it.

The synagogue at Livorno. In case you were wondering. You should see it.

Also, you owe me a joke.

I wasn't wondering, but the building's so weird that now I kind of am.

The next time I wake up, it's five, and I can't see the point in trying to go back to sleep. I get dressed, leave a note for Giulia, and head out.

Noli me Tangere

I'm not sure I've ever been out this early, at least not when I wasn't drunk from the night before or regretting taking an early flight. It's beautiful: the sun's just coming up, the sky's a grayish blue. I'm crying again, but there's no one to see me. As I walk, I can see the sun as it moves—the towers and domes are lit, but not the streets below them. And at dawn the white marble in the Vittorio Emanuele monument looks pink, like it's absorbing the light instead of reflecting it.

I need to see the exhibit when it's crowded, but right now I just need a destination. The guard lets me in the side door, and then I stand there, dithering. I haven't thought past getting here: now what? I end up in the Magdalene room. It's got too many Josh imprints, but it's the most unified part of the exhibit. The Guazzabuglio room, even though it has some of my favorite pieces, would be too much.

The bench in the center of the room is backless so you can face any direction you want. I plant myself facing the *Noli Me Tangere*. Jesus is cartoon buff and a little fey, which is how you know it's a Bronzino. Mary's wearing a blue tunic and a green skirt that almost exactly match the sky and the distant hills. Jesus looks down at her; she looks up at him, their eyes meeting across a diagonal plane. A few inches down, their mouths connect along a different diagonal. The painting's center is her spot-lit face, enclosed in the triangle made by her right arm, which almost touches his knee; the crevice of his armpit; and his raised left arm. For a painting that's explicitly about not touching, it's crazy sexy.

Bronzino froze them mid-step, with Mary's arms open wide, less to hug JC (the angle's not right) than to keep her balance: her back foot's on pointe, and she's leaning into Jesus's airspace. His back foot is half off the ground, like he's about to finish stepping forward. Their positions are so temporary, so clearly in motion, that not touching seems virtually impossible. If Bronzino advanced the frame another notch, there they'd be.

There wasn't room on the wall text, but an equally valid translation of *noli me tangere* is don't cling to me. Which means Jesus isn't saying, *'don't touch me, fleshy, desiring woman who doesn't understand where I've been and where I'm going.'* Don't cling to me is more like *'I'm sorry, but I can't stay. It's confusing, I know, because I was dead the last time you saw me, and I look pretty much like I used to, but I've got to go, and you clinging only makes it harder.'*

In some versions of the scene, they do touch. Bronzino's teacher Pontormo painted it that way. Mary's not touching Jesus, it's the other way around. He's brushing her dress with the tip of a finger, which changes the meaning again. It's not don't touch me, it's *'there's no need to touch me; I'm already touching you.'* To keep her at a distance maybe, but also to bless her. In the El Greco version, JC's hand is so close to her forehead that it's impossible to tell if they're touching or not: the space between them, if it's there, is a filament, a hover. Do I think they slept together? I think it's none of your or my business. What the Gospels say is that out of all his followers, she's the one who loved him best, listened best.

There was a monk in the late middle ages—they don't know his name—who wrote a manual telling lay people how to live a religious life and keep the Gospel in their hearts. His big idea was that they should imitate Jesus, which I

can't imagine was original, but he had a particular technique. He wanted his readers to imagine themselves into the story—at any point, at every point. When they read about the angels adoring baby Jesus, they should put themselves in the stable and adore him, too. He's very specific: he tells readers to ask if they can hold the baby, says it's fine to kiss him and chuck him under the chin, reminds them to give the Virgin a hand with her chores (I love that part: they can show up along with the three kings and the shepherds, but for Chrissakes, bring something useful like a casserole, or stick around and do the dishes.) Later, when JC's a little older, readers can imagine themselves playing with him, and so on, all the way to the end. For a second, I try to put myself in the Bronzino, but it feels intrusive. The women who were with Mary at the tomb are there, but just barely. They look terrified, for one thing, and they're in shadow and moving out of the frame. I take the hint and leave Mary and Jesus alone in their eternally charged moment.

I turn to the next wall, where it's easier to imagine myself in the crowd Mary's preaching to, although, knowing me, I'd be distracted by everything else going on in the scene—Flemish paintings are even busier than Italian ones, which is saying something. I'd want to know where the ship was heading, who left the baby lying in the grotto, what was up with the man kneeling in the woods. On the other hand, I bet the Magdalene was a real barn burner: she might not have had a problem holding my interest along with everyone else's.

Now I'm 180 degrees from where I started. It's easy to look at penitent Mary and imagine myself into the frame. She looks almost modern, a woman just out of a bath, her robe draped around her while she reads just one more page before she has to get ready for work. It's less clear what I'd be doing there,

though: are we roommates? If I'm also just out of the shower, we're just one rosy semi-nude woman away from your basic Orientalist bath scene. I love Ingres, but that's definitely not what the monk had in mind. You get to imagine scenes that aren't fully fleshed out (as it were), but not to add scenes that were never there, or forget whose story it really is. Picturing yourself in the crowd when JC is raising Lazarus from the dead is fine; calling attention to yourself by fainting from the smell is not.

I don't mean to look at the lamentation: too sad. But it's right there. This time, I notice that the women are all different ages: the one in green with her arms flung wide over the fainting Virgin is probably in her fifties; she's older than the Virgin, who despite being a teen mother, is a good 15 years older than Mary Mag. And their hands: the woman wearing green, her mouth open like she's crying out, is practically touching the Magdalene's hand: Mary's palm up, the woman's palm down. The Virgin has her hand at JC's collarbone, her thumb at his pulse, hoping against hope.

I've apologized to Claude, but I wonder if I've ever thanked her.

I skip imagining myself into the woods with Furry Mary: not because of the hair—I'm body hair positive, thank you—but because it's not technically a very good painting and her breasts and palms and the chubby cheeks of the baby angels around her all look alike, and it creeps me out.

It's only seven: there won't be anyone here for hours. Which means that no one's here to see me turning around faster so that the Magdalenes spin around me, red-robed Mary with her gold ointment jar; prostitute Mary in her rich brown gown; ringleted, topless Mary; then back to the lamentation; Bronzino's blue-green near miss; the departure for Provence, Mary draped in a

dark red shawl; then her preaching; full-frontal furriness; and the blue and pink ascension; followed by the door; the blur of wall text; then all of it again, faster. I'm the only one here, but it's not lonely, not with so many Marys keeping me company. Still, I shouldn't be hearing noises, and I am. Have been for a few minutes, I realize once I slow down. They're soft but crisp, like a person typing on a muted keyboard. They have that efficient quality: the sound of someone trying to get something done.

