

ROME

THERE WERE RUINS AND FOUNTAINS AND A FURY OF

beeping horns. Naked putti lounging fatly in marble. Gorgeous, long-armed women in skirts and strappy sandals, and young men leaning out of their cars in mirrored sunglasses. Old men in storefronts arranged cheeses and sausages tenderly, as if tucking in sleeping infants, while chattering tour groups trailed guides holding red umbrellas, and honeymooners licked perfect gelatos. There were long, hushed halls filled with onlookers crowding around famous paintings: Jesus flanked by apostles, emperors crowned with laurel, mythical women in half-dress being chased by centaurs. There were churches in which frescoes glowed in dim magnificence above altars. Gold coffered ceilings. Pietàs. Aqueducts. Domes.

In the catacombs, we followed a man with a bowtie and a stutter who told us of the city, its slaves and rulers, while the bones around us listened in untroubled silence. We'd seen so much beauty by then we'd been rendered insensate to it, like gorging on sweets to the point of sickness, or until one

tastes nothing at all. Our eyes could not absorb one more basilica. We were tired and dust-covered, our shoulders sunburned. We were sick of each other and sick of washing our underwear in sinks. We were finally seeing all the things—beautiful, famous things we’d waited all our young lives to see—but we couldn’t appreciate any of it any longer.

“Please don’t talk to me,” I said to Paul in the hostel’s small kitchen while a troop of merry Australians cracked open beers nearby. Friendships formed quickly here, and yet somehow Paul and I had managed to remain alone. We were pinched and irritable-looking, clutching our respective *Lonely Planets* like shields. We must have resembled a couple even though we hated each other. Maybe this even made our coupledness appear more authentic.

“Believe me, I have no desire to,” Paul said, slapping two thickly slathered pieces of bread together into a peanut butter sandwich, like he did every night, no matter where we were. Who ate peanut butter sandwiches in Europe?

The trip had seemed a good idea at first, but now even the sight of Paul—his socks, the sound of his breathing, the way he chewed—repulsed me. It was like a horrible stranger had assumed Paul’s shape, donning his body like a cheap suit. Everything about him I’d once found pleasant or appealing had been twisted into cruel caricature.

And yet here we were, with a coveted semiprivate room in the middle of July, the height of tourist season. Travelers from all over the world crowded outside the gates of the hostel each evening, waiting to see if one of the dorm beds might open up. Every hostel in the city was full to capacity, and late-arriving backpackers found themselves having to pay for low-end hotels, or, more bravely, sleeping in parks with new friends made on nights out. We had reserved in advance, following a travel itinerary plotted by Paul, who preferred to leave nothing to chance. It was just the two of us, and one silent girl from Japan who rolled her nightshirt neatly, tucking it under her pillow in the morning. How could we give this up? Rome, of all places. City of Seven Hills. We were bound together, Paul and I, by our good luck, by our reticence with others.

Our first night there, while the other backpackers were still out exploring the nightlife, sharing wine at little outdoor tables in the piazzas, falling in love, Paul and I read silently in our room. Even the quiet Japanese girl did not return before the curfew. I listened to Paul whispering to himself before he went to sleep, and I knew he was reciting words to stave off disaster, a godless prayer. When I'd first met him, I'd found this ritual endearing. It had given him a certain pathos. Now, of course, it was but one of the many things about him I hated—almost as much as he made me hate myself.

So I went on a day trip without him.

That morning, while the rest of the hostel slept off their Chianti and Paul lay in the half-light with his mouth hanging open, I rose and dressed quietly. In the relative calm of the early hour, I made my way to the tour company's designated meetup spot. The tour company was family-owned and specialized in intimate walking tours, guided day trips with no more than eight other people. I'd chosen Tivoli almost at random. I'd seen photos on the brochure—grand fountains set against statuary of ancient gods, lush hill-sides, Hadrian's Villa. My eyes would blur at yet more ruins, more beauty. But I wanted the rush of water falling, crumbling walls, a place where I might pretend to be a Roman emperor, a plebe, anyone but myself.

