

Limbo Babies

Chrissy's major takeaway from the past year was as clear as it was devastating.

Nightmares do bleed into the light of day. And from this one, she saw no hope of awakening.

To her right, a vendor cried out, first in Italian and then English. To her left, massive church doors yawned, exposing a slice of gilded altar, a spray of blood-red roses. A trio of priests emerged, then swished into the tumult of bicycles, pedestrians, a few cars, scads of motorbikes. She was jealous of how they melted into Rome's lively streets, where the fragrance of yeasty dough and simmered sauces floated on ancient and holy-scented drafts.

Unlike the priests, she was a misfit in this Roman feast of gods and edibles. A familiar spasm of longing for her old life back in Brooklyn nearly choked her. Her old life before the tragedy, that is.

The life she could never get back.

She consulted her watch. Precious time ticked away on yet another of her landlady's wild goose chases, frequent adventures in the newly solo life she was trying to shape for herself. She wondered what Albert would say. Probably a simple "I told you so."

She veered from the piazza and tried to figure out which way to turn, no easy task without Albert and his animal instinct for directions. She shrugged and crossed the street, away from the stone likeness of some unidentifiable saint, his eyes lit with petrified ecstasy and suffering.

The suffering part she got, as Albert knew well.

Albert had been her rock, her only constant throughout the horror of the past year. And as a reward for his unerring devotion, she'd inserted the entire Atlantic Ocean between them. When she tried to explain her behavior, all she could come up with was one simple explanation. She sucked at tragedy, and had no clue how to rise from its bitter ashes.

It struck her as deceptive, cruel even, that the New Year had dawned with such glitzy promise. She and Albert had thrown a small and shiny party in their apartment, the women sleek in sequined tops and tight jeans, the men confident in Brooklyn hipster mode. The stroke of midnight had sparked a barrage of hugs and kisses, harmonious clinks of crystal flutes, a tipsy chorus of Auld Lang Syne.

Of course Melanie was there, bony, smart, and opinionated, pontificating on one subject after another, notably the wallop of a washed rind cheese when paired with the pop of a Belgian Ale. Her 'plus one' that night, an upscale bartender who described himself as a mixologist specializing in liquid compatibility, was fixated in rapt attention. That night, neither mixologist Rolf, nor anyone, had an inkling that her next incarnation would be as Video Melanie, smiling and waving from the fluid amber of a funeral collage.

The twinge was now so familiar Chrissy was almost numb to the pain. Almost.

Together with a dozen or so friends, they'd played charades, chatted, and grazed on roe-topped deviled eggs and creamy pork rilette slathered on root vegetable crackers. No longer new to adulthood, all of them were high on the entitlement granted by early success, as if their sparkly lives were of their own making, as if they would remain forever unbaptized by those crushing heartbreaks that strike the unlucky willy-nilly, as unexpected as they were unbearable. It wasn't until recently that Chrissy realized the truth.

New Year's Eve was the last time she would ever raise a glass in blissful innocence.

A Vespa threaded its way through the chaos and Chrissy reflexively flattened herself against a stand of knockoff handbags. She'd become accustomed to close calls, but unfortunately, there was just no getting used to some things.

She kicked at a rock in her way on the narrow lane that now forked into two unfamiliar branches. She chose one that dead-ended in a sea of wicker tables where a few cappuccino drinkers lounged. Where was Albert when she needed him?

She craned her neck one way, then the other, hoping to spot the green cross of the *farmacia*, the Holy Grail in her landlady's incomprehensibly urgent demand *du jour*, the quest for a special brand of nail polish remover. Or should she say demand *della giornata*? When in Rome, after all, although Clementina would find something to correct in even that barest snippet of Italian.

As she made an about face to retrace her steps, she realized she had no right to complain about Clementina or Albert. Especially Albert. He had been wonderful, supportive, and above all, rational, starting from the moment she got the call to inform her that Melanie, her first and finest friend from the day their mothers had deposited them at Miss Ellicott's preschool, had neglected to glance both ways before stepping from a Manhattan curb.

