

Italy, 1990

by Savannah Schroll Guz

In the spring of 1990, her family traveled to Lake Como, continued to Milan, and finished their trip along the Italian Riviera. She was fifteen. Her parents brought her with them because they believed she would learn more out of school than in it. They were right.

The trip was not for idling, but for networking, connection-making, fostering the kind of familiarity that strengthened purchasing loyalties. On the trip with them were the hard-drinking machinery technicians and hardware salesmen her father did business with. These were men who came to her father's plant for days on end, fixed his foreign-made machines, and then came with him to dinner, where they taught the girl words from their language as they grew florid-faced and reckless from drinking bourbon. "Here," they said, growing ever redder, inhaling the fragrant steam that rose from their steaks and exhaling alcohol onto her as they laughed from somewhere deep in their chests, maybe even deeper, somewhere down in their abdomens, where their empty guts churned with booze, "this is the *real* American meal, yes?"

And she answered, laughing uncertainly, "Yes, real American," and knowing, even at that age, that these men were still foreign enough to compare everything they encountered in the U.S. to what they had seen on *Dallas*.

So, this Italian trip, like others before it, was intended to foster the same kind of camaraderie, the back-slapping relationships that ensured her parents would continue paying for technical services, for wholesale orders of hardware. And her father did in fact work with these companies for many years. It was an effective strategy, those trips. More importantly, however, it provided her with the education her parents hoped she would gain, a knowledge of people—their fears and capacities, although she wouldn't unlock all the mysteries until she, herself, became an adult. There, as a teenager, her mind merely recorded and observed, having no other experience to relate it all to, until later.

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And so, she became a student of people's habits and learned the ways of men, especially foreign men, who eyed her mother even as they passed around pictures of their children, wallet-bound photographs that included their reluctantly smiling wives. These wives, at the exact moment her mother's gray eyes rested on their features (whether doughy or sharp), were most likely lying awake under thick featherbeds, listening to the cracks and ticks of their sleeping house, instinctively knowing their husband was in a hotel bar thousands of miles and many time zones away. It was the not knowing with whom that rose like bile in their throats, that kept them awake. Other women simply slept, knowing but not caring.

Many of these same men were with the girl and her parents in Italy. Here, they drank wine until their lips were ringed purple, the ridges of their teeth stained blue, until spittle flew from their mouths as they spoke, laughed, attempted to flee the narrowest corridors they walked when they were alone or when they were with those wives they sometimes felt distant from.

The girl, now a woman, knows those corridors. She didn't then, but she's walked them since she knew each of those men, although she's several—no, *many*—years behind them. She can't even see their backs from where she is. Yet, she knows the wallpaper of the hallways, its texture against her fingertips.

She bets they never imagined, those men from Germany, from Austria, from northern Italy, that the girl they leaned over and spoke to kindly (maybe even a little lewdly), the girl whose diminutive shoulders they draped their blonde-red-black haired arm around, would become a woman who knows their secrets, who writes stories about them when they were in their late prime. Those men, who were soon to be surpassed by sons, even by a rival lover who visited their wife while they were away (as they were in May of 1990, when they sat at the marble bar of Rapallo's Grand Hotel Bristol and collectively searched a phonebook for Discothèques; she knows because she was there, too), were trying to escape the nagging sense of loss, the loss that's always there—the loss of what could have been their life, but wasn't, isn't, would never be. It is the loss

everyone feels as soon as they are done growing and begin living as adults, either suddenly responsible or old enough to realize not only what *is*, but also what *could be* (and the unbridgeable gulfs that lie between the two).

She knows now that the older she gets, the further back she will look—to those moments when she felt alive, or thought she felt alive. And in those moments, when she herself walks along those narrow mental corridors (often looking backwards) she fears the inevitable, which is not death but change, which encompasses death.

Still, she wonders, did they really feel this emptiness, too? Did they experience fear at the realization that they couldn't know everything ahead of them? That they never would. And the life they were headed into would become something they never imagined existed when they were children, as she was in 1990, when the world still seemed as shallow as tub water and her life too closely circumscribed.

