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Full Immersion

Miranda smoothed the edges of the Florence city map against the café table, humming as she went, and then folded it neatly into its original condition. Even with the bus fiasco, she had found her way to Gianni's building entirely on her own. She had done it.

"Enough," Gianni said, across from her. He clanked his espresso cup onto its saucer.

"Enough what?" Miranda blinked.

"Enough with the humming. We are sharing this space with other humans, you know." He sketched a circle in the air with the side of his palm, suggesting the café around them. Miranda shifted the weight of the backpack in her lap. Her toes throbbed in her pointy boots. Since when did he mind her humming? She waved the waiter over, plaintive: a glass of water, *per favore*.

Gianni was always exhorting her to learn to navigate the city, his city, beyond the cafés and bars frequented by American undergraduates, her classmates. She had met him in one of those bars two months before. "She won't come to you," he had said the morning after their first night together, gesturing toward the window with his cigarette, the famous bronze-tipped dome and red roofs and loggias beyond. Shirt over his naked lap, elbows on the sill, he tapped ash out her kitchen window into the courtyard below. A gap-toothed handsome; wavy hair and everything. He suggested that this getting-to-know-the-city was something she should do on her own, as a point of pride.

Yet he had left her no time for exploring solo. Not that she was complaining, exactly. When she wasn't in lectures or studying or drinking in nearby bars with her classmates, she was with him—the rides on the back of his scooter, the impromptu dinners in her tiny kitchen, the legs tangled together in her twin bed. His own building

was under construction, he said, and running months behind schedule; jackhammers all morning and rubble everywhere. So he met her outside her classroom building, in museum lobbies, at her apartment door. He always came to her. But, nearly two months in, she itched for more. To see him in the context of his life. Full immersion.

Well, here she was, in the café on the ground floor of his apartment building. He had come down right away when she buzzed his apartment. He'd never looked unhappy to see her, till then.

Gianni turned the empty cup, first one way, then the other, like a stuck key.

"How did you find the address?" he said.

"I used a phone book." She snapped the plastic case closed, map inside, and set it on the café table between them. Gianni had lent it to her weeks ago, but she had barely used it. She had never breached the borders of the city center till this afternoon. Gianni prodded the map with a finger and said nothing. Then he picked it up and slid it into the pocket of his coat.

"Can't I come up?" she said. She brushed his knuckles with the back of her hand.

"It's not the best time. I've got a deadline tonight."

Deadline was a word he had never uttered before in her presence. She wondered how you said it in Italian. "But I came all this way. Can't I just see where you live? I don't care about the construction dust. I won't stay long. I promise."

They rode a small elevator to the fifth floor. It was hard to make out Gianni's face, with only a skylight overhead, but when he turned to her she thought she saw his lower lip quiver. She stretched out a consoling hand but he regarded it, suddenly, with such malice that she snatched it away from his arm. What was wrong with him?

He knocked twice, paused for a moment, and opened the door.

There was a woman standing there, just beyond the threshold. She touched the knot in the scarf at her neck and then held out her hand. "Oscarina," she said. She was tall and pointy-nosed, with perfectly sculpted eyebrows and a silver wave that crested over an eyebrow and swept behind an ear. And there, in an angelic ray of late November sun, a revelation: Gianni's mouth. Gianni's cheekbones.

"And you must be Gianni's autumn secret," she said to Miranda.

She gave Miranda a puckered smile and a conspiring look. She removed her reading glasses, bent forward a little, toward Miranda, seeming to peer at the ground. "Bellissimi," she said. It was true: Miranda's boots were beautiful.

"Gianni bought them for me." She twirled once and laughed. She was pretty sure she had formed the sentence in correct Italian.

Gianni's mother clapped her hands together.

"Welcome," she said. "Welcome." She pressed Miranda onto a deep-green tongue of sofa that glowed, gem-like, before a vast window. The room around them was filled with shelves, floor to ceiling. Someone had arranged the books by color. "Stay for dinner," said Oscarina. Gianni explained that Miranda had to go home to study for an exam. But Oscarina refused to take no for an answer. She instructed Gianni to get chicken breasts—if Paolo's was already closed, then go to the Esselunga; in her opinion, for buying meat, the one on via Giuseppe was worth the extra walk.