When I got to the location, I saw two middle-aged parents and their five blonde daughters, the girls arranged from tallest to smallest like a line of nesting dolls. They all wore the long blue skirts of pioneer women. Although her face looked ancient, the mother had the round, taut belly and loose-hipped gait of a woman in late pregnancy. Her skin was the deep golden bronze of an aging sun-worshipper; the rest of her family was fair.

The father stepped forward, formal, almost bowing as he spoke.

"We're the Gooleys," he said with a sweep of his hand to indicate his brood. He retreated to the spot beside his wife before I could offer my own greeting.

"Hullo," the oldest girl said then, moving out from the line of her sisters.

Her voice was warmer than her father's. She wore a braid that fell down her back to her waist, Laura Ingalls Wilder-style. "You're our eighth!"

She thrust her hand toward me, unnaturally self-possessed for a child her age. A preteen? An early teenager? It was hard to tell with her prairie-settler clothes.

"I'm Lindsay," I said, accepting her handshake.

She beamed at me like someone emerging from a cave, from hibernation.

"Welcome," said our tour guide, a bearded Irishman. "It'll be you and the Gooley family today. Not how these things typically go. But it'll be grand."

"I'm Martha," the oldest Gooley girl said, squeezing my hand as if I were her new best friend. "I'm so happy you're joining us." She introduced me to the rest of her sisters as we all piled into a van. Connor, our guide, turned from the driver's seat to smile at us, and Martha took the seat next to mine, leaning into me as if we'd known each other for ages.

We wended our way toward Tivoli while Connor told us little facts about Hadrian's Villa, the Villa d'Este, and the town of Tivoli, where we would have lunch. I studied passing Vespas, squinting out at the hills to which we were headed.

"Where do you live?" I whispered to Martha, and she bowed her head slightly.

"Japan," she said, answering with polite formality. "We're there on mission."

I nodded, careful to keep my face neutral. It hung there unspoken: an understanding she somehow confirmed with the steadiness of her gaze. I had intuited a fundamentalist religiosity about this family from the moment I'd sighted them. Now the only question was of which variety.

"Mother teaches us," Martha said, "She used to, when she felt well. But we also go on trips like this as part of our education."

She spoke to me in a way I'd come to recognize in the handful of home-schooled children I'd encountered: with a strange, otherworldly adulthood, a lack of self-consciousness I found unsettling. Martha was fifteen, an age

at which awkwardness was not just to be expected but mandatory in my experience.

I explained to Martha that I was in college, about to enter my final year at the big state school back home. A wonderful education, I told her when she asked. A funny little wistful look passed over her face. I found myself delivering a brochure-ready vision, which she absorbed with rapt attention: heavy textbooks and students gathered in glossy quads before bearded professors with elbow patches, football games and friends on the weekends. All this was pure fantasy. The whole reason I'd ended up in Italy with Paul in the first place was because of our shared sense of alienation. Both of us had fancied ourselves special eggs, the type that ought to have been coddled in boutique classes at a tiny liberal arts college with an expensive price tag. That hadn't happened; we'd ended up lonely at a gigantic university, consoling ourselves with our own perceived intellectualism—a shared sense of grievance that had proven an excellent homing device. We'd met in class, connecting over the fact that we felt awkward and overlooked, the kind of people who signed up willingly for honors seminars on restoration drama and then complained to each other when the professor seemed not to notice us.

"I bet you have a million friends," Martha said, her heart-shaped face wide open with sincerity. "You seem so nice." She sighed and clasped her hands like a schoolgirl, laying them in her lap.

I flushed and didn't respond.

A bump in the road jolted us. Two of Martha's sisters had begun to sing a round up front—it was a song I recognized from a church camp I'd attended as a young girl. So maybe Protestant, not Catholic? Then again, maybe everyone sang that song.

I wondered what Paul would think when he woke and found me gone. I must have sighed unconsciously.

"What's wrong?" Martha asked, leaning toward me, all pale bloneness like a Northern Renaissance angel.

"Nothing," I said. "I'm happy to be here."

