

Lost in the Spanish Quarter

by

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I know you'd rather I was dead. I'm barely alive. I don't expect an answer to this email, and I won't write you again. I've been trying to write you for the past four years. I should write a hundred-page letter to try and explain. I would never be able to, and I won't try to explain myself now.

I'm a fool. I've always trusted my instinct but my instinct is a fake, a traitor, an idiot. A few years back I made the worst mistake of my life - unrecoverable, inexplicable, unimaginable. I lied to myself for a while (I can be quite good at that sometimes) that I did what my head, my gut, was telling me to do. Maybe it was the right thing but it ruined my life. I just wanted to tell you that. Because you deserve to know that my life isn't worth a cent. You deserve to know that every time I sit down to eat, with the utensils in my hand, for a moment I have the sensation of gouging out an eye out with my knife.

I hope with all my strength that these words will twist a little smile of satisfaction from your lips, just as I hope that for you I was just a bad dream, not your cross to bear. My other hope is that my life goes by quickly so that I can be reincarnated into someone or something better than my current self. Then perhaps I'll run into you in an airport in Stockholm or Buenos Aires and everything will be different.

Don't forgive me, don't answer, don't be sad. Be happy, have babies, write books, make some mixed tapes, take some pictures. It's how I always love to think of you. And now and then, if you can and if you want to, remember me.

b.

1.

“Heddi.”

I heard my name pronounced as no one had in years, like a person might say the name of an exotic species. Rising into a question but *mastered* – subtle aspiration, short vowels and all – as if it had been breathed in private again and again until it could unravel with startling casualness. No other sound in all of the Spanish Quarter, not a woman screaming bloody cheater nor a gun popping with the thrill of vendetta, could have made me turn away from the murmuring fireplace on such a cold night.

There stood a boy, a man, his mouth tightened like he’d said his bit and now it was my turn. His shirt was tucked in at the waist, rolled up at the arms and strained at the heart, a handy breast pocket barely managing a pack of cigarettes. Nothing like the other guests, who with their face piercings and dreadlocks and pasty skin tried to cover up the wholesomeness of their childhoods spent frolicking at the beach and eating potato gnocchi. Despite the hour, their sweet scent, of patchouli and thrift shops and hashish, still hung in the kitchen, fusing with wafts of flat beer and saffron risotto. Clearly, he wasn’t from our tribe of linguists, the *Istituto Orientale*. Yet there he was, as still as the water of a deep lake.

“Here, I made this for you,” he said, fishing something out of his jeans pocket. Definitely a southern Italian accent, if not Neapolitan. His hand quivered, a slight ruffle, as he handed me a cassette tape in its homemade case. *Per Heddi*, it read, beginning with a capital *H* and ending with an inky splash, the dot on my long-forgotten *i*.

This threw me. It was often the spelling of my name that derailed its pronunciation, for then it was easy to take it to its literal extreme, with a melodramatically elongated *e* and the *d* duly hardened by consonant doubling, which southern Italians took so very much to heart. That the *H* was ignored was entirely forgivable, for in Naples breathiness was reserved exclusively for laughter. “As in Eddie Murphy?” people would ask and I would simply nod. I didn’t really mind. Heddi was before and Eddie was now.

“Music?” I asked and he merely nodded, his knuckles taut uselessly over an empty beer bottle.

My back was warmed by the erratic dance of the flames and by the oblivious laughter of the friends I affectionately called “the boys,” *i ragazzi*. That I belonged there too and could turn back towards them at any time made me feel undeniably safe, a privilege that all of a sudden I perceived as unfair.

Downstairs the front door shook with a thud, probably the last of the guests staggering out, and my gift bearer looked jolted by the awareness that the party that had earlier been whirling around him was now gone. He tried to hide his embarrassment but I felt it all the same, a painful pinch followed by my own regret of being, once again, the only one sober.

“It’s probably getting late,” he said.

“I guess so, but there’s only one clock in the whole house.”

Abruptly, he shifted his weight from one leg to the other, and unintentionally I mirrored his asymmetry by tilting my head to one side. The better to see him with, at least, though his face was hidden every time he found solace in his shoes – comfortable, practical shoes – by a dark mane. I could honestly say I’d never seen him before, I could have sworn by it, because if we’d ever locked eyes I surely would have remembered that determined look, a willingness to bide his time.

“Well, that’s me.” He rested his bottle down as if afraid to break the glass, despite the fact that the kitchen counter was an invitation to make a mess, with its knocked-over bottles, greasy pans and mugs stained with wine like old teeth.

“I’m sorry, what was your name?”

“Bruno.” It was a rock of a name, heavy and ancient, and he lifted his eyebrows apologetically.

“Thanks for the tape...” I said, but his name died in my throat. “So you’re leaving?”

“Yeah, I have to get up early. I’m off to the farm for a few weeks. My family’s farmland, in the province of Avellino. I go every Easter. Well, not just Easter, but you know...”

I didn’t know, but I nodded anyway, grateful for the string of phrases. I still held out hope that in those last seconds before his departure (and I would probably never see him again) I could solve the mystery of how he’d come to be on such intimate terms with my name and why he’d gone to such trouble to make me something.