Miranda stood, offered to go with him. Gianni, glowering, stalked out the door without a glance in her direction. She cleared her throat and sat.

Oscarina spoke a hesitant but beautiful English, in a voice that cascaded like a gently chiming bell. She handed Miranda a tumbler of garnet-colored wine and asked about her studies, her family back home, what she had seen so far of Italy.

"I prefer Florence," said Miranda. (Sure, her classmates had long since rail-passed to Rome, to Venice, even to Prague. But she had Gianni.) Miranda told her about the expedition to the apartment. Her bus had been tapped by a car on the Piazza San Jacopino, everyone out and onto a second bus—rerouted, it turned out—so she had walked a long way south after disembarking. And she hadn't gotten lost, not even once! Oscarina beamed at her, hearing of the adventure.

Three months in Florence, and here she was at last, in a real Italian apartment full of books, wearing her gorgeous Italian boots, sipping wine. She willed herself to sit straight, though what she wished for, really, was to sink into the ocean of eggplant-hued rug, knees first, then palms, then arms, then forehead, and to drift off into heavenly sleep. Gianni appeared with the chicken, slamming the front door behind him, and marched it into the kitchen. Miranda drifted in after him.

Where was the fucking knife, the good one? he muttered. Miranda asked for something to chop vegetables with and he flung open a drawer for her. She stood next to him at the counter and they worked in silence.

"Your mother is so lovely," she said, at last. "This is the most amazing apartment." It only now dawned on her that she hadn't seen a single hint of renovations-in-progress—no banging hammers, no cursing workmen.

No. Of course not. There was no construction. Gianni lived with his mother and he hadn't wanted Miranda to know. *You could have told me*, she thought. It wouldn't have mattered. Would it? Gianni, always gorgeous, in his expensive jeans and blazers. A vaguely described job at some sort of arts foundation. She had guessed him to be in his early thirties: a real boyfriend, an Italian boyfriend. A grown-up. "Gianni's autumn secret," his mother had said, and smiled. Miranda's cheeks prickled with warmth now to think of it. *You liar*. She almost said it out loud. "Hey," she said instead, into the jagged silence, "are you okay?"

"It's very normal," Gianni said, turning, looking her in the eye for probably the first time since they had set foot in the apartment—his mother's apartment. The tip of his nose was red, and then his whole face. "Many generations live together. The housing market is atrocious. You know nothing of Italian culture."

He looked away again before she had fully absorbed the ferocity of his proclamation. She had been filled with cooling lead; her hands and her legs and her tongue weighed a thousand pounds. *You know nothing*. He was right.

"My mother will be too polite to say it, but you shouldn't stick around, after we eat," he said now. "I'll drive you to your apartment."

"I made it here." She jerked the knife into a thicket of celery. "I can make it back on my own."

He shook his head in one furious burst. "My mother will insist. Just remember," he said, not looking at her, not turning toward her, "you're the one who did this. There's no one to blame but you."

She could feel Gianni's cutting motion next to her, rippling his body. Chicken prepared, he was now attacking a fat, speckled squash. His left hand pinned the stem and his right hand sawed away. She was so close that an errant move on her part might send the pumpkin spinning, the knife angling toward flesh. His flesh. An accident. She tested her right elbow, once, twice, like a bird contemplating liftoff.

"Watch your elbow," he said. "I nearly lost my grip." He moved to the far side of the sink.

She resumed slicing. *Be a big girl.* That's what he had said in her tiny kitchen, impish, grinning, the morning after their first night together, goading her to venture out into the city on her own. *She won't come to you.* But he had come to her. Again and again. She had never taken a bus in Florence on her own, until today.

She took a breath now. Chop, chop, chop. Funny how the heart was a thing you could set in front of you and watch, pumping slowly, if you concentrated hard enough. The celery crescents fell across the cutting board like dominoes.

The knife was sharp, so it didn't hurt too badly when the blade bit into her thumb. But there was blood everywhere.

