

Notes on Rome

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Elena laughs. She's looking over my shoulder as I text via Whatsapp. She's generously using her phone to create a WiFi hotspot for me so that I can tell my fretting mother that I've made it safely to Rome. I tell my mother Rome is a "beautiful city". If Ellie were the kind of person to snort with laughter, she would be now. "You haven't even seen it yet." I look over at Noah, her fiancé, my dear friend. He's exhausted. We both are, having left Croatia at an ungodly hour to make our way here. He leans on Ellie, I can tell that they've missed each other. (As if Noah didn't tell me that every day of our trip. As if they hadn't face-timed every night of their separation.)

I smile. "I can already tell it's beautiful Ellie, I can, in fact, see out the window." In reality, I can't stop staring. Rome is like London and New York had a much cooler baby. It's modern and classic and chic all at the same time. We drive passed modern luxury boutiques and then, go under the arch of an ancient aqueduct. Casually. As you do. You know, an everyday occurrence.

Cobblestones mix with pavement and electric lights adorn buildings that clearly weren't designed with them in mind. I wish that I had done more research before coming here. It's so unlike me to just up and go somewhere. Especially someplace like Rome. So rich in history and art. I suppose it is just like me now though. I couldn't point on a map where in Croatia Noah and I had come from. Maybe it's better that way, to just go. Not know what you are going to get yourself in to. No expectations. I feel so small here. I feel like a minnow dropped in an ocean. I feel the way my mother must feel when she comes to New York. I'm not sure what I am looking at. Note to self: buy a book on Rome. Maybe I should buy my mother a book on New York.

When Ellie's attention isn't on Noah I know she's still silently laughing at me. She doesn't understand. This is where she is *from*. I can't imagine. I'm from one of those towns where everyone knows everyone. Where the nearest Target is a forty-five-minute drive away. The kind of place where people react to my going to university in New York in one of two ways. "You're so brave!" Or "When are you coming home?" They also say those things to the kids who go into the military after high school. This makes me feel strange.

From what I can see from my window I think Ellie's crazy for trading this city for New York, and I haven't even tasted the food yet. Ellie and I met in New York, in a dive bar populated by the performing arts crowd of our university. I met Noah in a performance class at said university. When I was told, in the strictest confidence of course, that they had started seeing each other I couldn't believe it. After spending time with them together though, I now can't imagine them apart.

Noah is wickedly funny, but he's quiet about it. You don't know it until you've known him for a while. He's chill as can be, a contrast to Ellie, who is not high strung but certainly not to be described as "chill". She's one of the smartest people I've ever met. I think she's that for most people actually, but they don't know it. She has a warmth to her that's rare. They're both incredibly perceptive people. They are from different worlds, but they send each other cute dog pictures so at the end of the day, they have the important things in common. They're getting married in a few months. I'm a bridesmaid. I am relieved that I don't have to pick out my own dress.

I stare at the people outside. I bet most of them are Italians! That's crazy. Okay, maybe it's not. But the fact that I, Sarah, am surrounded by Italians is absolutely crazy. I think of saying

that out loud and then remember how the comment “Rome is beautiful” was received by Ellie. I can’t imagine that I would get away with saying, “there are so many Italians here!” without being mocked into next week (and rightfully so.). Sure, it would make sense that there would be Italians in Italy, I get that, but as someone who spent the majority of her life in New England surrounded by people that had never been anywhere else, it’s always a novel experience for me. I love being surrounded by people who have never met my parents (and probably never will), who may never have gotten lost in the woods, or caught fish with their bare hands, or gone maple sugaring in the early spring.

My inner history nerd is grinning although a part of me can’t help but wish I had visited years earlier, back when I thought I’d grow up to be a history professor. Admittedly if I had come while I was in the throes of my passion for history I probably would have fainted and have been of no use to anyone at all.

I try to let myself relax a little as we head to Ellie’s family’s apartment. I hope her mother likes me. I hope I am a good houseguest. I hope we get to go to the catacombs. I saw a documentary about the Roman catacombs on the history channel when I was 13 and I promised myself I would go. It looks like I may have a chance to finally make good on that promise.