I shut my eyes, a well-known technique for making sounds go away. They're not scary, but they shouldn't be here. Then again, neither should I. They're getting louder and more purposeful; less like typing, more like a squirrel tap tap tapping at a tree to get the nut to fall. The sounds are overlapping now: multiple squirrels, multiple trees. I open my eyes, stand up, walk around the room: everything looks exactly like it did when I got here; or not exactly, the light in the room's different, yellower, now that the sun's been up longer.

I re-read the wall text. In the end, I went with all ways the Magdalene is described: Apostle to the Apostles, Mary of the Seven Devils, the woman who anointed JC (in one Gospel it's his feet; in another, it's his head: the first is reverent, power roles set at normal, the second is essentially what happens when you become a priest, which means she's blessing and sanctifying him, power rules upended), penitent, prostitute. I left out weepy and the link between *maudlin* and Magdalene. It's there, it's just a question of what you want to highlight. And there's no equivalent word in Italian. For which, kudos.

The noises have gotten louder. Not loud loud, nothing to alarm the guard, but louder. A kind of chittering, as if birds had gotten in. I count to ten, then do it

again in Italian. I don't know what I'm waiting for—I just know I am. It's like when someone's getting dressed, and you wait a few extra breaths to make sure you don't walk in on them. At a certain point though, you think, if they're not ready now, it's not my fault, and bang, you're through the door. I turn around, and sitting on the bench, facing me, legs crossed demurely, is Magdalene. Penitent. Naked. Three-D. Me looking at her; her looking at me. When I finally stop staring, I look at the painting: intact.

Mary Magdalene smiles. At me. A sentence that can't be thought, but I have, because it just happened. Then another unthinkable thought: as I'm watching, penitent Magdalene becomes, shimmers into, is, the blue-green Magdalene of *Noli me Tangere*. She's standing up; she couldn't possibly sit, too much pent-up energy. I'm staring, but if there's one thing she's used to, it's being stared at. Time has stopped, except it hasn't, because now she's prostitute Magdalene, running her hands over her velvet bodice. It's not her torso she's stroking, I don't think: it's the fabric she wants, the sheer joy of feeling, of tactility. When she's gone up and down a few times, she pats the bench next to her, the universal sign for come sit by me. She pats it again—I wonder what she thinks of the pleather—then again. I go sit by her.

As soon as I get there, she switches it up again. It's harder to see because we're sitting so close, but I feel the red shawl of departing Mary touching my leg. All the Marys are departing, though. From sin, the Monsignor would say; from their home, I'd say; their devils, their profession, restrictions on women preaching; from the hope of seeing Jesus, at least in this world, the one Jews think counts. Then again, all the Marys are arriving, always, not least right here.

One more interpretation of *noli me tangere*: don't hold on to me; touch me without gripping, without grasping. The shawl's gone, and what's brushing my leg is Mary's long hair, extra long from her years in the woods. Maybe the first time I'd ever heard of Italy as a place with specific characteristics was in sixth grade. Q: How do you know you're flying Alitalia? A: There's hair under the wings. I can't decide which is worse, how sexist it is, or how stupid. In a world where Sophia Loren existed, how did the playground version of Italy stay stuck on an unshaven woman in widow's weeds?

Hermit Mary's gone, replaced by Mary from the Lamentation. She's got her hand up like it is in the painting, her slightly too long fingers a mannerist hangover, and I raise mine, tentatively. She nods, so I keep on. Just like prostitute Mary with her velvet dress, she's craving touch. Can I touch her? You can't touch a painting, that's rule number one. Can't stand too close or lean in too far past the line on the floor. Can you touch a vision? I move my hand toward hers, so close the invisible gap between us thrums, and hover there.

This time I feel the switchover: lamenting Mary's replaced by medieval Mary with her unguent jar. It feels like we're near the end: I'm not expecting preaching Mary—I don't think she'd turn up just for me. I stand so I can look this beautiful calm Mary in the eye, which means I'm looking right at her when she glimmers into penitent Mary. It's been maybe ten minutes, and already I'm used to things that can't possibly be happening. Then penitent Mary reaches for her robe, which is draped loosely around her shoulders and lap, draws an edge up to cover one breast, then drops it.

I miss everyone: Josh, Giulia, Claude, Marianna, even Gogo. Then Mary Magdalene smiles, and then, I swear, she winks. At me, at herself, still up there

on the wall, at all of us. She's every woman; she's '80's Linda Evangelista not getting out of bed for less than \$10,000 an hour; she's Marie of Romania.

Appendix of paintings mentioned in the novel, by chapter, along with a few bonus tracks.

“Which One’s the Magdalene”

The best see-through veiling Mary Magdalene is in the painting that’s probably by Georg Gartner the Younger (1575–1654). Current location, outside the internet, unknown.

There are many Magdalenes in excellently fancy dresses. In one by The Master of the Magdalene Legend (probably from the Netherlands, active circa 1483-1527), she’s wearing a very embroidered and embossed dress and hair piece. Weirdly, it’s also a portrait, probably of Margaret of Austria, a member of the Hapsburg royal family: Elite women sometimes dressed for portraits of Magdalene in her resplendent prostitute guise—presumably to show penitence, but it still seems odd. Another one with a great outfit is by The Master of the Parrot, a man or, more likely, men, painting in Antwerp in the mid-16th century.

No painter wants to be in the van-panel-art hall of shame, and of course, these things are a matter of taste, but contenders include Tintoretto, The Penitent Mary Magdalene, in the Capitoline Museums of Rome (lots of snaky-looking braided straw that makes her look like she has a carnival act on the side); Titian’s 1531 version in which Mary’s breasts play peekaboo through a mass of reddish-gold ringlets (in the Palazzo Pitti, Florence). Less famous, and worse, is the version by Francesco Furini (1634) in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. It’s not on display, for reasons that will be obvious.

Ascending Mary Magdalene (1620), AKA Mary of the chubby arms, is by Domenico Domenichino and it’s in the Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg.

“Patron Saint of Mothers of Difficult Children”:

Giovanni Bellini’s *St. Francis in Ecstasy* (c. 1475) is basically perfect. It’s at the Frick Collection in New York City, a small but amazing collection (including a Duccio *Temptation of Christ* with an excellent devil, three Vermeers and two Holbeins).

Giotto’s *St. Francis Receiving the Stigmata* (c. 1295) is at the Louvre.

