

The Wait

I don't look suspicious.

This is what I tell myself as I scrape the last of the milk foam from the bottom of the small white cup. It wobbles on the little spoon as I bring it to my mouth. The taste is sweet with a hint of bitterness that hits me at the finish. The coffee here isn't great, but I don't mind. I'm not really here for the coffee.

I wonder what the residents of this small Italian town think of me. For the past two weeks I have visited this same sidewalk cafe every day. I sit by myself for the same two late afternoon hours, always at the same table, or if that table is taken, the one next to it. Always facing the same direction. Anyone who noticed this pattern would probably chalk it up to a harmless routine. They wouldn't realize that I always maintain an unobstructed view of the door across the narrow lane.

“Can I get you anything else, *signorina*?”

I smile up at Paolo and think, not for the first time, that he must know. With one simple question, I might put an end to all this waiting. The idea is exhilarating for about two seconds, until fear clamps back down.

“No, *grazie*.”

I had espresso machines installed in Symbal's employee kitchens because they reminded me of Rome. The problem was, no one knew how to use them, so they constantly clogged and spewed coffee-scented sludge all over the minimalist office

decor. Plus the suppliers could never find the right little ceramic cups and saucers. Eventually the machines had to be removed and replaced with Keurigs in what felt like a deeply personal defeat.

But that was just a ripple compared to the tsunami that came later.

On the night of the lavish party that we threw to celebrate our IPO, I remember I was trying to make conversation with the venture capital guys who'd invested early and thus felt like they owned the place.

“Preston has done brilliant job positioning the company,” one of them said to me.

I considered reminding him that I was Symbal's co-founder. And that while my husband spent his days glad-handing musicians and leveraging his father's connections into meetings with big label executives, I was the one who had “positioned” the company. It was my idea. I'd led the market analysis, written the business plan, done all the hiring, dealt with the lawyers, spent late nights reviewing UI specs with the engineers, and put in over 80 hours nearly every week for the last seven years.

But I didn't say any of that. Instead, I flashed a smile over my champagne flute. It was a nonthreatening smile that displayed cheerful acquiescence. I had perfected it.

“Sonia?”

I turned to find Tessa at my shoulder with an iPad tucked under her arm and a worried look on her face. I excused myself from the cluster of investors with an

awkward little bow, then followed her to the edge of the roof terrace where a stage had been set up.

“Preston was scheduled to start his speech five minutes ago,” she said in a low murmur.

I set my jaw and nodded. “I’ll find him.” I downed the last of my champagne too fast and cringed as the bubbles climbed up my nasal passages. I decided to check his office first. It was just one floor down.

The door that I’m always covertly watching is nondescript. Brown, wooden. No whimsical knocker, no carved embellishments. Just the number 35 written with blue glaze on a tile at eye level.

On the first day I walked straight up to the door and knocked. When nothing happened, I scanned the names etched into bronze plates on the wall. The bottom name on the right made me catch my breath. I pressed the shiny button next to it.

No response. I tried again, holding the button down longer. Still nothing. After the fourth try, I became aware of the people walking past. Of the security camera pointing down at me. Of how odd I must look, lingering there on the doorstep.

Later it occurred to me that I could have pressed one of the other buttons and used my hobbled Italian to inquire after the man in apartment 12. But I didn’t do that. And I have not been back to the door since.

If I hadn't seen Tammy's face at the exact moment she'd shut his office door behind her, if her eyes hadn't met mine, if I hadn't seen that mix of anger and shame, I might not have believed the report. I might have sided with my husband, the man I thought I knew. My charming, unconventionally handsome business school beau. Never the hardest worker, but always the smoothest talker. The most ambitious. The man I could hook my dreams onto, who could guide me through his world of connections and networking and late-night cigars. A world of which I was ignorant, and to which I was, it turned out, uninvited.

But Tammy's look said everything. It said: He has ruined both our lives.