2

Guests of Elena’s mother are going to be arriving for dinner just as Ellie, Noah and I will be leaving to go out for the night. You know, just some old friends of hers’, an extremely high ranking Italian general and his wife. The usual. I have no idea how to conduct myself. I have A)

Never met such a high ranking military official of any nation before and B) we don't share very much language. Do I say "Hi"? Do I not say anything? I don't know.

They arrive and much cheek kissing and greeting takes place in rapid-fire Italian. I try to give off the most respectful vibes I can muster up. The general greets me in English and I graciously reply. We all move to the guest seating area. Even though the apartment only really has one living room, half of the room is set aside as an "entertaining" area. The chairs and the couch are a soft yellow. They look expensive, almost like they could be museum pieces. I don't know that I should sit anywhere near them. Much less on them.

I'm given a cup of coffee and a saucer and I hold it as if I'm fancy. I either look stupid or British. I probably just look like I'm trying way too hard. Noah sits beside me and we share a look of, "Are we supposed to be here right now?" Elena, of course, is all smiles and social grace. Ellie can talk to anyone. She flows seamlessly from one social situation to the next and I am jealous. Ellie would have absolutely killed it back in the day. She'd be the much sought after Italian heiress, petticoat swishing and her hair perfectly swept up in some sort of sophisticated hairstyle. She'd travel from court to court. Stealing hearts along the way. I think I could have pulled off one of those old fashioned dresses as long as I didn't have to move too much.

Elena's mother starts to make conversation in English. She explains who Noah is, and begins to talk about his family history. Where he thinks his family is from in Italy. How his parents are both 100% Italian like their parents who met in the states so on and so forth. Noah nods along to confirm this. Although, I have a sneaking suspicion that a great many of these "facts" were just guesswork on his part. To be fair, I think that's the case with nearly everyone's family lineage after a while, especially if you're from the states.

Elena's mother then turns to me. "Sarah is not Italian," she says matter-of-factly, "she's Polish." The General turns and looks at me. He takes a moment to take me in, looking me up and down, his eyes betraying nothing. Finally, he speaks. "You look Polish", he says. I flush, "Um, thank you, Sir?"

Culturally, I am a little Polish girl. My grandmother is "off the boat" and English is her second language. My mother grew up surrounded by my grandmother's family. The stories are wild. My Dziadek, or great grandfather, only had a fourth-grade education and he had some interesting notions about how outer space worked and the proper way to determine if a mushroom was poisonous or not. I love those stories. I think that they are funny and sweet. I'm not supposed to tell them because my mother is worried about the "dumb Polak" stereotype. These stories were to stay within the family, passed down like heirlooms.

It is so funny how things change, whose immigration is acceptable and whose isn't. To my generation me being Polish doesn't seem to mean anything at all. I am just another nerdy white girl who loves coffee and doing well in school. I don't speak any Polish, neither does my mother. They didn't pass on the language. They say it was because my relatives were trying to learn English, but did they just not want to pass on the stereotypes and discrimination to their kids? In a way, they succeeded. I am thoroughly integrated into American society (hence me not knowing how to address an Italian General). I may be awkward, but I've never been referred to as dumb in my life, Polak or otherwise.

As I sit next to the child of another group of immigrants the tables have turned entirely. Genealogically Noah is much closer to everyone else in the room than I am, but culturally we are both just as lost. I don't know what it means to be Polish here. Noah and I sit for a second longer

and then exit gracelessly. I'm so glad he's here with me. I catch a glimpse of myself in the bathroom mirror as I pass by. My mother always said I have the "Polish look". I'm not sure what that means, but my translucent skin and freckles certainly set me apart from the rest of the company of the household. Noah especially is so tan that it's actually ridiculous.

One of my professors insists that I look utterly French. He's right of course, technically I am mostly French, but who wants the reputation of having lost all of their wars? Besides, they may have great food but they don't have perogies so clearly they are doing something wrong.