The Guido Reni that Connie makes fun of is *St. Francis Consoled by Two Angels*. It’s one of those paintings you can find on the internet, but can’t place in a museum (however, you can get a phone case decorated with it, should you want one.) It was not, as far as I know, destroyed in an air raid in 1943. For a better documented (and less icky) Reni *St. Francis*, see his *St. Francis Consoled by Angelic Music* (1605-1610) in the Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna.

Antonello da Messina is credited with having introduced oil painting to Italy. Modern scholarship disputes this, but he definitely influenced the great Giovanni Bellini. Everything he painted is wonderful, but his *Virgin Annunciate* (1476), in Palazzo Abatellis, Palermo, is sheer genius. Bonus da Messina and my other favorite of his: *Portrait of an Unknown Man*, c. 1470, Museo Mandralisca, Cefalù, Sicily.

“Saints, Gold, Saints”:

All the paintings said to be at the Barberini Gallery (technically the Barberini-Corsini National Galleries, but there’s not that much to see at the Corsini branch) are there, and they’re spectacular. The Holbein the Elder portrait is of Henry the VIII, the Bronzino is of Stefano IV of Colonna. The Caravaggios are *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, *Narcissus*, and *St. Francis in*

Meditation. And, of course, the Da Rimini that Connie looks at in detail: It's *Episodes of the Passion of Christ* (1345 to 1362); they credit it to Giovanni Baronzio, his real name.

"Three-D Boyfriend":

The St. Jerome in his Study (1630) in pale colors is by Hendrick van Steenwyck, the younger. It's privately owned. The fantastic da Messina version was painted 1475-1476 and is at the National Gallery in London. The original #metoo artist, Artemisia Gentileschi is a Caravaggiste I can get behind, and definitely the only painter whose decapitations come close to his. Her best Judith Slaying Holofernes (1620-1621) is in Florence at the Uffizi.

The St. George on the poster is more or less the one from an altarpiece decorated with scenes from the life of St George (c. 1420), probably by Andrés Marçal de Sas, that's in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

"In Bocca al Lupo":

The Preaching Magdalene is by our friend The Master of the Magdalene Legend. She's in the Philadelphia Museum of Art which is a powerhouse of late medieval/early renaissance art AND has a whole lot of Duchamp.

"Failure of Imagination":

Saint Nicholas Tolentino Saving a Shipwreck (1457) is also at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It's by Giovanni Di Paolo, and it's splendid. If you're not near Philly, the National Gallery in London has his adorable painting of a very young John the Baptist going into the wilderness. The Metropolitan has his

painting of Adam and Eve being exiled from Eden, which is almost certainly the first of his works I loved, though I didn't know who he was back then.

The little St. Nicholas wearing festive red stockings and bestowing dowries is by Bicci di Lorenzo (1433-1435) and it's in the Met, in New York City. There's a similar painting where Nicholas is on tippy-toe wearing bright blue socks. It's by Fra Angelico and it's in the Vatican museum in Rome.

“Get up Everyone and Sing”:

The Falconeri's masterpiece is a bit of a conflation. It's mostly the Strozzi Altarpiece (1354-57) by Andrea di Cione, AKA Orcagna, which is in the Cappella Strozzi in Santa Maria di Novelli in Florence. But it's attributed here to the brothers (Andrea, Jacopo, Nardo, and Matteo) because they often worked collaboratively and because the smaller images from the Predella are actually in an altarpiece attributed to Nardo or Nardo and Andrea, in Bojnice Castle Museum in Bratislava. Giotto was active at the end of the thirteenth century and the first half of the 14th Century, and yeah, he was better. But that still doesn't mean everyone had to follow him.

Titian's Saint John the Baptist (1540) is in the Accademia, Venice. It's campy and excellent. José De Ribera painted the Penitent Saint Peter multiple times (ranging from about 1612 to about 1632. The ones at the Hermitage, Moscow; the Metropolitan, and the Art Institute of Chicago are all great. St. John on Patmos (c. 1475-1500) is by the Master of the Rotterdam St. John on Patmos (probably a Netherlandish painter), which is in Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, in you guessed it, Rotterdam. Guercino's St. John the Evangelist (c. 1615) is in Dresden, in the Old Masters Gallery. John was the youngest Apostle,

and he's pretty teen-heart-throb dreamy here. The could-not-be-more-different St. Matthew the Evangelist (1478) by Gabriel Malesskircher is at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. He painted all four evangelists writing along with a set of paintings of key moments in their lives. In the other St. Matthew, he's taming dragons, a part of his life described in the always inventive Golden Legend.

"Tween Jesus":

Christ among the Doctors (1506) is by Albrecht Dürer. It's in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. This is a pretty problematic piece of art, but Drer's prints, from the simplest rat to the super elaborate Vision of St. Eustace, are astonishing.

"Family of Origin"

Caravaggio's Madonna of Loreto (1604) is, as noted, in Sant'Agostino, near the Piazza Navona. When he painted it, there was an uproar over how grubby the pilgrims were and that the model for the Virgin was a prostitute (not the same one who posed for his Magdalene painting). When in Rome, you should see all the Caravaggios in all the churches, most particularly the three in San Luigi dei Francesi.

The Garden of Paradise is by the Upper Rhenish Master, active 1410-1420, and it's in the Stadel Museum in Frankfurt. It will make you happy (just don't dwell too long on the little dead dragon near St. George.) Saint Sebastian by Hans Holbein, the Elder (c. 1516) is in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich. Francisco de Zubarán's St. Lucy (1625-230) is owned by the National Gallery of Art in

Washington D.C. where it is shamefully, at least at time of writing, not on view. Saint Maurice (1522-25) by Lucas Cranach the Elder is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. There is not, as far as I know, a contemporary copy. Bonus fact: Cranach repurposed the hat design for the super jaunty, otherwise naked Venus in his Venus Arguing with Cupid (1526-27) at the National Gallery, London.

The St. Francis Receiving the Stigmata that Vince likes is by Federico Barocci, and it's a real painting that for some reason I can't track down. The Met has another of his St. Francis', with stigmata as large as quarters.

There are many Margarets and many dragons, including some where she's holding the dragon like a lapdog. If you want something bloody, I recommend the one in the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya in Barcelona. If you like gold, check out St. Margaret and the Dragon by Gaddi (active 1369-1396) in the Metropolitan.