“OK, bye.”

“Bye, enjoy your farmstay. I mean, your stay at the farm.”

I wished he would just go now, this outsider who was now a casual witness to my slip of the tongue. It was exasperating how my Italian, my favorite disguise, could still come apart at the seams whenever I was taken by surprise.

A round of goodbyes and he was gone. I reclaimed my seat around the fireplace, slipping the tape into the pocket of my vintage suede miniskirt. The flames felt their way boldly, indecently, up the scavenged firewood, fondling what once used to be the leg of a chair or the headboard of a single bed. Within seconds the blazing fire swept any trace of unease from my face.

“What was that guy’s name again?” asked Luca beside me, tossing a cigarette butt into the fire and slipping a white ribbon of smoke from his mouth.

“Bruno, I think,” I said, tasting just how solid the name was.

“Oh, yeah. He’s a friend of Davide’s.”

“Davide who?”

“The short one with curly hair,” said Paola, the only other girl in our innermost circle.

Davide, now I remembered. Luca sometimes played in his band. Davide, Bruno, did it matter? The truth was we didn’t need anyone else in our clan. We were fine just as we were.

I was fine.

Mesmerized by the flames, we let the night slide into a moonless, hourless limbo. We talked about Hinduism, the Phoenician alphabet, the Mani Pulite judicial investigation. Now and then a chunk of wood caved into the embers, triggering a showy display of sparks and a few oohs and aahs for that little moment of drama. When the fire started to nod off, Luca rummaged through the stack of makeshift firewood. Beside it was an acoustic guitar, which Leo’s hairy hand reached for.

“You’re not throwing *that* in,” said Angelo, one of the other boys.

“No, Leo, please!” said Paola.

“Party’s over, children,” Leo announced with a heavy Pugliese drawl as he propped the guitar on his knee. “About fucking time for your lullaby.”

This was the part I loved the most. Leo’s foul language drawing us in closer, his glasses turning to golden rings in the firelight as he

began playing a tune that sounded like Lucio Dalla's "Attenti al lupo," Watch Out for the Wolf. He strummed with those small chunky hands covered in dark fleece, the hands of a garden gnome come to life. And he was hairy all over. Once Leo had asked me to shave his back to deal the final blow to some crab lice, incontrovertible evidence that he really had managed to get someone into his bed – a Spanish girl, or so he said. Underneath it all, shorn like a spring lamb, Leo possessed almost fine features that made him look, in a certain light, like my own brother.

Leo sang that ballad like a heavy metal frontman, with death growls and all, managing all the while to tweak the lyrics to his needs. "There's this tiny little house...with a tiny little grapevine...and inside there's a tiny little professor...who won't fucking shift the deadline...And there's this tiny little student...with a brain the size of Einstein's..."

"Fuck me, that's a hit song," said Angelo. "You know what? Forget your studies. You should start a punk band."

"Yeah, maybe I'll ask my Sanskrit professor if she wants to be the drummer, what do you say? That way she can beat the shit out of something else besides me."

"Play us one of those traditional Neapolitan songs instead," said Luca.

Leo handed over the guitar. "I'm not the fucking Neapolitan," he said, but it was a compliment.

"I'm only half."

"The bottom half, naturally," said Angelo.

His shoulder-length hair falling over his face, Luca cradled the instrument and conceded them an off-center laugh, but his eyes were on me. That half-smile was in itself a compliment, for Luca was as selective with his smiles as he was with his words, as if he'd spent his last incarnation seeing all the irony in the world and in this lifetime had achieved Zen. Although technically he too was one of the boys, I had always thought of him as distinct from the other two. He was Luca Falcone.

"This one's for you."

Only the first few notes and I already I knew he'd chosen Carosone's old classic "Tu vo' fa' l'americano." It was like I'd been caught out, the American incognito, and in fact Luca was looking my way, waiting.

I didn't feel like singing, and if I did from the second verse onward it was only because I realized the others genuinely didn't know the words and that it was up to me to fill the silence. Perhaps I did it for Luca too. To show him that, if nothing else, I could put on an impeccable Neapolitan accent, even more visceral than his. To see if I could make him smile. For his benefit, I crooned comically and gesticulated like a fishmonger. "*Mericano, mericano, sient'a mme chi t' 'o ffa fa'*," I sang, transformed momentarily into one of those poor women standing in the doorway of a musty, one-room *vascio* that opened straight onto the street. I was every bit her, that mother or sister or girlfriend waiting for that good-for-nothing to come home, her eyes narrowed and ready to snap...or burst out laughing. Oh, he thinks he's a hot shot, all drunk on "*whisky e soda e rock n' roll*," but I'll show him as soon he gets home, you bet I will, and I'll slap him good, or maybe I'll stroke his cheek, before cutting him down to size in front of the whole ghetto: "Look at you! You're just a Neapolitan! But when you're making out under the moonlight, you come out with *I love you!*" Apart from the last preposterous expression in English, the lyrics were in dialect so I wouldn't have been able to spell them; I wouldn't even have dared utter them without music. They were vulgar and truthful and sharp with that satire that Neapolitans were so skilled at turning inwards upon themselves since the fall of their city. And it was the words themselves that were directing me, assigning me the part, to the point where, as I channelled the character through the dialect, I wasn't an American at all but a *vasciaiola* who could see through the Americanness and expose it for nothing more than an act.

