

The Final Hours of Bonnie Lafever

Purple clouds cast shadows over a patchwork of fields, low shrubbery and green hedges seaming the perimeters, towns below littered about like broken teeth. Bonnie stares out the window of the airplane, seat 4A, her heart beating to the syncopated blink of the winglet light. *Bump. Bump. Bump.* A calm cardiogram. She stares, fixated, as white boats hover near the coastline, each trailed by a comet of seafoam. Bonnie imagines the plane's engine smoking before erupting into violent flames; she hears the panicked screams, the groaning metal, the frantic, useless bargainings. This would be her final view. *If only*, she thinks.

"Mrs. Lafever, would you care for anything else?"

Bonnie's flight attendant moves towards her with a deferential bow, the button of her too-small blazer strangling an expanding waist. She stares blankly, occupationally stripped of judgement per Chapter 3 Page 2 of the Flight Attendant Manual Standard. Her eyes are the color of untended swimming pools, green and murky. Such subservience used to riddle Bonnie with a great sense of unease, as though the whole world were just an abstract construct manufactured by a company playing for ever-more of your money. Her life had been defined by such nerving realizations. The first: Disneyland, 1962. The year Bonnie Lafever--then Barbara Kuziak--realized the Matterhorn was just a series of iron bars covered in wire mesh, its snow nothing more than paint.

"Another glass of Chardonnay, please," Bonnie murmurs, pulling on the corner of her ash blonde wig as the flight attendant disappears into a steel gray galley.

The plane lands at 5:37 p.m., 42 minutes behind schedule on account of rain in Houston. Bunny brushes her teeth in an airport bathroom the color of summer sherbet. The water tastes different here--metallic and unwelcoming. Everyone talks about Mexico, but you weren't supposed to drink the water in any foreign country, even Europe. Bunny recalled many trips to Paris, stomach shifting unpleasantly while she waited in the gilded lobby of Le Meurice for Stuart to come down from the room. Bunny spits politely into a wedge of porcelain and looks in the mirror, tired eyes sunken into a tired face. She remembers being more beautiful.

Her driver is a bulky man named Riccardo. His arms circle around his body, lines of latitude tracing the equator of a globe. A pair of large hands clutch the leather-bound steering wheel, the flesh of fat knuckles peering from his driving gloves like eyes. U2 plays on the radio. How strange to be famous everywhere, Bunny thinks, to have an impact so large on the world that it defies language. Bunny was once the head of three charities, not including her four years of leadership at the Champions Christian Academy PTA. Riccardo taps his fingers along to baseline of "With Or Without You" until the moan of a commercial intervenes, selling dish soap with sex.

The outskirts of Rome are dirty and old and insignificant, any beauty or consequence saved for the city center, where tourists and the rich can live under the illusion that everything in Italy looks like the Pantheon. Rome is nothing like Houston, where everything feels the same wherever you are, a new and dense city center quickly dissipating into nothing, leading people away on ropes of concrete to fields that advance without end. The endlessness continues, the

sky a ballooning dome of blue threatening to suffocate you with its limitlessness. Bunnie wonders if Lupita got her note about the cat.

There are too many mirrors in the suite. Whenever Bunnie turns, she is confronted with an image of herself, older than she'd like to be, against the backdrop of a city applauded for its age. There are no mirrors to speak of on the terrace, where, in a hospitable gesture Bunnie would have once seen as charming but now deems offensively presumptuous, the hotel has left a bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice, two flutes accompanied by a note reading "Buona notte, Mr. and Mrs. Lafever."

The sun begins to set over Rome, light painting everything with a terracotta bloom. Even Bunnie, whose translucent skin has been painstakingly lasered, peeled, pinched, stripped, and filled over the last two decades, seems at least one year younger than her actual age, a number she can barely remember herself and, frankly, doesn't care to. A knock at her door draws her back into the awful suite of mirrors. She lets the porter inside, a young boy who, unlike most Italian men Bunnie has encountered, appears uncomfortable being alone in the same room as a woman.

"Just there is fine," Bunnie instructs, pointing to far the corner of the room. The young porter silently complies, head down, shoulders slumped in an oversized wool jacket with gold buttons. For his efforts, Bunnie tips him fifty euro, upon which the young porter stutters, in thickly accented English, "What bring you to Roma?"

"I'm here to kill myself."