"Supposed to Be Smart":

One of the St. Jeromes in the abandoned St. Jerome room would probably have been by Cranach the Elder. He was a close personal friend of Martin Luther, and the unofficial official painter of the Protestant Reformation. He painted multiple versions of St. Jerome in his study featuring Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg as Jerome. They're weird but cool; the 1525 version is in Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt. As mentioned, the most charming St. Jerome sequence of them all (watch the unsuspecting monks flee when Jerome turns up with his lion; watch them mourn when he dies) is by Carpaccio, and it

doesn't travel. If you happen to be in Venice, it's in Scuola San Giorgio di Schiavone, and you should go.

The Temptation of St. Anthony (1470-75) by Martin Schongauer is a must see (and, though I don't really approve of this kind of thing, it would probably make an excellent shower curtain.) It's at the Met and London's National Gallery. Michelangelo's version is great, too, of course, but in this case, color really is gilding the lily. It's in Fort Worth, Texas, at the Kimbell Art Museum.

Mary as a courtesan in velvet is by The Master of the Female Half-Lengths, a group of artists believed to have been working in the Netherlands in the first half of the 16th Century. This is another painting that I've found on the internet, but not in real life.

The Deposition of Christ/Lamentation at the Cross that isn't chosen is by Tintoretto (rebounding from his tragic Penitent Mary). It's in Venice, at the Accademia. (He painted this scene several times: this is from 1550.) The one that is is by Caracci (1606; he's another Caravaggiste. I guess I like more of them than I think.) It's at the National Gallery in London.

The Bronzino *Noli Me Tangere* (1561) is at the Louvre. The odds of Guido being able to borrow it are, I suspect, slim to none. The Hairy Mary with the chubby cheeks is attributed to Jan Polack (b. 1435- d. 1519). Location unknown, at least to me. For a more typical hermit Mary wearing what Connie calls a "hair caftan," see *The Last Communion of St. Mary Magdalene*, by the workshop of Pietro Lorenzetti (Siena, active 1280–1348), in the Joslyn Museum, Omaha, NE. There's also a very cool statue (1430) of this (with angels, so it's an ascension, too) by Hans Multscher in the Bode Museum in Berlin.

The Giampietrino Penitent Magdalene may be in the Galleria Sabaudia in Turin...but it may not; the internet says yes, but the Museum doesn't seem to agree. While he mainly painted women, his paintings of men are also sexualized and weird—see his St. John the Baptist in the Museo de Arte de Ponce, Porto Rico. The *Noli me Tangere* by Lambert Sustris (1548-60, also called Christ appearing as a Gardener to Mary Magdalene) is totally unlike the Bronzino. It's pastel, set in an elaborate geometric garden with no sign of the tomb, and Mary Magdalene is dressed like a queen. It's great, but despite Connie's claims, it wouldn't have nearly the impact of the Bronzino. It's too placid, and there's no tension between JC and the Magdalene.

For a particularly dark and sexy version where Jesus as gardener looks ready for Tango night at the bar, check out the one by Giovanni Battista Caracciolo, a Neapolitan painter active around 1620. Another contender for sexiest JC is a print by Johannes Lange, 1790, which is a version of one by Johann Sadeler, itself a version of an earlier one (c. 1588) by Bartholomeus Spranger. In Sadeler's, Jesus has on a respectable tunic. In Lange's, he's shirtless and, with his jaunty hat and moustache, has a sexy '70s vibe. The two later versions are in the Rikjsmuseum, Amsterdam.

The Crivelli Tryptch, officially called the Montefiore Tryptch (c. 1470), is a knockout. It's in the Polo Museale, Montefiore dell'Aso, in the Marches Region of Italy.

Mary Magdalene Embarking to Marsiglia (c. 1504-13) is by Defendente Ferrari, and it's in the Museo Civico d'Arte Antica in Turin.

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I consulted a lot of books in the process of writing this one, but *Noli me Tangere: On the Raising of the Body* by Jean-Luc Nancy offered help in seeing this particular category of Magdalene painting in a variety of ways.

Finally, apologies for slandering the late, great, and beloved Leonard Cohen, patron saint of wayward Jews.

'Next Year *not* in Jerusalem': On Exile, Diaspora, and Jewish American Novels

Every year at the end of the Passover Seder, the celebratory retelling of the Jewish exodus out of Egyptian slavery but not quite into Israel, everyone at the table says "Next year in Jerusalem!" The idea is that this year we may be in exile, outside the Jewish homeland, but next year just might be the year of return. Of course, not only have most Jews spent centuries if not millennia far from the land they see as theirs, they've often fared badly in other lands, always at risk of being exiled from the places they arrived at via a prior expulsion or pogrom. Because of this, discussions of what makes Jews Jewish (a vexed question, to say the least) often turn on the experience of exile. *Exile* is one of the terms in the alphabetically arranged (and vast, and at least notionally encyclopedic) *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, and the entry opens by saying that the Torah (the first five books of the Jewish Bible) is "preoccupied with exile" (Eisen, 219). It goes on to compare Cain's fate—condemned to wander,

protected only by God—to that of the Jews, calling Cain’s difficulties an “eerie foreshadowing of the destiny of God’s people Israel” (Eisen 220). Less biblically but with equal assurance, an article in the *Cambridge Guide to Jewish American Literature* asserts that the “sense of displacement that comes with distance from the homeland of memory is then equated with Jewishness itself, where Jewish identity is defined as the condition of wandering, alienation, and perpetual deferral of identification with place” (Grauer, 277).

For how this equation plays out, we can turn to the Passover Haggadah translated and edited by Nathan Englander and Jonathan Safran Foer, two leading lights of what’s been called a Jewish literary renaissance. There novelist Rebecca Newberger Goldstein opines that: “no matter where we are, the chances are that we feel displaced. No strangers to estrangement, we carry a homesickness from place to place” (125). But Goldstein wrote that living in the U.S. the home, along with Canada, that has been the safest and most durable for Jews. She doesn’t say why we’re homesick, or for what: it’s assumed. And interestingly, this exile, this never feeling quite at home, is the better of the two options. The goal isn’t to settle down and say, I’m fine, thanks; this home is haimish¹ enough. Finding home where we find ourselves is not the answer: first because it will likely end badly, and second, because it cuts us off not just from Israel, but potentially from Judaism itself. Throw in the intermarriage problem, so called, and the fear of the disappearance of the Jews starts to rear its head. Arguably, this is why American Jewry has, until perhaps the last twenty years, been reflexively pro-Israel: As memories of the old country faded when the

¹ Haimish, also spelled heimish or heymish, is Yiddish for home-like, comfortable.

immigrant generation started dying, the Nazi destruction of Jewish Eastern Europe cut ties further, and “the majority of American Jews moved out of the working classes and into the suburbs” (Aviv and Shneer,12), i.e. away from their first American roots, what’s left but Zionism?