“Me too,” she said, pressing my hand again. Her touch was warm; my hands were cold no matter the season, but once again she didn’t flinch. “Cold hands, warm heart,” she added, giving me a little smile.

We parked in a large lot with several other vans and tour buses. Martha’s sisters spilled out into the sunny morning, their braids and long skirts and white ankle socks catching the light with too much brightness. Their laughter was wholesome, like a stream of fresh milk from a pail.

Or seemingly wholesome. Wholesomeness was a slippery quality. The first time I’d met Paul, I told him I’d been struck by this very quality of his. He was unfashionable, almost prim with manners. He’d been offended when I remarked upon it. He told me he’d grown up on a small hog farm in eastern North Carolina.

“See?” I’d said. “Exactly.”

“*Wholesome* isn’t the word for it,” Paul answered.

His parents’ farm had been bought up by one of the big industrial farming operations when he was finishing high school. They’d been one of the last holdouts in their county. The air smelled like shit there, Paul told me. If you called that wholesome, then there you have it. In school, he’d been shy and lonely, made odd by his habits; he was unable to stop himself from counting ceiling tiles, touching light switches again and again. He’d hated school but preferred it to home—his father, the gummy-eyed piglets slick in their afterbirth, the stench of the full-grown hogs. He’d been scared of them, the way they grunted, their snouts and tails, the horrible human quality of their squeals.

I followed Martha and the line of Gooleys through the ruins of Hadrian’s Villa. I was already thirsty and tired, eager to hurry through the sprawling complex. But I could feel Martha pausing behind me, taking the measure of the place. We came to a large, open area: the Serapeum. The water of the Canopus gleamed, reflecting back trees and sky. Martha exhaled, holding up one hand as if to snap a photo. I touched her elbow gently. She smiled at me. For a moment, it felt like we’d stumbled onto some other ruined world,

the stripes of trees painted onto the still, dark water and the silent columns rising above. It really did snatch your breath—I almost said this to her, but I figured she, too, must be thinking it.

“The rot of decadence,” Martha whispered.

“What?”

“Papa said he’d show us where it all started.”

She drew one finger down the line of the column.

“The Romans were a culture of decadence,” she said. “Immodesty. That’s why their empire collapsed.” She raised an eyebrow at me. Or just raised her eyebrow. And I felt conscious of my bare legs, my uncovered shoulders, multiple piercings in my ears—although in no way did I look avant-garde or rebellious. Then she locked eyes with me, and her gaze was serene and without judgment. I had the sense that she was parroting something she’d heard many times and didn’t wholly believe, testing out the sound of it.

Ahead of us, Connor made polite conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Goolley. Mr. Gooley was broad-shouldered with the serious shuffle and stoop of a clergyman. He wore fat white tennis shoes that looked like they’d come straight from the box. His wife was squat as a saltshaker, her gray hair pulled into a stringy ponytail and her heavy belly a hindrance to which she seemed to subjugate herself unquestioningly, like a cow or a mare. I watched her listening, absorbed, grave. From a distance, her face looked like Martha’s.

“They’re so serious,” I said finally, because I did not know what else to say. “Like Roman senators.”

Martha laughed generously.

“My father would appreciate that he’s given that impression.”

We trailed her sisters and parents past statues and the remnants of friezes, making our way to the Maritime Theatre. Even when we weren’t talking, Martha didn’t leave my side, careful to match her pace to mine.

“Do you like having such a big family?” I asked her. My only brother still lived at home with my parents. He worked for the same towing company as my father. They had the same gestures, the same long nose and humorless

mouth. It was almost like they were a single blank-faced person split in two, leaving my mother and me completely to ourselves whenever I was home.

Martha laughed again.

“Oh, my family’s not all that big,” she said. “My grandfather, on the other hand, had twenty-five brothers and sisters. And my father is one of eighteen.”

“You’re Catholic?” I asked her finally.

She shook her head.

“No,” she answered. “But we’re suckers for Catholic saints. My mom really likes them. She’s into miracles. That’s why we came to Italy.”

“For the miracles?”

