

2012

The Year of Santa Rosa

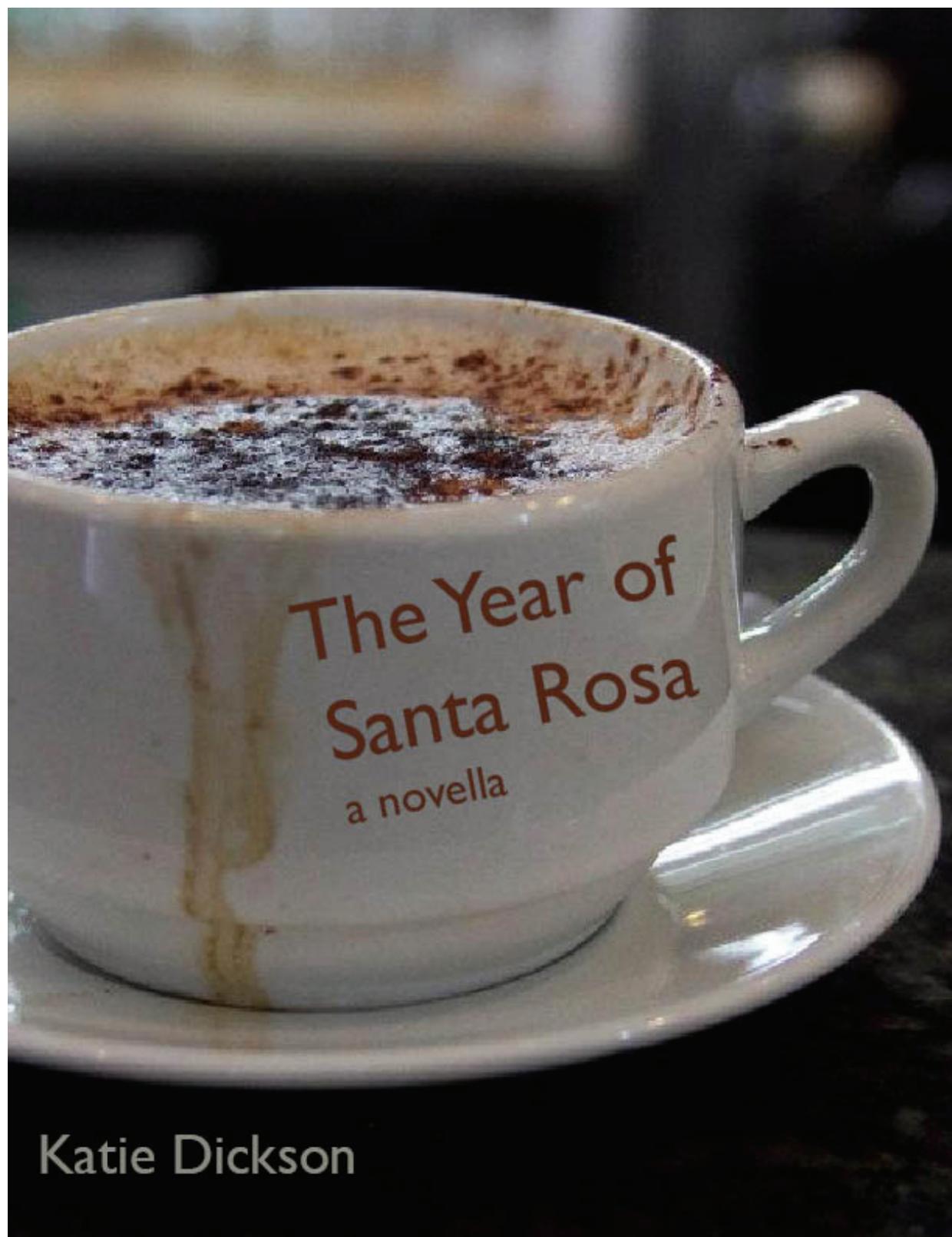
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Introduction

I have always loved Italy. My heritage drew me in, but the food got me hooked, and the language made me fall in love. The natural next steps were a trip, and more classes, and a semester abroad. My semester in Lazio was everything I could have hoped for, from out-of-the-classroom programs to my incredible host family, and my experiences as a real member of an Italian community were the initial inspirations for this project.

From there came the books, what everyone else thought about foreigners in Italy and surviving culture shock and the *why* of traveling. But for all I love Ernest Hemingway and Alain de Botton, none of these sources really captured the way I felt about Italy, and the small communities of Lazio in particular. I adored every moment of my stay in Italy, enchanted by the culture and the people, but I will admit to sometimes being simply overwhelmed by the Italianness of it all – days when I was exhausted from spending eight hours at the kitchen table or just wanted the man in the *tabacchi* shop to understand which stamps I was trying to buy.

But I didn't want to write just another book about culture shock or being a stranger in a strange land, so I drew particularly on my experiences as an agnostic in a Catholic country, the strange things I felt visiting the great cathedrals of Italy. Barely a week into my semester, I had the fortune of witnessing the *Macchina di Santa Rosa* just down the road, and I latched onto the strangeness and wonder of it. What could it be like, to be one of those people, so caught up in all the legend and lore of these traditions?

I realized I could never know, because I could never be *from Viterbo*, and that was of crucial importance. And so Cal Benson was born.

The Year of Santa Rosa

a novella by

Katie Dickson

Cobblestones

Aunt Lucille arrived in town unannounced, a whirl of Mediterranean sun and fine leather crunching up our front steps. Lacie and I peeked into the kitchen when we heard Mom open the door. We had never seen the strange woman before. “Lucille,” Mom stammered. She still stood in the doorway, holding our baby cousin and blocking the woman’s entry into the house. Our visitor was tall and thin, with grey curls and a large purple handbag. She had a smile on and was peering around Mom’s shoulder, as though she was looking for an invitation.

“Of course,” Mom said, noticing Lucille’s glances. She looked around the room but didn’t seem to notice us. “Come in. Of course.” Her tone had changed, gone colder, and Lacie and I cringed instinctively. It was the tone she used when she wanted us to feel guilty even without being scolded. We wondered who this woman was, to have earned that tone.

Aunt Lucille came into the kitchen and set her purse down on one of the kitchen chairs. Mom closed the door behind her and followed her back into the house. “Kids,” she said, still slowly, as she spotted us. “This is Aunt Lucille.”

Lacie and I looked at each other, unsure whether we were supposed to emerge from our corner. Mom kept looking at us, and Lacie finally shoved me out in front of her into the kitchen.

“Lucille,” Mom went on, “Cal and Lacie.”

The baby was getting fussy in Mom’s arms. “Joanna, why don’t you go put her down for a nap?” Aunt Lucille said, “and I’ll get to know these two.” She looked straight at me. I tried to elbow Lacie in the side, to transfer some of my terror, but she swatted my arm down.

“Hi, Aunt Lucille,” Lacie said bravely. And politely – Lacie was always polite. She extended her hand toward the stranger. Aunt Lucille shook it gently, smiling. Then she turned to me.

“And you must be Cal.” I nodded, and reluctantly reached out to shake her hand. “How old are you now, Cal?”

“Eight,” I said quietly. “Lacie’s older. She’s ten.”

“Ten already,” Aunt Lucille murmured, as though she had met us before. She had hung her purse on the back of a chair, and now she sat down in it, still murmuring vaguely to herself.

Lacie and I exchanged glances.

The baby cried in the living room, and we could hear Mom cooing softly to her. It seemed to shake Aunt Lucille out of her trance. “Is that your new cousin in there?” she asked us.

We nodded.

Aunt Lucille looked at us more shrewdly, as if suddenly realizing we weren’t what she expected. “Why don’t you two come sit here at the table with me?” We were never allowed to sit at the table with Company. “I want to hear all about you.”

We hesitated a moment, and then Lacie climbed into a chair across from Aunt Lucille. I followed suit. “Are you sure you want to hear all about us?” Lacie asked suspiciously. “Mostly people want to hear about Bethany. She’s the new baby, after all.”

“But she’s just a baby, isn’t she?” Aunt Lucille replied, her eyes twinkling. “Babies don’t do many interesting things, do they? I bet you two are up to lots of interesting things. What have you done lately?”

It was at this moment that Lacie and I revised our first impression of Aunt Lucille. Here, finally, was an adult who *understood*. We were extremely interesting children, much more so than the babies that were always cooed over despite accomplishing absolutely nothing.

“Last night, we caught seventeen fireflies,” I announced proudly, no longer afraid of this new, *wonderful* relative. “It’s our new record.”

Aunt Lucille was appropriately impressed, clasping her hands together the way old women do, and leaning over them across the table toward us. “Seventeen! And what did you do with them?”

“We let them go,” Lacie answered. I stuck my tongue out at her. I had not agreed with that decision.

“Mmm, fireflies,” Aunt Lucille repeated softly, apparently not noticing our antics. “Do you know, it’s been forty years since I last saw a firefly?”

Forty years was an incomprehensibly long time to us. It couldn’t possibly be true. “You’re lying!” we accused her.

Aunt Lucille laughed. “There aren’t fireflies in Italy,” she said.

We gasped. “Why would you want to live in a place with no fireflies?”

“Someday you’ll understand,” Aunt Lucille said.

We weren’t sure about that, but it was nice of an adult to acknowledge that we were real people and would understand someday.

“Someday you’ll visit,” Aunt Lucille said, half-serious. “You should tell your parents that.” She winked at us.

“Oh, I don’t think that’s necessary,” Mom interrupted, suddenly appearing back in the doorway. She was speaking softly (she must have put the baby to sleep), but very sternly. The three of us at the table all recoiled into our chairs.

“Now, Joanna,” Aunt Lucille began.

Mom shook her head brusquely. “No, Lucille, I think that’s quite enough for now.” She glared at her aunt intently, implying that Aunt Lucille had overstepped the boundaries of giving us Ideas. To us, she said later that Aunt Lucille was old and easily confused, and that she had a habit of making promises she couldn’t keep.

“Aw, Mom,” I said, unwisely, even as Lacie kicked my ankle under the table. “Can’t we hear more about where Aunt Lucille lives?”

Aunt Lucille turned to Mom, silent, and Mom tried to control the horror on her face. “Aunt Lucille lives in Italy,” she said tersely. “Very far away, and she’s been there a very long time. No one in the family has heard from her in a very long time.” She looked directly at Aunt Lucille as she said those last words, as though daring her to add on to the explanation.

Aunt Lucille held her gaze for a few moments, then turned back to us with her smile a bit tempered by sadness. “Yes,” she said in a small voice. “This is my first visit in a very long time. I was hoping to change that. I’d like to be more a part of this family again.” She looked at Mom again, who was still standing in the doorway, arms folded. “If you’ll have me.”

I opened my mouth to say of course she could be part of the family, but Lacie kicked me harder.

“Kids,” Mom said, “why don’t you say good-bye to Aunt Lucille, and go upstairs and do your homework?” It was June, only eight days left of school and certainly no homework to be done, but we knew better than to argue when we were being dismissed.

“Bye, Aunt Lucille,” we said, presenting ourselves for the obligatory hugs from our distant relative. “We’ll visit. Soon.”

We passed out of the kitchen, past Mom, who was shaking her head very discontentedly. Aunt Lucille watched us leave, waving, defeated. She knew we weren’t going to be visiting her any time soon. Once we were out of sight, we heard Mom slide a chair out from the table and sit down with a sigh.

“All right, Lucille,” she said, losing her patience. “What are you doing here?”

“Come on, Cal,” Lacie said, tugging me up the stairs. “We shouldn’t eavesdrop.”

I hung back as long as I could, but Lacie nearly dragged me up the stairs chin-first. I was not particularly fond of her conscience. It was overactive, if you ask me.

Upstairs, I followed Lacie into her room. “It isn’t fair,” I complained. “Aunt Lucille is nice. I don’t see why we had to go upstairs.”

“Can’t you tell?” Lacie asked, know-it-all as always. Mom doesn’t like her. She doesn’t want us to be friends.”

This made no sense to me. Mom always wanted us to be nice to all the old relatives, even though most of them reminded me of old couches, lumpy and sagging with a strange, musty smell to them. Those other old ladies never remembered how old I was, and usually got my name wrong, and still I had to sit in the kitchen with them and be polite and answer all of their boring questions, even though they asked all the same things last year. It didn’t seem fair that this one great-aunt (Lacie said that’s what she was, really, because she was Mom’s aunt and not ours), who was actually nice to us and interesting was also the only relative we weren’t allowed to like back.

Lacie watched me as I mulled all of this over in my head. “Don’t get any ideas,” she warned. “Mom doesn’t like her. So you can’t either.”

“Yes, I can,” I said. “I can like whoever I want to.” I folded my arms for effect. “Mom can’t tell me, and she can’t tell you, either. Don’t you like her, Lacie?”

Lacie was torn. Our mother’s favorite, even though they always denied that, Lacie felt obligated to align herself with Mom’s rules. But she couldn’t deny the truth, which was that Aunt Lucille was awesome. She was, in fact, way better than any other relative, and she was forbidden, which only increased her appeal. “Okay, fine,” Lacie admitted finally, “I like her. But don’t tell Mom,” she added quickly.

I pinkie-swore.

“Now it’s our secret,” Lacie said, satisfied. She pulled her globe off her desk and set it on the floor between us. “Do you know where we live?” she asked me.

I pointed to the small blue marker dot she had drawn on the globe, to correspond with our house.

Lacie nodded. “And this –” she spun the globe and pointed again, to Italy. “This is where Aunt Lucille lives.” She doodled absently with her finger over the contours of the globe, up and down the Apennines. “Someday, Cal, we’re going to go there. We’ll visit and we’ll bring her fireflies.”

Miracles

Lucille Carlisle, a young bride in the 1950's, followed her new husband to the naval base in Naples, Italy. It was a grand time for her, a new life on a new continent – I'm sure she was one of those bright and shiny navy wives, the type to host dinner parties and iron her dresses, popular and perfect. She ventured into Italian society with her neighbors, safe in their American navy bubble, practicing their *buongiorinos* and *grazies* with the little boys who carried their shopping bags and opened their taxi doors. These American women sparkled like diamonds in the dust and dirt of southern Italy, shedding lira like skin cells.

But this life wasn't enough for Lucille – she wanted adventure, the “real” Italy. While her husband was at sea, Lucille traveled throughout the country, fearless. She filled her home with souvenirs: Tuscan ceramics, a Sicilian orange tree, Venetian glass vases. She taught herself to cook with olive oil and fresh mozzarella cheese, went alone to learn Italian from the Mafioso pizza chefs down the street. Fewer and fewer navy women invited Lucille to luncheons and parties, confused and frightened by her infatuation.

By the time the navy gave her a folded flag and a pension, there was no going back. Lucille dressed herself in respectable black, boarded a train going north, and rode it until she found a town small enough and Italian enough to make her new home. Her neighbors at the base were scandalized, ashamed to admit they had invited that woman into their homes so naively. The orange tree was left as a scar in the front yard, until the navy realtor had it dug up and thrown away before it could scare away any more potential buyers. Back home, Lucille's family was furious. If she didn't come home on the next boat, they told her, she needn't bother ever coming back at all.

She didn't.

But after her second, Italian, husband died, Lucille started reaching back across the Atlantic. Old women regret abandoning their families, but it did her no good. Mom and her siblings never

forgave Aunt Lucille for staying in Italy when their mother died – “her own sister’s funeral!” – so Aunt Lucille turned her attention to us, the younger generation, presumably less hostile.

“If you ever need to get away,” she wrote in a letter Lacie and I agreed never to show Mom, “you’re always welcome here. Believe me, I know all about pissing off the family. And besides, it’s Italy – you’ll love it!”

Well, here I am, but I’m not sure I love it. I’ve developed my first migraine, waiting in line for half an hour at the customer service desk at Leonardo da Vinci – Fiumicino International Airport.

By “line,” of course, I mean “clump of people,” and by “waiting,” I mean listening to all the complaints of the Italian women who have forced their way to the front of the clump. These contradictory women astound me: dressed to the nines, even just off a plane, with high heels and fancy leather suitcases, and yet no calm, respectable voices to go along with any of that. The woman in the front of the clump is shouting at the customer service representative, her little kid, and the woman trying to shove her way in front, all at what the same time. They’re all yelling back at her and at each other, and no one else seems to notice. The clump swells around me. My migraine gets worse.

When I am finally pushed up to the desk, I manage to pull a “*buongiorno*” out of my jet-lagged brain. The man at the desk sighs.

“Can I help you?”

“My luggage isn’t here,” I say, in English, embarrassed. I can feel the Italians watching from behind me. I hand the man my bag check ticket.

He takes the ticket, scans it, and mumbles something to the woman at the desk next to him. “Glacier Park International,” he announces, unconcerned.

“That’s where my bags are?”

The man nods, hands me my ticket back.

“Where is that?”

He sighs again, frustrated that I am still asking him for help. “Kalispell, Montana. United States.” He looks over my shoulder, trying to summon the next customer out of the clump.

I shift myself in between the desk and the most aggressive of the clump. “So, how can I get them here?”

“Signore,” the man at the desk says, in a tone that suggests he does not really want to call me signore, “I don’t know.” He hands me a form. “We will call when it arrive.”

I look down at the form. It’s small, easily lost, and typed with miniscule Italian letters.

The man at the desk has already moved on to someone else, so I take the form and sit down on a bench to the side of the desk.

I manage to fill out the form and squeeze my arm back toward the desk to hand it back.

“Grazie,” I say, trying to smile.

The man ignores me but takes back the form, dropping it onto an already towering stack. I doubt I’ll ever see my luggage again.

Friday arrives hot and sticky, like every day in Viterbo. The Festival of Santa Rosa hasn’t been rained out in seven hundred and fifty years, Aunt Lucille’s neighbor, Signora Ricci, informs me, and that won’t change today. Instead, the city is oppressive, the sun beating down through the humidity (the humidity never stops here, and probably wouldn’t even if it did rain) and heat rising back up off the cobblestones. Signora Ricci instructed me very carefully to keep the shutters closed during the day and open them at night, and I do, but it doesn’t help much, and when I do go out, the streets are lined with houses just like Aunt Lucille’s, all closed up and unfriendly.

It's strange to me that all the houses have shutters than can be closed like this, instead of the plastic ones riveted onto the siding of suburban American houses. These houses can close their eyes, turn inward on themselves, as though they aren't actually watching every move you make in their city. It's at night that the truth comes out: with the shutters thrown open, every sound floats both in and out of every house, carried on the breeze everyone so desperately wants. Friends of Aunt Lucille stream continuously in and out of Signora Ricci's kitchen, craving more of a conversation than they can get from their windows. They sip their coffee, make shopping lists, gawk at me, and ask Signora Ricci whether she thinks I'm "sincere."

I've come out here, found a quiet little corner, with my sketchbook, the one graduation gift my parents gave me. Mom never believed that I wanted to go to art school; she thought I was just following Christie, and when Christie dumped me the day after I got my last rejection letter, I swore never to tell Mom she had been right.

"I don't want to go to community college," I told her, even though I would have settled for anything that looked like progress. "I want to go to art school."

"Well, you didn't get into art school," Mom reminded me, rubbing it in. "So what's your plan now?"