3

I didn't drink a drop of liquor until I was 21 years old. I used to go to frat parties stone cold sober. The frat bros would hold their sides with laughter as I coyly denied their offering of various drinks. "I don't break laws, it's just not my thing" I would say. Following the laws meant I don't have any stumbling home to vomit or sneaking past dorm security stories. I never hid a bottle of anything from an RA or my parents. It also meant that as soon as I was ready to jump into the party scene, most people I knew were kind of over it.

Seeing people drinking in the street is weird. Very un-American. The cobblestone streets and brown buildings huddle together like the girls in their black tops and short shorts. The air is warm and dense. People are everywhere, strikingly modern and stylish. They weave in and out of bars that are probably older than anything else I've laid eyes on before. I sip a mint julep that one of Ellie's high school friends bought for me. Sometimes traditional gender norms aren't so bad.

The drink's as perfect as randomly running into Ellie's high school friends in the street. We don't stay very long. Noah and I are pretty exhausted. I love seeing Ellie's eyes light up as she

speaks to her old classmates. I can't believe that this is where they used to hang out on Saturday nights.

We walk through the alleys and Ellie points out places she used to frequent as a teen. We see a very drunk gaggle of girls stumble by with a huge inflatable penis. A bachelorette party we conclude. The later it gets the more drunk people we see and the drunker these people are. One man is lying on the ground. His friends are only slightly better off than he is, trying to get him to sit upright. They all wear white button-down shirts and ties and are disheveled as hell. I wonder if the ancient Romans used to get this drunk. The men all carrying each other home. I've never been that drunk. I don't know that I ever want to be.

Ellie shakes her head. "I feel too old for this". I look at her. We are only a year or so apart, and I barely feel old enough to be here. "What do you mean?" I ask. "Well, I'm not 16 anymore." She says, a faint nostalgic smile creeping across her face. I cast my eyes back on the party scene that surrounds us. Some of these people are 16?! My wildest nights at 16 included tea and a few friends, maybe. I can't help but feel like Elena and I are representations of two extremes. I glance over a Noah who shrugs. I can't help but feel as if I've been cheated out of something. Then I think of all my friends back home who will probably never even go to Rome and scold myself for the thought. The group of men in white shirts has made it a few steps further before collapsing once again in a drunken heap. Maybe I haven't missed very much or maybe I just haven't made it there yet. Who's to say?

4

I can't help but burst out laughing as the hold music pours out of the phone. Even though it is a bit muffled there is no mistaking the classic tune. Ellie sighs with annoyance as we wait to be put

through to the taxi service. “Is this the IZ version?” I finally manage to ask between gasps. I wasn’t sure what I expected to hear on the other end of the line when being put on hold for a Taxi service in Rome but, “Somewhere over the rainbow” in English no less, would have held a spot towards the bottom of my list. Someone on the other end picks up and Ellie rattles off instructions in her flawless Italian. The white cab pulls up a few minutes later and the three of us hop in, speeding towards the center of the city. We drive past ruins and modern looking storefronts and church after church after church. Ancient and adolescent structures twist together like vines creating a cohesive landscape that surrounds our little white taxi.

I gawk as we slow next to what appears to be a department store window display. The mannequins are displaying a glamorous array of priestly garb in every color I can think of, and here I thought those guys always wore white. Ellie hasn’t so much as glanced up from her phone, “I can’t believe you grew up here” I say. My eyes still glued to the Macy’s of churchware. “It’s just a city,” she says, sounding bored. “It’ll always be more than that to me because it’s where you’re from.” She smiles at that. Noah rolls his eyes at me, but he’s smiling too.

I forget that some people are from cities. They are still exotic to me, even though I now live in one of the world’s most famous ones. I can imagine growing up surrounded by all of this stuff. I still sometimes have a hard time believing it’s real, even in New York. I have to remind myself that that is indeed *the* New York Times building or *the* Times Square. Rome is like this except it has this whole other layer of history to it. Ellie grew up more or less down the street from the Pope. That is *crazy*. I wonder where he gets his clothes.

