

Mirage

The waiter with the short ponytail appears next to my table.

“Back again, *signora*?”

Mustering a smile that I hope looks sincere, I nod and order a macchiato. The waiter disappears into the cafe, and I wonder what he must think of me. The American with grown-out bangs, puffy from the humidity, who has sat alone at this sidewalk table every day for a week. He probably assumes I’m an aimless tourist with no agenda and a fondness for over-roasted espresso. He can’t know that I chose this table for its view of the building across the street.

The building is the color of a raw egg yolk. Green shutters jut from its windows, flower boxes burst with geraniums and dangling ivy. Varnish peels from window frames and stucco has chipped away in big patches, exposing faded brick below. The building is elegantly stressed, like those effortless women who look flawless in old t-shirts and tattered jeans. I am not one of those women.

On the first day I walked straight up to the door, which is made of dark wood with the number 35 written in blue glaze on a square tile at eye level. I scanned the bronze nameplates on the wall. The bottom name on the right made me catch my breath, and I pressed the shiny button next to it. Nothing happened. I tried again, holding the button longer, pressing harder. 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.

I have not been back to the door since. I sit here and watch it for a few hours every

afternoon, with the leather-bound notebook I bought at the airport open in front of me. In it I've jotted down some things I might say to the man who I believe lives in that building.

How have you been?

Are you ~~pleased~~ surprised to see me?

When did you leave Rome?

How was your last tour?

Do you remember when we used to sit at sidewalk cafes all afternoon?

~~Did you ever think of me?~~

Next to each line I've copied down the Italian translation, supplied by an app on my phone, though it's probably unnecessary. Alberto will do all the talking. He could squeeze a conversation from a stone. On the night we met fifteen years ago, the first thing I noticed was how he mesmerized the crowd in that smoke-filled underground bar. It only took three words into the microphone to get everyone's attention—even the men squeezing past me at the bar turned to listen. After his first song, they all whistled and cheered, spilling beer on the floor. It didn't even matter that he couldn't sing the highest notes.

At nineteen, far from home and clueless about the adult world, I needed Alberto. He was my anchor, my guide. The glossy photos of our time together are tucked in a box somewhere, but I can see him now, sitting across the small round table, guitar case propped against the cafe wall. Dark messy hair, flannel shirt and ripped jeans. He would appreciate that I came here to find him, that I didn't write or call first. He loved spontaneity; most people bored him. I was more adventurous when we were together. I could do that again.

I think of another question and pick up my pen.

Did you hear about the—

The word “scandal” sounds too dramatic. But it’s the most appropriate word. *Scandalo*. I copy it into the translation column.

At the click of a latch—a sound to which I have become singularly attuned—I drop the pen and look up. The door of the building across the street opens and a woman appears, framed in the dark rectangle of the entryway, wearing a long cotton dress the color of marigolds. I slump down in my chair and watch her through the frizzy hair that falls over my eyes. She props open the door with her hip, then pulls a stroller across the threshold, swinging the bulky contraption around and down the shallow steps. The infant hidden inside starts to scream.

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

On the evening of Symbal’s IPO gala, the venture capital guys clustered around me, cooing their congratulations. They were all wearing patterned bowties that seemed somehow mocking, and they were only talking to me because they couldn’t find my husband.

“Preston’s done a brilliant job positioning the company,” said one of them.

I tightened my grip on my champagne flute. Yes, sure, my husband spent four years leveraging his connections into meetings with musicians and big-label executives. But I was the one who’d “positioned” the company. I’d led the analysis of the music-streaming market, drafted the business plan, spent late nights reviewing UI specs with engineers. I’d signed the lease on this building, designed its open-office concept. I’d even planned this stupid party.

But I was familiar with the looks I’d get if I pointed this out—the widened eyes, raised brows, sideways glances. So I stayed quiet and flashed a cheerful, acquiescent smile that was fine with everyone. They didn’t expect me to say much.

“Sonia, I need a word.” Tessa had come up behind me, a tablet tucked under her arm. Grateful for an excuse to escape the knot of bowties, I followed her to an empty corner of the rooftop terrace. The sun was setting, turning the sky over the bay a dusty mauve color.