*Tammy Ma, executive assistant of the music-streaming giant Symbal's founder and CEO, Preston Michaels, pressed charges today against her former boss for sexually assaulting her in his office on the night the company announced its initial public offering.*

I'm still upset that NPR didn't call Preston a co-founder. I know it's ridiculous.

The fallout of the scandal was swift and predictable. The board of directors called me in and explained that it wouldn't make sense for me to stay on after Preston stepped down. The optics weren't good. It would be best if I took a step back. And by 'back' they meant far, far away. I could have fought them, but I was hobbled from secondhand shame. So I gritted my teeth and did what I was told.

Publicly I expressed my deepest sympathies for Tammy, and for the other women who lined up to tell their stories in a parade of horrors that kept me awake for three solid months. Privately I did feel sorry for them, but it went farther than that. Their stories haunted me. I endlessly recreated the lurid encounters they

described, substituting my body for theirs. My husband's hands, those hands he'd touched me with, that I'd found such comfort in—transformed to the hands of an abuser. Of a rapist.

Preston and I never discussed the allegations. We made our statements to the press and to our lawyers. I moved into an Airbnb on the night the news broke and sent movers to get my things and put them in storage.

His perfectly-worded apology letter, handwritten on beautiful off-white stationary, arrived at the Airbnb exactly two weeks later. He said he was sorry, and he knew he had a problem, and would get help. And he hoped that, one day, we could be friends again.

I read the letter three times in rapid succession, then unraveled into a tangled clump of nerves on the floor of the tastefully furnished SOMA high rise apartment. I cried, then screamed, then scream-cried for hours. It is a wonder the police weren't called. When I woke up and dragged myself to the kitchen in the morning, I found the letter lying on the counter where I'd left it.

First I thought I'd burn it. But, worried about the smoke alarm in the Airbnb, I tore into tiny pieces instead. I considered throwing those out the window, but thought better of littering and simply swept them into the recycling bin.

It wasn't particularly cathartic.

The building across the street is the color of a raw egg yolk. The windows are surrounded by green shutters and matching flower boxes that overflow with pink

geraniums, dangling ivy, and spiky rosemary. Varnish peels from the window frames, but it only makes the building look more elegant, like those effortless women who evoke goddesses in old t-shirts and faded jeans. I was never one of those women. Effort has been the central theme of my life.

I shift in the metal cafe chair and wonder if I should order something else. Late afternoon light glows gold across chipped stucco, signaling the hour to switch from coffee to wine. The town is abuzz as the tide of humanity shifts from work to home. Bicycles rattle across flat, square cobblestones arranged in imprecise rows. Locks click and wooden shutters bang open.

I hear the door open and my head snaps up. I have attuned myself to the sound of the latch, like a dog to its whistle. My heartbeat spikes, sending bright fractals of terror into my limbs. Framed in the doorway, I see the back of a long cotton dress the color of marigolds. My heart sinks back down into its hole as a young woman props the door open with her hip and pulls a stroller across the threshold. She swings the cumbersome hunk of plastic around, then lets the door swing shut. The infant hidden somewhere inside starts to scream.

Maybe there's no such thing as an effortless woman.

On the last day before all the passcodes were changed and my accounts deleted, I sat in my ergonomic desk chair and gazed out at my coveted bay view for the last time. Container ships the length of city blocks crept through the low-lying fog. The water shimmered silvery amber, the color of marine layer and slanting sunlight.

Absolutely no blue at all.

I tapped my fingers nervously on my desk. My frazzled nerves had forgotten how to be still. This was the first moment I had paused in weeks, and for the first time in seven years I had nothing left on my agenda. Suddenly I realized that I had no idea what came next. My colleagues were no longer my colleagues. All my friends were his friends. My family was in Ohio.

As the yawning abyss of my future revealed itself, I flailed out for a handhold. My hands found the computer keys, and I typed his name.

The tables around me are starting to fill with couples and groups of teenagers ordering their first evening drink. I should leave. A glass of wine will do nothing to improve my mood. I am about to grab my purse and stand up when I hear a familiar high-pitched jingle paired with short, wheezy breaths. I look down at my feet and see Bruno.