She nodded, looking even younger, more childlike, in that moment.

“We could use some. For my mother,” she said, and then her voice dropped several decibels. “And for the baby. The baby needs a miracle.”

I looked at her, awaiting further explanation, but she turned away. Her mother seemed so old—Biblically old, like the fact of any pregnancy for her at this point was in and of itself a miracle. No wonder there was something wrong with the baby. Martha appeared distracted now, gazing upward at a broken hunk of wall looming above us. By then we’d caught up with the rest of the family. One of Martha’s younger sisters, who was sucking on a red lollipop, tugged at her arm with a sticky hand. We both turned to our tour guide, who was describing the architecture of the Maritime Theatre. The remaining columns seemed to huddle together above the murky water.

We formed our own semicircle, listening to Connor as he spoke. The air was hot and still. Clusters of other tourists moved around us. I thought of Paul, wandering the streets of Rome alone.

Paul and I had gotten along well at the beginning of our trip. Bright-eyed, fresh, we ticked off cities. First Paris, with its cafés and wide boulevards, the Parisians so elegant and dismissive; then Geneva, placid and pretty and a little dull; then Interlaken, blue-green picturesque and mountainous, the night air so clean and cool it made breathing seem like sucking a peppermint. We’d

quickly assumed the attitudes of backpackers, joining that temporary, rootless world wherein tips are easily traded and breezy acquaintanceships made and forgotten. Paul took little notes in a notebook he carried. We both were there on travel grants, theoretically doing research.

Before we'd left the States, our friends had made little jokes about this being the culmination of our secret romance. But I knew otherwise. Paul had confessed to me his crush on Lulu Robinson, a gloomily poised poet who'd already published a chapbook and would graduate a semester ahead of us. I'd always hated Lulu, with her dark hair and big eyes, her raw talent, but I softened for Paul's sake, for the melancholy that crept into his voice when he spoke of her. I knew better than to mock him for the way he dissected their paltry exchanges. She might as well have lived on a different planet—perfect and untouched, not yet spoiled by humankind—for all her awareness of him. I confessed a similar crush on Rhett Williamson, just to even things out. Rhett had had the same on-and-off-again girlfriend since sophomore year. We were friends, of sorts, and Rhett did leave me tongue-tied and pitiful, but I knew it wasn't quite the same.

"You're better than that," I told Paul once when he described an encounter he'd had with Lulu at a party. "You just haven't figured it out yet."

He smiled wanly at me.

"Of course you'd say that," he said. "You're the only one who gets me."

This had pleased me so much, so painfully, that I'd had to leave him in the library abruptly, telling him I must be sick from something I'd eaten.

I understood the pleasing, problem-solving symmetry of Paul falling for me. I had, of course, considered it. I knew the shape of his mouth, the way his lips moved silently in class. I could read the tension in his jaw, could gauge, by his expression, when he was arguing with himself internally. No one else would notice, though, unless he told them. He'd had a lifetime of practice concealing his compulsions, starting back when his father used to smack his knuckles with a hanger anytime he caught Paul touching the furniture, or made him sit with his hands in hog shit whenever he washed them until they bled.

Things were fine until Milan. We'd missed the train we meant to catch and so had ended up on a slow train with no seats left. We stood there, gripping the poles and swaying, while the train swung along the track. It was dark when we finally reached the station, and we were tired, our legs wobbly.

Paul got an email from his father just after we arrived: his mother was in the hospital again. Her white count had dropped precipitously. I'd met Paul's mother once when she'd come to visit: a tiny woman, elven almost, shrunk down to the bone, with big brown eyes and shoulders like the handles of a child's scooter. She'd been in treatment for breast cancer on and off since Paul was fifteen. I knew all of Paul's stories of her; she loomed like a demigod in Paul's private mythology. A self-described Southern Baptist housewife, Paul's mother loved him, in her way. He loved his mother back, ferociously, inexplicably, despite her sharpness.

Paul blinked furiously when he told me. I looked away to let him collect himself. A crowd of adolescent Milanese boys passed us then, speaking loudly. One of them knocked against Paul's pack so hard he stumbled. He flushed, and I watched him tighten his hands into fists.