In the space of a heartbeat, Melanie's oversight severed the chain that had long knit their two lives together, blasting their intertwined narrative into a rubble of disjointed vignettes. The hushed giggles of childhood sleepovers. Holding hands and jumping into the deep end of her grandmother's pool. Picking over Cobb salads while discussing male to female ratios in their prospective colleges. A shopping trip where they tried on Roberto

Cavalli and made fun of Rolf's cocktail-centric efforts at seduction. Reading side by side in beach chairs.

By the time she got the word, it was too late even to hold Melanie's hand, those hands she knew almost as well as her own, thin-boned and fluttery, a bloodstone set in silver on Melanie's right ring finger, a wing-shaped stain of a birthmark at the cusp of her left wrist.

Throughout all, Albert never wavered while the lonely year continued to reveal itself for the monster that it was, viler with every flip of the calendar page. He comforted her with the pronouncement that shit happens, nothing more, nothing less, and that if you wait it out, shit also stops happening. She wanted to take refuge in his reasonable view of a universe shaped by whim and vagary. In an odd way, it might allow her to hope again, just because, well, why not?

A cyclist edged close to her and she sucked in her breath.

She pictured Albert, his plaid flannel shirt loose over belted jeans, the protracted blinks of his hooded green eyes. Was he lonely back in the third floor walk-up they'd shared since pooling their rent money and falling in love? Or was it the other way around? She couldn't remember now.

She paused again to get her bearings. How far away was the damn *farmacia*? Clementina had said it was just a stone's throw past the Trevi, but her instructions had been typically imprecise, delivered in the heavily accented English she'd picked up from a stint in London, back, in her words, when "life was still grand," before her beloved Georgio had the poor judgment to turn her into a widow and broke landlady. If Albert had crossed paths with Clementina, he'd have declared her the Italian version of crazy,

which, in his view, was as crazy as a human being could possibly get.

And then there it was, the faint burble of pent-up waters percolating above the hubbub of Roman streets. Whether in spite of or thanks to Clementina's instructions, she was closing in on her destination. One could never be quite sure about Clementina.

Albert was already winging his way back to Brooklyn the day she'd trudged up the steps to Clementina's rental flat, dejected and alone. But by the time shadows wrapped its corners, she felt better. Not fine, just better. Clementina had refused to open their discussion with talk of rent or security deposits. "Business later, talk to me, now," she'd insisted, plopping herself on the sofa and patting the cushion next to her. "Why should you want to live in my apartment?"

Chrissy had obeyed, like an exhausted puppy, and slowly, under cover of the Italian gloaming, she began to tell Clementina about a friend named Melanie.

Not about the accident. About the way it was before.

She told her prospective landlady how she and Melanie had called each other twice a day on the purple cell phones they'd got for Christmas when they were twelve, the time they shared a bottle of sloe gin in high school and threw up pink behind the library. How they showed up wearing the same scarf when they met for lunch at Fiorello's across from Lincoln Center, and flipped a coin to decide who had to remove it.

"Ah, so she is gone, passed on, this dear friend of yours," Clementina had interjected softly during a pregnant lull in their conversation.

"Yes." Chrissy said, gazing out the open window, the faint light still enough to make out the tangle of laundry-strung balconies beyond. Warm and wet smells of cooking washed over them, as Chrissy imagined the thud of yet another shovel of dirt

falling between her and Melanie.

"Now what you must do is stop the crying and take these keys," Clementina had said. "That is just life, no?" And softer, "You must talk to her, your friend, this Melanie. I talk to my Georgio all the time. And it's been so many years. Promise me you'll talk to her." She turned on a lamp and the soft shadows evaporated. "See, it's beautiful. Small, but you are small, too. Like a crab in a shell. You don't want an apartment that's too big for you. Just one that fits."

"I want my life to fit again," Chrissy said.

Clementina stood, not quite squaring the stoop of her shoulders. "So it's settled. I'm old, too tired to run all over Rome anymore. Be my legs. You help me, I help you." Chrissy had offered a hand to shake, but Clementina pulled her into a hug instead. "See, not so hard at all," she said.

