

June was Fierce, Simple

Wednesday was Discovery

It was really Wednesday going on Thursday. Pietro went out in the middle of the night, not to see the stars, but to water his plants. He wasn't aware of the stars, not yet. He tripped over the hose. He swore the way his mother taught him. As he sat in the dirt, smacking dust from his slacks, he looked up and noticed that indeed there were stars, many of them.

He'd never been in love. At least he'd never felt the thing he expected love to feel like.

Most of the time he didn't fit into the world properly. Even in public places—where other people went about their business as if they were the only ones who mattered—even then it seemed he had no right to be there.

Outside at night, when it was quiet and there was nothing he could think to need—no money, no company, no time—he was at home. When there was solitude, he felt himself.

It was out there, under the just-discovered stars, over the garden hose, that he saw her. How he'd never noticed her before after nearly thirty years of living next door, he couldn't imagine. Perhaps she'd just moved in. Perhaps she was not real. But she was sewing something in her lap, eyes squinting and fingers needling. In and out, in and out. Pietro watched her through her kitchen window, that awkward square of light that lends itself to voyeurism, illuminating the inside and keeping what prowls outside in darkness.

He kept watching. In and out. In and out. It was all coming together, there in her lap. It could have been a dress or a curtain. The curls and folds draped over her knees. Her hair, a wandering gray braid, tumbled over her shoulder.

Pietro wished he had more plants to water. He thought, wouldn't life be better with more tomatoes, more lettuce. More time in the backyard with the water trickling from the hose at his side. More gray braid trailing over shoulder, breast, hip.

He wished, then, that he knew what she was piecing together with such intention, such obviously perfect stitches.

Thursday was Delicious

It was June and the squashes were blossoming. The hot, dry landscape of northern New Mexico was not so different from the one in southern Italy where Pietro grew up. There he'd learned to cultivate other kinds of plants—mostly trees. Cherry, lemon, lime, olive. The Russian olives that grew in this region were much different, practically considered a weed. They'd grow anywhere, even where other plants said, *no thank you*.

He snipped the delicate squash flowers from the vine with his shears and laid them gently in a basket. The midday sun was hot, but it was a sacrifice he had to make for this particular harvest. It killed him to feel the dryness of the earth under the poor, searching fingers of his plants. Draping a cloth over the blossoms, he placed them in a dark corner of the kitchen.

He saved them for sunset.

And when it came, he mixed ricotta cheese, honey, and cinnamon together in a bowl. One at a time, he peeled apart each flower's petals and spooned the mixture inside, then folded the

petals back together with a twirl to keep them closed. He dipped them in egg, then rolled them in breadcrumbs and added them to a sizzling pan of olive oil.

Pietro waited for the cheese to begin seeping and for the breadcrumbs to turn a crisp, golden brown. And just before the wafts of smoke began to tickle the fire alarm, he plucked them from the pan with a pair of tongs and laid them to dry on a paper towel.

In Italy, when he was a boy and his mother was cooking, he would sit at the kitchen table, polite, pretending to do his homework. What he was really doing, though, was waiting. He wrote in the margins of his notebook each step she took, each ingredient she used. He strained his neck to see if she was measuring out a half cup or a third while he waited for her to ask him for help.

She didn't. While he wished and willed her to turn around and request some service of him, he did not let the time go by wasted. He busied himself with the task of taking notes.

This was how he could say his mother taught him how to cook. A proper Italian mama.

Sometimes, when he looked back at the near indecipherable scribbles of his childhood—when he'd learned exactly no math in the process—he was struck with overwhelming memories. When he might have written something like “knead the dough for ten minutes,” instead he'd put down something else, like “squeeze the dough with your fingers and palms, using all of your muscles and force, until sweat begins to drip from your forehead.”

These directions provoked vivid images, but the specific motions that he so carefully recorded didn't translate to delicious cooking once he got to the kitchen himself, as a young man living alone and as an old man still living alone. Perhaps somewhere in this disconnect—between want and fulfillment, between gesture and truth—it could be located: the reason he'd stayed alone all his sixty-two years.