Oscarina cleaned and bandaged Miranda's wound herself, frowning and fussing. Poor thing, she said, and shooed away Miranda's gratitude. At last they ate dinner, the three of them, in the small but perfect dining room. Everything was delicious.

"No buses for the convalescing patient," said Oscarina, waving a friendly fork in Miranda's direction. "Gianni will take you home on his scooter."

Miranda asked if she could help with the dishes, but Oscarina refused. She told Miranda it was so nice to meet her; she cupped Mirandas hands in hers and squeezed, gently. *Tante belle cose,* she told her. Good luck with everything.

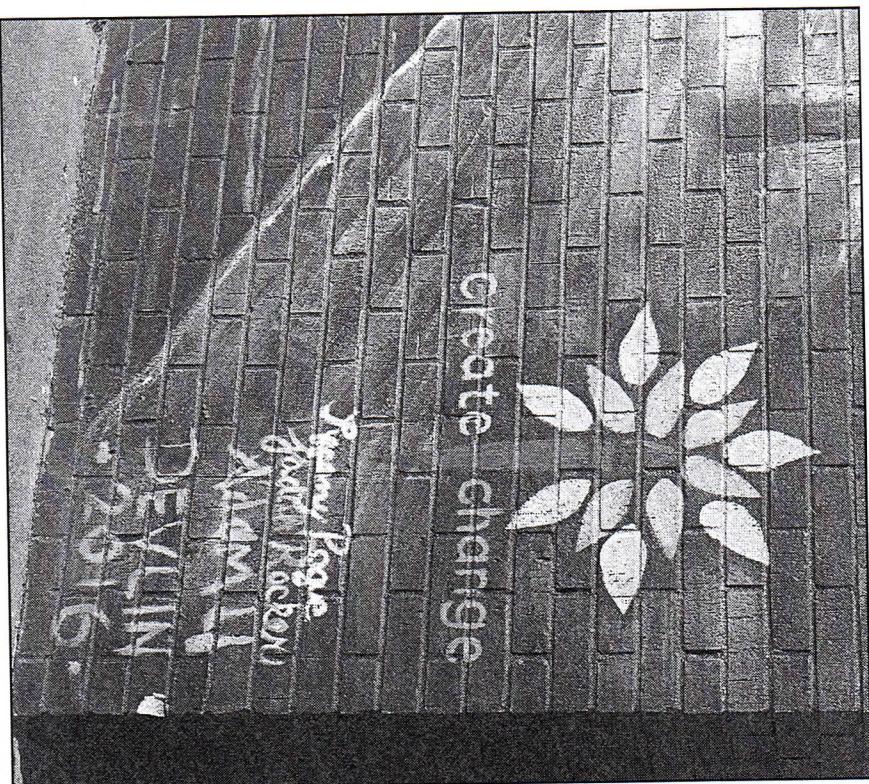
At the door, Miranda took a long, last look at the apartment.

Families strolled along the sidewalk, illuminated by streetlamps; mopeds and cars zoomed past. As they approached the corner Gianni realized he had forgotten his wallet. He told Miranda to wait there.

She obeyed. She pressed her forehead lightly to a shop window, her eyes grazing a display of notebooks and pens, half-watching her own reflection. She was dissolving, an over-exposed photograph. Her finger ached where she had sliced it open. The blood had seeped through the gauze and dried, and every move of her finger risked opening the fissure again. But what did it matter? The blood, a sign that she had been here; a rusty blot on a map. Any minute, Gianni would appear in the reflection, behind her. She felt like throwing up.

She turned left, away from Gianni's building, and walked quickly. She came to the end of the block, turned right, then left. She thought, at first, she was moving in the direction of the city center but the longer she walked, the less sure she became. She could ask someone for help if she needed it. She could hail a cab if she wanted. It wasn't a test—not anymore; she didn't have to take two buses home.

Shuttered stores, the shadowed hint of a large park down the street, the blinking lights of a traffic circle beyond. The strike of her boot heels against the pavement sent judders up her legs, her spine, like ice cracking. Her legs, kicking against vast waters; Miranda alone in Florence in the damp November dark. She walked until her pinched toes were aflame and then, after a while, she didn't even feel them anymore.



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