"Please," I said. "We just got to Italy. It's only a few more weeks."

We continued down a series of increasingly narrow streets looking for our hostel. By the time we found it, we were ravenous. A group from Sweden happened to be standing in the entryway, having predinner drinks and discussing where they could find a late dinner. They invited us to join them.

Maybe it was the shots the Swedes had offered us before we left, which we'd accepted despite our empty stomachs, but there was something loose now about Paul, jolly and volatile. Normally, he was slow to warm up in a crowd, but now he strode ahead of me, exchanging banter with the tallest of the group, a dimpled blond guy with a big laugh. It worried me. I thought of Paul's mother, back in her room at the community hospital in the eastern part of the state. They were considering moving her into hospice, Paul had said, but his father was very clear that his mother didn't want him to feel he needed to come home yet, didn't want him to cut his trip off early. "Once in

a lifetime,” his mother had said to Paul, squeezing his wrist before he’d left. She’d only ever gone as far as the Maryland state line.

“But I feel like I have to go home now, right?” Paul asked me. “No matter what he says.”

I didn’t answer him.

He seemed to interpret my thoughts correctly, though, and his mouth hardened.

Then he hurried to catch up with the two Swedes leading the way. Paul fizzed and crackled with energy, jabbering with our new acquaintances. It unsettled me to see him so lively.

As we entered the small, dark restaurant, I pulled Paul aside.

“It’s okay if you’re not up to this,” I said. “We can find a slice of pizza somewhere low-key. They have that here, right?” I meant to make my voice light. I didn’t want to mention his mother again. He shrugged, already seeming a little drunk, which wasn’t impossible given the strength of the shots, his low tolerance, our hunger and fatigue.

“I could use a night out,” he said, and I saw him do a counting gesture with his fingers. It was quick—a pressing of each finger onto his thumb.

“Okay,” I told him. I touched his arm gently. He was my friend, truly, and so when I chose to touch him—rarely, platonically—it was meant as emphasis. *I’m here if you need me*, I tried to make my touch say.

He brushed me off, maneuvering to the bar and ordering his drink beside two of the Swedes. I sat down with one of the women, Karolina. The restaurant was dark and cramped, built to look like the inside of a cavern, and filled with the loud chatter not of Italians but of other backpackers like ourselves. Ordinarily, I would have hated such a place on principle, avoiding it at all costs in search of an “authentic” trattoria, but tonight there was an energy carrying us, and I was prepared to submit to it.

When Paul and Karolina’s friend Erik brought back drinks, we all cheered. Eventually, there was pizza. We tore into it brutally, laughing and calling one another by new nicknames, citing inside jokes created only an

hour beforehand. We had the air of old friends, friends who went back years. Paul outtalked everyone, and I watched the strange glitter in his eyes, the reckless way his hands swirled. There was a new edge to him.

I went with it, emulating the volume of his speech, the way his hands moved. I laughed louder. We ate and drank like animals, laughing with pizza sauce smeared on the sides of our mouths. When I felt Erik's body shift beside me, moving a bit closer, I let myself lean into him, his carnal warmth and smell of sweat. I found him loud and unfunny, a little bucktoothed, which was maybe unfair, but for tonight, I decided that wouldn't matter. I saw the way Paul was openly flirting with Karolina, something he would never have been able to do unless he was very drunk. He was funny, charming even—I could see this reflected back in the way Karolina beheld him.

By the time we walked out of the restaurant into the surprisingly cool night, it was like we were engaged in open competition. Karolina had slung her arms over Paul, pretending she was unable to walk. Maybe she couldn't quite walk—we'd had a lot of sour-tasting wine, stuff they surely only doled out to tourists. I let Erik hold my hand. It would all end quietly at the hostel, I figured. Paul and I had our own room, and the Swedes shared one of the large coed rooms lined with bunk beds.

"Wait here," Erik said when we got back. "Sit with me awhile and watch the stars." He gestured to the open courtyard in the center of the hostel, a small atrium with plastic chairs and potted plants, cigarette butts and empty wine bottles and abandoned novels.