At that moment, I just wanted to make her mad. "I'll take a year off," I decided. "I could go to Italy and stay with Aunt Lucille," I continued, watching my mother's face redden with anger. "She's always inviting everyone."

Mom was speechless.

"You can't stop me," I went on. "I'm eighteen. I can do whatever I want."

"Well, then," Mom managed. "You can pay for it, too."

I think she really expected that to stop me, but I just waited. The day after graduation I cashed all my relatives' checks and bought a one-way ticket to Rome. A week later, here I am, with my sketchbook.

"You're going to Europe," Mom had said, giving me the book, still in denial. "You better fill it up. We're letting you run off to Italy –" I thought the implication of permission was a little overgenerous – "but you bet your ass you're going to college when you get back."

Christie hadn't been accepted at RISD, her first choice. I look at the blank pages in the sketchbook; maybe I can build a portfolio here, all inspired by Italy, real worldly stuff, and then get in there next year. That would show her. Bitch.

Now I've found a secluded little corner of the street, but I don't even know where to start. Staircases, of course; this city – at least this old section – seems to be built of staircases, going up and down and in and out of cramped little buildings all around me. Some of them have wooden railings, some just flowerpots, some nothing at all to keep you from toppling off the side into the street below. Those are the most difficult to draw – there's no way to keep them from looking stupid, hanging down from doorways into the street. They look unfinished.

I set my sketchbook down on the step beside me and check my watch: 10:20am. I'm running out of time to get a cappuccino – that's a lesson I learned Day One. The café that I frequent (they call it a "bar") is a couple of blocks away, and the morning barista is a friend of Aunt Lucille's. I know this because Aunt Lucille left me a note recommending that I go there for my coffee; Aunt Lucille herself is in Milan. Apparently her niece is having a baby and it's taking longer than expected, so in the meantime I've been left in the care of Signora Ricci downstairs.

I resented being "taken care of," so I went to the café on my first afternoon, alone, ordered a cappuccino, and immediately announced myself (again) as an outsider. Manuela, the barista,

looked at me closely, placed an espresso on the counter in front of me, and said very clearly, “*Non prendere mai un cappuccino così tardi.*” Never order a cappuccino this late.

I certainly haven’t since, and I’m running out of time today. I tuck my pencils and my sketchbook under my arm and head off down the street to the bar. The heat hits me as soon as I stand up out of the shade, and I find myself strangely homesick for the cool, crisp Adirondack air.

Then I remember I’m in Europe, and I set out for my coffee.

“Ciao, Manuela,” I say. “*Un cappuccino?*” I smile my most charming smile at her.

Manuela nodded. “Just in time, *signor Cal,*” she teases as she starts the coffee brewing. I set my sketchbook on the counter and she gestures at it with her chin. “*Artista?*”

I shrug. “*Provo.*” I try. I wish my Italian consisted of more than weakly constructed one-word sentences. I don’t have a personality in Italian. I look at my book while Manuela froths the milk in my cappuccino. I try to be an artist.

“*Eccolo.*” Manuela hands me my cappuccino and watches me sip it.

“Hm?” I ask her after a moment. “What is it?”

Manuela shrugs and tilts her chin toward my sketchbook again. “What do you draw?”

I hesitate, unsure about showing her my sketches. “Just things.” I finish my cappuccino and set it back down on the counter, sliding my hand back onto my sketchbook protectively.

Manuela draws back behind the counter, still watching me. “That’s my husband’s shirt,” she says. “It suits you better.”

Maybe that’s a compliment, but it makes me extremely uncomfortable. I try to pull the sleeves longer, and nod at Manuela uneasily. She sighs, taking the empty cappuccino cup away with her. She looks disappointed. I glance down at my hand on my book, trying to reconsider. The Italian language does not include a word for “privacy,” and that’s a hard thing to adjust to. I

take my sketchbook over to a table in the corner, empty, like all the others, and open a new page. Drawing is easier than talking.

I can hear bells ringing somewhere nearby; a church service must have ended. Soon the bar will be filling up with people stopping for coffee on the way home. I anchor myself more securely at my table, spreading my book out open to take up more space and discourage more curious eyes.

I recognize a few people that wander in, friends of Signora Ricci or Aunt Lucille, or both, that I have “met” over the past couple of days. They eye me at my table, hold their glance for a few seconds, then move past me, perplexed looks on their faces. *He’s not sincere*, I can picture them reporting back to Signora Ricci and Aunt Lucille. I don’t even know what that means.

The Riccis are insistent that I should not be alone in a brand new country, constantly dragging me downstairs for meals and company. While I await my luggage, they have filled two dresser drawers with clothes for me, procured from some assortment of neighbors. They fit me strangely, in a way that makes me feel like I’ve been stretched out, and I don’t like wearing the clothes of people I don’t know. I feel awkward and indebted around everyone I meet, especially Signora Ricci, who is shameless. She has brought me every style of underwear she could find, telling me all about the men who own them, and asking me very personal questions about the size of things and whether everything fits me all right. I can’t even get a moment’s peace in Aunt Lucille’s empty apartment.

This week is worse than usual, Signora Ricci’s older daughter, Maria, assures me. Everyone is wound up about the festivities this weekend. She has found me in the café, and insists on taking me for a walk. “You need to get out and see the city,” she says, leading me into a sprawling piazza. “Especially this weekend.” She points to some kind of structure at the entrance of the square, draped in tarps and supported by scaffolding. “*La Macchina di Santa Rosa*,” she

says, waving her arms out in front of her. “Tonight, you’ll see it. One hundred men will carry Santa Rosa across the city.”

Santa Rosa is the patron saint of Viterbo; that much I understand. But I scan my eyes up and down the immense tarp. It looks much too large to be a person, especially one who’s been dead for seven hundred years. I raise my eyebrows skeptically at her, trying to ask her what she means. Maria is patient with me, articulating each word slowly and clearly so that I can repeat my sentences back to her.

“It’s a symbol,” she explains. “A tower, with the relics of Santa Rosa inside. The *facchini* carry it across town by candlelight.” She pauses, then gives up. “You’ll see tonight,” she finishes.

Maria doesn’t say anything about my sketchbook or the fact that I covered it up when I saw her approaching in the café. This could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

The *Macchina* transport takes place at 9pm. The timing pleases me at first; maybe, just maybe, the world won’t be wholly stifling at that hour. And I could use the rest – I’m already exhausted from a week in Italian, and I’ve barely spoken to anyone. This weekend is all celebrations and parties, Maria told me, and it’s going to be a long one. At least it doesn’t start for several hours.

At five-thirty, the Riccis arrive. “Cal?” I can hear them calling through the door. “Cal?” Patience is not highly regarded in Italy.

I peek out through the slats in my bedroom shutters. So much for avoiding the heat with a nighttime event. I put on a new shirt, still uncomfortable, and go to the door. “*Vieni!*” cries a girl, the younger one, whose name I can’t remember. She takes my hand and pulls me downstairs.

When I come into the Riccis' kitchen, I am accosted by a horde of Italians and just as many conversations. Signora Ricci spots me across the room. "Cal!" When the Italians say my name, it always sounds unfinished, like it's waiting for another syllable. *Caldo*, maybe – hot – or *calze*, stockings. Signora Ricci holds up a tiny espresso cup. "*Caffè?*"

I decline her offer politely, and am promptly struck in the back with a chair. The little Ricci boy is carrying it into the kitchen, and his eyes widen when he realizes he has hit me. "*Mi dispiace, mi dispiace,*" the boy repeats. I'm sorry.

I tell him not to worry, and take the chair from him. "Where does it go?" I ask, wishing I could remember his name.

He smiles. "You speak Italian! Why didn't you say so at lunch?" Because too many people talk at once at lunch, I don't say. There's no time for me to process a sentence.

"*Provo,*" I say slowly, unhurried and thus successful.

"*Dove vuoi la sedia, Mamà?*" the boy calls across the kitchen to Signora Ricci.

"*Lasciala li,*" his mother replies. I can't understand a word anyone is saying. It's terrifying.

"*Caffè?*" someone asks me again. I shake my head and excuse myself from the kitchen, not that I think anyone noticed. I slip out the door and back upstairs. I'm drowning.

I have done no research on this place or these people. Lacie would have been ready, the good sibling, expecting the parties and the baby-sitting and the constant crowds. She would have studied the language, been able to participate in conversations. She would have read all about this Santa Rosa business, and she would be excited about it.

Lacie has been planning her "adventure of a lifetime" since she was twelve years old. "Backpacking through Europe," she would say with a dramatic sigh, even before she really understood what backpacking was. Over the years, she has become more practical, building files of potential destinations, sights to see, pros and cons, possible itineraries. She is insanely jealous

that I've made it to Europe first, but she is also horrified. She has always known what I am just beginning to realize: I am not cut out for this kind of traveling.

Climbing the steps away from Signora Ricci's crowded kitchen and into Aunt Lucille's apartment, I am homesick for the first time in my life. Not that I would rather be in Middle-of-Nowhere, New York, stuck in tractor traffic or eating a processed-meat sandwich, but this apartment echoes my loneliness back at me. I feel like an ass, since I know all kinds of people around me are trying to make me feel welcome and less alone, but it doesn't help me, really. I'm not any less alone in the middle of Signora Ricci's conversation than I am in Aunt Lucille's empty living room.

In my bedroom, I open the window, the screen, the shutters. I lean my head out the window a bit, hoping for a breeze, trying to clear my head. It's useless. The world outside is stifling. People seem to be sprouting from the cobblestones, dropping from balconies into the streets. I have no idea how Viterbo could possibly contain this many people. These tight shirts are cutting off the circulation to my brain, making me hallucinate. I've only hallucinated once, a result of a scary-high fever when I was five; I thought my dad was Elmo, and I still felt better than I do right now.

"*Ciao*," says a voice from the doorway.

I turn around; it's the Ricci boy.

"*È me, Giancarlo*." He thought I forgot who he was, which I hadn't, but at least I don't have to ask his name again.

"Cal," I say. I ought to be polite, even though this child has followed me into my bedroom. I add a "*piacere*." Nice to meet you.

"Are you ready?"

No. Do I look ready? "Should I be?"

Giancarlo nods. “We have to see the parade! And we want a good spot.” He looks at me, still standing by the window. “Why did you leave?”

“Just taking a minute,” I tell him. “Wasn’t the parade yesterday?”

I know the parade was yesterday; I saw it. There’s been something every damn day for this festival, and I’m going crazy. Maybe if I had my own pants on, or a cup of coffee larger than a peanut. But I can’t take it – this place is more ridiculous by the minute.

“That was the big parade. This is the parade for the *Macchina*.”

I nod, as though I understand the distinction. I don’t even have the energy to try anymore.

“And we have to get a good spot before it starts!” Giancarlo is staring at me intently, as though he can sense my apathy. Like a dog. “So are you ready?”

“I will be in a minute,” I tell him.

Giancarlo narrows his eyes, suspicious, but eventually nods with approval. “Okay.”

He bounds out of the room and I rub my eyes. It’s going to be a long night. A long weekend. I take a preemptive aspirin and return to the Riccis’ kitchen.

“Ready for tonight?” Maria asks me, placing an espresso into my hands. I don’t argue anymore. “You’ll love it.”

I stir sugar into my coffee, watching the crystals disappear into the dark brown liquid.

“Sure?” I say, trying to be agreeable.

“*Buonissimo!*” she pats me on the shoulder. “You’re coming around.” She winks, excited. Friendships happen very quickly here.

I’m intimidated, but I smile anyway. “*Sto provando*.” I’m trying. Still. Again.

“Your first transport.” Signora Ricci joins into the conversation, standing next to her daughter. They stare me down. “You’ve never seen anything like it.”

I'm not so sure I'm really missing anything, seeing as no one has managed to properly explain the point of this thing, but I don't dare say that out loud, so I nod. I find that is generally an appropriate response.

"You're an artist, yes?" Signora Ricci continues. I nod again, even though I'm slightly concerned that that information has already gone from the café to this family. "You'll really love the *Macchina*. It'll give you something to draw for weeks," she predicts.

Maria takes the espresso cups from me and her mother and begins moving through the kitchen with her sister, collecting the rest of them. "Ready?" Signora Ricci asks me again.

I say nothing, but try to absorb some of her enthusiasm into a smile. Giancarlo appears right behind her.

"Ready?" he asks me.

That's really the question of the night, and it's getting old. "Let's go," I tell him finally. Let's get this over with. He grabs me by the wrist and leads me out in the front of the group.

We descend the stairs to the street, and the sun begins to bake us as soon as we emerge from the shade of the building. The streets are filled with people already, even more than when I looked down ten minutes ago. The clacks of shoes on cobblestones echo off the stone buildings that surround us, magnifying my sense of the crowd. The aspirin isn't helping. A car appears behind us, laying on the horn to cut through the myriad conversations happening simultaneously and trying to force a gap in the throng. We shift to the side of the street, leaving space in the center for the car. These streets were not made for large motored vehicles, but centuries of use by horses, carriages, and eventually small European cars have worn the cobblestones down into tracks for the wheels, just far enough from each wall to allow pedestrians to press themselves out of their way. We do that now, halted in our progress to squeeze sideways between the car and the buildings.

Once we can move on, Giancarlo skips circles around our group in his excitement. “Isn’t this the best day ever?” he asks me, as his family watches, amused.

“I don’t know yet,” I remind him, really impressing myself with my patience. “It’s not over.”

He skips past me, toward his sisters. I exhale, hoping for a reprieve, but Signora Ricci appears next to me. I am forced to walk beside her, twisting and turning through the medieval quarter, trapped in my spot in the crowd. I always get lost around here, and all the people around are not helping my sense of direction. “You should try to enjoy yourself,” Signora Ricci says. She can see through me, and I feel bad all of a sudden. She’s been trying so hard to make me feel welcome. I’m just not sure that I want to be quite so welcome.

“I’m sorry,” I apologize. I do mean it, but I’m frustrated. “I just don’t get it. All this fuss for some kind of parade?”

Signora Ricci shakes her head. “It’s a lot more than a parade,” she says. “It’s about miracles.”

Miracles. How anyone, in this day and age, can believe in miracles is beyond me. There’s too much shit in the world. I don’t respond.

“Sometimes,” she goes on, quietly, probably to prevent me from offending the people around us, but also forcing me to lean in to hear her, “you have to think about something a little bit larger than yourself. That’s what Santa Rosa is about.” She pauses, sighs. “Just try to think about Viterbo. For a little while. You might surprise yourself.” She winks, as though that will shoot a miracle into me.

I doubt that, but I tell her I’ll try. “*Provo.*”

We somehow arrive at the piazza with the giant tarp. Officials in fluorescent vests pace the square, keeping spectators back behind the ropes. There are some bleachers set up to one side,

reserved for important guests and city officials, probably. We join the masses on the other side of the square and, following traditional Italian protocol, squeeze ourselves as close to the rope as we can get. I can barely breathe; I don't know why people would want to subject themselves to this. I make a mental note to tell Lacie I've changed my mind about wanting to spend New Year's Eve in Times Square. Ever.

Looking around at the crowd makes me claustrophobic, so I look up. Somewhere behind the tarp is a tower of some sort, or a sculpture; I still haven't been able to get a satisfactory explanation of what the thing *is*. Whatever it is, it's located just in front of the Porta Romana gate – the top of the archway peeks out from behind the curtain. The walls of the city wrap out and around from there, disappearing behind a church on one side of the curtain and a block of shops and apartments on the other. There are flags draped out of the windows of all the apartments above us, in honor of the city and Santa Rosa, and the balconies are crowded with the luckiest spectators in town. I can see them breathing, or maybe I'm imagining it because I know they are and I'm jealous of all that oxygen.

The crowd down here is unbelievable; I don't think I have ever seen so many people in such a small area. They are flooding into open shops and restaurants that line the piazza and the streets, and there's not an open space as far as I can see. The mob continues for the length of the procession, almost a kilometer. That fact – the length of the procession – is one of those facts that I've picked up in metric and can recite when prompted, but I still have no concept of how far a kilometer is.

The Riccis are engrossed in some kind of conversation that expands into the crowd and includes people I've never met. I can't understand a word of it, so I stop trying. I wonder if I'll ever be able to keep track of anything going on around me in this country. What was I thinking, coming here?

Giancarlo tugs at my arm after a few minutes. “Do you want pizza? We’re going to get pizza before the parade starts.”

“Sure,” I say. “Are we all going?” I turn to follow him, naively hoping that fresh air might await me if I move from this front-row spot.

“No!” he cries. “Alessandra and I are going. The rest of you are keeping our spot.”

“Oh,” I reply. I adjust my feet firmly in place, which pleases Giancarlo. “All right then, I’ll be here.” Waiting. For God knows what. I sigh. I wonder what it would be like to be like that boy, actually excited for this thing, in spite of the crowd and the fuss and the heat and the chaos.

“Good.” Giancarlo scoots himself to the back of the crowd, where his sister is waiting, and they disappear down the street.

Shortly after they leave, I can hear the parade approaching. The crowd filling the street disperses slowly, impossibly condensing itself to the last edges of the street and forcing the shops dangerously beyond capacity. It makes my head spin just to think about being in one of them, so I force my eyes down the street so see what’s coming. Finally, the parade is here, the bands first, each one a different collection of instruments: drums, trumpets, clarinets. The musicians are dressed historically, with stern militaristic hats and flowing, shiny tunics. It’s amazing they don’t drown each other out, all of these bands following one after another, but then I suppose the mob around them acts as an insulator with its own noise.

Behind the bands are the flags, a phenomenon I first saw in the parade yesterday. And now they’re back, doing the same things: fleets of costumed performers, twirling and tossing their flags around in the street and in the air above them. They’re the first thing I see of the parade, actually, glimpses of green and red flying over the distant crowds. I have to admit, these guys are impressive. They’re fearless, absolutely in control, like the flags are an extension of themselves stretching out above the crowd. Maybe they would teach me. People want to know what I’m

“doing” over here, they want some kind of tangible proof of my cultural experience. I could come home with a set of those flags, maybe join the circus. No need for college. Problem solved.

I assume Giancarlo and Alessandra watched the parade from the pizzeria; as the last of the flags waves off out of the piazza, I can hear Giancarlo’s voice calling out to all of us, “Did you see the parade?! Wasn’t it great?!”

Turning, I can see his hands moving slowly towards us, extended up above his head and supporting a stack of pizza slices as he squishes himself through tiny gaps in the crowd. Alessandra, behind him, serves her mother and sister; Giancarlo presents a slice to me. “Weren’t the flags amazing?” Giancarlo says to me, his neck craned up because we’re pressed so closely together. I nod, and we both bite into our pizza. “They’re amazing every year,” Giancarlo goes on, pulling at a string of mozzarella with his teeth.

Dusk is just beginning to fall; we’ve been out here for over an hour already. My shirt is dripping with sweat. “Soon,” mumbles Giancarlo with a mouth full of pizza, “we’ll see the *Macchina!*”

I nod, trying to think about anything other than my claustrophobia. Signora Ricci said the *Macchina* would give me plenty of inspiration for drawings. Maybe this will finally be the start of something useful.