“You’re not going to get cancer from just one time.” The threat of foreign data fees prevents me from whipping out my phone and conducting a google search to confirm this. I’ve never smoked anything before. Never ever in my whole life, tobacco or otherwise. But, I guess if I was ever going to break that, it would be at an outdoor hookah bar in Rome with two people that I love more than my life. At least that makes a good story, right? Besides, I feel like I could say that to my kids without any guilt. “Yes, you can smoke. I did. But only at Roman hookah bars.”

After much mulling over our options, we order a berry flavored one. As we wait I can feel my apprehension rising. A young man brings it to the table, it looks like a cross between something that you would find in ancient Arabia and something out of a sci-fi film. Its’ long plastic tube is as unruly as it is terrifying. The glass base full of water bubbles as Elena takes the first pull. It looks like something out of an alchemist’s lab. I am not so sure I want this thing anywhere near me, much less any of its contents inside my poor, pure little lungs.

The end of the tube is reminiscent of a vape pen, or I guess a garden hose? I’m not sure. This isn’t really my thing. I am so confused. I swear Ellie and Noah both to absolute secrecy and they are perplexed and a little amused by my serious, insistent tone. “You don’t understand. My mother would kill me and I have a reputation for being very hard on my friends who smoke cigarettes.” If anyone of them found out that I’d tried a tobacco product I would be mocked into next year. I would never be looked at the same way again. No one can know.

Finally, they agree to my terms and show me how the contraption works. You press a button on the vape pen end thingy and inhale. The glass orb at the bottom bubbles when you’re doing this right. You take the end of the hose out of your mouth and inhale some air for maximum lung

cancer exposure. Then, you breathe out a puff of vapor as if you are a dragon or someplace very cold.

I try it. Nothing comes out when I exhale the first time. Elena and Noah insist I try again, breathing deeper this time. I take a pull, drag, hit whatever the heck the correct terminology is. I exhale a steady stream of God knows what this time, success. They applaud and I feel just a little bit badass¹.

6

It's hot. Everything has a golden tint to it. Rome is a beige city. New York is steely grey and black, Boston is all deep brown and brick, and Rome is beige. I think the beige might be my favorite. Noah and I walk by building after building. Each one is more detailed and fantastic than the one before. It's so funny, how where you are determines everything. If a single one of these buildings were in my hometown it would be a monument. Everyone would know of it, of its' history. They'd come from miles around just to see it. Here it's just another building. I recognize some things from an art history class I took last year. I point some particularly famous structures out to Noah. He's polite. It's funny how people go to different places for different reasons.

We are on a mission. Elena has a doctor's appointment so it's just the two us and a paper map from the back of a book about Rome I purchased at the Colosseum. Noah has the coolest leather jacket back at home. I've recently found out that he got it in Italy when he came to visit Ellie last year. I. Want. One.

¹ According to the CDC website Hookah is actually much worse for you than cigarettes. So, fingers crossed I don't get cancer from that one time.

I agonize over a \$3 subway ride. This jacket will cost well over 83 times that at the cheapest, but I don't care. This will be my big ticket item. Besides, I 100% want to be *that* person. You know, that blonde girl sipping a drink in a dive bar in Alphabet City looking classy and badass af in her leather jacket from *Italy*. We end up stumbling upon the place half by accident. Noah recognizes the logo and we head out of the heat and light into the cool, dark store.

Oh my goodness. So many leather jackets. They are freaking everywhere. Every size imaginable. Grey, brown, black and in every cut and color. I am a little paralyzed. Noah and I seek out the smallest size in the women's section and start pulling jackets. A thin man slides over to us. Slick as can be. It's funny to watch him size up the two of us. He clearly goes from thinking we are a couple to maybe, siblings? Cousins? Friends? His confidence waivers as he tries to get a read on the situation. Eventually, to my relief, he just leaves us be.

Being on the receiving end of customer service almost always makes me feel nervous and a little guilty. At restaurants, I have to restrain myself from jumping up to help the waitstaff. After years of working as a food-runner and barback, I'm pretty good at locating server stands and just taking what I need rather than troubling the waitress for more napkins. It's bad. I should probably just let people do their job. It makes me look silly when I try to be fancy or go someplace fancy. People just do things for you. I never expect it. I always end up embarrassing myself.