*Ciao bello*, I say to the chunky bulldog, leaning over to pat the loose skin around his ears. Then I look up at the *nonna* who walks past my table every day. I do not know her name, and she does not know mine, but the fact that we both know Bruno's seems to be enough.

*"Buongiorno, signora."* My Italian is flat and clunky from decades of neglect.

*"Buongiorno,"* she replies, graciously ignoring the way I brutalize her language. She's wearing an almond-colored skirt and a white linen blouse. *"Tutto bene?"*

*"Si, tutto bene,"* I lie.

Did I mention that she lives in the building across the street?

Rome, Fall Semester, 1999. I think of it as the last carefree time in my life. I must have attended classes, but I don't remember a thing about them. What I do remember were the huge chunks of whole days where nothing was expected of me. That was something new. Confusing at first, but I learned to embrace my freedom. I wandered the wide *stradas* and narrow alleys, snapping photos of laundry drying on lines between windows and *nonnos* sipping grappa in shady piazzas. I wanted desperately to feel like I belonged in that beautiful, profoundly old city. But I felt detached from the place and its people, as if they were all behind glass. Or I was.

One night I tagged along with some other Americans—all hipper more fun than I was—to a rock show in the cantina of an osteria in the cool part of town across the river. The dark-featured lead guitarist captured my nineteen-year-old heart and imagination with his first chord strum. He wore the confidence of someone with the freedom to choose whether or not to belong.

After the show I sipped red wine at the bar and waited for him to notice me. He didn't. At the next show I struck up the courage to say hello. At the third show, he offered to buy me a drink.

Eventually Alberto took me under his wing and began to show me around his city. We visited all the dark and divey spots far from the university-sanctioned itinerary. We sat at countless cafes like this one, whiling away whole afternoons. It was like a punk-rock Roman Holiday. I felt giddy during every moment in his



presence. Together, we belonged.

But I had been practical, even then. Falling in love with a struggling artist who lived a world away from where I wanted to start my career wasn't an option. And so, at the end of four months, I returned to California and tried to forget all about him.

Over time, I nearly succeeded.

When Symbal signed with Alberto's band, he had been the first to reach out. He sent me a light, friendly email congratulating me on my success. Fifteen years had passed since we'd exchanged a single word. I'd answered in kind, my tone professional and cordial.

On my last night in the office, I thought about writing him again. But what would I say? *Ciao Alberto. My life is a shambles. Care to pick up that impassioned romance where we left off twenty years ago?*

It wasn't strictly ethical to look up his home address in the client database. But after Preston's tornado-like destruction of my life, I felt entitled to this one small transgression. I scribbled three short lines onto the back of a receipt, folded it twice, and tucked it into my wallet. Then I logged out of the system and left the building forever.

Three days later, I was on a flight to Rome.

This has gone on too long, I think to myself as I give Bruno a thorough behind-the-ears scratch. My body pulses as I look up at the thin, grey haired

woman. She is about to tug Bruno's leash and continue down the street. In a tone that I hope is casual, and words that I hope are comprehensible, I finally ask.

"Do you know Alberto Levanto? I think he might live in your building." I trail off, not knowing how to explain why I would know this.

Her face brightens. "*Si, certo.* Lovely man. But he moved two months ago, back to Rome with his fiancée."

Fear drains out of me, and I am hollowed.

Concern creeps onto the woman's face. "I'm sure he left a forwarding address with the building manager," she says. "Would you like me to ask?"

Tears spring to my eyes and I look at her, unable to speak. Then, to my shock, I feel myself smile. A real smile. It emerges from deep down and trusts itself upon my face. The invisible ropes that had tied me to this chair dissolve and fall away, like stitches from a healed wound. I feel as if I could float straight up into the air.

I shake my head. "*No, grazie.*"

A brief look of confusion and then the woman returns my smile. "*Andrà tutto bene,*" she says with a nod. You'll be fine. She tugs Bruno's leash and they amble on together.

For the first time in a long time, I think she may be right.