Mom took Lacie and me to our first art class when I was seven. We went, dutifully, week after week, just like the piano lessons and study sessions and soccer practices, but art was different. I was good at art. I could draw fruit-bowl still-lives, even with shadows, I could trace lines back from a barn roof to create “perspective,” I could mix paints to make just the right orange. My teachers put me in the school art shows. I latched onto it – I was Cal, “the artist.” It no longer mattered that I was alone at recess; I could sit on the bleachers and draw instead, and it was okay because artists didn’t need friends.

In high school, there was a special kind of cool for people like me, loners with sketchbooks and notebook and headphones. We were left alone, but not laughed at, and that was enough. Christie was always the social butterfly among us, throwing parties at her parents' art deco house, where we drank cheap California wine and flipped through coffee table books and pretended to be real art critics.

They were the closest I've ever had to friends, except my sister, I guess. I followed along, drank their wine and bought cheap imitations of the finest pastels, talking about brushstrokes and Degas and Impressionism. We talked about Europe, going to Amsterdam to smoke pot and visit the Van Gogh Museum. I went along with all of it, because I had never been part of something before, and because Christie had adorable little dimples when she laughed. The things I didn't want, I pretended to want. The things I didn't know, I bullshitted. I made out with her in the backyard of her enormous house and told her things I almost meant about following her to Mexico so we could be the next Frida and Diego.

It was good practice, I realize now, smiling at Giancarlo. "It's exciting," I tell him, a white lie, as I follow his gaze to the towering curtain at the head of the piazza.

Soon enough, a group appears to the side of the curtain, working a complex set of ropes to slowly lower the tarp to the ground. Behind it, the *Macchina* slowly comes into view, nothing like I've been expecting. It reminds me of a candle at first, narrow at the top like a wick, and widening as it goes downward. The construction is spiraled, three or four narrow strips swirling around each other to extend thirty meters (translated out of the metric system, that's tall – really tall) into the sky. The strips are shiny gold, and seem to be speckled with colored gems or something through the middles. At the top is a statue of Santa Rosa, standing on a bed of tinsel, and at the base is a lion, guardian of Viterbo, standing guard over her relics. Beneath it, one hundred little pillows await the shoulders of the *facchini*, the porters of Santa Rosa. Somewhere

inside the immense structure's base are the relics of the girl herself, her body disinterred year after year, still intact, to make this pilgrimage across the city. Maria explains this all to me in a whisper, enamored with the mere thought of such miracles. I'm unconvinced; if Rosa wasn't an Italian saint, she'd be a freak show by now. Or exposed as a fraud.

Looking back up at the structure, though, I can't deny that it's impressive. And Signora Ricci was right, I've never seen anything like it. The structure towers over the city wall behind it, dwarfing the church and shops nearby. It commands the attention of the city, and thousands of people have answered. I join in with the applause, still astonished by the physical sight of the *Macchina*. It's impressive, yes, but I still don't see how it can really mean so much to an entire city. I mean, really, what is it?

"Isn't it beautiful?" Giancarlo asks me.

I agree with him. "Yes. It's very beautiful."

"It was new last year. I like this one."

"How often do they change it?" I ask, still looking at the *Macchina*. The tarp is being cleared out of the piazza to make room for the transport.

"Every three or four years, I think," Giancarlo says. "I don't really remember."

I nod, and Giancarlo goes back to speaking with someone behind him. I don't try to follow their conversation. The *Macchina* is still wrapped in scaffolding, and now I can see why. People are on it now, starting at the top and lighting the sculpture. The spirals are lined with candles – there must be thousands – and each one is being lit by hand. As the night darkens, the glow from the *Macchina* brightens the entire piazza.

"Look," Giancarlo says to me, drawing my attention away from the candles. "They're going to dance now."

A group of children is filing into the center of the piazza, dressed in still more historical costumes. Giancarlo points out a little girl in a white dress. “That one is Santa Rosa. They’re going to reenact her martyrdom.” That’s an awfully gruesome thing to dance about, if you ask me. I wouldn’t want to think twice about a death like that, let alone reenact it.

A voice starts speaking over a megaphone somewhere. I can’t follow the narration distorted through speakers, but I assume he’s telling the story of Santa Rosa, how she saved Viterbo, how she died, and how she was found again, perfectly preserved, a medical miracle. Giancarlo told me all about it on the walk over here. That word again – *miracolo* – I hear it over and over. If only it *meant* something, I want to shout at them. It doesn’t seem fair, these children growing up believing in things that can’t ever be true – and even the adults don’t seem to know any better. How can that be?

The voice stops with the children, and a song begins. It’s a beautiful song, a haunting melody. *Santa Rosa, Santa Rosa, Santa Rosa*. I wonder about these saints, these perfect Christians. How can they sleep at night, letting all these people throw themselves at their feet, empty of dignity? Oh wait, they’re dead. They don’t sleep. There are children dancing in the square. They are young, Giancarlo’s age or so, and yet I can tell that they believe wholeheartedly in every word, every step. Everyone around me does; they sing along, sway with the music, watch with wonder and veneration as the sun disappears from the shadows and the city is lit only by the candlelight of the *Macchina*.

The dance finishes, the children are escorted back to their parents, and the crowd noise again fills the square. It takes on a different tone now, a bit hushed, but even more anticipatory. More and more eyes are fixed on the *Macchina*, now that it’s glowing above us. I look around at their faces, Giancarlo, his mother, his sisters; their eyes are shining with some kind of emotion brought out by this tower. Their faces have a quiet, calm look to them – they trust in this thing,

this person, so completely. I don't understand it, but for the first time I feel like I might be missing something.

It's eight-thirty now. The transport is scheduled to start in half an hour, but of course it won't. It's Italy. Too bad there are only Italians around; it's the sort of thing you can bet on, how late something will start around here, but somehow I don't think I'm in the right crowd to do that now.

It doesn't take long, though, surprisingly, for something else to start happening. Coming from somewhere behind us, moving up the procession route, is a hush in the crowd. We turn to find the cause – "*I facchini!*" exclaims Giancarlo in a whisper.

And here they come: the porters of Santa Rosa. There are one hundred of them, one of them Signor Ricci, clad in all-white tunics and pants, tied with red silk sashes. Their heads are wrapped, again in white, with fabric draping down their backs as well. I am again reminded of a cult, and it's a bit disconcerting. They walk past us, silent and solemn, and it strikes me as a shocking change of pace. They don't seem celebratory at all, and the reverence that the spectators have for them is remarkable. No one says a word; we just watch them pass us and file into the church.

Once they are inside, the noise picks up again. I ask Signora Ricci why they've gone into the church.

"The bishop gives them their last rites now," she explains. I can feel my eyes widening against my will. That's pretty morbid for a festival, I don't say, but Signora Ricci can read it on my face. "It's very dangerous," she goes on. "Thirty years ago the *Macchina* fell. It killed seven of them. And it's for Santa Rosa, so the bishop wants them taken care of in case." This ceremony is starting to freak me out. Maybe I'm glad to be missing whatever it is I'm missing.

Within a few minutes, the bishop's voice is broadcast out of the church. The city is silent once again as we listen to him bless the *facchini*, bestow forgiveness on them, like he expects them to die. It's creepy.

When the bishop finishes, the *facchini* emerge from the church to thunderous applause. The time for solemnity has passed, the porters have been cleansed of their sins, and it is time for them to perform their duties, ready to die, so naturally we must cheer them on. They line up in their ranks, in the center of the piazza, facing the *Macchina*, and one among them steps out in front.

"See, he'll call them out by row," Signora Ricci explains. "And send them into position."

I watch as row by row, the men race out and under the *Macchina*.

"*Sotto col ciuffo!*" calls the chief *facchino* again and again. And they run.

Viterbo is pitch-dark, every street light and reading lamp turned off to let the *Macchina* light up the city. With the *facchini* all in position, the crowd is silent; the city trembles with anticipation. Someone important yells something in Italian and suddenly the *Macchina* is up, an almost imperceptible shift from concrete support to the shoulders of one hundred men, and the city erupts. The cheers and applause are almost enough to drown out the next orders: *Avanti!*
Destra! Sinistra!

Everything seems to be happening at once, and so it begins – one hundred men moving as one, the tower glittering and sparkling in its own candlelight, illuminating the street as it forges onward like a force of nature. As the *Macchina* passes us, I watch the faces – the *facchini*, already gleaming with sweat in the shadows; the mob around them, awed and humbled by the sight of their patron saint carried through their city. We turn as one in the crowd, flooding into the full width of the street, following in the footsteps of the *facchini*. We press forward until we are halted by the size of the crowd, then stand in the darkened street and watch as the last glow

of the *Macchina* disappears into the night. The crowd is hushed in its absence, the quiet of New Year's Day.

Now that it's over, I don't know what to say. It really is extraordinary.

Dazed, I follow the Riccis back through the labyrinth of streets to our apartment building. The excitement of the *Macchina* festival is wearing off, replaced by a persistent droning in my head, voices going on and on in the background. I've had to stop listening, for fear my head would explode, so I wander in silence, behind the pack of them, thinking about lying down on that ice-cold linoleum before I crawl into bed.

We climb the steps of the apartment building. Signora Ricci places her hand on my arm, speaking slowly and clearly. "*Domani, si? La festa a casa nostra?*"

My brain seems to gain a hundred pounds, threatening to collapse my skull down into my stomach. A party? Tomorrow? A *party*? I had forgotten all about it. There's no way I'll survive an all-day party with these people and their loud, racing speech. I nod at Signora Ricci, trying to keep the panic out of my eyes.

She smiles. Italian women have incredible smiles.

"*Meraviglioso! Ci vediamo domani!*" See you tomorrow.

I nod again, still unable to formulate a sentence back to her. It's hard enough deciphering what she's saying to me. I turn the key and let myself into Aunt Lucille's apartment, where it is, mercifully, quiet.

How in the world am I going to be able to spend a whole day eating and talking with all of those people? There's no way.

I'm considering ways to get out of my fate. I'm sure faking sick would only get me an Italian doctor, and who knows what could happen then. I could throw myself out the window, I

guess, but that sounds painful. Maybe as a last resort. I could get on a train. I don't even know where I could take a train, but anywhere would be better than here.

Aunt Lucille's answering machine is blinking a little red light.

Cobblestones

The largest fountain in Viterbo, the Fontana Grande was begun in the year 1206, and took more than seventy years to complete. It is the pride and joy of Viterbo, and is rumored to be famous even outside the province. It dominates the Piazza Fontana Grande, water trickling down two tiers of stone into a large pool at the base, elevated above the piazza and edges with wide stone steps. The fountain is just inside one of the gates, welcoming visitors to the mighty city of Viterbo. That is, except for today, when its grandeur has been irreparably undercut by the Fiat Panda I have just smashed into the pool.

Naturally, Signora Ricci has just arrived, followed closely by the rest of the city. They abandon their feasts, flooding out of buildings, thrusting their heads out windows or over balcony railings. The piazza fills up; I can hear the dilemma in their voices as they realize I am Cal, an outsider, not one of them. They are horrified, offended. I wonder if these people have the power to deport me.

Signora Ricci places her hand on my arm but does not say anything, her face grim. An official-looking man in a suit and stiff black shoes appears beside her. “*Signore il sindaco,*” she tells me, hushed, by way of introduction. The mayor.

The mayor does not shake my hand or kiss me on each cheek; he offers no *piacere*. Instead we stand next to each other and contemplate the heretofore unimagined strength of Aunt Lucille’s Fiat Panda. I wonder how much he saw from his office.

I suoi baggagli sono arrivati. The voicemail on Aunt Lucille’s machine had been my ticket out of here – not just my own comfortable clothes, back from Montana, but an excuse to get out, anywhere but Viterbo, away from the party and Santa Rosa’s dead body and all the talking and yelling and talking and yelling. Aunt Lucille’s keys had been lying on the coffee table; surely she of all people, the family rebel, the one who knows all about needing to get away, surely she wouldn’t mind if I borrowed her car for the drive to Rome.

By the time I reached the piazza, I was salivating. Freedom was so close, I could taste it – it's got a taste like a burger. You can't get a good burger in Italy.

I wonder if the mayor saw Aunt Lucille's car give that tremendous, horrible hiccup, the way the cobblestones knocked the car in all directions. I wonder if he could tell I meant to hit the brake, but missed and slammed on the accelerator. Or maybe he didn't see any of that, only turned his attention out the window when he heard the shrieking, crunching, splashing sound of the car finally landing in the basin of the fountain.

The mayor looks the fountain up and down, then nods at Signora Ricci. She tightens her grip on my arm and leads me into City Hall behind him, leaving the rest of town to stare at Aunt Lucille's Fiat Panda and the ruined fountain.

The mayor's office in the City Hall is stone-walled, like everything in Viterbo, and there are tapestries hung periodically throughout it. I can't tell if they are actually as old as this castle building, or just designed to look like it. There are tall windows on two walls, partially blocked by bulky curtains that look like strips of carpeting. The mayor himself is a sturdy man, large enough to beat me up if he felt like it. I cannot apologize enough.

I remember reading once that most Italian public officials can be bribed in situations like this, but of course almost all of my cash is still in my suitcases, waiting for me at the airport in Rome. I also don't want to risk offending an upstanding citizen if he is not actually bribe-able. I apologize some more, in English and in Italian. He smells lightly of cigarettes; the skin of his face is overly smooth, like a lotion advertisement. A bead of sweat tickles its way down my nose. I resist the urge to wipe it away.

I am conscious of Signora Ricci watching me, conscious that I have ruined her feast day and her city, conscious that she was one of the only people who might have been an advocate for me, and now I've ruined that, too. I can feel her judging me; I must seem like an ungrateful bastard.

“I like it here,” I lie, since she’s judging me correctly. “I want to stay. Please just let me help.”
Please just don’t arrest me. No one answers me.

I scratch at the floor with the toe of my shoe, wondering how much a felony charge in a foreign country will affect me once I’m deported. It’s going to be hard enough to get into college and find a job without a criminal record. I don’t even have a credit card yet, and now I never will. They probably don’t give credit cards to felons. I could be a starving artist, I guess, squatting in the Village with no job, no credit card, no phone. Christie would be impressed. This man, however, would not. Signora Ricci would not.

The mayor looks at me sternly, a long stare intended to read my mind. I hope he doesn’t understand English long enough to catch all my thoughts. His desk is messy, pens peeking out from stacks of papers speckled with nondescript stains. The phone is buried in the corner, more papers sliding off the handset onto the floor. It is indeed incredible that my luggage actually did arrive here at all, with offices like this running the country.

“I will not arrest you,” the mayor declares finally. I suspect his decision involved the stack of paperwork that no doubt accompanies arresting a foreign national, but I don’t care.

“Thank you,” I say. “*Grazie mille.*”

“But,” he continues. My relief subsides a bit. Signora Ricci judges my momentary lapse of fear.

“The fountain will need to be repaired. Very expensive. Very difficult.”

I had to squeeze my eyes shut when I bought my plane ticket over here. There’s no way I can afford the repairs to an 800-year-old fountain on top of that. When you can’t pay your mortgage, the bank takes your house; I don’t have anything for them to take as leverage. They’re going to have to arrest me after all.

The mayor looks at me closely. “The city pays, because I do not trust you.” This is the best insult I have ever received. The mayor goes on, “You will help.”

“Yes, sir,” I say, grateful. “Of course, sir. Thank you.”

“Every day the men work, you work. Start next week. We will tell you.” The mayor’s breath is labored when he speaks. He stomach, firmly perched over his belt buckle, trembles with each wheeze.

“Yes, sir,” I say again. The mayor continues to stare at me. I nod, assuring him that I understand and will do everything he says. He nods back and relaxes his gaze, apparently satisfied. Somehow, I sense that Signora Ricci will be less easily convinced.

At lunch, seated around a long table back at the Riccis’ feast, I am quiet. I don’t have anything to contribute to any of the conversations, and every now and then someone glances over at me suspiciously, in a way that suggests they have just been talking about me. I wish I at least knew what they were saying, whether they would ever forgive me.

Lacie is really determined for me to make a good impression as an American in Europe. Before I left, she gave me all kinds of “rules” to follow – I think she actually just wants to make sure she has exactly the kind of vicarious experience she wants. Lacie’s always been the one who wants to go to Europe. One of the rules she came up with: never sleep past nine. Europeans, Lacie insists, are early risers – and I can’t want to be seen as a “lazy American bum.”

I agreed, last month, but when my alarm goes off today at 8:30 a.m., I’m questioning the wisdom of that decision. I’m exhausted from two solid days of nightmarish festivities, and would like nothing more than a little more time in English, in my dreams, where I can crawl away and pretend I didn’t drive a car into a priceless fountain. But even Lacie admits that I’m a damn good

brother, so I roll out of bed. Not that I think it will make much difference for my image as a terrible American.

The floors in Aunt Lucille's apartment are strange. They're some kind of smooth, marble-looking stuff, cold, like I'm standing on a sheet of ice every time I get out of bed. Even in this heat. I worry that my toes might actually freeze off come winter. If I stay that long, I mean.

The floors are loud, too – everything echoes off them. Even here, I don't feel alone with all these echoes watching me, criticizing me.

I make a cup of coffee, following the instructions Aunt Lucille left as I always do, but it's not one of my successes. I let the smooth, dark liquid drip too long into my cup; now the coffee tastes weakly of burned beans, and I pour it down the drain. I'm officially a failure.

I dress myself again in ill-fitting Italian clothes. My sketchbook doesn't fit in my pocket. I peer out the window at the street below me.

This is my first Sunday here, and it's quiet. I suppose everyone is in church, or getting ready for church. Now that they've feasted and celebrated in the name of Santa Rosa, it's time to confess it all away. Aunt Lucille lives in the old, medieval quarter of Viterbo, a labyrinth of cobblestones lined with earth-toned stucco buildings. The houses and apartments were built one on top of another, probably in stone deep beneath the stucco, so there are no windows in the side walls. The windows in the front are shuttered over, closing out the heat but also reminding me that I'm alone out here at the moment.

Some of these apartments are second-floor only, with shops and restaurants on the ground level. These are all closed up, too, with metal gates drawn down over their doorways. Sunday morning must not be a busy time for Viterbo businesses, but then again most of the stores seem to have impractical hours, and they're not even posted – like you're just expected to guess when to stop in.

I can hear footsteps echoing in the silence outside, then a knock on the door. I answer it reluctantly, half-expecting the mayor, his opinion forcefully changed by Signora Ricci, here to arrest me once and for all. Instead, it is Signora Ricci herself.

“*Buongiorno, Cal,*” she says brightly. She, all Italians perhaps, have a way of changing their minds without warning or worry. “*Come stai?*”

I’m not sure how to respond. I was sure, yesterday, that Signora Ricci was at least as furious with me as anyone else in Viterbo. I don’t know what to make of her sudden friendliness. “*Sto bene?*” I say cautiously. I guess I’m okay.

“*Buonissimo.*” She smiles, almost as warmly as ever. Signor Ricci is involved in construction; he must be involved in repairing the fountain, and he must have told her it will all be all right. I knew I liked him. “*Vuoi andare in chiesa con noi?*”

My heart sinks into my stomach. For one moment, it had seemed like yesterday might not have been the end of the world. Now, I can see I’m going to destroy everything all over again. I’m not going to church with the Riccis.