Chrissy hadn't imagined how many times she would hear those words. Clementina would dispatch her on an errand, with hopelessly garbled instructions— deliver an invitation to her cousin Giuseppe after two o'clock, when he'd have a full belly, "so he wasn't too cranky," but well before his nap, "or he'll chew you up like a bear," carry a box tied up with string for the shopkeeper's niece "three and one half houses down from the lace maker's shop," bring home four lemons from Georgio's Zia Maria two minutes by foot past the last bus stop to Tivoli, "tell her fat ones for pollo al limoni, so heavenly." Chrissy would run all over Rome, asking strangers for assistance, getting lost in labyrinthine alleys, butchering and honing her Italian. And when she showed up, mission accomplished, Clementina would greet her, beaming, and say, "See, not so hard at all!"

The Trevi sang its full-throated song now. Chrissy paused on the constricted street, its edges clogged with tables and chairs filled with smug afternoon wine drinkers, and ignored the efforts of white-aproned waiters to waylay her. She turned left, the only promising option. And there it was, the Trevi, its carved mass of travertine stone ghostly pale in the afternoon sun, the music of its waterfall a comfort in any language.

She glanced again at her watch and smiled. Not too shabby. She was improving at navigating this strange city. Why on earth hadn't she asked Clementina the Italian word for nail polish remover? No matter, she was part mime, part mind-reader by now. She saw things differently here.

Maybe it was the Italian air. Chrissy couldn't quite put her finger on it. She still wasn't happy, not even close, but there was something about Rome, and Italy in general, that upended a person's view of the world. The boundary between now and yesterday was all blurry and fungible. To set foot in Italy was to enter a new time zone, to inhabit two worlds at once. Tacky souvenir stands lined the mega-mythic Pantheon. Whizzing traffic circled the ruins of the Coliseum. From the hills of Tuscany to the alleys of Rome, day to day business was hopelessly entangled with some storied and gloried past. Everywhere, the rattling of old ghosts intruded on the noise of modern life.

Chrissy smiled when she spotted it, the glowing green cross of the *farmacia*. She opened the glass door and stood just inside. "Inglese?" she began. The shopkeeper shrugged and the sides of her mouth drooped. Chrissy mimed the act of painting her nails and then rubbing off the imaginary coat of polish. "Clementina needs..."

The shopkeeper's face erupted with a smile. "Ah, Clementina!" She pointed upwards, "*Supra, supra.*"

Chrissy reached up and retrieved a bottle from the shelf and handed it over.

"*Due euro*," the shopkeeper said as she rolled the bottle into a sheet of white paper, twisting the ends.

"*Grazie*," Chrissy said and stepped back into the madcap dance of Roman streets, straining to hear the old voices encrypted in the ambient noise.

Before he packed up and declared himself over it, Albert had felt it too, the way Rome vibrated with more than met the eye, how its streets echoed with times past, how its breezes carried clots of history that clogged the nostrils and lungs of the living. The past parted just enough for everyone to go about their daily business, he'd said, but just barely. With a chuckle, he'd warned her to guard against the many petulant and powerful ghosts who were determined to elbow the living right out of the way.

They'd both laughed at this, and Chrissy imagined that, from the outside, she and Albert still appeared to be the savvy young New Yorkers they were before Melanie forgot to look both ways on Broadway. Albert had worked hard to make it so, to use their Italian respite to relax, to give her space to unwind before resuming their sharp-edged and important existence back in Brooklyn.

Certainly, they'd tried. Both of them. They'd traipsed around the hallowed Vatican, where dead popes slumbered in every corner of St. Peter's, cozy in red velvet death slippers. They'd gawked at the keyed gold reliquaries where dismembered hands or heads or assorted bones of saints lurked in vaults, within catacombs, in secret caches beneath altars. They'd prowled through galleries and gardens, where statues and paintings of saints loomed, arrows piercing their beatific hearts, devils flaying their incorruptible flesh.

Albert had held her hand as they navigated this timeless land, marinating in what

he called "Italy's dank and crusty eternity." Throughout, Chrissy had tried to rekindle her zest for the future in the many cafes that ringed historic piazzas, draining the last drops of rosso di Montepulciano from countless glasses. Albert couldn't accuse her of failing to try.