“Preston was scheduled to start his speech five minutes ago,” she told me in a tense whisper. The salty wind brought a slight flush to her cheeks.

“Ok, thanks. I’ll find him.” I downed the last of my champagne and cringed as the bubbles climbed up my nasal passages.

“I think—” she trailed off, pressing her lips into a pale line.

“Is something wrong?”

“No.” Her eyes went from her watch to the sunset to her shoes. “I think you should check his office.”

I had espresso machines installed in Symbal’s employee kitchens as a nostalgic nod to my semester in Rome. But no one knew how to use them, so they were always clogging and spewing coffee-scented sludge all over the minimalist office decor. Eventually they had to be removed and replaced with Keurig machines.

“It feels like a personal defeat,” I told Preston on the balcony of our twentieth-floor SOMA apartment one grey Sunday morning. He sat across from me, legs stretched long beneath the table so I had to tuck mine back, holding a vape pen in one hand and his phone in the other. He glanced at me and flashed that perfect, triangular smile. “You’re so cute when you try.”

Down on the bay, container ships the length of city blocks crept through the fog. “You shouldn’t use that so much,” I said, gesturing to the vape.

“This?” He looked at it as if he’d forgotten it was there. “Jesus, Sonia. It’s not even tobacco. You need to lighten up.”

Preston was always telling me to lighten up. That was our dynamic, and I told myself it was healthy. He was the yin to my yang, the chill half of the power couple. It had been that way from the beginning. In business school he'd been the ultimate catch. He radiated confidence, but was also endearingly self-effacing. He was never in a hurry, because life moved on his schedule. Everyone had wanted to be in Preston's orbit, to revel in a bit of his reflected glow. I was simply the most determined. I sidled up to him at every bar during every happy hour and class mixer. I drove him home when he got too drunk to stand. I helped him pass his classes. I never flinched when he slept with other women, when he told me he loved me one day, then disappeared the next.

I wanted that glow. Needed it. Eventually forgot that I could exist without it.

Our company was three years old, and our marriage only about a year younger, when he started coming home late. He made excuses about meetings that I knew weren't real, and he knew I knew they weren't real because I booked his meetings. Eventually he stopped bothering with excuses. I didn't say anything, because I'd never expected him to change. I'd just thought it would take us longer to get to the point where we never even touched.

"I don't understand what you're asking."

Nine men in suits shifted uneasily around a long oval table. They'd put me at the head, in the seat closest to the door. Beyond the boardroom's glass walls, sea and sky blurred together in a haze of amber, the color of marine layer and slanting sunlight. Absolutely no blue at all.

A week had passed since the first allegation went public, and the harassment claims against Preston were now blooming like mushrooms. It had started with his assistant, the one I'd seen leaving his office the night of the gala. If I hadn't looked her in the face at the exact moment she'd shut the door behind her, I might not have believed the report. But that expression—that mix of disbelief and anger and shame—left no room for doubt.

Preston resigned four days later and flew to his family's beachfront property in Mexico. He didn't ask if I wanted to go with him. Anyway, I didn't. I had to stay and manage the fallout.

"The Board thinks it would be better if you took a step back."

"Back where?"

Furtive looks flitted around the table.

"Sonia," said the suit next to me. "We're asking you to leave Symbal."

My throat seized up.

"It's a matter of optics," he went on. "People associate you with Preston. You're sort of a...package. With him gone, and all the mess in the news, the Board feels it's better for the company if you step away."

"But it's my company."

A pause. My fingers dug trenches into my thigh.

"Not anymore."

Another pause.

"We have to do what's best for the shareholders."

A cough.

"If you'd like to collect your things from your office, Tessa will escort you."

My singular thought as I left the room was that I would not cry. I would not.

"They want me to watch while you pack up," Tessa said, standing just inside the door of my office. "I'm not going to do that. Just come by my office when you're done and I'll walk you out."

I slowly lowered myself into the ergonomic desk chair. "Tessa—"

She shifted her eyes to mine. It seemed to take great effort.

"I'm glad you decided to stay."

Her lips tightened and she nodded.