“Thanks,” I say, slowly, “but I don’t go to church.” I can’t bring myself to lie about this one. I admit I don’t care about a lot of things – it drives my parents crazy – but I care about not supporting organized religion. And besides, it would only make things worse for the truth to come out at the church instead of here at this door. I can run inside and hide from here.

Signora Ricci stares at me. I fidget with my toes. I still don’t have shoes on, and Signora Ricci notices, peering down at my feet. I stop.

I need to say something in the silence. “I’m sorry,” I say. I don’t know how to continue, and Signora Ricci just keeps staring at me. Damn, I wish I improvised better. I want to disappear into the door.

“*Non sei cattolico?*” She is confused.

“I’m not Catholic,” I confirm. “I’m not anything.”

Signora Ricci still doesn’t understand. “No religion at all?”

I shake my head. Realization descends slowly over Signora Ricci’s face. She is speechless.

“No church,” she repeats, still processing, picturing me corrupting her children with my fountain-killing, heathen American ways. She shakes her head slightly, wondering too what she should do next. Then she nods, gives me a small, tight smile. “Well, then.” She sets her hand on my shoulder. “*Allora*,” she says. One of those Italian words that means everything and nothing, all at once. “*Ci vediamo*.” She turns and heads back downstairs, taking her lovely Catholic family to church.

I lean my head back against the doorframe. Strike two.

I wander up and down streets that catch my eye, with particularly nice-looking staircases, trickling fountains, or bridges over the street connecting opposite houses. Some of these streets have steps right in the cobblestone, and I wonder if the crazy Viterbese drivers actually bring their cars up and down them. It wouldn’t surprise me.

I think about stopping to draw something six times during my walk, but I decide I’m not really in the mood. I’m never really in the mood, but that doesn’t bother me much. It doesn’t bother me that I don’t know how to get back to Aunt Lucille’s apartment from wherever I am. I just want to be out here, anywhere, by myself.

I’m still not really sure why I came here, and I’m not even sure I want to stay. I’ve never done something like this on a whim before; I don’t know what’s supposed to come next. I’m feeling every minute less like I belong here, less like I should be here. As much as my parents hate me being here, they would be even more upset if I wasted all that money on a plane ticket over here just to come right back. Even that is starting to seem like incentive to get out of here,

but then again maybe I'll just wait it out. Sometimes this place even seems charming, and eventually this whole fountain thing has to blow over.

On the plane over here, all I could think about was everything I was getting out of – no more Christie, no more parents, no more art school letters, no more “what next?”

I had no idea what I was getting into. Aunt Lucille had been my favorite relative since I had met her, so it naturally followed that staying with her would be infinitely better than anything at home, but the truth is I didn't really know her. I had no idea she would be leaving me with her terrifying, traditional Italian neighbors. I hadn't known early July meant Santa Rosa and festivals and feasts and on and on. I can hear Lacie saying “I told you so.”

She would smack me upside the head if she knew I've already stolen a car and broken the city. She would drag me to Signora Ricci's church and make me apologize to the whole city and Santa Rosa and God, which might actually not be a bad idea, if it didn't leave me with the problem of going to church and having to pretend I'm a Catholic for however long I stay here. This place is only charming when it's not trying to force me into a carbon copy of every proper Viterbese citizen around me. I could probably pull it off, do all the right things at the right times and act Viterbese, but what's the point? I wouldn't even know why any of it mattered.

I make my way up a hill and arrive at a little church – Santa Rosa's chapel. I want to understand the whys of this place. The *Macchina* is next to the chapel, dwarfing the tiny church as it watches over the town. The tower will stay on display for a few weeks, and will then be dismantled for storage until next year. The church seems empty, as though no one comes here for a weekly mass, and the *Macchina* looks very different in the peaceful morning sun.

The size is still impressive, and thinking about men carrying it makes my head spin. But without all the candles, without the crowds and the noise and the ceremonies, this thing is just a

tower, a hollow sculpture. I wonder if this even counts as the real *Macchina* anymore, now that the city is ignoring it.

There are bells ringing somewhere behind me, down in the town. Churches must be starting to let out. I sit down on a low wall near Santa Rosa's church and finally open up my sketchbook. Francesca said the *Macchina* would give me plenty to draw. It looks out of place here by itself, with nothing nearby except the miniature church.

I draw bells in the background, trying to capture this moment instead of remembering how the *Macchina* first looked. It still looks like a candle to me, but now it's hokey, and I don't like it, but I finish the drawing anyway. The bells have died down, but I stay on my wall and I look at my sketch. Maybe my mother was right – being in Italy isn't going to help me get into art school.

I stand up – stretch my legs, rub my forehead. The sun from beyond the *Macchina* throws my sketchbook into shadow on the cobblestones. I look up at it again, trying to feel the way Giancarlo and his family do, but I don't.

A family with two little kids walks past me, on their way home from church, probably. The kids look at me curiously; it's probably not normal to stand here looking at the *Macchina* like this, or maybe they recognize me as the one who caused all the ruckus yesterday. They say something to their parents in Italian, and I don't understand. Maybe I'll never understand any of this.

Promises

Aunt Lucille calls in the evening. The baby and mom in Milan are doing fine, and Aunt Lucille finally feels like she can come back to Viterbo. Her train will arrive in Rome tomorrow night.

She doesn't say that Signora Ricci has called her and told her to come home before I ruin anything else in town, but I have a feeling.

"Why don't you come down to Rome?" she says. "Take the train, spend the day. We'll stay in the city overnight, pick up your luggage, and head back to Viterbo on Tuesday."

Rome, right now, sounds perfect. I would love to get out of Viterbo, away from all these people staring at me, judging me. "Sounds great, Aunt Lucille," I agree right away.

Rome will be a real city, with stoplights for the traffic and restaurants open for lunch at noon and millions of people with no idea who I am. It's not possible for Rome to be half as traditional or easily scandalized as Viterbo is.

I'm up early in the morning to catch the first train into Rome. Aunt Lucille is insistent that I should have a whole day to myself in Rome, and quite frankly I like the sound of that idea. I take the last of my cash with me, everything that isn't still in my suitcases, ready to do anything except be in Viterbo.

The train ride into Rome is long and crowded. Apparently two hours is not an unreasonable commute for the people of Viterbo, even though they couldn't possibly arrive at work on time – I'm told these trains are notoriously behind schedule. And the seats, dreadfully outnumbered by people, are extremely uncomfortable – molded plastic that seems to want me to stretch my neck up and to the left in order to properly access the "headrest." I hate Monday mornings.

We arrive in Rome forty-three minutes late.

I try to look around outside the train at Rome, since I didn't really pay attention on the way north, but it's no use. The train hops above and below ground, blocking out any indicators of

location for long stretches of time, and the areas I can see look more like shabby suburbs than a world-class city. I flip through my guide book and pull out the map from the back. I hunch down in my seat, trying to hide it in my lap. I feel a little guilty about being a tourist. Still, I decide it's worth it not to get lost or arrested, since I've been avoiding that so well thus far.

When the train finally pulls up at my station, I try to climb off as gracefully as the Italians around me. The women leap off the train like gazelles, click-clacking away in their heels across the platform. Businessmen stride purposefully past them, barely adjusting their steps to cross the gap and step down from the train. I nearly fall on my ass, caught off guard by the drop between the train and the platform, and limp away with a twisted ankle.

I can already see the video going viral: *American Tourist Humiliates Himself at Italian Train Station*, but thankfully I can believe myself saying that everyone around me had too much purpose in their own lives to bother filming me make a fool of myself. I sit down on a bench and reexamine my map. Colosseum. Pantheon. Trevi Fountain. Roman Forum. Saint Peter's Basilica. Do I really want to be a tourist?

I can hear Lacie, threatening to whack me over the head if I don't go to all those famous things at least once so I can say I've been there. After all, I'm already here.

But I'm not giving in without a fight. I peel away from the crowd and press myself into a corner with the shameful guide book. Maybe I can find an art museum to spend most of the day, and run out of time for the rest.

One of Aunt Lucille's neighbors passes me on her way off the train and glances disapprovingly at the book in my hands. I understand why Aunt Lucile resented her role as an American navy wife. Labeling yourself with a foreign passport or a tourist book is like giving this country permission to gawk at you, to condescend with their English translations and watch

you wander around lost, smug with the knowledge that their country and culture are ancient and timeworn and therefore superior.

Italian museums, the guide book informs me, are universally closed on Mondays. As an alternative, it suggests visiting churches throughout the city, since much of the country's finest art has been donated to the Church over the centuries anyway. The book cautions, however, that many churches are closed for an extended lunchtime in the early afternoon.

I close the book in disgust. It's not Viterbo, it's the whole damn country.

"All right, Lace. You win." Vatican City is close by the train station, so I'll start there. My map isn't great, but it gets me there. I come into St. Peter's Square from the side, which I think was probably not ideal. Off to my right, the grand entrance to the square extends to the River Tevere, a long stretch of road lined with immense pillars. The piazza, too, is lined with a colonnade, four rows of columns that curl around the square (it's round, really, or oval – not a square at all) and, when you line yourself up perfectly, they all disappear exactly behind one another. Architects are show-offs.

After a few minutes of desultory awe at the piazza, the colonnade, the statues, the heat in the square becomes unbearable. It's even hotter in Rome than it is in Viterbo, and the sunlight beats back up from the black cobblestones, and the crowd (which is an incredible thing in and of itself) produces its own secondary source of heat. I decide it's time to go inside the church.

This, of course, is not an immediate solution. It seems that half of the crowd in the piazza is actually the line to enter the basilica. I join this line reluctantly and continue to look around. It's hard to remember that this place is in fact a church, so crowded with tourists and cameras instead of prayers. Granted, I'm not inside yet, but still. I wonder how many of these people actually care about this place because of what it is, and not just because it's famous and cultural and all

that. I'm certainly not one of those people. All of the Viterbese women would probably be horrified at that thought, if they approved of me enough to care.

A girl in line in front of me is not allowed to enter the church because her shoulders aren't covered. That surprises me, still a rule in this modern day and age. I proceed past the unfortunate girl, stuck out here in the heat, and into the basilica.

I'm not sure what was really expecting St. Peter's to be like, but I don't think I was expecting what I found. The basilica is more like a museum than any church I've ever seen. No priests, no choir, there aren't even any pews. The altar looks like an elaborate bed, gilded and canopied at the far end of the central aisle. Only when I look up am I reminded of a cathedral, the ceiling soaring overhead in domes and vaults. The place is enormous, but large sections are roped off and all the art is locked behind glass. Tourists line up and file past the "Pietà," rows of important paintings, the body of a pope who never decomposed. I don't quite understand the appeal of that one, I'll admit.

I don't much care for St. Peter's, I decide. I don't know how even the most devout Catholic could feel a connection to this crowded, sterile place. The art would be better off in one of Christie's coffee-stained books. I wedge my way out of the basilica and back into the piazza, where the crowds have not dispersed at all. I'm already exhausted by this city. I walk down a few streets, trying to get a few square feet of space to myself, and consult my map. Aunt Lucille told me that Rome is very walkable, and I have all day, so I set off for the Colosseum. I hope something that big will make the crowds seem smaller.

It's astounding how every street I turn down is filled with people, even the ones that look small and out of the way. Even in Rome, some of the main streets are still cobblestones, hordes of pedestrians periodically melting into building walls to make space for a car to pass by. The city is incredibly loud, cars flying down the rough streets and blasting on their horns,

conversations drifting out of open restaurants, street artists and vendors shouting at the top of their lungs to advertise their wares. I weave my way down street after street, sometimes turning just to see where a new road might lead.

I arrive in the hub of ancient Rome by way of the Circus Maximus – it's a field, no ruins to be seen. The oval track from the chariot races is still there, gravel now, but for the most part it's a park. Kids are playing kickball and chasing each other past picnicking couples, and it's all happening in a place thousands of years older than anything I've ever seen in my life. Italy is bizarre.

Crossing the Circus Maximus, I can see a group of crumbling Roman skyscrapers. I skirt the edge of this complex, following a street around toward the Colosseum. As I follow the curve of the street, the world in front of me suddenly opens up, and there is the Colosseum. People are swarming around it, but I was right – they fade into the background like blades of grass in the shadow of the Colosseum.

The structure stretches out and up into the sky, like a crown towering over the world. I walk a circle around it, only half-looking for the entrance. It's so unbelievable from the outside, dwarfing everything around it just as it always has – it's hard to convince myself I need to go inside right now. After all, I'll have plenty of time to come back to Rome if I don't get deported.

I eventually do find the entrance, and I decide not to brave the crowds today. Instead, I find a little space on a wall across the road (a real Roman road, that is, huge blocks of basalt like stepping stones through the city) and stake it out. I buy a prosciutto sandwich from a street vendor who is probably ripping me off, but I don't really care. It's food, and all food in Italy is better than anything comparable back home. I sit on my wall and watch school groups crowd their way into the Colosseum. They remind me of penguins, waddling one after another. I once

heard that penguins will follow each other around in a circle, never noticing that none of their group has a real destination in mind.

I pull out my sketchbook and draw the Colosseum, trying to capture the smallness of the people skittering in and out of it. I wonder how many other people have drawn and painted and sculpted this image, and why I'm even bothering. I sketch it again, from a different angle, trying to place the Colosseum in the same frame with modern Rome in the background. This is a land of contradictions, where everything always fits together, and I'm here completely on my own. Maybe that's the problem. I could give myself a role as "the outsider," just like I was always "the artist," and then it won't matter.

I'm feeling very empowered with this realization, ready to take on Italy and Viterbo and even Signora Ricci, when a bus stops in front of my wall and a group of Japanese tourists floods out of the doors, waving cameras and maps in all directions. They seem not to notice me, increasingly approaching my space on the wall without any concern, and my head is already starting to ache from the sudden bombardment of yet another foreign language.

I stand up and squeeze my way along the wall away from the tourist group. My empowerment is being drowned out by anxiety. I am suddenly desperate to get back to Viterbo. It's Italy, real Italy, with space to breathe and no tourists, and all of a sudden I want to be there, *The Outsider*.

I run away from the Colosseum. Not literally, but close enough – past an enormous white marble building with some kind of winged iron horses on the roof, past a Romanian dressed as a Native American with a headdress and a wooden flute, past some buses and a fountain and some tourists following a guide with a big pink umbrella. The umbrella has a metal tip, glinting in the sun. It blinds me and I stop running, now lost and no less overwhelmed.

I open my map back up and check my watch. I should start heading over to the train station to meet Aunt Lucille.

I appreciate that Aunt Lucille hasn't mentioned anything about the car and the fountain and the Riccis during our time in Rome or the train ride back, but I can't expect that to last forever. It comes out during dinner, when the phone rings.

"That was Ennio Ricci," Aunt Lucille tells me. "They're starting work on the fountain tomorrow. You need to be there at nine." She looks at me.

Aunt Lucille is older than I remember her. Her hair is gray and wavy, tucked behind her ears, and the waves add an inch or so of height to her petite stature. Her eyes, blue, twinkle without trying – the kind of eyes that have smiled and laughed through a lifetime, won over two husbands and two countries. I don't know why my mother hates this woman so much.

I nod, acknowledging her statement. "Nine tomorrow."

"Ennio will pick you up at 8:45." Aunt Lucille continues to look at me. "Now, about my car."

I had forgotten about the car. Not about its existence, or its present location in the fountain, but that the fact was I had totaled Aunt Lucille's Fiat Panda, and she would want something done about that.

"Your car," I repeat. "I'm so sorry. I'll do whatever I can."

Aunt Lucille sighs. "We'll work something out. Once we find out what needs doing." She peers at me over a piece of beef on her fork. "Just as long as you realize what you're in for."

I nod and take another bite. "Of course. Whatever you need me to do."

Aunt Lucille nods back and eats the beef off her fork. She sets it down and looks at me across the table. "It's nice to have you here, Cal," she says. "Even if you did steal my car and crash it into a fountain." She lifts her glass and winks.

I reciprocate her toast, unsure how to take her "compliment."

"I think the Riccis hate me," I mention as an aside, hoping Aunt Lucille might ignore the statement and the whole thing could evaporate away.

She's too Italian at this point, though. She sets her fork down loudly and looks at me firmly across the table. "What makes you say that?"

I take another sip of my water, a small sip, because I still can't get used to the carbonation. "Well, I crashed a car into the Fontana Grande, which as far as I can tell, made everyone in Viterbo hate me. On top of that, I did it while I was supposed to be getting ready for a feast at the Riccis house. And then Signora Ricci came over the next day, trying to make things up with me, and she found out I don't go to church." More water, even though the bubbles have a metallic aftertaste that makes me even thirstier.

Aunt Lucille sits back in her chair. "Well," she says. "To some extent you have to expect that. Francesca's an Italian woman, with traditional ways. What were you thinking?"

What was *I* thinking? I don't even know how to answer her.

"You ignored her invitation to dinner, and then her invitation to church. What is she supposed to think? Those are not things you do in Italy." Aunt Lucille looks at me very sternly. "I'm inclined to think Francesca is going to give you another chance, but you have to care about that. You have to give her a reason or two."

I lean over the table on my arms, stretching my neck a bit. "And how am I supposed to do that?" I ask.

“For starters, you could change your attitude. You are in a foreign country, in a city that has welcomed you as a guest, and you’re doing a pretty poor job of appreciating that. Try respecting this place and these people, and maybe they’ll respect you back.” She pauses. “And it wouldn’t kill you to go to church.”

“I told you,” I tell her again. “I don’t go to church. That was part of our agreement before I even got here.”

“Well, that was before you started with all of this nonsense,” Aunt Lucille says flatly. “I think it’s time you consider what you’re doing here and whether you want to be a part of this community or not. Frankly, you should have thought about that before you got here.”

We stare across the table at each other, trapped in a stalemate.

“I’m not making any promises,” I tell her. “I’ll start with fixing the fountain.”

I stand up and take the plates over to the dishwasher. I’m frustrated, and I can see that Aunt Lucille is, too. Hell of a family reunion.

Signor Ricci is at the door at 8:45 in the morning, ready to head over to the fountain with me. I’m surprised at his punctuality, but I keep that to myself. He reintroduces himself to me, as Ennio this time. “If we’re working together, you can call me Ennio,” he reasons.

Ennio Ricci is a large man, large and strong enough to carry 1/100 of the *Macchina* on his shoulders. He is also quiet; I don’t think I’ve heard more than five sentences out of his mouth in all the meals and parties I’ve attended with the Riccis so far. The man is eminently respectable, the epitome of a blue-collar Italian family man. His children adore him.

We begin walking toward the fountain, and I expect Ennio to mention something about what we’ll be doing, or about the weather, or anything, but he is silent. I walk quietly alongside him. I

haven't spent enough time with the men in Italy, I realize. This is much better than walking with Signora Ricci, or even Aunt Lucille or Maria.

We are not the first to reach the fountain. There is a group of men already there, with a truck, working to attach a steel cable to the Panda. They are having trouble accessing the frame of the car, wedged awkwardly atop the steps and the wall of the pool, and I am suddenly mortified. I did this, and now all these people have to deal with it.