I looked up. There were no stars, the sky choked with clouds and city light.

Ordinarily I would've said no. I looked to Paul, wanting some signal, perhaps, but his eyes were dark and inscrutable.

"Sure," I finally said. Erik flung himself onto one of the chairs, and I settled onto his lap.

Karolina made a clicking sound with her mouth, waiting, it appeared, for Paul to say something, to invite her up to his room. But when he said nothing, she made the clicking sound again, and then she and the rest of the group

headed off to bed. Paul waited a beat longer, watching me. I saw him touch the pad of each finger to his thumb five times quickly. His mouth moved like he was going to tell me something, but instead, he walked away.

I kissed Erik for a while, letting him fumble at my bra until his motions slowed and his head lolled back like a flower too heavy for its stem. He began to snore softly, his breath smelling like cured meat. I said his name, but he didn't respond. I rose and padded off to find my room.

It was dark when I entered, well after 3:00 a.m. I closed the door quietly, careful not to wake Paul, but then I heard the creak of his bed. I could make out his shape, alone in the darkness.

"You're awake," I whispered. I no longer felt tipsy, only dehydrated and wired.

"Couldn't sleep," he said, and his voice sounded like it came from the bottom of a well. I thought of his tiny mother, feverish now, praying in her hospital room. She was hateful, too; I knew that. Whole lists of unfamiliar people and ways of being scared her, and so she hated them.

"Oh, Paul," I said, and I climbed into his narrow bed with him. He let me take his head and pull it against my chest. I felt sorry now—for my selfishness, for not correctly reading the evening. Paul moved his hands to my back. I could feel him breathing, the thud of his heart.

"Lindsay?"

I knew what he was asking, and I let him. He was nervous, as if engaged in an elaborate act of contrition. He whimpered at the end, then collapsed to my side. I felt the urge to brush his hair back from his forehead—it was a maternal gesture, which was maybe the wrong sort of expression in that moment. I felt a giddy sadness that I distrusted—it was too much like nostalgia. We pulled apart. It was dawn.

We slept late into the day. I woke sweating in a hot stripe of midday sun. I was parched, my mouth bitter. I had a terrible headache. I felt Paul's familiar-yet-unfamiliar body against mine. I decided I would not say a word. It would ruin what had happened.

But when Paul woke up, I saw the way he looked at me. His repulsion was so powerful I could have believed I'd transformed into one of the bristled sows on his father's farm.

"Oh, God," Paul said. I could see his mouth working in silent, anxious recitation. "Oh, God," he said in disgust, in anguish, in regret. "That shouldn't have happened. I'm sorry. Are you—should we?" He made a kind of raking gesture then that I somehow understood.

Relax, I told him. I'm on the pill. I had been for years, to help regulate my cycles.

Of course, I should have known Paul well enough to have predicted what might happen: he kept at it. He muttered to himself. He teared up. He worried aloud. While we wandered the Duomo, he calculated due dates, his brow furrowed. Of course, he said morosely, his parents would want him to marry me. As if there were a baby definitely happening. As if that baby were a monster. As if I were a monster who'd entrapped him. He paced like a prisoner. He did not let up in the days that followed.

"You'll tell me when your period comes?" he asked, not once, but many times, contagious in his misery. "You'll let me know?"

I scoffed.

"I can't go home now," he said, shaking his head like a scolded child. "Not now, not with this."

"There's nothing keeping you," I said, but it wounded me to say it.

"You don't know for sure."

"It's your mother you're worried about," I said, but it wounded me again, and deeper, the way he went on. "This is about her. Your mother. We're fine. The same. Like nothing ever happened."

I explained to him the unlikelihood, the almost-impossible odds. Eventually, when no logic would prevail, I gave up. I laughed bitterly in his face while he fretted. I called him an idiot in the lovely, uneven streets of Florence. Finally, on a train from Venice, I brought him into the swaying bathroom stall and showed him what he wanted: blood.