Pietro took the squash blossoms out to the backyard in the dark. The air was cool again and the stars had returned. The moon curved at just the right angle to make him wonder if he could get into astronomy. Or astrology? What was it about the sign the moon was under on a given day?

These musings were for him alone, though he wasn't without entertainment. The square window of light beckoned from the neighboring yard, and he made quick work of watering the plants, anxious to sit and eat and observe.

And so, alone in the dark, after watering his plants hurriedly and taking great care not to trip over or swear at anything, he sat in a lawn chair under the moon and devoured bloom after tender bloom. It was still, clear. Which is how he saw that, folding herself over the cloth in her lap, the woman had begun to cry.

Friday was Misunderstanding

The following night, *it* was there. Pietro couldn't tell what it was, but it slumped in the tree on the other side of the fence—lumpy and brown and maybe the size of a small bear cub—since he ventured outside. The tomato beds, the eggplant, the zucchini and summer squash. He watered them all, and after each row he looked up to check on it, and it—the *thing*—was still there. It hadn't moved at all, as far as he could tell.

The cottonwood was just on the other side of the fence and sprawling, some of its branches as thick around as Pietro's own waist.

When he saw the darkened shape of the woman next door, standing outside as well, he realized he'd stopped paying attention to the hose and created a pool around his feet. In the

moonlight, he could barely see the dark outline of squash leaves floating on its glistening surface.

She stood with her hands on her hips, her neck arched and her long, thin braid nearly reaching the curve of her lower back.

“Psst,” he said, wanting to get her attention and a little afraid that he might. “Psst.”

She turned in his direction and leaned forward, her fingers clutching the top of the coyote fence as she peered into the darkness.

“What is it?” she said, pointing above her.

Pietro shrugged, then realized she probably couldn’t see such subtle movements in the dark.

The woman had a youthful silhouette. He couldn’t quite understand how he’d gone all his sixty-two years without ever feeling that anticipation, that desire to be in the presence of another human being. Male or female, platonic or sexual—he’d never felt it. But now he found himself invigorated by the thought that eventually they might exchange over-the-fence glances and gestures in the daylight.

The curiosity of what he was feeling and why he was feeling it was likely what prompted him to make his first mistake.

“If you ever want to come over here,” he said, “and talk about anything.”

The woman backed away from the fence. She turned away and said, “What do you mean by that?”

“I just mean, you don’t need to be alone at night. Or sad.”

“What makes you think I’m sad?” she asked. “Or alone, for that matter?”

Pietro shrugged again, imperceptibly.

He wanted to say something more, or to explain himself better, but he didn't know how to say what he imagined was appropriate. He had no experience.

They stood there for what seemed to him a long while. So much beautiful, awkward silence, and this creature huddled in a tree that was neither in his yard nor hers. There but not theirs.

Saturday was Confession

“Do you think it's alive?” she asked the following night. “The monster?”

This took Pietro by surprise. It had hardly done anything to deserve the title of monster. The creature had moved only slightly since the first time he saw it. It crawled a little farther up the branch, maybe when no one was looking. Or maybe so slowly that its movements were unnoticeable.

The woman didn't mention Pietro's awkward question of the previous night. Her eyes, it seemed, cared only to discern the true shape and vitality of the creature.

“Because if it is,” she went on, “it's probably dying. We're sitting here like studious observers when it's more than likely in distress. I think we need to save it.”

Pietro squinted into the dark. “Has it moved?” he asked, doubting his earlier conviction that it had surreptitiously shimmied up its branch. It very well could have been in the same place the entire time, his memory betraying him.

“What if,” she said, “it's a sloth. Maybe it escaped from a zoo somewhere, because I don't think they're native here. It's in an unnatural environment and scared.”

“And hungry,” Pietro added.