"Is there anything I can do?" I ask Ennio.

He scans the scene and shakes his head. "Not now. Too many people. Once we start to get the car out, then we can see. For now, we'll just wait."

I watch the process from a distance with Ennio. He lights a cigarette and offers me one, which I decline. The cigarette looks small between his fingers; his hands are rough and bulky with callouses, not designed for precise tasks like plucking a single cigarette from the carton. Those cartons here are morbid: *IL FUMO UCCIDE*, they proclaim in bold capital letters across the front of the pack. Smoke kills, but the Italians don't seem to mind. Ennio smokes the way Clark Gable smoked, cigarette propped in the corner of his mouth, mid-conversation and mid-action. Inside, after dinner, he stands in the kitchen with his friends and they pass a lighter around, clustered around the fireplace so the smoke trails up the chimney.

These men are quiet, their conversations a low rumbling beneath the strident voices of their wives and the rushing faucet across the kitchen. They talk about politics, how Berlusconi is ruining the country and whether the EU will last forever, and bet on who will win the Milano-Juventus soccer match this weekend. Even here, Ennio smokes his cigarette in silence, and the men at the fountain speak only in murmurs across the piazza.

Finally, they have managed to connect Aunt Lucille's car to the tow truck, and they begin to winch it up and out of the fountain. It is slow going, the men watching the fountain carefully as

the car is removed. I have a sudden nightmarish image in my mind: the car is pulled away from the pillar of the fountain, only to reveal a crack running straight through it; without the support of the Panda's hood, the whole fountain comes tumbling to the ground, crushing car, steps, and workers all in one hideous crash. I shake this from my mind and instead I see the car, hooked to the winch, removed safely from the fountain, only to come rushing back, the winch like a pendulum, crashing back into the fountain like a wrecking ball. Beads of sweat are forming on my forehead. I hope Ennio doesn't notice.

One of the men by the fountain lets out a triumphant cry at last, and Ennio nudges me in the side. "*Finito, e?*" And it is true. The Panda has been pulled all the way out of the fountain and is sitting at the bottom of the steps, still crumpled. Dirty water drips from the front of the car, darkening the cobblestones underneath it. The fountain is still standing.

I follow Ennio over to the fountain and introduce myself to the men working. They don't seem to be overly upset that this is all my fault; they joke about it. "Glad you're keeping this business interesting," says one. The others laugh, and I join in uneasily.

Once the car is towed away, we start. Today is damage control, and I follow one of the foremen around with a clipboard, writing down his notes about what needs doing and in what order. I estimate that one-fifth of the things I'm writing down are spelled correctly. Only about that many words are actually in my vocabulary.

For lunch, I walk home with Ennio. Everyone goes home for lunch in Italy, he explains. We aren't expected back at work for three hours.

Signora Ricci visits for coffee some afternoons, and she is civil to me, asking polite questions and speaking slowly and telling me that Ennio says I have been doing a good job at work. This point seems to weigh very heavily in her opinion of me, and I hold out hope that she may approve of me yet.

At work, I'm gaining popularity because I laugh at everyone's jokes, and they haven't figured out the difference between my humor laugh and my confused laugh. I'm also good at carrying things, which makes me useful, at least.

On Sundays, Aunt Lucille invites me to go to church with her and the Riccis. I decline.

Giancarlo stops by the fountain sometimes, on his way to a soccer game or just out and about. "My mom doesn't like you," he tells me, with the kind of honesty you can only expect from a ten-year-old. "But my dad thinks you're okay." Giancarlo taps a soccer ball back and forth between his feet.

I'm sitting on the steps at the base of the fountain, surrounded by sacks and piles of various stones, none of which I can name, tallying them up on yet another clipboard. The construction business seems to contain an infinite number of clipboards. It's difficult to concentrate on counting in the midst of Giancarlo's conversation.

"Why did you drive into the fountain?" Giancarlo asks me casually.

I completely lose count and let the clipboard fall onto my lap in frustration.

"It was an accident," I explain, exasperated.

Giancarlo pauses in his soccer and looks up at me, grinning. "I know," he said. "I just wanted to see what you would say."

I look at him, furious, and he bursts into laughter. "All right," I say, retaliating. "You count these rocks."

Giancarlo looks at me like I'm crazy. "No way!" he says. "That's your job." He's worse than a sister.

I slide back to the corner of my step and begin counting again. I can hear the soft taps of Giancarlo's shoes on his soccer ball. I pretend he's not there, in the hopes that his silence will continue.

"Why don't you go to church?" he asks, breaking my concentration again.

"Because," I say. "I don't."

"That's a bad reason," Giancarlo tells me.

"Well, I'm not Catholic."

"Do you go to a different church, then?"

"No."

"Well, why not?"

"I'm not any of those religions either."

Giancarlo's eyes widen. "*Sei ebraico?*" he asks, enthralled.

"No, I'm not Jewish."

"Don't you believe in God?"

I exhale, frustrated.

"Why does it matter?"

Giancarlo shrugs. "I believe in God."

"Good for you," I say. Fifty-one in that stack. Thankfully, Giancarlo is quiet long enough for me to write that one down.

"I liked when you came over for lunch," he says.

"I liked it, too," I say, which is partially true.

"Can you come over again?" he asks. "Zia Lucia comes over sometimes, too."

Zia Lucia. I'm taken aback by this, a reminder of how entirely Italian Aunt Lucille has become in her fifty years away from the States. She has even lost her name. I can't imagine

translating myself so completely, but I can almost understand why she has. In this world of family and neighbors, I've already been branded as the worst kind of outsider – a brand I don't think I'll ever be able to shake, unless I follow Aunt Lucille's lead and make myself an outsider at home instead. It's enough to almost make me jealous of her, for being able to do that.

"I don't know," I tell him. "Your mom doesn't like me, remember?"

Giancarlo shrugs again. "Maybe she would like you. She used to."

I shrug back at him. "Maybe. We'll see."

He kicks at his soccer ball. "I hope so."

Ennio, walking toward us from the fountain, whistles. "Giancarlo!" He gestures at us both. "Cal! Lunchtime. Let's go."

As unconcerned as Giancarlo is about ignoring his mother's disapproval of me, his sisters are more like Lacie. They're unsure what to do about me, given my status as an outcast and public menace. Alessandra is concerned for my soul, suggesting without subtlety that everything would be all right if I just went to church and asked Santa Rosa's forgiveness for my crimes against Viterbo. I don't quite know what to think about Alessandra.

Maria, for her part, is determined for me to be happy here even if everyone hates me. "There must be some reason you came here," she insists.

We are in the park; I have my sketchbook and she has a book of poems. I look at her dubiously. "Everyone at home hated me. It's a special talent I have."

Maria laughs, wiggling her feet out of her sandals and stretching her toes in the grass. "If people hate you, that means you're interesting." She reaches over to grab my sketchbook, but I pull it away. "Oh, come on," she pleads. "Can't I just see one sketch?"

I shield the book under my arms. "I don't like to show people."

“You’re not much of an artist, then.” Maria doesn’t sugarcoat anything. “I dated an artist once,” she goes on. I raise my eyebrows at her. “What? Everyone dates an artist at one point or another. Anyway,” she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, “I dated this artist. He couldn’t stop showing off his work. Everything he did, he wanted to hang on a wall and explain to people.”

I am not like that.

“I’m just saying,” Maria says, worried she has offended me. “Maybe you don’t want to be an artist. You just want to draw.”

I decline Maria’s invitations to go out for *aperitivi* or dancing with her friends; I don’t want her to feel obligated to repeat everything her friends say so that I can understand, and I know they won’t want to change their whole system to accommodate me. I don’t want to be in the way, so I go home to Aunt Lucille and hide my outsider’s face. Maria kisses my cheeks when she turns off the street, her purse dangling loosely from her arm.

“You know you can always come,” she reminds me. “You don’t have to be as isolated as you think.”

I shrug and return her *baci*. Kiss kiss, left then right. I’m getting the hang of that, at least.

“There’s a letter for you.” Aunt Lucille waves at an envelope on the hall table. “From the States.”

“Is it my mother?” I call back to her as I head into my room to change out of my work clothes.

“No, I don’t think so,” Aunt Lucille replies. “I don’t recognize the return address. I left it on the table for you.”

I pull my t-shirt over my head and drop it onto my desk chair, where it lands in a soft puff of dust on top of my sketchbook. I like these little reminders of construction work – dust and dirt following me around all evening. It's like proof that I've accomplished something today.

Cleaned up and re-dressed, I go back into the kitchen and pick up my letter. I already recognize the handwriting, and my head starts to hurt.

"I ran into your mom the other day, and she told me you're in Italy – wow! I hope you don't mind me writing like this..." That's Christie for you. Of course I mind my ex-girlfriend writing to me when I'm supposed to be safe on another continent. I'll be furious with my mother, too, tomorrow, for giving the bitch Aunt Lucille's address.

I skip the newsy paragraphs, instead imagining art-school Christie, with those infuriatingly adorable paint-splatter freckles, a flannel shirt with sleeves rolled up to the elbows, her hair falling out of whatever twisty, tangled thing she put it in this morning. She's probably surrounded by other hipsters, all ready to reinforce her superior self-image, already famous on campus for some avant-garde something or other. I bet they all drink cappuccino every afternoon.

She hopes I'm planning to be back in the States soon, she says, and reapplying to art school. "I'd love to see you around campus," she writes, "but I do have to tell you that I've had to reconsider our relationship. Given the way you self-destructed when I got into all of my schools and you didn't, I have to say that I don't think our relationship is healthy. I mean, what's going to happen if I get signed for a big show and you don't have anything lined up? Anyway, it wouldn't be good, so what I'm trying to say is that I have to retract my openness to getting back together. I think it would be better for both of us if we just stayed friends."

I rip the letter to shreds.

I can't believe her nerve, to send a letter across the ocean just to insult me like that. I never said anything about getting back together with her, and even if I had, I wouldn't now. In fact, who's to say I have any intention of going back to the States at all, let alone art school? I could stay here in Viterbo as long as I want to, maybe forever. I'd never have to defend myself to Christie and her self-aggrandizing art-school friends, that's for sure. I could matter here.

"Who was the letter from?" Aunt Lucille asks when I come back into the kitchen, trying to make conversation.

I shake my head. "No one."

Aunt Lucille inhales and lets that go. She has taken the whole stove apart, burners lying on the table, and is cleaning the underbelly of the thing. "Well, then, is there something I can do for you, or have you just come in here to be unhelpful?"

I move a hand toward one of the burners. "Is there something I should be doing to help?"

"No," Aunt Lucille waves me away. "It's a one-man job."

I pull a chair out from the table and sit. "I want to belong here," I announce.

Aunt Lucille stops her cleaning, turns around and looks at me. "Excuse me?"

I nod.

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

I am taken aback. "I told you," I say. "You're always saying I don't understand what this place is like, so here. Teach me."

"You want to belong here," Aunt Lucille repeats, skeptical.

"Yes."

"You didn't want to belong here yesterday."

I shrug. "That was yesterday. Today I want to try it."

Aunt Lucille crosses the kitchen and narrows her eyes, looking at me. “Why?”

“Well, I just figure, I’m here, right? Might as well give it a shot. Maybe you’re right. Maybe I’ll like it.”

Aunt Lucille looks at me closely. She crosses her arms. “Who wrote you that letter?”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Oh, really?” Aunt Lucille drops her arms and heads out of the kitchen, toward my room.

“I tore it up,” I call after her. “It was from my ex-girlfriend.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” she says, coming back to the kitchen.

“You’re as bad as all of them,” I call her out, exasperated.

“All of them?” Aunt Lucille gestures around her. “All of these people that all of a sudden you want to belong with?”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” I stammer.

Aunt Lucille picks her sponge back up and holds it in my face, threatening me. It drips on the floor between us, something gray and grimy. “You listen to me, Cal,” she says. “I know all about proving points and pretending to think things through.” She lowers the sponge before it can defile the floor any further. “If you think you can get back at your ex-girlfriend by proving that you don’t need her, by making a new life way over here, you’re doing it for all the wrong reasons.”

“So what are the right reasons?”

Aunt Lucille shrugs. “I don’t know.”

“What were your reasons?”

“I loved it here. I had friends here, a life here. I didn’t have those back home. I left too young.” She looks at me with meaning in her eyes. “I didn’t realize what I was giving up.” She wipes her hands on a towel and grabs both of my shoulders. “You have to understand, Cal, you

can't have both. Not really. If you want to belong here, you have to give up your right to belong anywhere else. That's how it works." She pauses for effect. "Is that what you really want?"

"No," I admit. "Yes. I don't know." I shrug her hands off my shoulders. "I don't know, okay? Can't I just try?"

Aunt Lucille is quiet for a moment. "Of course you can," she says at last. "I just hoped you didn't want to."

"Why?" I ask. "Why wouldn't you want me to be happy here?"

Aunt Lucille goes back to scrubbing what's left of the stove, but only half-attentively.

"When you first told me you wanted to come here, I was so excited." She pauses her cleaning and looks at me. "A second chance." Back to the stove. "But I was wrong. Letting you come here to change your mind about me was selfish, all the things everyone at home hates me for being. I made a lot of choices, Cal, and they weren't always popular. I don't regret my life here, not for one second. But I shouldn't need to. I shouldn't be the person you go to to rebel against your parents, or your girlfriend, or your sister. That's not good for you."

Aunt Lucille sighs. "I thought maybe I could change your mind, that if you could see what it's really like to live here, an ocean away from everyone you know, you'd decide it was too much to give up. I thought maybe you could figure that out sooner than I did, and then when you went back it would be like my second chance."

She shakes her head, as if to knock those ideas out of her mind. "But Cal, if you want to stay, I'm happy to have you. Just know that you can't try forever. Sooner or later, you'll have to make a decision."

I nod, acknowledging everything she's just said. "I always liked you," I tell her. "Even when Mom told me not to."

Aunt Lucille laughs. “Well, she would tell you that.” She winks. “I appreciate that. Now, here,” she hands me the sponge. “You want to belong around here, start helping.”

Seams

“Put on a sweater,” Aunt Lucille tells me, shooing me back down the hallway. “You want to make a good impression,” she informs me. “Make up for lost time.”

I nod, reentering the kitchen. “All right,” I say, still not believing I’m going through with this. “Let’s do it.”

We walk to church with the Riccis, which is unsurprising. I can see Aunt Lucille saying something about me to Signora Ricci; every few words, they turn their heads to look at me. I walk with Ennio, trying to ignore them. Ennio has a particular knack for tuning out conversations around them.

“It’s good of you to come,” Ennio says. That’s all he says, and I appreciate his brevity. Everyone else is making such a big deal out of this.

“Well, what do you expect?” Maria says, suddenly appearing next to us, as if she could read my mind. “You were so determined to never set foot in a church. You made this a very important victory.”

I stare at her. She shrugs.

“You can sit next to me,” she says. “I promise not to laugh at you.”

“You can’t keep a promise like that,” I tell her. “I’ve never been to a Catholic mass before. I’m going to look like an idiot.” May as well go along with it; they’re going to judge me anyway. Maybe it’ll endear me even more.

We have reached the church by now, and Maria steps out of the pedestrian traffic flowing up the steps. I follow her, and she bursts into laughter. “There,” she says, catching her breath and resting her hand on my forearm. “It’s out of my system.”

I follow her into the church, pretending to maintain my dignity.

I slide into the pew between Maria and Aunt Lucille, acutely aware of Signora Ricci watching me from the other side of Aunt Lucille. These women all have purses on their laps, and

my hands feel conspicuously empty. I look around me, trying not to think about that. The church is tall and narrow, surprisingly bright given its few windows. There is one main aisle, down the center, to our left. The walls and archways are stone, with hardly any paintings, and the wooden beams of the ceiling are exposed. It's a simple church, nothing like St. Peter's.

The priest enters soon after we take our seats, and I stand up with everyone else, trying to follow along. The congregation and priest take turns praying or praising or something, and everyone makes the sign of the cross, and then we sit down.

"If you don't know the words," Maria whispers, "just move your lips. No one will be able to tell the difference."

Aunt Lucille pats my knee reassuringly.

A few people read from the Bible, we stand and sit back down, and I try to follow along with Maria when the congregation reads back, but it's hard to keep up with any of the words between the echoes of the church and the denseness of the congregation's voices. Eventually, the priest returns to the altar and gives a longer speech; and Aunt Lucille whispers that this is his discussion of the readings, telling us why they are important.

I can catch words and phrases in this homily, and I'm reminded of why I dislike organized religion in the first place. I'm sitting on an uncomfortable wooden bench, listening to a man who knows nothing about me tell me how I should think and feel and live my life. I'm not sure if that idea makes me more or less uncomfortable here, given that I can't understand all of what he's saying to me.

I'm considering this when Aunt Lucille nudges me. The priest has finished speaking, and everyone is standing back up to murmur some more prayers. I'm beginning to wonder what exactly I'm pretending to say, suddenly uneasily aware of how easy it would be for these incoherent mumblers to make me sell them my soul, just by calling it a prayer.

I hand a few coins down the pew to Signora Ricci to place in the basket when they collect for the offering, which seems like the respectable thing to do. The offering baskets travel up the aisles and arrive at the altar with bread and wine for communion. There's a lot of standing, sitting, and kneeling, and Aunt Lucille and Maria alternately pull me along with them – I've hopelessly lost track. At one point we kiss everyone around us.

Finally, I'm left to sit alone in the pew when everyone files into the aisles to receive communion. It's a long, disorderly process, giving me time to breathe in the empty pew. I see people I recognize proceeding toward the altar, and smile politely at them. Several of them seem pleased to see me here; Manuela, Aunt Lucille's barista friend, takes a step into the pew to kiss me and squeeze my shoulder affectionately. "So good to see you here," she says. "We're proud of you." I wonder who "we" is, but appreciate the sentiment.

When everyone squeezes back into the pew, there are a few more prayers, the sign of the cross again, something of the sort. Then everyone rises one last time and begins unpacking the church.

Signora Ricci is mollified now that I have attended church, and apparently even participated to a respectable extent. I can hear her murmuring something to Aunt Lucille as she stands up; maybe I'm more sincere than she thought after all, but of course once can't be sure just yet. She gives me a smile and sets her hand on my arm in that gesture of hers that could be reassuring or condescending. I smile back.

"*Ci vediamo*," she says to Aunt Lucille and me. We all say it back to each other, "*ciao ciao ciao ciao*" and so on. Maria slips past me, raising her eyebrows.

"Told you I wouldn't laugh," she says. "You wouldn't make such a bad Catholic."

Maria is one of those girls who can make anyone feel at ease. She smiles, says “*ciao*,” rests her hand on my shoulder as we exchange little cheek kisses. She listens to me like she’s interested, like she doesn’t want to throw me out the window for torturing her ears with the way I butcher her language. I’ve always appreciated that, ever since we met, and especially while her mother wasn’t speaking to me. And now, weeks into my new church-going self, Maria makes me less afraid of trying to reestablish myself in good standing with Signora Ricci. It’s nice to have a real ally.

