

*She Said Yes*

“Dad, you won’t believe it—I ran into this old friend from college today and her daughter is on the island.”

“By herself?”

“Yeah, by herself. She’s in college at NYU and she’s taking an extra week to travel in Europe after finishing her study abroad program. I think she was in Croatia but now I forget. Anyway, I gave her your number. Her mother, I mean. I told her that her daughter could call you.”

How strange, Victor thinks as he holds the phone to his ear and cuts another piece of pecorino from the large hunk sitting on the TV tray. When he was young, women never traveled alone. What would make someone that age want to come to Ischia of all places?

“Dad, are you there?”

“Yes, *dolcezza*.”

“It would be good for both of you. She gets a tour and you get to get out of the house.”

“I do get out of the house.”

“You know what I mean.”

He does but she doesn’t understand. Neither of his children does. “I’m looking forward to meeting her.”

“Great! Got to go. I have a meeting in a few—I’ll call later this week.”

He holds the phone the way he used to hold his daughter’s hand before letting it drop to his side. He takes a small sip of wine and cuts another piece of cheese. He mostly eats cheese for dinner now. Cheese and an occasional glass of wine. He knows how to cook a few things but there is such sadness in the ritual.

He wraps up the pecorino in a cloth napkin and places it in the refrigerator next to the *paccheri* he prepared a few days ago but couldn’t bring himself to eat. He wipes down the counter and washes the plate and the glass. Should he take his evening walk near the lake or down by the beach? Maybe he will admire the yachts in Cassamiocola Bay. He has almost made a decision when the phone rings again.

The girl’s name is Erica. She is short, blond, and speaks with an excited Texas accent. In the time it takes to pick her up from her hotel and drive her to the bay, he learns that she is a fashion merchandising major, she has three sisters, she hates pork, and doesn’t know what a spritz is.

White wine and seltzer?

No, no, he says. Aperol. It needs to have an orange slice and an olive.

Gross, she says and makes a face as though she's just tasted it.

I will take you to a place.

She starts to tell him about the food in Croatia. He has forgotten how much American women talk. Still, it is nice to have company. Usually, he goes out alone at this time, picking a different place on the island to eat a gelato or drink an espresso before heading to bed. The island comes alive when it gets dark. The air turns cool, coaxing people out of their houses and onto boardwalks, beaches, and cafes. Children exert the last of their energy chasing each other while their parents sip cocktails at nearby tables. Older couples perambulate about on the sidewalks the way pigeons and gulls do. All around are sounds of silverware, laughter, and waves.

This is so pretty, she smiles and he realizes how long it's been since he was in the presence of a young woman who was genuinely happy.

He insists on buying her a pistachio gelato while he delivers a history lesson of the island. Did she know that Emperor Augustus took Ischia in exchange for Capri? That the Romans used to travel here to rejuvenate themselves in the hot springs? That Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton stayed in *that* hotel while filming *Cleopatra*?

She throws her empty gelato cup in her trash, and he realizes he must have been speaking for a long time. I've forgotten my manners, he says. I'm sure you don't want a lecture from an old man.

No, it's really interesting actually, she insists, but he can't tell if she is humoring him.

How old is she, he thinks. Every woman is young now: he's become too old to judge to discriminate between their ages. He clasps his hands behind his back and looks ahead.

None of my friends have even heard of this place, she adds in her obviously loud American voice. They are like, where are you, and I'm like, in Italy!

It's true, he thinks. When he arrived in New York at eighteen years old, eager to work and hungry for success, everyone thought he was from Greece. The Americans couldn't understand his English and the Italians thought he had a funny accent when he spoke his native language.

This is *Il Fungo*, he points to the giant mushroom rock protruding out of the water. It is the pride of the island.

She asks why and he explains that it is very unique. It is what the Italians call *bellissimo*.

It's just a rock, she shrugs. That can't be all there is to it.

Does there need to be more, he wonders.

The waves lap up against the boardwalk and the boats. A light turn on in a docked yacht and the shadow of a woman walks to the railing and pops the cork of a bottle of prosecco. It launches into the air like a tiny cannonball and disappears into the water.

That's disgusting, Erica huffs.

The sea, the sea, Victor thinks.

"So what brings you to Ischia?" Victor asks Erica as they enter the restaurant's garden. Obscured by lemon trees and blooming bushes, the place is only visible from the street by the soft glow of garden lanterns suspended over the tables like tiny moons. Men talk in hushed tones while the women mostly smoke. Everyone is drinking something caffeinated or alcoholic.