Without speaking, they both advanced toward the tree, slow and tentative, as if once they reached its thick base, the monster might choose that moment to suddenly drop to the ground and devour them.

The territory beyond their fences seemed to blur into a shadowy orange with black smudges of juniper bushes scattered here and there. It was an open, wild place.

They tilted their heads back.

“Maybe we should come back when there’s some daylight,” Pietro suggested.

“Okay,” she said. “And maybe try to coax it down. Or at the very least bring something long to poke it with.”

“Maybe,” Pietro said. “Maybe you could sew something, like a sack, so we can capture it.”

The woman rose, on her tippy toes, to see over the coyote fence posts. “Have you been watching me?” she asked. “How do you know I sew? How would you know if I was sad?”

Pietro scolded himself for so carelessly revealing himself.

“It isn’t like that,” he said. “I was admiring you. Not spying. And I’ve only seen you these past few nights. Just before *that* arrived. And then we met.” He threw his thumb in the direction of the lumpy probably-not-a-sloth.

“It’s kind of frightening,” she said.

“No,” he said almost on top of her words. His eagerness startled even him.

“Oh,” she said. “I see. You’re the kind of person who isn’t afraid of anything, is that it?”

“Of course not.”

“Then tell me. What are you afraid of?”

He paused and thought, but not very hard.

“Okay,” he said. “Imagine this: you’re walking down the street one day,” he said. “And suddenly the cops are on you. They’re cuffing you, taking you in to the station, asking you questions about a crime. Let’s say it’s a murder. Of course, you don’t know anything about it. You’re innocent. But somehow your identity has been mixed up with someone else’s. Or worse, someone’s framed you, made the authorities believe it was you. People have spent years in prison for crimes they didn’t commit. How does it happen? I don’t know, but I know that if I interact with as few people as possible, then the chances of something like that happening are considerably slimmer.”

“So you’re afraid of being wrongfully accused?”

He realized how stupid it sounded, but since he’d thrown it out there and it was very nearly what he meant to say, he had to follow through.

“Kind of,” he said. “The point is, the less time you spend out in the world with others, the fewer chances others will have to swindle you.”

“Hmm,” the woman said. “Well that part, at least, makes sense. My name, if you don’t already know, is Luisa.”

Sunday was Unavoidable

It was the first day in a long time that he’d woken up with a sense of purpose. Usually that sensation came at night, when it was cool and dark and his plants needed him.

But then that feeling was stolen and he was pitiful at hiding his disappointment. It was an unwelcome mix of loneliness and jealousy that he wasn’t used to.

Luisa was apologetic—she'd forgotten that her daughter was coming by to take her to church and then out to brunch with some friends. And then, she told him, by the time they returned it'd be hotter than the hinges of hell.

Which was true, and which was why he stayed inside most of the day and let what was left of the squash blossoms wilt on the vine. He sat in the kitchen window, drinking iced tea and watching hummingbirds hover around the red trumpet flowers that spilled over the adobe wall. In all the time he'd been in New Mexico, the lightweight creatures had never made sense to him, their energy and the bizarre rotation of their wings. In Italy they'd had hawk moths, which were not quite the same and looked a little too mischievous.

In his aunt's house in Sardinia, there was a small table in front of each window with a bird identification book on it. His aunt owned seven different pairs of binoculars and had journals overflowing the bookshelves, all filled with notes on the birds' peculiar behaviors and when they occurred and what the weather had been like that morning or afternoon or evening.

He would flip through them and then walk through the house with a pair of binoculars swinging from his neck, spouting off a list of the Latin names he could remember.

The hummingbirds he watched from the kitchen were graceful, though somewhat frantic. *If only*, he thought. *To have that kind of energy.*

It felt like a betrayal to Luisa to investigate the creature alone, so he occupied his time with other pursuits. It was hard, though, remembering what he used to do before she was part of his life. Only days ago.