On occasion, I will admit it has occurred to me that it would be easy to fall in love with a girl like Maria, if I had asked her out myself. Instead, tonight I am mortified with the realization that I have been set up by my great-aunt and her neighbor. Now that I’ve been redeeming myself in the eyes of Viterbo, these aggressively well-meaning women have joined forces, and I have fallen right into their trap.

Maria has turned to Aunt Lucille, asking to help with something because that’s the kind of nice Italian girl she is, endowed with all the easy social graces that flow into the veins of her culture with the wine. She hands coffee cups to Aunt Lucille, who starts the machine grumbling and whirring. Signora Ricci is seated at the table with Alessandra, stacking the plates from dinner.

“You didn’t finish,” Signora Ricci says to me accusingly, using a fork to push chicken bones from my plate into a pile on a napkin. She drops my cleaned plate onto Aunt Lucille’s with a soft, scraping clink.

I take the napkin from her, trying to make myself useful. Maria is standing in front of the sink next to Aunt Lucille, blocking the cabinet with the garbage underneath. She’s talking to Aunt Lucille, so I stand next to them and wait. I can feel their eyes on me. Looking down, I inspect the chicken bones. Signora Ricci disapproves of mine, of the tiny scraps of meat still

clinging in tiny threads to the joints. Aunt Lucille has licked hers clean, like a dog, the creamy flesh of the bones gleaming in the insufficient light of the kitchen.

“*Mi scusi*,” Maria says, noticing me waiting. She slides aside, exposing the doors to the cupboard. I must look like an idiot, staring at a napkin full of chicken bits. I crumple it into my fist, the best I can, and toss it out quickly. I turn to smile at Maria, but she has already wandered over to the table, handing coffee to her mother and sister. All of a sudden I’m flustered around her, like this is a real date. Which of course it can’t be, since Aunt Lucille invented it.

“Do you ever finish your dinner?” Signora Ricci continues at me, disrupting my train of thought. She brushes crumbs off the table from my seat. I smile at her and reclaim my seat, crumbs and all. I lean my arms on the table over them. Out of sight, out of mind. But the crumbs dig into my forearms, and I can feel them branding my skin like a pebbled tattoo. The bread in this area is made without salt, leaving it slightly tasteless and extra-dry against your skin. Aunt Lucille places a cup of coffee in front of me.

“*Si*,” I say to Signora Ricci. “Just not as well as Zia Lucille.” I persist in calling her Lucille, even in Italian. Pretending there is some American left in her makes me feel a little less alone.

This answer satisfies Signora Ricci, who cannot deny it. “You’ll learn,” she says, winking. It’s a poorly directed wink, and I can’t tell if it was intended for Aunt Lucille or for Maria, who is sitting across the table from me and speaking quietly to her sister. I sip my coffee and realize I forgot to add sugar. I do so now, aware that everyone has watched me waste half of my little espresso in a bitter mouthful. An amateur mistake, one I swore I was never going to make again after my first disastrous attempt. “You’re much too skinny,” Signora Ricci continues, poking at my bicep. I pull away from her, dripping crumbs onto my lap, but she has seen enough. “Lucia,” she calls, even though Aunt Lucille is standing right behind her. “Cal doesn’t eat enough.”

Aunt Lucille sits down. I exhale in relief, ready for an ally. “No,” she says simply, agreeing with Signora Ricci.

I am trying to discreetly flick the crumbs off my lap and onto the floor, where I’m sure they will go unnoticed for at least a day and a half, but at this I raise my eyes to Aunt Lucille in horror. “I eat!” I exclaim indignantly. “I eat plenty.”

Maria and Alessandra are giggling. “You’re supposed to get fat in Italy,” Alessandra says. “Didn’t you know?” she smiles, charming.

Signora Ricci turns around to check the clock on the wall behind her. It’s after nine. She makes a slow clucking sound, like a very tired chicken. “You two had better get going,” she announces.

Aunt Lucille nods her head in agreement, quickly standing up and whisking Maria’s cup away. I hurriedly gulp the last of my coffee and hand it to her obediently. Following Maria’s lead, I stand up to leave, but Maria excuses herself to the bathroom. Left standing at the table, I mumble a few syllables and stride purposefully into my room. I close the door behind me and look around for a task. Finding nothing, I walk across the room and back again, hoping my footsteps imply productivity, and then I return to the kitchen. Thankfully, Maria is back as well.

“Ready?” she asks, slipping her sweater over her shoulders.

I nod, and we wave to everyone left in the kitchen. “*Ciao ciao ciao ciao ciao ciao*,” we all say at one another. It’s impossible to leave a conversation or a room with fewer than four “ciao.” I try to ignore the weighted smiles of Aunt Lucille and Signora Ricci.

As we descend the stairs into the street, Maria bursts into laughter. “It’s okay,” she tells me. “You don’t have to come.”

“No, no, no,” I assure her. “I want to come.” This is untrue. I do not enjoy dancing, and am not interested in a discoteca. I have been coerced, and I am not looking forward to making a fool of myself in front of a group of people I won’t even be able to speak to.

Maria nods, still laughing. “Of course you do.” She tosses her head lightly as she steps into the street. She knows I’m lying, but I’ve learned my lesson about rejecting invitations.

“I do,” I repeat, trying to make myself seem more believable. The toe of my foot catches on a raised cobblestone, and I trip. Maria turns around to see the last moments of my recovery. She nods again.

“I can see you’re a very good dancer,” she says.

“And you’re a diplomat,” I counter, trying not to wince visibly. This makes her laugh.

“Your Italian is getting better,” Maria observes. “You’re funnier.”

“*Grazie?*”

Maria rolls her eyes and tugs at my wrist to lead me around a corner. “You don’t have to try to impress me,” she says. “I know better.” She winks and laughs.

I look down at her hand on my arm. It’s a small hand, tiny really, the kind of hand that should belong to a concert pianist. Her fingers are thin and smooth, barely bulging at the knuckles. “Giancarlo does that,” I say, nodding my head down at her hand. “Pulls me along after him.”

Maria follows my glance downward, shrugging. “I must have picked it up from him. At least it makes you keep up.” She raises her eyebrows, still pulling me after her step after impossibly quick step. I feel like I’m the slow half of a three-legged race, always about to topple over. I watch her feet, stepping lightly from cobblestone to cobblestone. They are small, like her hands, and seem to barely touch the ground, more like taps than actual footsteps. My own feet, in comparison, are large and clunky, crashing into cobblestones and stumbling on the uneven pitch

of the roads. Even if I make it to the discoteca with both ankles intact, Maria is going to dance circles around me. Her friends will probably laugh me out of the club.

A quick *thwump* and Maria's quick pace has finally done me in, mid-daydream. There's a hole in the road, a cobblestone missing. My right leg crumples under me as my foot lands in the gap and can't get out. My toes are bashed up against the neighboring cobblestones, still very solid, and my ankle is curled behind my heel, scraping against the stones as it tries in vain to straighten itself out.

I sit down.

I have made some kind of awkward pain-sound, which I try not to think about, and it makes Maria draw back her lips in empathy. "How is it?" she asks as I gingerly extract my foot from the road.

I test it, trying to flex and rotate my foot. It's no good. Maria winces for me.

"Can I?" she asks, crouching down next to my foot. Without waiting for me to decide if she can, she prods at my ankle. It's already swelling, and it hurts like a bitch.

I grunt and withdraw my leg.

Maria stands up, brushing her pants off even though they aren't dirty. "Come on," she says. She extends both arms to me. I look at her skeptically.

"Come on," she repeats. "You can't stay in the street all night."

I look around. There are no cars; I could probably stay here most of the night at least and be perfectly fine. But I'd rather not risk being the American idiot that stops all the traffic in the middle of the night.

I give one arm to Maria and prop myself up on the other, hopping myself up onto my good ankle. I try putting weight on the hurt one, and almost fall back to the ground. "Son of a —" I

mumble. Maria wedges herself under my arm. I must protest. “*Grazie*,” I mumble, embarrassed to be incapacitated, “but you don’t have to.”

Maria rolls her eyes at me. “Or what? You’ll hop all the way home?”

I don’t have an answer. “*Grazie*,” I say again. Maria adjusts herself more firmly, gripping my arm over her shoulder.

“Ready?” she asks.

“*Andiamo*,” I reply. Let’s go. Maria steps forward, and I take the smallest hopping step I can manage. I’m worried about Maria supporting my weight.

“Oh, get over it,” she says impatiently. “It’ll be fine. Now stop worrying.”

We step again, together this time, and remain upright. So far, so good.

“Last time,” I say. Maria raises her eyebrows at me, ready to cut me off. “Sorry we won’t be able to go to the discoteca,” I say quickly. “Will your friends be upset?”

“Who?” Maria asks.

“Your friends.” I glance sideways at her. She looks confused. “Weren’t there friends of yours meeting us there?”

Maria shakes her head, confused. “They canceled,” she says. “I called yesterday. Zia Lucia said she would tell you. Then today she called back and said you still wanted to go.”

I am horrified, my worst fears confirmed. Aunt Lucille coerced this girl to take me on a pity date. A pity date that now, surely, has evolved into the worst date of her life. And we were such good friends yesterday.

I can’t conjure a word, and Maria turns to me, realization dawning on her. “Didn’t she tell you?” Her eyes widen and she bursts into laughter.

I don’t understand why she thinks it’s so funny.

“Cal,” she says, gently scolding me between laughs. “Oh, don’t you think it’s funny?”

“No?” I say.

“Zia Lucia is always trying to marry someone off.” She thinks about her statement for a moment. “And my mom. And my aunts. And everyone.” She shrugs, which is a poor decision, because it dislodges my arm around her neck and almost sends us both teetering into a wall.

“Sorry,” Maria says.

I think about what Maria has just said for a few moments. “Marry?” I clarify.

Maria waves her free hand around in front of her. This means nothing to me, but it seems to help her speak. She says a few indistinct syllables before the gestures kick in. “Oh, you know,” she manages at last.

I nod, even though I don’t “know.”

“Anyway, why does it matter if they try to marry people off?” Maria challenges me.

“It doesn’t.”

“You asked.”

I am silent.

“You must care. Is it because you don’t want them to marry you off? They don’t actually marry you off, you know.”

“I know *that*.”

“Or is it because it makes you think about staying here? I thought you wanted to stay here.”

I don’t respond.

“Giancarlo wants you to stay here, you know.”

I look at her, not liking where this is going. My ankle hurts.

“Your aunt does, too.”

More silence. Maria sighs. I get that a lot, those sighs. Something about me seems to draw them out of people.

“Haven’t you thought about it at all?” Maria blurts out finally.

“You seem to have done plenty of thinking for me,” I yell back. I feel like I have to yell here, to make myself heard. “What about you, Maria? Do you want me to stay here?”

“It doesn’t matter what I want!” Maria shouts. She’s always going to be able to shout louder than me, I realize. “This is about you! Why can’t you make a decision for once in your life?”

“Hey,” I counter. “You don’t know me. You don’t know the first thing about me.”

“No? I know that as soon as anyone here started to care about you, started to try to make you feel at home here, because *you* said you wanted to stay, you start running right back out the door.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” I hop off her shoulders to look at her straight.

Maria gestures at me. “Looks like running to me.”

I drop my arms to my sides in surrender. I hadn’t even realized they were flailing around. Maria takes a step toward me and situates my arm over her shoulder again.

“I don’t want to marry you, Cal,” she says quietly, calmly.

“Oh, good,” I say. “That’s great to hear.”

“I’m just saying,” Maria says, getting testy again. “They can try to marry you off to me all they want. You’ll be okay.”

We walk a few steps in silence. “How does it not bother you?” I ask finally. “All these people trying to live your life for you.”

Maria looks at me, puzzled. “Because they’re not trying to live my life for me. They’re trying to make sure I find what’s best for me.”

“By marrying you off?”

“They know I don’t want to be married off just yet.”

“I don’t believe you,” I tease.

“It’s true,” she insists, laughing. “I had a boyfriend, for a long time. I’m not in the market now.”

I nod. “I know how you feel,” I tell her. “But that doesn’t seem to stop them.”

“You’re too hard on everyone,” Maria declares. “Yourself included. Loosen up a little. Try to listen to people – you never know when they’ll say things worth hearing.”

“You’re the only one so far,” I tell her.

“I don’t think that’s true,” Maria says thoughtfully. “I’m just the only one you’ll admit to.” She sighs. “This isn’t a big city, Cal. You’ve got to start expecting people to take an interest in you. And that’s not always a bad thing. You said you don’t know what you want. Maybe someone else does.”

“You sound like Aunt Lucille,” I say.

Maria laughs. “Your aunt is a smart woman. And she’s always wanted to be able to go back home to your family. You’re her first real shot. I bet she’d tell you lots of interesting things, if you let her.”

We are almost home by now, hobbling down the last block. I am quiet, considering what Maria has said. We arrive at the building and Maria helps me hop up the stairs. This feels very dangerous and requires our full attention, and I am relieved to let our conversation sink away. Maria is just as attentive helping me into the building as she was before our argument. Our whatever-it-was. She is a genuinely good human being.

“Good night, Cal,” Maria says quietly. She drops my arm from around her shoulders and stands on her toes to give me a kiss on my cheek. “I didn’t mean to upset you,” she adds. “Just – think about what I said.” She opens the door for me. I can hear Aunt Lucille banging pots together in the kitchen. She’s doing dishes. “Do you need help inside?” Maria asks.

“I’m okay,” I say. “Thanks.” I turn to hop inside. “And I’ll think about it,” I add, glancing back at her on the landing. “Really.”

Maria smiles. “Goodnight, Cal,” she says again. “I’ll take you dancing some other time.” She winks. “A little slower next time.”

She disappears up the stairs, and I pull Aunt Lucille’s front door closed behind me. Aunt Lucille’s noise stops abruptly in the kitchen. “*Chi c’è?*” she calls.

“It’s me,” I answer. “Don’t worry.”

Aunt Lucille emerges from the kitchen. “You’re home early,” she says, surprised. “How did it go?”

When Lacie and I were little and our dad was on the road half the year for work, a man in long black and white robes knocked on our front door. Lacie wasn’t home, so I crouched down in the corner of the kitchen and listened to what the man said to Mom. He was concerned, he said, about a single woman raising two children on her own. It wasn’t right, he said. It wasn’t holy.

I didn’t know what that meant at the time, but it made Mom furious. She yelled at the man, offended that he was making assumptions about her in her husband’s absence, and said that even if she was a single mother, she’d be a damned good one, and she’d hit him over the head if he said things like that to her ever again. She didn’t care how blessed he was.

Mom caught me eavesdropping, of course, and she explained that the man was a religious missionary, who thought it was his job to convince people that they were living their lives the wrong way and that they needed to convert to his religion in order to be saved. “It’s not true,” she concluded her simple explanation. “If you’re a good person, you’re a good person, and it doesn’t matter if you believe in a God or not.”

Here, captive in a Catholic world, I endure another church service with my mouth politely closed. Aunt Lucille holds me back when I start to follow the Riccis home, just as someone calls out, “Signora,” to her.

The priest has emerged from the church at the back of the congregation, and Aunt Lucille leads me over toward him.

“Padre,” she greets him, clasping his hands and kissing each cheek. “*Buongiorno. Come stai?*”

The priest nods, agreeing that he is very well, thank you. Then he turns to me, greeting me the same way. I tilt my head from side to side and endure it politely. “It’s good to see you here, Signor Benson,” he tells me. “You’re new here, new to the Church.”

I acknowledge that this is true.

“Well, we’re glad to have you. Better late than never,” he adds to Aunt Lucille, inclining his head toward hers knowingly. He turns his attention back to me. “Your aunt tells me you’ve decided to stay here a little longer.”

“Oh,” I say, glancing sideways at Aunt Lucille. “Um, yes.”

“That’s wonderful,” the priest says, clasping my hands again.

“Yes,” I agree. He releases my hands and I slide them into my pockets.

The priest turns to Aunt Lucille and murmurs something. She nods.

“Well,” he says to me again, “whenever you’re ready to start the *catechism*. We’ll be happy to have you.”

“*Catechismo?*” I repeat, not understanding.

The priest looks at Aunt Lucille, as though confused I don’t know what he means. “The process,” he goes on. “To join the Church.”

“Oh,” I say, lifting my eyebrows. I turn to Aunt Lucille, wondering what other promises she has made to priests and neighbors and anyone else.

There is a silence, as neither I nor the priest knows how to continue. Finally, someone calls out to him from another part of the piazza.

“*Piacere*,” he says, nodding his head cheerfully and grasping my shoulder. Nice to meet you.

“*Piacere*,” I reply, still uneasy.

He nods to Aunt Lucille and turns to his other parishioners.

I don't say anything to Aunt Lucille as we walk back to the apartment. I can hear her open and close her mouth a few times, but she never gets a sentence out. When we arrive home, I take my sketchbook from my room and let myself out. I need to think.

“Back for lunch?” Aunt Lucille calls after me.

I wave back at her. “Sure, couple of hours.” I pull the door closed behind me and hurry down the stairs before any Riccis catch sight of me.

I wander down the street, away from the fountain and my usual spots. There's a bridge nearby, crossing over a deep valley that crosses through town. It's quieter over here; there are trees. There are so few trees in the city, with all the space taken up with close-packed stucco. Over here, things are more spread out. Viterbo used to be some kind of fortress for the Pope, Giancarlo once explained to me proudly, and the palaces are nestled in this out-of-the-way corner. A couple of dogs walk by in the Park of the Dead. I don't know who had the idea to name a park after death but it creeps me out a little.

I sit on a bench across the street from the park. I should be inspired here, with the Death Park and the Pope's palaces and the trees and the dogs and the cobblestones. I try to channel Lacie into my pencil. Perfect Lacie, who got straight A's and was accepted into all the best art schools in the country, who will probably be a rich and famous artist even without running off to

Italy without approval, who for that matter never does anything without approval, even though she's already all grown-up and married with a picket fence and neighbors who love her. The golden girl.

I draw a few branches, but they look dead. Suffocated.

Mom didn't want me to go stay with Aunt Lucille. She thought it was outrageous of Aunt Lucille to try and weasel her way back into the family after her second husband died – and a *foreigner* no one had even met, at that – and she worried that my going to Italy would be like giving in to the old woman's demands. “A woman that can just leave everything behind without a care in the world, who can *abandon* her family like that,” here, my mother would shake her head and exhale uneasily from her nose, and usually slam whatever she was holding on the counter, “is not the kind of woman who is willing to change her ways. She's stubborn and she's selfish. I don't see why you're so interested in going over there with her,” she insisted.

I tried reminding her, gently, that it had been years since Aunt Lucille had missed Grandma's funeral, and that no one had ever even tried to find out if she had had a reason. Maybe, just maybe, it was time to give her a second chance.

Mom denied this, shaking her head more vigorously. “If you're expecting anything different, you're only fooling yourself.”

It was one of those conversations we had over and over again before I left, Mom trying to change my mind. Now, I can't help but recall it, staring across the dinner table at Aunt Lucille.

“I know I said I would try church,” I tell her again. “And I did. I tried it, and it's not working for me.”

Aunt Lucille twirls her spaghetti around her fork longer than necessary, trying to formulate an effective argument. “I just think –”

“That’s just it,” I say, cutting her off. “*You* think. Isn’t religion supposed to be personal? About what *I* think?”