I was wicked about it. Disgusting, like a hog on his daddy's farm, wallowing in filth.

"Here," I said. "Touch it."

He blanched, but he did what I said.

"You know your mother's dying."

I said it plainly, watching his face contort. He already knew, but saying it out loud was cruelty. "She's dying, and there is no baby. Go home to her if you want. Just go home."

The train swung on a curve, and he fell back, catching himself against the foul little sink. I could see it in his eyes, the frantic way they flickered: fear, relief, fear. I shoved him out of the way so that he couldn't even wash the blood from his fingers.

And then we arrived in Rome.

To see the full majesty of Hadrian's Villa, of much of the grandeur of ancient Rome, we had to imagine it in its unruined state. The complex had been set up as a sort of retreat, an imperial enclave from which Hadrian could govern outside the city. By the time of the decline of the empire, the Villa fell into disuse, and people stole the most valuable statues. Marble was burned to extract lime to use for building material. The Villa, we learned, was eventually used as a warehouse during the Gothic Wars.

"It had to be trashed before anyone bothered to protect it," Martha observed.

"Isn't that always the way?"

Two of Martha's little sisters were chasing each other near one of the shallow pools.

"Stop!" Mr. Gooley yelled, his voice sharp enough that several other passing tourists paused to stare. He grabbed the arm of one of his daughters and yanked. The little girls went silent, chastened, but it was Martha's reaction that I noticed. She'd flinched. The angles of her face had hardened. I saw the way she'd stiffened all over.

“You okay?” I asked her.

She nodded, but her jaw didn’t unclench.

As we followed Connor out of the Villa, Martha touched my arm to stop me. Mr. Gooley had an announcement for us. He cleared his throat and spoke. Instead of going for lunch as planned in our tour package, the Goolseys would be heading back to Rome early. Mrs. Gooley wasn’t feeling well.

“We don’t want to spoil your fun, though,” Mr. Gooley added, knitting his shaggy brows. He and Mrs. Gooley both had mirthless, Old World faces, so it was improbable to think of them in any proximity to the word *fun*: laughing at a little table with a white tablecloth, passing bread and olive oil, drinking aperitivos. I couldn’t even imagine it.

I shook my head.

“It’s okay, really. I’m not so hungry. We can all head back together.”

I dreaded the thought of the forced conversation with Connor if we had to ride in the van alone. A wild and inexplicable panic was also rising in me at the thought of Paul, whom I’d left without a clue to my whereabouts. But he hated me, I reminded myself. He would be fine.

“Please,” I said. “It’s okay.” I smiled at both the Gooley parents in a way I imagined to be earnest and appealing. “Martha and I have had such a nice time. It’d be lovely to have the drive to chat more.”

I smiled weakly at them, realizing the truth of my own words: I *did* like Martha. It felt simple and reassuring to talk to her. To take a brief reprieve from Rome, with its constant horns and sirens, the frenzy of traffic and majesty. I was not yet ready to take leave of Martha, but there was something else I felt—a sense of protectiveness. Mrs. Gooley rested one hand on the curve of her abdomen, where I could envision the baby floating peacefully. She had to be fifty at least, I thought, the good Mrs. Gooley. I wondered about the magnitude of the miracle this baby required.

I looked to Martha, thinking I might see gratitude in her face. I believed that I offered her something fresh, a vision of life outside the stultifying duty and discipline of life as a Gooley daughter.

Martha wouldn't look at me. She held a bit of her long skirt in one hand and twisted it. She bit her lip, glancing at her father.

Mr. Gooley shook his head.

"No," he said. "You're very kind, but we must be getting back. You've paid for the tour. You should get your money's worth. I've already hired another van."

I laughed a nervous laugh. The whites of Mrs. Gooley's eyes looked yellowish, her face almost gray in the strong sunlight.

"Please," I said. "I don't mind at all. It's okay, isn't it, Connor?"

Our tour guide lifted his hands in a helpless gesture.

"I'm sure Martha agrees. Don't you, Martha?"

I was uncertain why this direct appeal felt so important, why I was making myself such a fool.