"I wanted to go somewhere different. Everyone told me to go to Capri or Positano but it was so expensive. Ischia is cheaper because only Italians and Germans vacation here."

"And the Japanese."

"Sure. Pretty much anywhere the Americans or British go is going to be more expensive."

A waiter seats them at an outdoor table Victor specifies. "Is there a band tonight?" Victor asks him in Italian.

"On Thursdays and Saturdays."

"You used to have a band every night."

"I've worked here for five years. It's always been Thursdays and Saturdays." It is only then that Victor notices the American pop music blaring through the speakers.

Victor orders them two spritzs. He can tell by the way Erica hands her menu to waiter that she is not used to being ordered for. He asks if she would like something else instead.

"No, that's fine," she says. "I've never had one of those."

Being in charge feels very good. "This place," he gestures widely to the overgrown foliage surrounding the little bar with its dessert counter in the back, "Was my wife's favorite place to come when we started dating. She was the one to suggest it for our first date."

"When was that?"

"May 4, 1956."

"You remember the actual day?"

“It was a Friday and she was wearing a red dress and a flower in her hair. One of those flowers”—he points to the camellia flowers blooming behind her—“I knew she liked me because she wore lipstick.”

“Lipstick?”

“Red too. I’d never seen Anna wear make-up before that night. Of course, she didn’t need to wear any. She was very beautiful, like the saint she was named after. The patron saint of the Ponte.”

“Where did you sit?” she presses him, leaning in and folding her arms on the table.

“Here.” He pats the table with pride. “This was the table. Or at least the spot where the table we sat at used to be.”

“That’s crazy that you remember all that. My boyfriend, Bryant”—(she pronounces a staccato *l*)—“can barely keep track of our anniversary.”

“How long have you been dating?”

“Two years.” She pauses, then adds, “He’s a bio-chem major.”

A baby, he thinks. Their spritzes come and Victor makes a small toast, “To your travels and youth.” He takes a sip.

She does not. Instead, cupping her glass with both hands the way a priest does a chalice at a Eucharist, she asks, “How long ago did your wife die?”

He closes his eyes. She is the first to say to him ‘wife’ and ‘die’ in the same sentence. “Eight months ago.”

“And you both grew up here? You both lived here your whole lives?”

“We both grew up here, yes. But we spent most of our lives in America. Brooklyn.” He takes another sip. “I planted an olive tree there forty years ago, corner of Henry and President. I hope the people we sold the brownstone to do something with the olives.” Her eyes go still. He realizes he is staring past them. “We—I—only came back here a year ago. She—Anna—was very sick.”

She finally takes a sip of her drink.

He wants her to enjoy it.

“It tastes like oranges.” With her teeth, she pulls the olive off of the cocktail stirrer and discards it on the cocktail napkin. “I like this island. I like the way that it smells of lemons.”

“We are famous for our lemons. Lemons, oranges, and olives. Also, wine. Have you had the wine yet?”

“No, not yet.”

“You must try it while you are here. Actually, you should try the wine of every place you go. It helps you remember the land.”

“Italians are obsessed with food and wine.”

“It is who we are.”

Suddenly, the tinny music cuts out. A man takes the stage and introduces himself as the entertainment for the evening. Victor flags the waiter.

“I thought you said the music was only on Thursdays and Saturdays.”

“Today is Thursday.”

This surprises Victor. What day was he expecting it to be?

“Do you dance?” Erica asks him.

“I used to dance,” he says, thinking about memories he knows he has but are muddled by time and pain. “My wife is—was—an excellent dancer. She knew all the dances, all the songs. People used to watch her dance, she had such grace.”

“I learned to fox trot in cotillion. That’s about it.”

Victor does not know what a fox trot is. He looks at the paired off couples, swaying sloppily, occasionally spinning their partners in arrhythmic time. The next song is faster, more upbeat, as if it is encouraging this poor display of human choreography.

“Do you know the tarantella?”

Erica takes an American-sized sip of her drink, “Tarantula?”

“No. *Tarantella*. I will show you.” He grabs her hands. She is embarrassed, he knows, and to keep from feeling foolish himself, he drags her to the middle of the dance floor where she cannot escape. With his hands on his hips, he taps his left foot, then his right, back and forth. She tries to mimic him but trips on her first try. She laughs and tries again.

No grace, he thinks. Women these days have no grace.

He parks the Fiat 500 in a space overlooking the cliff. A behemoth, domed rock is illuminated in the distance by store and street lights that circle its base. “I want you to see St. Angelo before I drop you off. It has the best square in all of the island.”