“Oh, is that it? And tell me, Cal, what do you think? Do you think that Europe is your own personal playground? That you can come here and fool around and not think about anyone else but yourself? This is a community, Cal, made up of real people, with feelings. You can’t expect them to not care about you, just because you’re content to waste your life away.”

The conversation is getting out of hand. “Waste my life away? That’s rich, from the woman who ran off to Europe and couldn’t be bothered to even come back for her sister’s funeral.” I set my fork down and lean on my elbows, glancing sharply at Aunt Lucille.

“I see. And I suppose you have some other grand plans for your life, now that you’re here? Do enlighten me.”

I sigh, frustrated. I’ve been frustrated a lot lately. “Well, I’m sorry I don’t have my whole life figured out at eighteen.” I push my chair out from the table, suddenly losing my appetite. I set my plate on the counter and lean over the sink. “I don’t get it,” I say finally, trying to be less confrontational. “I don’t understand why everyone here has to put all this pressure on me to know exactly what I’m doing for the rest of my life. So what if I don’t know yet? I don’t know,” I repeat. “And I think that’s fair.” I turn around and face Aunt Lucille again, arms crossed.

She is still twirling her spaghetti. “Well,” she says slowly. “I’ll agree, it’s unfortunate, given your situation, that this is a culture that expects things from you.” She pauses to let the implications of that statement sink in. “But that doesn’t have to be a bad thing. You said yourself, you want to stay here a while, give it a try. You said you want to be a part of this community. And the people here want to help you. Going to church might help you.”

I sigh again. I'm really starting to see what Mom meant about Aunt Lucille's stubbornness. "No, it won't," I say firmly. "Listening to an old man tell me why I'm a heathen and going to hell won't help. Having him offer to baptize me every week won't help, either."

Aunt Lucille makes a vague, sprawling gesture with her hands, finally out of spaghetti to twirl. "So that's what this is about. You want to stay here, but you don't want me to tell people because then they would expect it of you." She shakes her head. "Would it really kill you to give it a try?"

I shrug. "Only my soul."

"That is enough." Aunt Lucille slams her silverware onto the table. "I welcomed you into my home, I have tried to make you feel comfortable in this city. I think I have been more than tolerant of your antics while you've been here, disrespecting everyone and everything, wrecking my car, offending my friends. And quite frankly, I think it's gone on long enough. If you want to stay here, it's time you started proving it." She stacks her plate on top of mine and looks at me sternly, a little too close than I would like.

"Oh?" I prompt her at last.

"You will go to church. Every week. And you'll be respectful and polite to everyone, especially the Riccis, who have been nothing but gracious to you. And you'll get your act together. Figure out where you stand."

I rub my forehead. "Or what?"

Aunt Lucille stares at me. "Or you can start paying rent, and actually replacing my car, and finding your own way."

I don't say anything for a moment as I decide whether arguing any further would be worth it. "Okay," I say finally. I rinse the dishes and put them into the dishwasher, trying to be agreeable. "By the way," I add, "when did you become Ms. Responsible? All these wholesome

cultural influences, I would have thought you'd think very highly on family responsibilities."

This is a low blow, and I know it as soon as it comes out of my mouth, but it's too late to take it back.

Aunt Lucille hands me the saucepan. "No one came to my wedding," she says quietly.

"What kind of responsibilities does that leave for me?" She leaves the question hanging in the air between us and begins folding the tablecloth.

I don't know how to respond, so I scrub half-heartedly at the pan in the sink. I let the water drizzle onto the sponge slowly, quietly.

"Do you remember," Aunt Lucille says, more mildly, "when I came to visit you? You couldn't have been more than ten."

"Eight," I correct her. "I was eight. Mom said you were trying to make us pity you so you didn't have to take responsibility for leaving all of us."

Aunt Lucille chuckles, a bitter, sarcastic laugh. "You said you would visit me someday." She smiles. "You said you'd bring me fireflies."

I laugh. "Sorry to disappoint you."

Aunt Lucille pats my shoulder. "You don't have to try to fix me," she says, trying to undo all that family guilt she dumped on me. "I just want to make sure you don't want to *be* me."

Scars

Giancarlo throws himself against his mother, sobbing, and I stand at the door like a spectator, watching myself tell the Ricci women that there has been an accident at the fountain. The girls watch me, waiting for details I can't produce, wondering if this too is somehow my fault. Signora Ricci hands Giancarlo off to her daughters, calling something back to them very rapidly and whisking me down the stairs with her. I can hear the girls take Giancarlo inside, still sobbing, and click the door shut behind them.

"What happened?" Signora Ricci asks me as we race back to the piazza.

"I don't know," I babble at her. "There was a statue, and it fell on his leg."

Signora Ricci rushes ahead of me. I follow her into the piazza, but hang back as she approaches the group. The men will just tell me again that it's not my fault, but I can't help but feel responsible. It's because of me that this fountain needs fixing in the first place.

The statue was supposed to be one of the last parts of the fountain to fix, a small but heavy cone-shaped thing, to replace the fragments left in the wake of the Panda. "How would you like to stay on?" Ennio asked me this morning, commenting that the project was almost finished. "We could use you on our other projects. I could see you as a mason."

I impress myself every single time I understand the word masonry – *muratura* – but I've never actually been allowed to touch the precision equipment. I kicked a pebble in the street nervously and nodded that yes, I would like to learn.

"You're working with Babbo for real now!" Giancarlo interrupted, skipping up next to us excitedly. "You're really staying!"

I hesitated, Maria's comment from the other day resurfacing in my mind. How sure am I, really, about staying? I looked from Giancarlo to Ennio, who had distanced himself from us with a smile. I wonder how many people here are already making plans for me like this. Giancarlo ran

circles around me, hyped up on the coffee spoon his mother let him lick at breakfast. When I didn't answer immediately, he slowed down, settling into a stride next to me.

"This is your home now, isn't it?" he asked. "Forever?"

"Forever's a long time," I told him, treading lightly in the conversation.

"Don't you want it to be your home?"

I hesitate again, a rookie mistake. "Yes," I sigh.

Giancarlo was quiet, suspicious of my answer. "Do you want to go back to America?" he pressed me.

"I don't know," I said desperately, looking in vain toward Ennio for help. He wasn't paying any attention to us. "Maybe someday."

I was worrying him, and I looked down at my feet to avoid his eyes. My steps have grown steadier on the cobblestones now; I hardly ever trip up of my own accord.

"Would you take Maria away?" Giancarlo asked quietly.

"Why?" I replied, suddenly confused.

"Well, when you get married, and you want to go back to America, would you take Maria away with you?"

I stopped walking and looked at him. "Giancarlo, Maria and I are not getting married," I said, speaking carefully to make sure I was saying the right words. I was concerned that he was so sure of that fact. I don't know who gave him that idea.

Giancarlo retreated into his silence, processing that information. I have crushed his dreams, apparently, which were somehow, inexplicably, tied to my impending marriage to Maria. "I still think you should stay," he announced finally. He found his own pebble and kicked it, watching it bounce off the stones down the street. His pebbles go farther than mine; there's soccer in his blood.

At the fountain, I wandered off to help unload buckets of mortar, still distracted by Giancarlo's conversation. Ennio went with Giuseppe, the foreman, awaiting the delivery of the last statue. The delivery truck arrives and parks uphill from the fountain, blocking most of the traffic through the piazza. I watched Giuseppe step out into the piazza, redirecting traffic, and Ennio and the driver set about unloading the statue. It must have been made of lead; I could hear it banging and clanging in the bed of the truck as I carried a bucket of mortar over to the base of the fountain.

Activity in the piazza was picking up as the city began its day. Child-footsteps came bounding down staircases and onto the cobblestones; cars flew past us, glints of chrome and metallic paint flashing in the sunlight. Drivers were laying on their horns and shouting at Giuseppe, obstructing their path past the truck. "*Vaffanculo!*" they yelled. Go fuck yourself.

All at once, the noises of Viterbo in the morning seemed to stop, leaving in their place a terrible screech of tires and a blaring horn. The voices picked up again, *vaffanculo, vaffanculo*, and this time Giuseppe's voice was among them. From beyond the fountain, I turned with the rest of the construction crew just in time to see a black car slam into the delivery truck with a gut-dropping screech of tires and tearing metal. Giuseppe, lying in the street where he dove out of the car's way, was shaking his fist and screaming obscenities I haven't even learned. The driver climbed out of his car to continue their argument, still angry with Giuseppe for standing in the middle of the road.

As their unintelligible argument faded into the background of my awareness, the men around me leapt into action, sprinting past the fountain toward the delivery truck. The crash jolted the truck, dislodging the heavy statue; it toppled out of the bed to the ground, pinning Ennio beneath it.

I backed up, unprepared for a crisis in a foreign language, and tried to distance myself from what was happening. Time seemed to slow down, the atmosphere went hazy. Ennio was writhing in pain, his teeth gritted together and his fists balled against the ground. The statue, pried off his leg, rolled down the piazza toward the fountain, broken and bloodstained. Someone was pressing a t-shirt to Ennio's leg, someone else was yelling into a cell phone.

I was acutely aware of my own uselessness, watching the statue roll slowly into the fountain with a final *clunk* against the bottom step. Nothing seemed real.

Now, I'm back, and not much has changed. The statue is still lying at the base of the fountain; a group of people is still clustered around the delivery truck. An ambulance has arrived, and Signora Ricci hurries over to it. I try to imagine myself as one of the masons huddled around Ennio, prepared and helpful, a part of the process. It's hard to picture.

As the ambulance pulls out of the piazza and the police begin reordering traffic, Giuseppe emerges from the crowd and spots me. "That was good of you to take Giancarlo away," he says. "I don't know where he came from, but that's nothing for a kid to be watching."

I nod, not really taking in his words.

"Go on home, kid," Giuseppe tells me. "Nothing more to do here." He pauses. "See you tomorrow?"

I nod again. "See you tomorrow."

Giuseppe pats me on the back, violently, in his usual way. When he congratulated me on my new job with the crew, he nearly knocked the wind out of me. Now he shakes his head and disappears back into the crowd. "Hell of a thing," he murmurs.

Surely Signora Ricci blames me for the accident, and this has made our acquaintance even more fragile. I've taken to avoiding her at church; she watches me from down the pew as I tap

my feet and fiddle with the hem of my sweater. Aunt Lucille tolerates this as part of our compromise, but I don't see Signora Ricci coming to that kind of understanding with me. Even when she joins the throng of communion-seekers, I don't feel safe.

I hate Sundays.

"Come on," Maria says to me as we leave the church. She waves to her family and Aunt Lucille for me. "We'll see you later," she calls, practically dragging me in the opposite direction.

"What are we doing?" I ask, following after her. Maria always moves like she's running. I barely try to keep up anymore.

"We're getting coffee," she says. "You look terrible."

I shrug. "It's a Sunday morning."

We arrive at the café and Maria orders us espressos, even though it's still morning. She rolls her eyes at me. "No kidding."

We take our espresso and sit at a little table in the corner. Maria whacks a sugar packet against her hand. "I used to hate going to church," she says.

"So why do you go?"

Maria stares at me. "Have you met my mother?" She stirs the sugar into her coffee. "Besides, I realized it wasn't about sitting and being lectured."

I sip my coffee and look at her. "Sure seems like it to me."

"That's because you're there to make other people happy. Obviously you're not going to be happy about it." She leans back in her chair, stretching her back. "You know Santa Rosa didn't have a sternum?"

"What?" I ask, sure I can't have heard her right.

Maria nods, as if she's said something completely normal. "Her body didn't decompose, and when they went back and looked at it, there was no sternum. She shouldn't have been able to live

more than a few years, and yet she lived to eighteen. You don't have to be particularly devout to call that a miracle."

I shrug.

"I used to think believing in Santa Rosa, in miracles, in God didn't really have anything to do with the stuff in church. You know, the lectures and confessions and communions and all that. I'm not a very good Catholic," she adds, in a whisper, lest her mother hear her all the way across town. "I like to think God is a pretty nice guy."

I chuckle. Maria runs her hands through her hair, smiling easily in the sunlight.

"But anyway, then I realized that maybe church *isn't* about God, or at least not really. It's about all these people coming together because they believe in something. It's more like the *Macchina*. We're a community." Her coffee is finished; she sets her empty cup down on the table and twirls her spoon in it, making an idle scratching sound on the ceramic. "You don't think like that, do you?"

I shake my head, draining the last sip of my coffee. Maria makes a little sound.

"I don't think like that," I repeat. "And let me guess the rest. I don't belong here if I don't think like that."

"I didn't say that," Maria says. She pulls an elastic from her wrist and wraps her hair up in it. "You're always waiting for someone to tell you to get out of here. I don't know why. I want you to stay."

"Well," I say, stretching my chest out for bravado, "I am a pretty impressive addition to any town."

Maria reaches across the table and whacks me on the arm. "Don't encourage yourself," she laughs. "You're not *all* that great." She settles back into her chair. "But you're a good friend.

And Giancarlo looks up to you, for whatever reason.” She looks at me very seriously. “He’s gotten very attached to you.”

“Yeah, well, I have no idea why.”

“I have no idea why he does anything,” Maria says. “But he’s my brother.”

“I know.” I pull a pen out of my pocket and start doodling on a napkin. “I try not to set too bad an example for him.”

Maria rolls her eyes. “You don’t draw as much as you used to,” she says, watching me sketch.

I shrug. “Not much point to it, I guess.”

“What?” Maria pulls the napkin away from me, examining the half-drawn coffee cup. “Of course there’s a point to it. This is good.” She hands it back. “I bet all your stuff is good, if you’d let people see it once in a while.”

I shrug again. “Nothing was good enough to get into art school.”

“So? Lots of artists didn’t go to art school. That doesn’t mean the world ends. Besides, I thought you decided you want to draw without being an artist. That way you don’t have to show off.”

I shrug again. “My sister went to art school. My ex-girlfriend went to art school. I was supposed to do it, too. But I’m not good enough.”

“Then maybe you’re ‘supposed’ to do something else.” Maria practices the finger quotes I taught her, even though they don’t make sense to her. Italian quotation marks are little arrows on the page like explosions, drawing attention to the speech, to make it louder, more life-like.

“Well, that’s why I came here,” I say, frustrated as usual. “But I haven’t figured that out, either.”

“Then maybe that’s why you keep waiting for someone to tell you you don’t belong here,” she says honestly. “Because you know you should be telling yourself.”

Aunt Lucille cuts a piece of mozzarella and places it on Giancarlo’s plate. “*Mangia*,” she says firmly. “*Mozzarella di bufala. Il tuo preferito.*” Your favorite, she reminds him.

Giancarlo watches the bright white milk trickle out of his cheese, tracing the cracks in Aunt Lucille’s dish in tiny rivulets. His foot bounces anxiously on the rung of his chair; the legs are uneven, and it creates a maddening tapping sound on the floor.

“Giancarlo,” I say. He stops, looks at me, and starts bouncing again.

“They haven’t called yet,” he observes. “When will they call?”

“Soon,” Aunt Lucille says patiently. “Now eat your mozzarella.”

I understand why Giancarlo was not allowed to wait in the hospital with his mother and sister. He would have driven them all crazy. I check the clock, hoping he doesn’t catch me. Ennio’s surgery isn’t even expected to be finished for another hour.

“Eat your mozzarella,” I echo, taking a slice for myself.

Giancarlo pokes at his cheese. “I’m not hungry.” He looks at the clock.

Aunt Lucille sets her fork down loudly. “Giancarlo.” She stares him down. “Your father will be just fine. Starving yourself isn’t going to help anything. Now sit still and eat your mozzarella.”

This subdues Giancarlo, and he eats his mozzarella obediently. Aunt Lucille nods in approval. “That’s better.”

She starts clearing the table, and I hand Giancarlo a dishtowel. “I’ll wash,” I tell Aunt Lucille. “Giancarlo can dry.” That’ll keep him busy.

Aunt Lucille starts stacking dishes in the sink. Giancarlo waits for me to hand him clean plates, swinging the dishtowel around his head in the meantime. “Giancarlo,” Aunt Lucille warns him, narrowly avoiding a smack to the head.

I hand Giancarlo the first pot.

I wash the dishes slowly, keeping Giancarlo busy as long as possible. When I start to run low, Aunt Lucille restocks the sink with clean dishes and silverware. Signora Ricci finally calls, and we crawl into Aunt Lucille’s new Fiat and speed away to the hospital.

By the time we arrive, Ennio is awake and reasonably coherent. Signora Ricci keeps a hold of Giancarlo’s waist as he tries to leap on top of his father with a hug. “Careful,” she says sternly. “Be careful.”

Giancarlo nods. “Are you all better, Babbo?” he asks.

Ennio laughs. “Of course. All better.”

Signora Ricci is less amused. “He will be,” she clarifies. She explains to Giancarlo the long process of crutches and follow-ups and therapy. Giancarlo adds the weeks and months together as she lists them, then opens his eyes and mouth in horror.

“But Babbo!” he cries. “The *Macchina!*”

Ennio sighs. “The *Macchina*,” he acknowledges.

“What will you do?” Giancarlo asks.

Ennio pats him on the shoulder. “Nothing I can do,” he tells him. “Next year.”

Giancarlo is not placated. He pulls his shoulders up, lifting himself almost onto his tiptoes. “I’ll carry it for you, Babbo.”

“Giancarlo,” Alessandra sighs. “You can’t.”

Giancarlo furrows his brows. “But Babbo, it’s *your* spot.” He looks around the room. “Cal, don’t you think I could do it? There’s time. I can practice.”

I have no desire to get involved. I look to Aunt Lucille, Maria, anyone for help.

“You know there’s more to it than that, Giancarlo,” Signora Ricci reminds him. “You can’t do it. You’re too young.”

“But Babbo is a *facchino*. Not just anyone can have his spot.” Giancarlo turns to me again. “Cal, you could do it. You’re almost like my brother.”

It’s very nice of Giancarlo to think so, but now is not the time for that sentiment. I open my mouth to protest, to insist that I cannot carry 1/100 of the *Macchina*, but Giancarlo’s face almost makes me reconsider. Maybe I could train. I could build up muscles that I don’t have and carry the *Macchina*. For Ennio. For Giancarlo. Santa Rosa would surely approve of motives like that.

I’m concerned to hear thoughts like that running around in my head. No thousand-year-old dead girl is going to be telling me whether I can or can’t carry her bones across the city. I would be a *facchino* to honor the living, for the real people who matter, who consider me one of their own. Maybe I could be a *facchino*, maybe I could stay here and be one of the 100 men.

“No.” Signora Ricci interrupts my swell of Viterbese pride. “You know better,” she tells Giancarlo again. “Cal isn’t Viterbese. He can’t be a *facchino*.”

I can feel my chest deflate. For a moment, I had almost convinced myself that I could belong here, that I could be part of this weird little family in this weird little town. For a moment, I had forgotten that Viterbo is a culture you’re born into, that there are some things that label you forever. I can never be a *facchino*, just like I can never be a Ricci, because I was born on the wrong continent. I will never be Viterbese.

I catch Maria’s eye across the room, over her father’s bed, and I wonder if I have suddenly realized what she meant when she asked what I was doing here.