She shifted her package to her right hand, consulted her watch and picked up her pace. A group of noisy young boys with backpacks surrounded her, split around her and joined up together again like a school of fish as they overtook her. If Albert were here, the two of them would reach for each other, the moment thick with the prospect of what might lie ahead.

When Albert had announced it was time to rejoin the living in Brooklyn, he hadn't expected her to say she wasn't quite ready.

"We're done here. You were the one who proclaimed yourself ready to face the world again, that Santa Fina was the final straw," he'd reminded her, in reference to the day in Tuscany when they'd found themselves staring up at an aged fresco. The artwork's subject was a hapless girl, paralyzed since the age of ten, strapped to a hard board, emanating a fuzz of saint-light as she atoned for God knows whose sins. According to the pamphlet, tucked under the bank of candles that tourists lit for one euro each, her death sent the local *campanile*, the bell towers, into frenzied song. As if that weren't enough, the petals of the gillyflowers burst open into a mass-bloom that blanketed the countryside.

"I guess I changed my mind," Chrissy said when they returned to their hotel room back in Rome, her suitcase still empty while Albert stuffed his full. "Anyway, maybe Santa Fina did something wonderful after all."

"Besides making me wonder what the hell gillyflowers are, I can't imagine what. Come on, Chrissy, be real. It's time to go home."

“Time? I’m not sure I even know what that means anymore. Time isn’t the same here.”

“It’s your body clock. You’re all fucked up.”

“I think I can believe in something if I stay here.”

It wasn’t until she said it that she knew it was the truth. The way Italy’s past coincided with the now, with no attempt at reconciliation, no apologies, no efforts to shape life into a sensible form had formed at least the beginnings of a scab over her broken heart. For Chrissy, that was reason enough to stay. She knew she was still too exhausted to return to a world that needed to make sense.

Albert had dragged her to *Il Sole Trattoria*. They sipped cappuccino as he made a last ditch attempt to convince her to leave with him. He’d encircled her with strong arms, his voice even. “Staying here won’t change anything. Come home with me. Please.”

“I just need a rest,” Chrissy had answered. She tried to smile through her tears, to soften the slap of her words. “I need to hang around with the dead popes and saints and angels a little longer.”

Albert’s hooded green eyes shuttered in long slow blinks before he threw down money for the waiter, stood, and retreated in silence.

Chrissy held Clementina’s white parcel tight against her chest as she retraced her steps around the curve of the Trevi. Past the stands of *frutte* and *verdure*, Chrissy wound her way through the warren of crowded streets until she found the turnoff to Clementina’s, marked by a shrine of a benevolent Mary peering from her niche in the wall above, a colorful array of half-burned wax pillars at her breast. A smiling neighbor waved as she pulled open the door to her landlady’s building.

Albert called her from Brooklyn. Often. Just the other day to tell her their friend's video installation, a crosscut of a building in Queens had earned a mention in *The New York Times*. That the farmer's market in their Cobble Hill neighborhood was pungent with the garlicky zest of her favorite scapes. She visualized the wide Brooklyn sidewalks as he spoke, the bustle of the living—smart, purposeful people, focused on concrete and achievable goals--devoid of those haunting legions of ancestors that shadowed her Roman steps.

“So how are the dead popes, saints and angels?” Albert asked sometimes.

“Great,” she'd say, always.

She passed the inner courtyard of Clementina's building, remnants of the well that refreshed ancient occupants still visible at its center, and leapt up the worn stairs, functional relics from some early century. Her footsteps echoed on the smooth stone of the hall floor as she made her way to Clementina's door. Before she could knock, Clementina flung open the door, grabbed the white package and thrust a coin into Chrissy's hands, air kissing her on both cheeks.

“No, it's fine,” Chrissy said, but Clementina waved her inside and closed the door behind her.

“Look at me!” Clementina said, pointing to her hair, coated with a frothy layer of dye, and her upper lip, foamed white with hair remover. “God forbid anyone sees me, but you and Georgio.”

She gestured toward a photo in a frame on the kitchen counter of a suave young man in a dapper jacket, one leg half bent on a tree stump. From the stilted absurdity of the pose, Chrissy got little sense of who or what Georgio might have been. “He looks... like

one cool guy,” she said, after a minute.