The others tapped a foot and chimed in for the chorus. Finally Luca raked his fingers over the strings. "I can't remember how it ends."

I leaned back in my chair, sweating and giddy, almost tipsy. There was always a mimic in me, or maybe even a gambler, waiting to burst out. No sooner had the fire popped lethargically than I was already on my feet. "We need bigger pieces of wood. I'll go up on the roof."

"I'll come up with you, Eddie," said Paola. "I could use the fresh air."

Luca and the boys shifted effortlessly into a Pearl Jam song. English rolled much more readily off their tongues than Neapolitan, but they mangled it, slurring the diphthongs and crumbling the consonant clusters. Paola and I climbed the spiral staircase beside the fireplace.

There was so little room that Paola, who was tall, had to duck, the black sheet of her hair dipping forward, her combat boots ringing the metal all the way up to the flat rooftop.

“My god, it’s cold,” I said, my words little clouds in the night.

“Freezing.” Paola hugged herself, adding in that Sardinian accent that was as crisp as the air, “So I guess you know Bruno.”

“Bruno? From tonight?”

“Yeah, Bruno.”

The name had rolled extraordinarily lightly off her tongue. For an instant it occurred to me (surely a one-in-the-morning type of folly) that we must be talking about two entirely different people.

“What do you think of him?”

“I don’t know him really.” I crouched to pick through the loose wood, a bookshelf dismembered and lumped against the protective wall of the roof. “Why do you ask?”

“Don’t tell the boys.” As Paola sank to the spongy ground, her face as bare as a full moon, I grasped that it wasn’t a breath of fresh air at all but a confession. Kneeling like that and looking considerably less tall, she reminded me of how young she really was, just in her first year at the Orientale. Although only the stars could have heard us, she fell into a whisper. “We’ve barely exchanged a handful of words. But there’s just something about him, I don’t know...”

“He seems nice enough.” Instinctively I patted my pocket where I’d put the cassette tape, as if to smooth out its conspicuous bulge.

“I really do like him. Next time I see him, I’m going to go up to him.”

“You definitely should. You have nothing to lose.”

Paola had a way of biting her bottom lip when she was restless. She breathed out hard as if preparing for a sprint.

“Chin up, Paola. You’re beautiful, smart. This Bruno guy would be a fool not to give you a chance.”

I loved Paola’s sweet doodle of a grin, but the word *fool* used in connection with this stranger named Bruno somehow felt like an insult to my own sensibility and filled me with remorse. Paola offered to help, grabbing a broken plank and letting out a *brrr*.

“You’re cold,” I said. “Take those and I’ll finish up here.”

“OK.”

But as soon as I was alone, I lowered the wood to the ground and leaned my elbows on the wall, the only barrier preventing a seven-

story freefall to the street. “Tonight...” I whispered to myself in English, but I was unable to finish my own sentence.

A cold breeze pressed the smell of the gulf against my face, that unique infusion of fish and diesel and salt. Below me, the city shimmered its way down to the water, strings of yellow streetlights beaded here and there with the pearly glow of kitchens. Naples never really slept. Even in the dead of night, fluorescent lightbulbs shed their cheap, unforgiving light onto family members who were up and about and slapping the kitchen table in god knows what argument or joke or confession. But, like a moth, I was drawn to those white lights. If I could, I wished now as always, I would flutter towards them and slip in through a window. I would sit there soundlessly and seamlessly blending in with the wallpaper, trying to piece together the shards of their sentences into a narrative that made sense.

A foghorn bleated. I couldn't tell which of the many ships it could have come from, vessels invisible but for their connect-the-dot lights and suspended in the utter blackness of the bay. It was a rare clear night, and without a moon I couldn't even see the volcano. The only trace of it were the homes on its flanks sketching its silhouette as far up as they dared. Vesuvius hadn't made a peep in half a century, but I stared at it through the curtain of the night and tried to imagine what it might look like breathing fire as in so many of those eighteenth-century oil paintings. I stared so hard that I almost believed I could will it back to life with my eyes.

My hands had turned to cool marble, yet I still hadn't had my fill of Naples. But I could have stayed there all night drinking in its scent, feasting my eyes, and still it would have been in vain. The city was water seeping through my hands, and my very love for it filled me with sadness, especially at night. It was a sadness I could never fight off or even put my finger on. I'd given myself over to the city, maybe even betraying myself to do so, and yet even after all these years it still held me at a distance.

Vir' Napule e po' muor', they say, See Naples and die. A city so magnificent that, once you've seen it, there is nothing left in the world to see. The saying had become such a cliché that I would never have used it in conversation, but that night I whispered it to the night as the truest of truths. Then I collected the firewood before heading downstairs to clean up the mess.