Before Lacie left for college, she spent weeks slowly building up piles in the hallway outside her bedroom – take, maybe take, donate, keep home. In the late in-between hours, after our parents went to bed but before Lacie returned home from her dates, I sat in the hall and flipped through her books and photo albums. I was sixteen, old enough to know how pathetic it was, but I thought maybe if I could memorize the things she was bringing with her, Chicago wouldn't seem so far away. I didn't know how I was going to survive two more years of high school alone.

I fell in with Christie and her crowd and made it to graduation intact, but I've never had another friend like Lacie, even when she was halfway across the country. Until Maria. Maria gets me, in a way that's almost creepy. I could belong with her, I think sometimes, freaking myself out. Except that she's here, and she always wants to be here, in a world I will never be a part of.

Giancarlo has made himself right at home in my bedroom. He is seated cross-legged in the middle of the floor, with stacks of papers spread out on in all directions, and a pencil behind each ear.

“*Ciao*,” I say uncertainly, carefully stepping around the pages. “What's going on here?”

“*Ciao*, Cal,” Giancarlo says, not taking his attention off his paperwork.

I reorient myself, standing behind him, trying to figure out what he's doing. The papers appear to be a collection of lists and grids, with names and numbers strewn across them.

“Giancarlo,” I say, trying again to get his attention. “What are you doing?”

“Mamà told me I couldn't do this at home anymore. It upsets Babbo.”

“Ah,” I say.

“Then Zia Lucia said I couldn't do it in the living room or the kitchen because she was cleaning. So I came in here.” He says this like it clears up everything.

“So,” I repeat. “What exactly are you doing?” I’m starting to wonder if I’m using the wrong words for this question.

“It’s the *Macchina*,” Giancarlo explains.

I wait.

“Since Babbo can’t do it, I’m trying to figure out who’s going to replace him.” Giancarlo furrows his brow, distressed that his father has to be replaced at all. He must have been compiling this data nonstop for the two weeks that have passed since the accident.

I watch him for a few moments, impressed by his intensity even though I can’t imagine that a ten-year-old really has the knowledge to determine the optimal selection and order of the *facchini*.

“Don’t they have alternates lined up in advance?” I ask, curious about Giancarlo’s knowledge on the subject.

“Well, yes,” he answers matter-of-factly, “but it depends whose spot opens up, doesn’t it? That’s why they have more than one substitute.”

This makes sense.

I lean over Giancarlo’s shoulder. “So show me. Who do you think would be best?”

Giancarlo’s face lights up, excited at the prospect of showing off his calculations. I half-listen to him, nodding appropriately, wondering how much of this is an intentional distraction from his father’s condition.

“There’s a rehearsal tonight,” Giancarlo tells me when he finishes circling Alessio Napoli’s name at the bottom of his page.

“What’s that?”

“They have to practice,” Giancarlo says. “So they can carry the *Macchina* the whole way and walk in step and everything.”

Again, this makes sense.

Giancarlo draws little shapes in the corner of his paper. I can tell he's watching me out of the corner of his eye. "Babbo was going to take me," he goes on. "But he can't."

He stops drawing and looks directly at me.

"Do you want to go with me?" he asks.

I hesitate, but I find it very difficult to say no to Giancarlo; his eyes are so hopeful.

"When is it?" I ask.

Giancarlo smiles widely. He leaps to his feet. "I knew you'd want to come! You really are like my brother!" He scampers around the rooms, gathering his papers. "I'll go get ready." He dashes out the door. "It's at seven!" he calls behind him.

I nod to myself in his absence and lie down on my bed.

I hear Aunt Lucille come into the apartment. The sounds of this place have become more familiar than the noises of my real life. The clicks and clanks of Aunt Lucille's complicated lock have replaced the wobbly slamming screen door Lacie would let fall shut behind us on our way out to the backyard; I've gotten used to hearing three footsteps echo for every one I take. Aunt Lucille drops her keys on the coffee table – a jingling, metallic thump – and sets the groceries on the kitchen floor in their soft, rustling bags. It's quiet outside, but every now and then a car passes under my window in a burst of rumbling cobblestones.

I stretch, roll off my bed, and wander into the kitchen. I set my sketchbook on the table and help Aunt Lucille unpack the groceries. "Your sketchbook," Aunt Lucille remarks, mildly surprised. She hands me a bag of fruit. "Haven't seen that in a while."

I shrug, stacking apples into the fruit bowl on the table. "I haven't been thinking art school for a while."

Aunt Lucille nods and ducks into the refrigerator with a tomato. “What about now?”

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” I say. “I mean, what’s the point?” I take the bread from Aunt Lucille and move toward the bread chest. I’ve always felt that bread boxes were a little unnecessary, but Italians take it to a whole new level – they’ve got chests the size of refrigerators, filled with paper sacks of bread in all shapes and sizes, all unsalted. The better to taste the olive oil or prosciutto, I’m told, but that doesn’t help when it’s just a piece of bread.

“What’s the point of bread with no salt in it?” I continue, waving the sack around. “What’s the point of a three-hour lunch break if you have to work ‘til 8pm? What’s the point of pretending I’m from Viterbo if I’ll never be allowed to carry a fucking statue around?” I slip into English, too upset to let this country win over my tongue.

I throw the bread into the chest while Aunt Lucille watches, quiet, bemused.

“You don’t really want to be a *facchino*,” Aunt Lucille reminds me.

“It’s the principle of the thing,” I say, calmer. “I’m always going to be the outsider, the one who’s not from Viterbo. All this stuff, the going to church and drinking coffee and all of it, it’s never going to make any difference.” I toss my hands. “And you, you’re not from here, either. How can you stand it?”

“Because I chose it,” Aunt Lucille says simply, continuing with the groceries. Flour into the cupboard, a packet of prosciutto into the fridge. “It was here or home, and there was no difference for me. So I stayed here.” She sidles around the table and sets a hand on my shoulder. “The food’s better.” She winks.

The groceries are done; Aunt Lucille rolls up the bags and tucks them into a cabinet.

“You’ll figure it out,” she says, off-hand, as though it’s the least important thing in the world. “I’m going for an *aperitivo* with Francesca. Do you want to come?”

“Can’t,” I say, which is true, although I wouldn’t really care to go out for drinks with Aunt Lucille and Signora Ricci anyway. “I’ve got plans with Giancarlo.”

At 7pm sharp, just in time to be late, Giancarlo is leading me down the stairs and into the street, talking in a frenzy I can almost understand about how exciting it is to see the rehearsals, when everything isn’t so formal and perfect. It’s “different impressive,” he says.

I’m reminded of a play I saw in elementary school – nothing big, just the high school performance. For a field trip, they took us up to the high school to watch a rehearsal the week before opening night. We went backstage and saw all the ropes that worked the scenery, the tape marks on the stage for the choreography, the pages and pages of lighting cues all written out. When my parents took us to see the show later that weekend, all the magic was gone. I’m surprised watching these rehearsals hasn’t done that to Giancarlo.

We finally reach the roped-off corner of town where rehearsals are held. Tonight, it’s just a piazza closed – Giancarlo explains that this means they’ll be practicing lifting and setting down the *Macchina*, or short bits of walking only. Closer to the transport in September, they’ll practice walking the length of the procession, for endurance.

Giancarlo scampers along the ropes, pulling me behind him. He points out each of the *facchini* in turn – their names, their family histories, and an incredibly large body of seemingly irrelevant information. These men really are celebrities.

“That’s Francesco Morrini,” Giancarlo says. “He’s Giorgio’s uncle, and he’s one of the best guys on the soccer team. You could be friends with him, easy.” He squeezes my hand encouragingly. “You can learn to be a better soccer player. I’ll practice with you, even, if you want.”

I rustle Giancarlo's hair. No version of my future includes any kind of soccer uniform, but his determination is very endearing.

"Francesco was July in the calendar this year," Giancarlo adds, in case I thought he looked familiar. I prefer not to think about that calendar, which Signora Ricci showed me proudly on my first visit to her kitchen: the local soccer team, month by month, shirtless, like swimsuit models. But not swimsuit models. Apparently, this calendar is equally popular with the men and women of Viterbo; everyone just wants to know the calendar models personally.

Giancarlo returns to the *facchini* as a group; they are practicing with some kind of weighted pallet to simulate the tower they'll eventually carry. They crouch in position, count off, then rise to their full heights in a sudden, trembling effort. They take a few steps, reverse the process to lower the pallet back down onto its supports.

"Isn't it amazing?" Giancarlo whispers, as though the full pressure of his voice on the atmosphere might alter the delicate balance of men and machine. "One hundred of them, and it's like one huge person."

I nod, watching the men, their brows and shirts drenched in sweat, their muscles rippling and twitching from exertion. I can picture them going home, collapsing on couches, begging their wives for aspirin and heat packs to soothe their strained bodies. Tomorrow, they'll barely be able to hold their necks up. Who would want to do this, year after year after year?

"I can't wait to be one of them." Giancarlo answers my question for me, full of awe and genuine, honest ambition.

"You'll be great," I say encouragingly, because I know he wants me to reinforce his dream.

"It's too bad you're not from Viterbo," Giancarlo goes on, patting me on the forearm in sympathy. "Don't you just want to be part of this?"

That's it, I realize, even as I nod distractedly at Giancarlo. I don't. For all I've been trying to redeem myself in the eyes of the Riccis and their community, it's just because I don't like *not* belonging. I don't really have a driving need to belong here, in this world of candlelit towers and three-hour lunches, even if it was possible.

The rehearsal has ended; Giancarlo takes my hand and leads me away from the crowd, back toward home. "Just think," he says, "in a few years, you can watch me like that!"

I'm going to feel really guilty when I leave.

Home

Ennio's birthday is this weekend, and Signora Ricci is determined to celebrate just as she would if he wasn't laid up with all his surgery aftermath. This point, as I understand it, has been bitterly contested in the Ricci household, and Signora Ricci has had to resort to a surprise party. Aunt Lucille has gone downstairs to help her clean inconspicuously, and Maria has been sent up here to bake.

"This is ridiculous," she announces, dropping a sack of hazelnuts on the table. "Babbo doesn't want the party."

"Isn't he used to parties by now?" I ask. "Even I'm getting used to all the parties."

Maria looks at me, annoyed. "He's in pain. He's grumpy. He can't even get up to talk to people."

"Maybe he could use a diversion?"

"You're trying to be helpful?" Maria is dubious. "Here." She hands me a mallet. "Start cracking the nuts."

I stare at the sack. "All of these nuts?"

Maria nods.

"And they all still have the shells?"

"Of course."

I am stunned.

Maria stands next to me, looking down at the sack. "Get used to it," she says, nonplussed. "This is nothing compared to how many we'll have for Christmas."

Christmas. That's coming up. I had almost forgotten.

"You'll love Christmas," Maria goes on, rummaging through cabinets for other ingredients. She turns to me; I haven't moved. "If I don't take your head off with that mallet for not cracking those nuts."

I turn obediently to the hazelnuts and let a handful trickle onto the cutting board. They're tiny.

"Don't hammer your fingers," Maria warns. "We don't have time to go to the hospital."

"Right," I agree.

"We'll start decorating soon," Maria says. "The 8th. It'll be beautiful, you'll see."

I nod absently, focusing on the nuts.

"Lights in the streets, and all the trees, and then everyone starts baking, and the whole city smells incredible." She returns to the table, arms full of supplies, smiling widely. "You'll love it," she repeats. She sets the scale in front of her and starts weighing ingredients. "I'm glad you're here, Cal. You're nice company."

"*Grazie*," I reply, in the most obnoxious accent I can muster.

Maria laughs. "And your Italian is really coming along."

I hammer away at the nuts, and Maria pours flour into the scale.

"Listen, Maria," I say after a few minutes. "I've been thinking."

"Hm?" she says, her attention on the last few grams of flour drifting into the scale.

"I don't think I'm going to stay."

Maria sets the flour down and pushes a strand of hair out of her face. Her finger leaves a streak of white across her forehead. "What?"

"You were right," I tell her. "I don't feel right here. I'm not cut out for this extended-family thing. I don't want everything in my life to involve everyone around me. I can't make decisions here." I pause. "You know I'm right. You said so yourself."

Maria nods slowly. "I know I did." She sighs. "You're really sure this time?"

I smile, sadly. "Yeah, I'm sure."

Maria leans against the counter next to me and folds her arms. "So, when are you leaving?"

“Soon, probably. Before the flights get expensive.”

“Christmas. Right,” she murmurs.

I turn the mallet over in my hand. I feel the need to do something in the silence, but smashing hazelnuts is too loud.

“So, what are you going to do?”

I shrug. “I don’t know yet. Go home, I guess. Go to college.”

“Art school?”

“No. Something I really want.”

“Right.” Maria nods, letting her hand scoop into the flour and watching it fall back through her fingers. An hourglass. Her lips are tightening, her temper flaring. “What you want,” she repeats. There is a sharp edge to her tone.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I retort.

“Just that you really have some nerve.”

“Nerve?” I ask, my temper rising to meet hers.

“Yeah, nerve. You show up here, you break things, and then you say you want to stay, to make things up to us, and now you’re leaving. Do you really expect me to be happy for you, finally making up your mind?”

“Well, yeah, maybe. You’re the one always saying I have to figure out what’s best for me, and now I’ve figured it out.” I’m not sure why I have to defend myself to her. “So I’m sorry if that doesn’t fit with what you think is best for me, or what you want for you, but you said yourself, you’re not going to marry me. So why do you care?”

Maria springs up away from the counter, and for a moment I think she’s actually going to slap me in the face. “Just because I’m not going to marry you doesn’t mean I don’t care about you,” she yells. “It doesn’t mean I want you to leave. I thought we were friends, Cal. I thought

maybe this family meant something to you.” She runs her hands through her hair, pulling at her scalp in frustration. Flour floats through the air around her, dusting her shoulders, the counter, the floor. It makes her look hazy, somehow unreal. “What am I supposed to tell Giancarlo, Cal? Have you thought about him? What about Zia Lucia?” She is circling the kitchen now. “I know things are a little different here than you’re used to, but we’re people, Cal. Our lives aren’t your personal playground.”

She reaches to take the mallet out of my hand, but I move it defensively behind my back. “Hey,” I say, holding her at bay with my arm. “I’m not a playground, either. I didn’t come here to be judged, or scolded, or changed, just because some Italian woman thinks it would be good for me. I don’t go to church, Maria. I don’t know why your saint hasn’t decomposed, but I sure as hell know it’s not a miracle. And I’m sick and tired of having community and family and miracles shoved down my throat like medicine. I’m not sick. I’m just eighteen, and I’m okay not knowing what I’m going to do tomorrow, or next week, or next year. Because, contrary to popular belief, I’m going to be okay.”

Maria glares at me, rocking on her heels. “So, so what?” Maria is flustered, furious. She loses track of her speech, shouting something faster than I can catch.

“What?” I ask, and she whirls on me.

“I said, so you’re just going to go back and pick up where you left off, like none of this ever happened? Go back to Christie?”

“Why do you care about Christie? I’m going anywhere but Christie,” I say, “not that it’s any of your business.”

Maria screeches in frustration. “I don’t care about Christie! I care about you!” The kitchen has suddenly become too small to contain her. “I want to see you do something with your life, not just run away because living here was too hard.”

“I’m not running away,” I argue, although my resolve is weakening with the thought that she may be right.

“Well, you’re not running to anything.”

I don’t have an answer. Deciding not to go to art school doesn’t mean I’ve decided what to go to school for, and I can’t tell her that I really do just want to escape from people like her mom, smothering me with rules and events until I don’t even know who I am anymore. I’ve spent too long following people like Christie and Signora Ricci – that’s what Viterbo has taught me. It’s time for me to go mess up my own life, somewhere where no one is watching and I figure something – anything – out for myself. I can’t tell her that it’s killing me to be friends with her, to have her know exactly how I feel all the time and never care because she’s too busy trying to make me fit into all of her naïve, traditional ideas. I know her, too – I know she’s not nearly as unlike her mother as she pretends she is, not even as much as she wants to.

“Maybe I’ll go to California,” I say. “Los Angeles. Something completely different.”

Maria shakes her head, about to respond, but she is interrupted by the door opening behind us.

“California? You’re leaving?” Giancarlo says, suddenly appearing in the doorway.

“Giancarlo,” I begin, but he cuts me off.

“You said you were staying,” he shouts, accusing me of breaking a promise – which I suppose I might have done. “You said you’d be here.”

“Giancarlo, I –” but I don’t know where to go from there. “I’m sorry,” I say insufficiently.

Tears are welling up in Giancarlo’s eyes. “You said you’d stay,” he repeats.

“Come on, Giancarlo,” Maria says, pulling him close to her. She sends bitter glances at me, hurt and angry. “Let’s go home. We were wrong.”

The phone rings behind them, but I don't answer it. I'm sure it's my parents, calling to wish me a happy Thanksgiving. I don't feel like telling anyone else my plans right now.

"Well, what did you really expect?" Aunt Lucille asks me, gesturing at my empty coffee cup and the unopened door. My bags are packed and loaded in the car trunk. I've been ready for two hours, sitting in the kitchen, just in case anyone stops by. No one has stopped by. In a book, a movie, even a song, it would be raining outside, but Viterbo is as sunny and dry as always. Even December is crisp and pleasant. What a pain in the ass.

I understand, suddenly, vividly, what Aunt Lucille meant when she kept saying I had to choose one or the other. I try to imagine what she must have felt like, when all the people not coming were her own flesh and blood. It must have hurt like hell for her to have to build herself a new family here with the Riccis. I'm ashamed that I hurt them. I know she'll never blame me out loud.

"I don't know," I shrug. "I don't really deserve any more second chances though, do I?"

Aunt Lucille takes my cup away. "Probably not," she says.

I lean back in my chair. Finally, someone telling me the truth in all its terrible glory. If only it was useful. "Great," I say. "That's fantastic."

Aunt Lucille makes a sound. She has never really appreciated my sarcasm. "Well, what do you want me to say?"

"I don't know," I answer, raising my voice. Aunt Lucille looks at me without moving. "I'm sorry," I blurt out.

"For what?"

I don't really know where I was going with that apology. "I'm sorry I won't be able to change their minds," I improvise. "You know, at home. They won't care what I say." I'm not very good at improvising. "I don't know. Something like that."

Aunt Lucille shrugs and changes the subject. "You're going to miss your train."

"I know, I know," I groan, sliding my chair back from the table. I glance at the door again, but it's still and silent.

"You messed up," Aunt Lucille says, interrupting my thoughts and opening the door. "Everyone messed up. It was a mess."

I pick up my backpack and head down the stairs. I don't bother asking if I'm making a mistake, going home like this.

Aunt Lucille doesn't say anything in the street, just slams the trunk closed and opens her door. I catch sight of movement above the street; one of the curtains in the Riccis' apartment is drawn back, and I can almost make out Giancarlo's face, watching. Or maybe it's Maria's.

Aunt Lucille sighs, catching my gaze. "There are always more second chances," she says firmly, shaking her keys in front of my face to catch my attention, "for those that deserve them." She motions at the car, telling me to get in.

"But next time," she goes on, climbing into the car, "you better bring me those fireflies."

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