“Or something. I don’t get his photo out so much anymore. One day I look at him, I say, I am old enough to be your mother, and I turn over the picture and say, that’s it. But sometimes I need him.”

Chrissy laughed.

“It’s funny, I know. But then, understand, Georgio knew me as I was then, before I disappoint myself and so many, before my skin wrinkled and my eyes clouded. With him, I am still that person. You see?”

“I guess I do,” Chrissy said.

“Later, when you see me with brown hair and smooth lip, you know I have even more secrets, no? Here, come here, a new book for you, for your Italian. Take it now, and go.”

Chrissy took the book and let herself out. She threaded the streets, unlocked the heavy door to her apartment, and walked to the window. Opening the shutters, she heard a family from somewhere beyond, a mother scolding a child, then laughter. She could pick out a few words here and there, more every day, it seemed.

Her cell phone rang and it was Albert. They talked for a few minutes, about his job, the weather. His voice conjured up visions of her pillow next to his in their bed, the way he draped his shirt over the hook in the bathroom when he took a shower, the cozy nest they'd made across the ocean in a world called Brooklyn.

“Did you know the Catholics used to keep unbaptized babies all penned up in Limbo, and then, all of a sudden, the freaking Pope wiped out Limbo altogether? Legislated it the hell out of the picture,” Albert said.

“No,” Chrissy said. “I didn’t know that. Where did the babies go?”

“Yeah, right. Exactly. I just figured you should know. I mean, it’s not like Brooklyn has the corner on bullshit. Magic is just an illusion, wherever you find it. Even in Italy.”

“Thanks, and I guess you’re going to tell me terrible truths about Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, too.”

“I just want you to think about what you're doing, Chrissy.”

Just before the quiet stretched into uncomfortable silence, Chrissy said, “I miss you, too.”

“Well, just remember the Limbo babies the next time you pass a church.”

They talked some more, laughing a little, tender, divided but not entirely separated.

It was a silly thing, the Limbo babies, but she couldn’t let it go. She had no idea why she took it so personally, but it was as if Albert had somehow proven that the whole of Italy teetered on a fault line, as if Rome couldn't support her any better than Brooklyn could.

The next day, she lured Clementina out to lunch with a promise of her favorite, pizza Margherita. Halfway through a glazed brown jug of vernaccia, Chrissy relayed what Albert had said about the Limbo babies. Clementina stared, her brown eyes unchanged.

“So?” she asked, biting into her slice of pizza, its thin crust sauced red and dotted with creamy mozzarella, flecked with bright basil.

“So, what do you think of that? You can’t just make up fake rooms in heaven

stuffed with babies. And if you do make them up, you can't just unmake them, like you're redecorating a tired dining room or something."

"No, no, you can't," Clementina said. She nudged the man at the table next to her, told him the Limbo baby story, in Italian of course, but Chrissy could hear *bambini* here and there, and a few other familiar words. A waiter stopped by, and more talk about the *bambini* in Limbo, most of which Chrissy couldn't understand.

After a while, with much joviality and a new round of wine, Clementina announced to Chrissy that it was "all okay."

"Now, we need a parade, a day for the Limbo babies to fill the streets of Rome with their innocence." Clementina threw her arms into the air. "In God's infinite wisdom, He has broken the bars of their cage and let these poor bambini run as free as the Tiber!"

"That's it?" Chrissy asked.

"Si, yes," Clementina said. She winked at the man at the table next to her and he said something in Italian to her, his arms flying.

"Si, okay," Clementina said, and then turned to Chrissy. "Gino says we need a patron saint of Limbo babies. Maybe you, Santa Cristina." She pushed Chrissy's shoulder and laughed.

Chrissy leaned over and raised her wine glass to Gino, aware of the vernaccia's effects from the sudden heat in her cheeks. "Okay, so maybe it will be me," she agreed, and laughed. Gino bowed to her.

"I think, from now on, we will call you Santa Cristina," Clementina said.

"Something more for you, Santa Cristina?" The waiter cleared the plates with a smile.

“No, *basta*, enough,” Chrissy said.