Anyway, jackets. So many jackets. Noah and I find only a handful that are in my size. He insists I try a brown one like the one that he has. He can kind of pull it off but I know what I want. Black. I'm a New Yorker(ish) baby. Black or nothing. The only problem is that the black

ones are badass. Like a bonafide badass. Maybe I should get a tattoo. You know, just to be worthy of this jacket. The girl in the mirror looks a bit like a stranger. I know I can, in theory, wear a black leather jacket with literally anything but do I really have anything that goes with this?

I remember hating black growing up. Everything I owned was pink. Everything. It was a problem once I reached high school and pink Aeropostale shirts were no longer a socially acceptable thing to wear every day. I only ever wore black during choir performances. Now I open my closet in New York and it's all black and grey. No pink. At least rose gold seems to be a socially acceptable adult color now. For accessories at least. Do they do rose gold tattoos?

Noah plays stylist for me and he really is phenomenally helpful. We finally chose a black fitted one with this biker chick detailing along the ribs. I wear it for a while, twisting and turning to see it at all angles in the mirror. Can I really pull this off? I look at him, seeking validation. He nods, "I think you should get it." I do.

7

I've taken two solo cab rides in my life. One yellow cab and now this white one. I hold Noah's phone nervously in my lap as the car goes around another bend that I think I recognize. Elena had given the driver instructions on where to take me. I was to head back to the apartment while they ran some errands. My phone was just as well equipped for Italy as I was, so Noah left me his phone so that I could reach them if anything happened.

It was only a ten minute or so ride. It was the middle of the day and our driver seemed trustworthy. What could go wrong? I can hear my mother in my head chastising me for being alone in a foreign country and listing off all of the possible horrible things that could happen to

me, alone, abroad, where I don't speak the language. And not to mention I am alone in a car with a strange man! I shush her and attempt to soak in the scenery. Play it cool Sarah. Don't be a baby. You're a badass. You own a leather jacket. It's the middle of the day for goodness sake! The roads are incredibly winding and the trees are golden in the sunlight. Families stroll by and everything has a golden glow to it. It's peaceful. Serene. Smooth like butter. I got this.

We stop abruptly, turns out there is no particular reason for the abruptness. Just, Italian driving I guess, treating a stop sign with the same intensity that you would a small child dashing into the road. A second goes by and then I am jolted forward in my seat with a sickening thump. The driver and I make eye contact in a moment of wordless communication. "Did we just get hit?" He begins investigating and indicates to me that he's going to pull over to the side of the curb. I nod. I turn in my seat to see who the hell hit a stopped, gigantic white taxi.

Two ladies. Old. With hair colors that would be suitable for highlighters. One pink the other an explosive purple. Both are sporting sunglasses that I'd never seen outside of a cheesy movie disguise montage. The driver goes around and looks at the back of the cab and then goes and knocks on the window of the old ladies' car. They seem totally baffled that he is approaching them. There is no way they can't have realized that they hit us. Is there? That was some pretty significant contact.

The driver slowly begins to lose his cool. His hand gestures rise with his temper. Finally, the woman driving the car begrudgingly steps out onto the pavement. She looks at where my poor driver is pointing, to what I assume is some sort of visible damage. She shakes her head and matches him in her intensity. I'm trying not to stare but I am captivated by the drama that's

unfolding before me. The passenger of the car that hit us remains stone-faced, staring straight ahead. Neither of the women removes their absurd glasses.

I realize that my friends will probably be wondering why I haven't let them know I've made it home yet. The ride was supposed to be ten minutes, tops. I reach down to lift up Noah's phone, only to realize that it's passcode locked and I haven't the faintest idea of what his passcode might be. Classic, it's utterly useless.