That move to the suburbs comes up a lot: the suburbs are the site of the worst kind of exile—so comfortable it goes unnoticed. It is better to know we are in exile, even with the estrangement and homesickness it entails (can you be homesick for a place you’ve never been? That question goes unasked, or is answered by teen tours of Israel or programs that send twenty-something Jews on free trips to Israel to build their ties to and support of the Jewish state. (And if, along the way, they meet a nice Jewish boy or girl and marry them, would that be so wrong?) Conscious exile, on the other hand, the awareness of one’s diasporic status, has not only religious value (we should be in Israel, not here), but a literary one. It makes Jews the quintessential modernist creatures, never safe at home, lacking “a single essence,” living with “multiple identities.” This, the editors of *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism* go on to suggest, means that Jews are “emblematic of the postmodern condition as a whole” (Biale, Galchinsky, and Heschel, “Introduction,” 9, qtd in Schrier, 55). But wait. Perhaps Jews are stand-ins not just for the modern condition, but the human one, assuming—and who can really argue?—that humanity is coterminous with suffering. This idea can be seen most clearly in Bernard Malamud, who said that “every man is a Jew, though he may not know it,” because, as he added later, Judaism is “a symbolic way of showing how history, sooner or later, treats us all” (30, 146). Exile from home, roots, and security makes us first unique, then universal.

Thus the presumed Jewish relationship to exile is kind of a good news/bad news joke, a type of joke where both categories are problematic. For example, this one featuring a doctor and his patient:

Doctor: "I've got good news and bad news. Which do you want first?"

Patient: "Tell me the bad news first."

"Okay. Well, you've got terminal cancer; you've got about a month to live."

"Jesus. What's the good news?"

"See that nurse over there? I'm fucking her."

The good news in this case is that Jews in Canada and the US, and, for that matter, the UK, are, in general, successful and secure. The bad news is that assimilation could destroy us more fully than the Nazis did. Or the bad news is that we can never feel safe anywhere; the good news is that anti-Semitism is on the rise, so at least we're not being paranoid.²

And what is all of this to me? I'm not fucking the nurse. But I have written a book about Jews. A Jewish book, even. And as I try to figure out how that happened (it was not my intent, I assure you), exile and diaspora come up. In the first instance, because very little of what tends to get said about diaspora Jews applies to me. I am not homesick or estranged; you couldn't pay me to go to Israel, and I grew up in a city. *The city*, New York City, which the main character in my novel calls "the anti-diaspora, a magnet drawing in the scattered." Or, as comedian Lenny Bruce put it, "If you live in New York, you're

² I write this two days after the most recent U.S. synagogue shooting, with the country living under a president who famously addressed the neo-Nazi march in Charlottesville, VA in 2017 by saying "there were very fine people on both sides." Anti-Semitism is as real and violent as it has always been, but that doesn't mean it's the defining fact of everyday Jewish life everywhere.

Jewish. It doesn't matter if you're Catholic; if you live in New York, you're Jewish. If you live in Butte, Montana, you're going to be goyish even if you're Jewish."

Whether or not that's the case, New York City Jews are a thing. A category. Recognizable from Woody Allen circa *Annie Hall*, who described the prototype: New York, Jewish, left-wing, intellectual, Central Park West, Brandeis University, socialist summer camps and an apartment featuring Ben Shahn drawings. This only partially describes my family. I grew up on Columbus avenue, not Central Park West (one block apart, but a huge difference class-wise, and I would never have gone to Brandeis. My family was too intellectually snobby for that, and besides, there are way too many Jews there. I went to YMCA camp, not the much more expensive socialist kind, but it's close enough). And that's just one version of Jewish New York—there are many others, a multitude, so much so, that as Caryn Aviv and David Shneer argue in *The New Jews: The End of the Jewish Diaspora*, New York can be seen as "a new Zion of the Jewish World" (137).

That's the world I left when I came to Canterbury to write a novel, the one you've likely just read. A novel that can legitimately be characterized as Jewish. But when I started, it didn't have a Jew anywhere near it. Or maybe it did: the main character was always from New York; she might have been Jewish, but that didn't mean it would have come up. Then I got to Canterbury and had encounters like this: my neighbor had taken in a package for me. When I came for it, she looked at my name, added it to my accent, and said "Schulman; that's

not an American name.” To which I could only say: “It is in New York.”³ Maybe it would have been different in London, but here I read as American (evident as soon as I open my mouth), from New York (because everyone always asks), and brash (because I am). That was it. It just didn’t occur to most people to wonder if I was Jewish. I hadn’t expected this. In China, sure, and when I taught English as a Second Language to Central American refugees, there was usually the big reveal when—to broaden minds or counter assumptions—I announced I was Jewish. But in England? English-speaking England? I know New Yorkers can be provincial, but most Americans, even non-New Yorkers, recognize Jewish names.⁴

Two things happened: I started telling people I was Jewish, which was uniformly awkward. I didn’t know why I was telling them; they didn’t know what they were supposed to do with the information. And I took a train two towns over to go to Yom Kippur services, something I’d never do in New York. As soon as I got there, I remembered why I don’t go: I don’t know Hebrew. I’m not religious. And I definitely don’t want to have to sit on the women’s side. Jewish, yes. That kind of Jew, no. Then a third thing happened, which is that the feeling of being mis-seen, coupled with the hyper-awareness of being Jewish (which on an ordinary day back home is background noise), worked itself into the novel. Turns out, this book is, in its own way, a product of exile. And while I have issues with the idea of Jewish life outside Israel as a permanent exile, I

³ In New York, Schulman isn’t that different from Cohen or Katz. There are a lot of us, and wherever you go, whether it’s the dry cleaner or yoga class, you have to give your first and last name to be accurately identified.