“I’ve read about it on the ferry. It’s the ancient fishing village.”

“Yes. At the end of September there is a big feast day for the Saint Michael. The people of this town—many of them are still fisherman—march in a procession with a statue of the saint. One

of the last things I did with Anna was go to this festival. There were fireworks—more fireworks than there are in the East River on Fourth of July—and so much music. She couldn't dance but we sat in a café listening to all the other people dancing and singing and rejoicing.”

They are walking briskly down the hill now, towards the tiny village encircling the volcanic rock that juts up from the ocean. “Right there,” he points to jetties in the cove they are walking alongside, “Right there was where I proposed.”

His heart is in sync with the waves lapping the shore below them.

“How did you propose?”

“How did I propose.”

“You mean, you remember the first date, but not the proposal?”

Victor stops and grabs the rail with both hands. “I can't believe I forgot.”

“So you did forget,” she teases.

“No,” he waves his hand. “Just a detail—as soon as I asked her, lightning hit the water. She screamed and nearly fell over the edge.” He points to the sky and drags his finger through it as if he is cutting it in two.

She wrinkles her face like he is telling a tale that only grandparents can get away with, “Lightning struck and she almost fell to her death?”

Victor rubs the back of his neck and closes his eyes, “We've always told the story about her nearly falling over. I don't know how I forgot about the lightning.”

Erica begins to balance on one foot like a stork, trying to pick gravel out from between her sandaled toes. Little and blond and nothing like his wife. Yet, Anna was about her age when his life began to happen. When he stopped being Vic to his friends and became Victor Buono, husband to Anna Buono, the prettiest girl on the island that made him rabbit in Brooklyn the way he'd eaten as a boy and sang his favorite song, ‘Santa Lucia,’ to his children before bed. To be here, in this twinkling, magical place of a distant life, with this very young girl that could just as well be his granddaughter, felt bizarre, invigorating. He could see his wife's face for the first time in years, the way it looked when he'd first fallen in love. The chestnut brown hair that matched her eyes, the skin the color of fresh baked bread, the slow smile that was more than anyone was expecting. The face that only grew into the loveliness of the person he'd been lucky enough to know. He would never know love like that again, but he would be all right. To recall, to feel, his life with her the way he felt it now—to know joy without the details—was more than he could have ever hoped for in all the years and months he'd watched his wife slip away from him like the waves below being pulled back

into the sea. He could never show that life to another person. He could never explain it. Anna had left him, and now he was the keeper of the keys to their story. All the secrets of it would die with him.

“Why did you leave Brooklyn when she was so sick?” Erica asks. The wind had begun to pick up and swirl her hair around her face.

Victor knows what she is implying: Ischia is a quaint island that boasts so-called ‘healing’ waters and outmoded religious festivals, while New York has the best hospitals, the visiting nurse services, and the twenty-four hour food and medicine deliveries. He looks out at the blood orange horizon that will soon turn into a bruised sky. “I wanted her to remember. She’d forgotten our daughter and our son. How to get from the corner store on Court Street back to our home around the block. What pasta is, who the neighbors were. I once found her trying to drink water from the shower. The olive tree I planted—I brought all the way from her father’s garden for her. It is probably the only olive tree in Brooklyn. And she forgot it too. I thought if I took her back here, to Ischia, she would at least stop forgetting.”

“Did she?” Erica asks after some time passes. They’d reached the square where there were only a few open seafood restaurants and clothing stores. Along the cobblestone street, skinny cats were lounging on rocks like lazy guards, basking in the fluorescent glow of the street lamps that force pedestrians to stand in awe of the massive volcanic rock towering above them.

Victor looks at the ground.

“On that night—the one celebrating Saint Michael—we sat out here for a very long time. The rainy season doesn’t start here until October but around ten o’clock or so, we started to feel drops come down. People began to clear off the tables and the chairs and the umbrellas, but I kept our seats because she seemed content. A few minutes passed and then the sky started flashing. I have never seen a sky like that. ‘Come on, Anna, I told her, we have to go.’ Then there was this loud boom, thunder that sounded like a bomb going off, and that’s when I took her hand. ‘Will you?’ I asked her.”

The waves crash up against the rocks and the cats move to higher ground. The wind grabs the back of Erica’s shirt, and she folds her arms to become more compact.

“She had this big smile on her face and I thought she didn’t understand so I repeated the question. I took her hands and I asked her, ‘Will you, Anna, will you?’”

“What did she say?” Erica yells over the wind.

Victor can feel the story choking him. How had he not realized it at the time?

“Yes. She said *yes*.”