“But...” I couldn’t say ‘I thought we were friends.’ It was too pathetic.

Tessa’s accusation against Preston had come out last, a miserable coda to the parade of horrors that had kept me awake all week. I didn’t know the other women well, but this was *my* Tessa. The bright woman I’d plucked from the intern pool, the one I’d been grooming. Grooming for what, I wondered. Maybe for something she never wanted.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked finally.

A flash of contempt crossed her face. I shrank back and my eyes fell to the desk. Then I heard her sigh. “For a while,” she said, “I forgot who I was.”

I couldn’t look up. I heard the door close, the click of her heels fade.

On the night I woke up to the heat of Preston’s body on top of mine, it had been months since we’d exchanged more than a few words. The sensation of him pressing into me had a far-off quality, and I thought at first I was dreaming. But his hand clamped my hip, and the pain was real. I lay still and waited for him finish. The glow of the alarm clock caught his eyes staring at some spot on the wall far above my head.

I felt no shock, no anger. Only gratitude. That he still wanted me. That I remained worthy.

It wasn’t until after the sun had seeped through the blinds, when I was in the shower, a longer one than usual, rubbing the loofa absently back and forth across my stomach, that I remembered about the tampon. I squatted under the spray of the shower and tried to find the braided string. I forced myself not to panic, to let my muscles relax, so that I could reach up and claw it out. Finally the finger-sized hunk of cotton emerged, curved and solid crimson like a sickle cell. I choked back a sob while water and blood swirled around my feet and into the drain.

I should have said something, then, there. I should have shrieked, thrown things, slapped his face, torn the curtains, burned the building to the ground.

But I didn't make a sound. Because I knew what he would say. So he got a little carried away. I was his wife, wasn't I? And anyway, I hadn't objected.

Lighten up.

I scrape the last of the milk foam from the bottom of the little white cup. It's sweet with a hint of bitterness at the finish. The shadows of the table legs have stretched and thinned, marking the hour to switch from coffee to wine. Tables around me are filling with old men sipping grappa and teenagers ordering their first evening spritz.

It hadn't been strictly ethical to look up Alberto's home address in Symbal's client database. But after Preston's tornado-like destruction of everything in his path, I'd felt entitled to this one small transgression. I'd scribbled the number, street, and town onto the back of an old receipt that I'd folded twice and tucked into my wallet before Tessa escorted me out.

"Can I get you anything else, *signorina*?" The waiter smiles down at me, a black tray balancing on his tented fingers. I return his smile and think, not for the first time, that he must know where Alberto is. The man is a celebrity now, and this is a small town. With a simple question, I could put an end to this desperate crusade. The idea exhilarates me for one thrilling heartbeat, then fear clamps down. This chair, that door; without them I'm lost.

"No, *grazie*."

I stack a trio of coins on the table, but I don't get up. The street buzzes 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 close my eyes. Someone is playing a violin in the piazza and the sound stretches through the air like taffy. An undefined

amount of time passes. The wobbling, imperfect, beautiful notes hit me in waves until I almost cry. It would be so much better if I could.

A voice pierces the suffusion of sound. I wonder if I am dreaming. The staccato words, too fast for me to understand, are punctuated by the clattering wheels of a suitcase. I don't need to turn around to know it's Alberto. But, anyway, I do. He's wearing a bluetooth in his ear and big, square sunglasses. His hair is slicked back, his white linen shirt matches his pants. The teenagers at the table beside me elbow each other, lift their phones to snap a photo. He doesn't notice. A cigarette balances on the edge of his lip, forcing him to speak from the side of his mouth. I told him so many times that he should quit. Each time he'd say the same thing. *Lasciati andare*.

Lighten up.

At the door he pauses and fishes for the key in his pocket. Then, in one sweeping movement, he opens the door and passes through. I feel the subtle quake of it shutting, like a train passing beneath my feet.

The notebook lies open in front of me. One by one, I tear out each inked sheet of paper. I crumple them into little balls and toss them in the ashtray. When I'm finished, only ruffled strips of frayed pulp and blank pages remain. I tuck the notebook into my bag, stand up, and walk down the cobbled street toward the piazza.

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