⁴ I’m sure many English people do. I just didn’t happen to meet them. Eventually I met one—a student who was mortified when he brought in a Nazi clip from *Inglourious Basterds* for class and suddenly realized I might be Jewish. There was another, but she’d grown up in North London, and turned out to be basing it on my affect and politics, not my name, which she didn’t know.

have no problem with what I said above, since, like most proudly provincial New Yorkers, I've never doubted that New York is the center of the world. To be away from it is to be dispersed, displaced, dis-oriented.⁵

What happens then when a New Yorker, Jewish less by practice than by osmosis, moves to Rome and has an Italian daughter? Would she raise her to be an observant Jew? Of course not. Not only wouldn't she want to, she wouldn't know how. How then would that daughter know she was Jewish? Answering that question, or, rather, addressing what it might mean for the daughter and thus her mother, became one of the main threads of the book. In Rome, another city that knows itself to be the place all roads lead, Connie Singer, who narrates the book, had somehow assumed her daughter would pick up Judaism the way she had, on the fly, in the street, the air. This was not a reasonable assumption. Rome has the largest Jewish population in Italy, but it's still fairly small, and the community bears the marks not only of the Nazi occupation, but before that, of being the last Italian Jews to be freed from the Ghetto. That's because until 1870 and Italian unification, all of Rome was controlled by the Pope. Rome was the *Caput Mundi*, head of the world, that is, of the Catholic world. Which is relevant, since part of the problem, at least according to daughter Giulia, is that Connie, who loves medieval and renaissance saint pictures and is curating an exhibition of them, is too closely connected to that version of Rome. Connie's sins—from failing to take her daughter to Jewish historical sites to a fondness for explicitly Christian art—are so obvious that Giulia quickly that decides her mother is

⁵ When I left New York for the first time, to attend college in Chicago, I tacked a post-it note up on my dorm room wall with a John Updike quote: "The true New Yorker secretly believes that people living anywhere else have to be, in some sense, kidding."

insufficiently Jewish. Perhaps she's that fabled creature the self-hating Jew, or even downright anti-Semitic. This, needless to say, is a drag for Connie.

Giulia's interrogation of her mother led me straight into the thickets of Jewish identity politics. Consider her tactics/concerns: her first complaint is that Connie never took her to what Giulia calls the Jewish museum, but is actually the Museo dello Shoah or Museum of the Holocaust, which focuses on the fate of the Jews of Rome specifically and Italy more generally. Note that this mistake equates Judaism with the Holocaust, about which more later. Why, Giulia wants to know, hasn't she been there? Oh, did she want to go, Connie asks. It's not that she wanted to go, Giulia says, but that she should have already been. Because she should "know." She does know, of course, she didn't grow up in a bubble. What Giulia seems to mean is that it's not enough to know about it as a historical event; she should know about it *as a Jew, because she's a Jew*, and if she doesn't, perhaps she isn't one. When Connie responds by telling her about her own relationship with the Holocaust—a surfeit, a "one-note" understanding of Judaism that came from her grandparents—things seem like they could work out, but when Giulia realizes that there's a whole other Jewish museum (of the lives of Roman Jews, not their deaths) that Connie hasn't taken her to, the battle's on again.

It flares up a few chapters later, when Connie and Giulia are repeatedly approached by members of Chabad, Ultra-Orthodox Jews whose self-assigned mission is to help less-observant Jews reconnect to Torah.⁶ To Connie's horror,

⁶ Chabad has had a street outreach program since at least the 1960s, when they began sending out what they call Mitzvah Tanks. In an article on the Chabad website, the vans and trailers are called "tanks against assimilation." and explicitly linked to the fears of Jews disappearing into the mainstream/secular world. Started in New York City, the tanks have spread across the globe, including Rome. The process is simple: two men (it is always men) in full Orthodox garb stand on the street and ask passersby if they're Jewish. Men who say yes are asked to put on the ritual tefillin and pray; women get offered Shabbat candles. If it's near Passover, both are offered Matzoh.

Giulia doesn't seem to be able to respond to the simple question of whether she's Jewish. Connie says "you know you're Jewish, right?" and Giulia says she doesn't, since she doesn't know or do anything Jews know and do. Pushed into a corner, Connie tells Giulia that of course she's Jewish, "because I am, my mother is, her mother is, and so on, ad infinitum." This cuts no ice with Giulia, and, when Connie thinks about it later, it doesn't do much for her, either. In fact, she describes it "as a little bit Nuremburg." And here we are, back to the Nazis. Judaism is traditionally passed down via the mother, which lets Connie ignore Giulia's father, a non-Jewish Italian. (She ignores him in other ways, too, but that's a different topic.) Although Judaism is not a race, it has the blood-borne heritability often associated with it. But talking about Judaism this way puts you into a racialized discourse, which, given history and the scientific discrediting of biological race, is not a discourse most of us want to be in these days.⁷ Politically left, raised in 70's New York by a feminist mother, Connie finds herself caught in a mode of thinking she objects to, but still finds useful.

What *should* she tell her daughter? What does it mean to be Jewish, anyway? Connie's sister Claude, for lack of a better answer, says, well, tell her the jokes. Jewish jokes, she means. Which initially seems like terrible idea, but on closer examination might not be. In his book about jokes, philosopher Ted

They don't ask everyone: they couldn't. In an interview on the New York City public radio station, when asked how he decides whom to stop, a man who's been doing it for decades says: "I can smell a Jew." The interviewer quickly moves to disassociate himself from a phrase that, coming from anyone else, would probably seem anti-Semitic. Some Jews appreciate being asked, apparently, happy to take a moment to remember spiritual things. Then there are the rest of us, who experience it as an intrusive referendum on our level of practice.

⁷ In an interesting discussion of what texts Jewish Studies programs study and why (that is, what criteria are used to deem a text Jewish), Michael P. Kramer suggests that, much as it is obscured by use of the word culture, the real determinant is the author's race, that is, whether he or she is Jewish by bloodline inheritance. So scandalous was this idea that the Jewish scholarly journal that published the article printed five rejoinders along with it. All took issue with Kramer, mostly by saying it can't be race because a) Judaism isn't a race and b) race is an invalid category. It is, of course, but if you're a secular Jew, and you never ask yourself why you still consider yourself Jewish or what that means, if, in short, you never confront the biological/heritable aspect, you're probably not trying very hard.

Cohen stresses the way jokes assume shared a knowledge in teller and hearer that builds intimacy and community (26-28). Telling jokes is a way to mark an in group and an out group; that's why there are surgeon jokes and pilot jokes and why they are most likely to be told by internists and flight attendants, who have both the need to make fun of those groups and the knowledge to see why they're funny. And in fact, when Connie starts telling jokes, she creates an in group—herself and houseguest Josh,⁸ an American Jew—and an out group—Giulia. The first knows exactly why these jokes are funny and has a connoisseur's relish of them; the second is appalled at the way jokes rely on stereotypes. If you think, as the very PC-Giulia does, that using the word "they" is othering, you're not going to be happy with a joke that starts out "A Jew, a German, and a Frenchman are lost in the desert."⁹ Why, Giulia wants to know, does it have to be a Jew? After all, Jews come from somewhere, just as Frenchmen and Germans do. "Couldn't he be Italian?" she asks. Of course he could be, Josh says, Italian, South African, Argentinian—"he could be from anywhere. But it's funny because he's Jewish."