He lumbered out to the mailbox, slow and with much deliberation, as if intending for anyone watching to know the effort this required of him. When he found the box empty, he closed it calmly and lumbered back. He went into the flower garden—a narrow patch of dirt

between the adobe wall outside his kitchen and the front of his house. He hoped the hummingbirds would zip around him like the hawk moths had when he was a boy, under his arms, over his shoulders. Past his ears and in front of his nose.

But they disappeared when he inserted himself into their world. In their light restlessness, they fled.

Monday was Invention

“Is it fur?” she asked. “Or feathers?” Pietro held the binoculars up to his eyes and blinked. The more he twisted and adjusted them, the blurrier things seemed to get.

They stood on his back deck to get a better view. They figured the distance would grant them perspective.

“It’s at an awkward angle. There’s a branch in the way. It looks... soft, I guess. Like fur, but I don’t see a tail. Or a head for that matter. It could be feathers. But I don’t know. It’s still really hard to make out. Christ, it could be neither.”

“We’re going to have to get closer,” Luisa said. “And we’ll need a new approach.”

They began by piecing together the dead Cholla cactus branches. They’d parted and met again on the other side of their fences, under the enormous cottonwood. Luisa used one of her stronger yarns—a deep maroon that was rough and that she said would probably only amount to an itchy, unappreciated scarf anyway. Weaving the yarn through the hollows in the cactus stalks, and reinforcing the contraption with a broom, yardstick, and old television antenna, they finally pulled together one long pole—twenty, maybe twenty-five feet long.

Pietro stood behind Luisa and together they lifted it off the ground. It wobbled, teetered. It knocked on stray branches going up, but came very near the creature before it cracked and folded in half. Luisa dropped her contributing grip, which left Pietro grappling with the awkward weight before finally letting the whole thing fall to the ground.

“Unbelievable,” Luisa said. Then she cursed under her breath, which made Pietro’s heart somersault. She left the tree and slipped through the gate of her own coyote fence. She disappeared into her house for a few seconds, and when she returned, she didn’t bother coming back all the way. From behind her fence, she threw bottles up into the branches, aimed at striking the poor, motionless creature.

Pietro ducked.

They were wine bottles, San Pellegrino bottles, clear bottles without any identification on them. They broke against the branches, none of them actually hitting anywhere near their target. Shards of green, brown, and shimmering crystal fell to the base of the tree, and the creature didn’t move at all.

“Get down here!” Luisa screamed. “You stupid thing. How are we supposed to help you if you won’t do your part?”

Tuesday was Departure

Then the next morning, it was gone. Just like that. They didn’t see it move an inch for days, and then suddenly it was as if it had never been there.

Pietro didn’t say what he was thinking, which was, *See? It obviously didn’t need us after all.*

He didn't have to. Luisa had an answer regardless. "Clearly," she said, "It has wandered off into the desert to die. Animals do that."

"Then maybe we should let it," he said. "Maybe that's all it wanted and here we were bothering it the whole time."

She shook her head. She dabbed at her glistening hairline with a handkerchief. "And maybe it was hoping someone would care enough to follow it."

Wednesday was Nocturnal Hunger

They waited until the sun had twisted the sky into scarlet ribbons before meeting at the base of the tree. Luisa was there first, sitting in the scattered mosaic of her broken bottles. Her cream-colored skirt was spread on the ground around her like an unfurled wave. She wore a small backpack and had wound her braid multiple times on the top of her head, creating a tight bun. With a piece of glass, she was carving indecipherable hieroglyphics into the hard earth.

"Before I was born," Luisa said, "my father left Colombia and came to America. He was going to send for my mother later. I was born six months after he left. He never wrote her. He didn't even keep up a pretense, sending sweet missives that eventually tapered off. There just wasn't a single one. I guess one night, that I'm too young to remember, she smashed an antique vase in the backyard. The glass was this swirling blue and white. As a kid, I used to go out there and run my hands over the pieces, embedded in the dirt, grass grown over them. I thought it was put there intentionally, for decoration. But it was just the mess of a stupid girl losing control. And I was a stupid girl too, playing happily in the middle of her sadness."