“Come tomorrow, I will have chef Francesco make gnocchi specially for you, Santa Cristina,” he said as she and Clementina stood up to leave.

“Gnocchi and *insalata* with arugula from Francesco’s garden,” Clementina said to the waiter. And then, to Chrissy, “I know he's holding back the best.” They linked arms and stood a moment on the street. “I have some things to do now,” Clementina said. “See you for gnocchi tomorrow. We’ll eat and drink and celebrate the Limbo babies.”

“We will,” Chrissy said, alone on the street, smiling as she melted into the Roman flow. She ducked into the corner *pasticceria* to glimpse the colorful pastries, wrapping her tongue around the names of the flavors, *cioccolato*, *nocciola*, *fragola*. “*Così bella*,” she said, when the young woman behind the counter smiled at her. She ordered a square of *cioccolato* with *crema* and left an extra euro on the glass case.

She stepped back into the street, where the sun now waned, and vendors boxed up papally blessed rosary beads and key chains of naked David from their makeshift shelves.

Back in her apartment, Chrissy sat on the couch without turning on a light. After a while, she rose, lit the lamp in the corner, and from her wallet, pulled a photo out from behind her driver’s license, one she'd tucked face down right after Melanie's accident. She hadn’t been able to bring herself to look at it since that day, but she hadn’t removed it either. She stared at it for a long time.

“Melanie,” she said aloud.

She’d thought her friend’s name hundreds of times a day. But the sound of it on her tongue was dizzyingly sweet. “Melanie,” she said again and again. After a while, she uncorked the bottle of Brunello di Montalcino that she and Albert had bought together,

for a special occasion. She poured herself a glass, propped up the photograph on the windowsill, and studied it.

She remembered the two of them donning boas from a pile of props, hers neon yellow, Melanie's fuchsia, and ducking into the photo booth at a friend's wedding reception last year. In the photo, their hair was sleek and straight and mingled together, Melanie's strands pale against the dark of her own, their eyes narrowed in laughter, their smiles gleaming. They would look much the same today, if a kinder fortune prevailed and allowed for a chance meeting.

Chrissy thought of the aging Clementina peering at the likeness of her young Georgio, and knew she should savor today, when she and Melanie were still the same, equals. She wondered if she'd see the day when that same photo would hold the likeness of a Melanie young enough to be her daughter, a relic of bygone days.

"So Melanie, today, you'll never guess what happened," Chrissy began. She paused, sipped her wine and continued, "You would have loved it. Seems I've become the unofficial patron saint of the Limbo babies. You'd be so jealous." Chrissy smiled, imagining how the two of them would double over in laughter at the image of a herd of penned-up babies busting from the gates of Limbo. She took another sip of wine. "If you were here, though, we'd be co-saints. I bet we could even talk Rolf into concocting some official Limbo Babies Cocktail."

It wasn't much, but it was a start. She wondered if even Clementina had been a bit awkward with Georgio at first. She slid the photo back behind her license. This time, she didn't turn it face down.

On a sudden impulse, she dialed Albert's number. The phone rang and she

pictured Albert in their Brooklyn apartment, pulling his phone from his pocket or his bedside table, perhaps worried or maybe just curious when the screen lit with her name. Or maybe enough time had passed that he'd be annoyed, pulled from the side of a new lover he'd culled from the sidewalks or bars of Brooklyn.

All she knew was she needed to talk to him, now, this minute.

She would begin perhaps, by describing the way the sun gleamed on the Trevi while the workers cleaned it and fished out coins, something they'd witnessed together. And then she'd tell him how tickled she was to be the neighborhood's newly christened patron saint of the Limbo Babies. She counted the rings and waited breathlessly for him to answer. Of course, she would tell him that tonight she'd uncorked their bottle of deeply red Brunello and resurrected her friendship with Melanie. But the moment Albert's familiar voice spanned the miles between them, Chrissy realized that what she really called to say was so much simpler.

She'd called to tell him that she wasn't returning to Brooklyn any time soon, that she was head over heels in love with the way the Roman sky softened as daylight broke, before the shopkeepers unlocked their doors, in those hallowed moments when the streets teemed with only the unseen.