Instead of trying to explain why, Josh and Connie just keep telling jokes, partly in the hope that Giulia will magically get with the program, but largely because they enjoy them. Things don't end well. But in rubbing up against the question of Jewish identity, my book is in the main current of contemporary Jewish writing, which in "Identity Matters: Contemporary Jewish American Writing," Tresa Grauer says should be "examined less for its coherence as a

⁸ Josh's grandmother is an old friend of Connie's mother, who signed Connie and Giulia up as hosts. Josh is 27. Connie's 46. Giulia's 17.

⁹ And while Giulia's Generation-Z PC-itude is played for the occasional laugh, she's not wrong about the problematic nature of *they*. She just needs to think more about the problems of *we*.

body of literature defined by an identity as for its focus on it" (270). In the *Cambridge Companion to Jewish Literature* she says this, no less. Because that's the thing about being Jewish: there's no credo you have to subscribe to, something Connie tries to tell Giulia. Which is great, except here comes race again: what is a Jew? Someone born to a Jewish mother. Or, perhaps, someone tagged with that label by people who assume it's a negative. As Daniel Boyarin says, "Jews in general feel not that Jewishness is something they have freely chosen but rather that it is an essence—an essence often nearly empty of any content other than itself—which has been inscribed—sometimes even imposed—on them by birth" (*Radical*, 241).¹⁰ Perhaps this feeling, which does, after all, sound a bit burdensome, is what Connie thought she was saving Giulia from, but now she's worried that the Orthodox or other religious and/or Zionist Jews will rush into the vacuum she's left, propagandizing Giulia with ideas about gender separation, the necessity of keeping Kosher, and Israel as a biblically bestowed Jewish homeland. This, to Connie, would be a horror.

Connie's negative feelings about Israel are where the novel departs from a major trend of Jewish American writing, which has increasingly been engaged with Israel. We have already encountered Israel as a replacement for belief, a kind of secular religion. It does not feature that way in the kinds of literature I'm interested in, because that kind of certainty is the death of thought. But Israel as a place where a Jew might feel more authentic; might go to find himself; might ambivalently decide to protect if it were in harm's way, is a frequent feature in

¹⁰ Boyarin adds, importantly, that if identity is somehow essentialized, it matters quite a bit as to whether the people doing the essentializing have power or don't. As he puts it: "for subaltern groups, essentialism is resistance, the "right" of the group to actually exist" (241). In a less cogent or theorized way, this is what Connie means, I think, when she explains why she can't just tell the Mitzvah Mobilers she's not Jewish. "It's bad luck to say you aren't Jewish if you are, bad faith, anyway" she says, an idea that speaks to the historic reality that for centuries Jews have been pressured to renounce their faith and their Jewish identity.

contemporary Jewish writing. In this, as so often with Jewish writing, the thread starts with Philip Roth, who sent Nathan Zuckerman to Israel in *The Counterlife* in 1986.¹¹ Roth directly takes up the Israeli assumption that Jewish history only happens there—that is, the idea that diaspora life is essentially just a marking of time in the suspension of real Jewish experience—when Nathan writes a long, passionate letter to his newly Orthodox settler brother telling him that just by living in a New Jersey suburb, “more or less forgetful from one day to the next of your Jewish origins but remaining identifiably (and voluntarily) a Jew, you were making Jewish history no less astonishing than theirs” (150).

In speaking so directly to the fetishization of Israel and Israelis and their insistence that they are on the front line in every way, Roth is more critical than more recent books, which tend to assume that American Jews need to be in conversation with their Israeli cousins (sometimes literally, as in Safran Foer’s most recent book, *Here I Am*). Connie has no interest in such a conversation, and I’ve spared her the other conversation about Israel that is always already happening, the one about whether anti-Zionism equals anti-Semitism (Not automatically, say I; yes, say many others) And the follow-up one, about whether the state of Israel is a racist or settler-colonial project (Yes, I say, along with the UN, some revisionist Israeli historians, and a growing number of American Jews; no, say lots of people, some of whom I’m fond of.)

¹¹ It is impossible to write Jewishly or about Jews thinking about being Jews without thinking about Roth. It is almost impossible, if one is also a woman, to avoid being drawn into the “was PR a misogynist?” conversation. My answer depends on the day and the book, but to the women who’ve given him a pass on this (see, for instance, the discussion on the New Yorker Radio Hour, broadcast July 10, 2018 and featuring Judith Thurman, Claudia Roth Pierpont, and Lisa Halliday, who all knew him personally), I would point to *The Dying Animal*, in which a young woman’s breast cancer is portrayed primarily as a tragedy for her much older, #metoo-worthy former professor and lover (her breasts, we are repeatedly told, are amazing). Roth is much more than just a misogynist; at his best (which I count as *The Ghost Writer*, *The Counterlife*, *Operation Shylock*, *Sabbath’s Theater*, and *American Pastoral*, although I wonder how they’d hold up if I reread them now), he’s really, really good, but that doesn’t mean he deserves the clean bill of health they give him.

Even that brief and fairly dispassionate summary gives a sense of how quickly conversations about Israel descend into name calling and accusations of bad faith. However, it turns out that there's another way to think about the problem of Israel, one that doesn't involve ping-ponging accusations of war crimes. Daniel Boyarin, already mentioned, teaches Talmud at the University of California, Berkeley; his brother Jonathan teaches anthropology and Jewish Studies at Cornell. They've thought a lot about diaspora, and though this is from "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity," which they wrote in the '90s, it seems even more important now that nationalism is up to its old tricks in Europe, Israel, the US, and elsewhere. As they put it, they want to

"propose a privileging of Diaspora, a dissociation of ethnicities and political hegemonies as the only social structure that even begins to make possible a maintenance of cultural identity in a world grown thoroughly and inextricably interdependent... Diaspora can teach us that it is possible for a people to maintain its distinctive culture, its difference, without controlling land, a fortiori without controlling other people or developing a need to dispossess them of their lands. (723)

In this light, diaspora (Jewish or otherwise) isn't a loss or a lack; it's a gain, a productive space that, unlike most ways of thinking about populations, doesn't privilege or assume nation or nationalism.