"No," Martha said softly.

She still wouldn't meet my eyes. Mrs. Gooley knelt then, slow, like a hot-air balloon on its descent. She vomited quietly, and the dirt darkened and ran sour with bile.

I hurried over and knelt beside her. Everyone else seemed paralyzed, unsure what to do.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Let me help you up."

She touched the back of her hand to her mouth and then wiped her lips. Our backs were to the others, offering us some semblance of privacy. Mrs. Gooley stood up carefully, refusing the arm I offered her, then turned to face her husband and daughters again.

"I'm so sorry," I said to Mrs. Gooley. "About the baby."

Her face jerked up then, the cords in her neck tightening hideously. Her hair was dry and sparse, thinning at the center part. When she looked at me, her lips peeled back into a grimace.

"I know what it looks like," she said, shaking her head, still cradling the heft of her belly. "But there is no baby."

I turned to Connor now, trying to meet his eyes, to find someone who would witness and affirm my bewilderment.

The Gooley girls lined up like doleful ducklings, Martha included. I watched the way their expressions shuttered and went blank. They wore now, down to the tiniest girl, perfectly unperturbed masks of docile stoicism.

Mr. Gooley heaved out a great sigh, leaning down and offering his wife an arm. His knees clicked as he helped her to her feet, handing her a white handkerchief to dab at her mouth.

“Mrs. Gooley has liver cancer,” he said to me, his voice flat. “It causes fluid in the abdomen.”

He wheeled around with more grace than I expected from a large man, and the rest of the Gooleys followed him. I watched them go with a swishing of skirts, Martha at the end. She turned to me for a quick moment and her face briefly opened before closing again, completely. Her eyes flashed a warning to me, and I thought I understood then what she’d meant about a baby. A hideous prickling sensation ran down my spine. I almost called out for her to wait, to come with me, to run away from her poor, sour mother, great with tumor, and her father, the patriarch. But I couldn’t have been sure. I feared being wrong. I watched Martha recede, and said nothing. The Gooleys filed neatly behind a line of parked vans and buses, then disappeared.

Connor and I got sandwiches and sodas from a little tourist stand on our way out of town instead of lingering. We both ate while he drove, and then I fell asleep. When he shook me awake, I thought I saw relief on his face. Perhaps I really was the unbearable one. I’d behaved awfully with Paul. I had to make amends.

It was late enough in the day that small clusters of weary backpackers were leaning against the walls near the reception desk inside, waiting to check in. One of them, a sunburnt boy with blond hair and a sprinkling of acne on his chin, nodded at me. I hurried past him, up the stairs and down the hallway,

to our room. My hand was shaking as I worked the key into the door. I was breathless when I entered, ready to face Paul. To apologize.

His bed was neatly made, the sheets pulled tight and crisp under a shaft of afternoon sun. My pack slumped against the bed, next to the Japanese girl's. Paul's belongings were gone.

There was a torn bit of paper on my pillow with a hastily scrawled note: he had changed his flight.

I sank onto my bed, the golden yellow light of the Roman late afternoon washing over me. I closed my eyes.

What I'd shown Paul, in my cruelty, in my desperation to calm and absolve him, had really just been sleight of hand. I'd cut myself—the dumb, soft meat of my inner thigh. I'd transferred the blood.

The truth was that my little plastic clamshell of pills sat on my dresser back home, along with the floss I'd also meant to bring but had forgotten.

Rising, I opened the window and looked out onto the street below. A man was pushing his bicycle up the sidewalk and a group of girls in tank tops coaxed along a nervous little dog on its leash. Bells were ringing from a campanile in the distance. Martha and her family were somewhere in the city, maybe saying grace before a quiet supper. Elsewhere, across an ocean, lay Paul's mother in her hospital bed. Two pigeons landed on the windowsill, heads bobbing as if to better appraise me. Brushing them away, I stuck my own head out a bit farther. At the end of the block, a small crowd had gathered to watch a fire-eater. She tipped back and opened her mouth wide to extinguish the flame, making it look effortless—an everyday sort of miracle.