Pietro bent down and picked up a shard of clear glass, the arc of it absorbing crimson light. He tossed it aside and held out a hand to help her up.

“What people don’t understand,” she said, ignoring his gesture, “is that love is never simple. It always requires more effort than it’s worth to keep the balance. And even when you put in more than your share of the work, it doesn’t guarantee reciprocation. And you still might catch the blame when it doesn’t work out. You could be the most lovable person in the world.”

He hadn’t had any practice for this part. Pietro had no idea how to comfort her, or even if comfort was what she wanted.

“Maybe we should just sit here and watch the sunset. I’ll get us a bottle of wine and we’ll have a nice simple evening under our favorite tree. Newly decorated. I’ve begun learning the constellations. Do you know there’s one named after a slug? Or, more precisely, a ‘naked snail’?”

“I can’t imagine how I missed that one in school,” Luisa said. “You’re talking nonsense. We’re going out after that animal. We need to find out what it is and it probably needs us to save its sorry life.”

Prior to then, they hadn’t made any concrete plans regarding which direction they’d travel first or what they’d bring with them. Pietro sensed that for Luisa, these were not things that naturally flickered across her mind in the first place. For him, it took all he had not to ask her to sit down and draw a map and elect someone as leader of the expedition. He’d secretly made a detailed list of all the items in his backpack, checked old maps of the mesa for where water might be found, and left a note on his kitchen table explaining himself should they not return.

Beyond the tree, the flat, orange earth expanded and broke off into winding canyons. Spiny goathead latched onto their shoes, the stickers finally detaching as Pietro and Luisa found

their way to a dip in the terrain that formed the arroyo. Normally a tiny trickle, the water was moving at a strangely rapid pace, carrying with it orphaned branches and clusters of dried leaves. They had to cross it to get to their starting point.

Pietro balanced on the larger rocks snaking through the shallow current. He extended a hand back for Luisa, who waved him off, shouting, “Get lost. I’m not in the market for a lover!”

On the other side of the arroyo and in the shadow of the mesa, the canyons suddenly looked less impressive. Pietro felt the panic of a game show winner having to choose a door behind which a prize—or no prize—was waiting. “What do you think,” he asked, “about that way?”

Luisa’s gaze drifted directly above them and then swung down over her left shoulder to the setting sun. She seemed to be calculating something. “Okay,” she said simply. “I’m sure it’s good as any.”

The sand was soft and gritty, not like the clay earth Pietro normally dug his hands into. It felt like beach sand, swallowing their shoes with each step. The extra effort sent a jolt springing up into Pietro’s legs, a liveliness he remembered from childhood. He felt downright energetic.

The path was serpentine layers of compressed rock, the walls three times their height and narrowing in on them. Everything was touched with flecks of mica, glittering answers to the quarter moon. Luisa kept reaching out and breaking off chunks of the softer pieces, the ones barely still hanging on. Then she hurled them directly back at the cliff and they exploded into luminous dust.

Pietro wondered what might be nestled in each dark, cavernous curve of rock. He knew there were animals out there—coyotes, rattlesnakes. He was briefly and inadvertently startled by

the possibility of encountering something wild and unknown, and then he reminded himself that was why they were out there in the first place. In search of that very thing.

After more than half an hour of walking, the only plant life they saw were low sagebrush and juniper. Nothing new until the abandoned car at the bottom of a ditch, wedged between two intimidating aspens. It was rusted and sagging to one side, but at one time, they could tell, it had been shining white and muscled, a voluptuous maiden bathed in moonlight.