In a later essay, Daniel Boyarin added a gender component to this argument. He points out that in the Christian world, Jewish difference has historically been feminized: to be Jewish is to be weak, unmanly. That's not surprising—it's a typical trope of dominant group discourse about the subaltern. What's interesting is what Boyarin does with this fact: he shows that

the Rabbinate, the scholars who shaped Judaism through their commentary and rulings, mock their enemies as “crude, macho, violent, and hyper male” (“Tricksters,” 91). The rabbis didn’t aspire to be like their overlords; instead, Boyarin argues, they valorize the feminine (89). (In men, he means. No one is suggesting Midrashic texts are always or inherently feminist.) He uses these ideas to argue again that the proper condition of the Jews is diaspora. Today’s Israel is appropriate as neither homeland nor aspirational Judaism, because it denies essential Jewish values by devaluing the feminized or, as Boyarin also calls it, the “queer” (91) diaspora and overvaluing an aggressively macho nationalist project.

Boyarin also claims that Israel’s tendency to make the Jewish past and present more warrior-like has led it to try to distance itself from the Holocaust (because it shows Jews as weak, which they find intolerable). This is quite different from its role in America, where the Holocaust is, arguably, the other form of secular Jewish religion. The article on “The Holocaust in the Jewish American Literature” in the *Cambridge Companion* quotes novelist Norma Rosen to telling effect: “As safe Americans we were not there. Since then, in imagination, we are seldom anywhere else” (quoted in Budick, 212). In the introduction to their recent anthology of American Jewish writing, editors Victoria Aarons, Avinoam J. Platt, and Mark Schechner Wayne say that “literary preoccupation with the Holocaust among Jewish writers...has taken on considerable momentum” (6). The language they cite from recent novels is telling, with Holocaust stories described as passively “absorbed,” transmitted through “DNA,” an “unwanted inheritance,” something that has “seeped” onto or into characters whose parents weren’t born at the time of the actual events (7).

It is, of course, a form of privilege to be a Jew whose family was not touched by the Holocaust, but it is the case for numerous American Jews. And the language, with its invocation of inheritance, shifts the idea of what is passed on from Jewish blood to Jewish trauma,¹² thus potentially making the Holocaust the key marker of Judaism (Cue the Nazis, again). There are many reasons to write a Jewish book, but creating what Aarons et al call a “contemporary kaddish, a Yizkor Book, a chronicle of remembrance” (8) need not be among them.

And cue Roth again, too, as it was he who indelibly linked the question that dogs Jews writing about Jews—will it be good or bad for them?—with the Holocaust. Roth, as is well known, received a great deal of reproach from the Jewish community for *Portnoy's Complaint*, and he addressed the issue in, among other books, *The Ghost Writer*, the first Nathan Zuckerman book. It comes up when Nathan's story, which his parents fear shows Jews in a bad light, is accepted by a prestigious literary journal. When Nathan refuses to pull the story, his mother invokes the Holocaust. He responds by saying “we are not the wretched of Belsen! We were not the victims of that crime!” We could be, his mother answers; “in their place we *would* be” (106). What she says is likely true: had she, or I, or my family, been there, we would almost certainly have been victims. But what are we to do with that truth? And true or not, how exactly is it relevant?

Times have changed, of course, and for my parents, publication in a literary journal would have far outweighed any potential scandal, but the Yinglish phrase “a Shonda for the goyim,” that is, a Jewish scandal that the

¹² A lot of work has been done in the last decade on epigenetics, i.e. the genetic transfer of trauma: I claim no knowledge or expertise about this, but I have no doubt that regardless of whether nature passes down trauma, nurture certainly does.

Goyim will observe and use for their own purposes (think Bernie Madoff or Monica Lewinsky), is still with us. If any further proof were needed of my Judaism, it can be found in the fact that, among my many worries about my novel is the fear that in some tiny way it might be bad for the Jews. Because it was written in England, in the condition of knowing almost no Jews. Because as Jewish as New York is, most Jews don't come from there, so my assumption of safety and my cavalier attitude about being a bad Jew are just forms of privilege (I actually buy this argument, but bad, bacon-eating, non-synagogue-attending Jews from big cities are a recognizable strand of Jewish life). Because saying I'm not writing from the Holocaust might suggest that I don't take it seriously, and so on. Add to this the reality that I'm not just non-observant, I'm often downright ignorant (not unlike Connie); God only knows what I've gotten wrong, even with research and consultation. I'm not all Jews, obviously, and I don't speak for the Jews or even all the other Schulmans, whether actual relatives or total strangers. But expecting all that to be considered seems like a lot to ask: people don't always have time or inclination for nuance. Consider the joke about the man who blames the Jews for the sinking of the Titanic. Told that it was an iceberg that brought the ship down, he says, "Iceberg, Goldberg, it's all the same."

Even if I don't get things wrong or cause offense, there is still the sense of revealing insider conversations, of telling jokes and stories out of school. The idea that such conversations exist is exactly what Connie's Italian ex-husband is referring to when he wants her to talk to an Italian Jew. He assumes that only under those circumstances will the real information, the nitty gritty that could never be shared with a non-Jew, be divulged. Connie, of course, immediately

makes an inappropriate joke about that idea; she references the blood libel, a centuries-old recurring, Pogrom-triggering claim that Jews make Passover matzoh with the blood of a Christian child. The truth, at least in my experience, is that conversations between Jews don't usually include secret recipes, but they might well include jokes about how we're assumed to have them. It can be confusing. For years I thought my cousins (not Schulmans, and not Jews either) might be a touch anti-Semitic when, hearing that I was writing a guide book about Chicago and would be calling Catholic churches for information, they suggested I not use my real name. Then a friend pointed out that I'd misread it. They weren't being anti-Semitic; they were mocking the Catholic Church's frequent history of anti-Semitism. Oh. As Claude tells Connie about the Abe and Benny joke, it's meta. And sometimes it's not simple. Which isn't an apology, exactly, nor an admission of guilt. I mean no ill, true, but I'm not opposed to a little mischief (since *Operation Shylock* (1993), a word associated with Roth, alter kocher¹³ and forebear, and isn't it normal for grandfathers and fathers to be more sexist than we'd like?). I've always wondered what non-Jews make of Roth. I'm sure they get—both in the sense of understanding and receiving—lots of things, I just want to know what they are. Now, maybe, I'll have a chance to hear what Jews and non-Jews alike get not from Roth, but from this book, my book, which along with all its other threads—unmentioned here, but including saints, art, mother-daughter relationships, and love of various kinds, including for my grimy but beloved lost Zion, 1970s New York City—is Jewish in its concerns, jokes, and questions.

¹³ Yiddish for, essentially old fart: the elders in a community who know, or think they do, what's what.

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