Clearview Forum states the core elements that contribute to a fulfilling life as the following: Nurtured Relationships, Disciplined Pleasure, Adventurous Spirit, Removal of Self-Deception, Accepting Non-Control, and Avoiding Excess. There were more, but Bunnie had spent most of that particular weekend in a pleasant, pharmaceutical haze, one weak heartbeat away from the emergency room. It had been her daughter's idea. Bunnie, like most good Texans, had never been one for self-help. Even more abhorrent was self-help administered in a group fashion. How demoralizing. But Bunnie's daughter insisted, using Bunnie's credit card number, which she had memorized by heart, as she signed her up over the phone. "This will be great for you, Bunnie. Really great."

Downstairs, a man in a black suit plays piano into an empty room. His right foot taps on a carpet the color of old blood, his fingers producing a subdued version of "Moondance." Bunnie, wearing a pair of Brunello Cucinelli slacks and a cashmere sweater of similar origin, walks through the glass doors onto a back patio she remembers from her last visit as being deathly charming. The hotel has since renovated, and standing in the place of the creeping green vines and elegant bistro tables is a hulking, towering mass made of green plastic manned by a bartender.

"When did you do that?" Bunnie asks a passing server.

"Do what?"

"Do *that*." Bunnie points to towards the new bar, which has, to Bunnie's horror, water features.

"I'm new here," the server says.

Bunnie has half a mind to complain to the front desk, to ask them why they haven't left well enough alone, but that was the Old Bunnie. New Bunnie sits down at the bar, the shifting colors of the water fountain playing pink, purple, red on the surface of her artificial hair. The bartender reminds her of a lover she once had, many years ago. The same thick curls, the same thin lips, a tragic air that hinted to women that to know him would be to know what it felt like to be hit by a semi-truck, to have your bones ground into a fine powder. Pulverize. Destruct. That kind of man. Stuart was not that kind of man at all. In the end, he still did his damage. Wet clumps of hot tears anchor themselves in the corner of her eyes, begging to be unacknowledged until, too pregnant and heavy, begin to slide down her full cheeks. Wiping them away, Bunnie orders a martini.

On the bartender's arm is the crooked stain of an old tattoo, what Bunnie assumes was made by hand with a hot needle and ballpoint ink. "LOVE OR PERISH" it screams in English. Bunnie wishes it were in Italian, a message rendered inconsequential by her own ignorance.

At 10 p.m., a fevered air still clings to the city. The crowds of tourists that littered the Spanish Steps have gone, leaving behind discarded paper and plastic cups. All that remains are two groups of teenagers clustered around the Fontana della Barcaccia. Each faction screams at the other while two young women slap each other viciously, their soft belles exposed in between cheap jeans and crop-tops. "Cagna! Cagna! Cagna!" one yells, her pink lipstick sitting in the dry cracks of her lips. "Vaffanculo!" the other screams, grabbing a vengeful fistful

of hair. Ugly girls doing ugly things, the young women surrounding them too cowardly to stop the fight or throw punches themselves.

Bunnie's own daughter was not a bad person, nor was she a remarkable one. The only reason Bunnie had relented and had a child was because she had been under the illusion that every parent has: that her child would grow up to be someone of import. Even though she knew better. Nearly a decade behind all of her friends by the time she had Constance, Bunnie had watched as children went from beautiful, blank canvases on which their parents projected every height of success to self-governing beasts that, by age eleven, had provided concrete evidence that they would never amount to anything. Constance did PR and looked like her father. On occasion, she watched after Minky, but that was hardly an accomplishment of note.

The plastic signs of gelato stores buzz from cobblestone streets as Bunnie makes her way to the Trevi Fountain, which she first saw as a child in *La Dolce Vita*. How she had wanted to be Anita Ekberg--impossibly nipped waist, a set of breasts that would send a lesser woman tumbling towards the floor. Bunnie, just a child, sat glued to the television set, watching Anita traipse the streets of Rome, not a care in the world because the world knew she was beautiful, a stray white kitten she intends to feed playfully clawing through her hair. But instead of finding milk, Anita finds the Trevi Fountain, and abandons the cat to seductively play in the shallow water without ruining the thick sweep of her eyeliner or the soft wave of her hair. "Marcelo! Come here!" Anita moans to the handsome Italian in his beautiful suit. He takes his shoes off and the two stand, overdressed, in a grand puddle of water. Neither of them care about the cat.

As Bunnie arrives at the fountain, she is greeted by a chainlink fence, the water drained save for a sad, shallow moat at its edges. "Closed for Restoration" is says, in one of the 19 languages Bunnies sees that she can understand. A hot wind blows through the square. Bunnie smooths the side of her ash blonde wig, wondering why they couldn't have left well enough alone, this weekend of all weekends.