Luisa scrambled down the crumbling cliff, six feet to where dried grass offered her something with which to ease herself the rest of the way. Pietro followed, a little annoyed at the diversion to their plan, and watched as Luisa traced over the cursive letters with a looping finger along the back end: *Barracuda*. Neither of them could come up with a good explanation for why, or even a plausible how, the car would be that far up into the hills. Dropped from a helicopter. Washed there by a flash flood. Had someone been in it at the time, or was it just deposited there while backs were turned?

Luisa opened the passenger side door. It moaned dully. “Take me somewhere,” she said, nodding toward the driver’s side. She got inside and began cranking down the window. Pietro jogged over to the other side and slid into the driver’s seat. The car rocked. He rolled his window down too.

“There,” he said. “Imagine this: we’re in Italy. I’ve just picked you up. We’re going to see *Nights of Cabiria*. The moon is shining and we’re cruising along the coast of Sardinia. You’ll have to do some imagining with the last part.”

Luisa unwound her tight, braided bun. Her long, wavy hair glowed. She shook it like a woman in a shampoo commercial and leaned out the window to inhale the salty sea air. “I’ve got that covered,” she said.

Pietro grabbed the wheel and ran his hands along the bumpy leather, full circle. He adjusted the rear view mirror, pressed buttons on the dash. Had there been a moment like this in his younger life, he imagined his next moves would come to him.

Or perhaps it was too late.

Pietro tried to remember their mission. Why they'd come out here.

They heard the mountain lion before they saw her. A metal-bending thump on the roof of the Plymouth, and then four heavy paws sauntering down the windshield. It continued down the hood and leapt to the ground where the beam of their headlights would have hit. She turned and scraped her claws on the aspen beside them and then climbed, looking down on them. Her eyes eager and sparkling.

“Do you think that’s it?” Luisa asked. “Our poor, sad little creature?”

“It doesn’t look very sad to me,” Pietro said. “Or little.”

They sat, suddenly aware that they couldn’t go anywhere. Not until she left them. There was panic first, and when it subsided, a sense of disorientation was left behind. Pietro felt the presence of the cat above them and of Luisa beside him. He wanted both to relish in the danger, and to return to his simple, quiet life.

“I was watching you, you know, because I’ve never loved anyone enough to break something,” Pietro said. “A violent sort of love.”

“I have,” Luisa said. “Too many times.”

“Have you seen the hummingbirds?” he asked. “They’re everywhere suddenly. I ever saw them in Italy. We had hawk moths, and they’d come out to feed on lavender nectar at sunset and sometimes they’d stick around all night. I’d climb out my bedroom window and sit in the middle of the garden and close my eyes and hold my arms out and wait. I had to hold my breath to keep

from giggling when they landed on me, thinking I could feed them. Anyway, that's how I imagine love to be. The friendliest of creatures. A sort of uncontrollable laughter."

"My mother called them demons," Luisa said. "The hawk moths. We have them here too, you haven't seen them? 'Those demons,' she'd say, 'they'll steal the honey straight from a bee hive. They have no sense of boundaries. No fear.' But I always like them. They've got something figured out, the way they move quickly from side to side while hovering and feeding—it's how they escape the predators that hide and wait within the flowers."

Leaning forward, Luisa strained to see the animal waiting in the tree.

"You're too kind a person, you know," she said. "It's not like laughter at all. What it feels like is this: just after she's caught you and her jaws are wrapped around your neck. Her teeth sinking into your flesh more slowly than you can bear, a little deeper, until you're not sure there's any of you left to hold. Something rips. She takes the parts of you she can use, then leaves the rest for whoever comes later. And there's a little less of you each time."

The branches of the tree creaked under the animal's weight and for the first time Pietro was truly afraid of what they'd found, but then the lion bristled and began sniffing the air. Her ears flattened. She smelled something—maybe a deer or a creature even less majestic. Just something alive. Worth pursuing and tasting. A fraction of a second and the predator was on the chase, vaulting out of the tree and out of sight. Luisa's eyes followed the last glimpses of it through the windshield.

"It's just hunger," she said. "A fierce hunger, but a simple one."