It appears my driver has gained some ground. The woman is writing down what I can only assume is some type of contact or insurance information. She hands it to my driver and returns to her vehicle with a huff. My driver takes one last look at his damaged taxi, shakes his head, and slowly makes his way back around to the driver's seat. We share another expressive glance via the rearview mirror, he shakes his head wearily. I shrug and he starts the car and pulls back onto the road. I can't help but take one last glance at the women behind us as we ease our way into the traffic.

8

I step out of the white cab and onto the pavement and I am immediately set upon by men with colorful vests. I'm not sure what has given me away, must be the location. People say that there is something very "European" about me. I have yet to figure out what this means, but usually until I open my mouth people assume I'm a local. "Real" Italians probably avoid this area of the city at all costs, (Ellie has flat out refused to accompany me.) Leading these men to believe, and rightly so, that I have no idea what I am doing. In spite of that, I am proud of having made it here. I'd gotten into a cab, that was admittedly called for me, told the driver where I was going in broken Italian, thanked him in slightly less broken Italian, and stepped into the street.

I've never been alone in a foreign city before, outside of a cab anyway. I can't help but laugh at the me of two years ago, terrified to take a cab from the train station to the airport in Boston alone, only a few hours from home and all conducted in significantly less broken English.

One very insistent man wants to look at my ticket. He tells me that I have the wrong one and that I'll have to purchase an additional one if I want to go to the basilica. A small seed of apprehension takes hold in my throat but I know I've double-triple checked my ticket. I thank him, nod politely and say I'm in desperate need of a coffee, which is not a lie, and that I am in fact early. He nods and tells me to make sure I find him before I go inside. I nod and duck into the first coffee shop that I see.

I love the coffee shops in Italy. Even the super touristic ones that feature "American coffee". I love standing at the counter. I love pretending not to hear all of the old white couples yelling at each other in English and I try to not see the irony of resenting those doing exactly what I myself am doing. (Although to be fair I have no one to yell at.) A young man behind the counter with a sweet round face breaks into a grin as he sees me approach. "Ciao Bella," he says. I feel a flush even though I know that if I were back in the states I'd probably scowl. Maybe this makes me a bad feminist, I'm not sure.

"Ciao. Un caffè, per favore," I say doing my absolute best to not sound like a total idiot. He smiles at my attempt and brings me a coffee. I try to relax and enjoy the espresso. I know I'm right about the ticket. I double check I have my passport, I know the Vatican is technically a different county, but will I have to go through customs? That sounds like it would be a logistical

nightmare for them. The beaming man takes my empty cup away and wishes me luck. I smile at him and head back into the throngs of tourists and cons congregated outside the Vatican.

Not only is my ticket correct, but I'm put into a special line. I feel a little guilty as I glide through the entrance, passing the endless line of people without the foresight or extra euros to purchase a tour ahead of time. The first building I experience in the smallest country in the world feels more like an airport than anything else. The security isn't as intense as I imagined it would be. I go to the ticket booth and get all of my documents in order and then head to station E to get ready for the start of my tour. I am one of the first people there, the others slowly begin to appear and I watch the farce that is people trying to follow directions as I pretend to read my book about Rome.

People skip steps and are sent back, they can't find the booth, they drop a ticket, they aren't sure what ticket they've got so on and so forth. Finally, our little group is assembled. An elderly couple from Missouri sporting large crosses and look as if the walking we have ahead of us may be more than they can handle. Another young woman from California who is here on her own, like me. I feel proud of that, of her. I'm not sure why. A younger, adventurous, American looking couple who are in fact Swedish. Some Indian students, and a South African family with an Indian father and a white mother and two of the most adorable boys I've ever seen. They are dressed in button-down shirts that are coordinated but not matching. They are polite and simply stare, taking everything in. You can just tell they are brilliant. They immediately establish a rapport with our tour guide and ask the most intelligent of questions and are delighted in answering her questions in turn. They break my heart as much as they make it hopeful. I am

unsure about the whole “having kids” thing but if I were to have children I would want them to be like these two little curious boys.

Our tour guide is a short, energetic young Indian woman who’s just gotten her masters in art history from a school in Britain. She is all smiles and positive energy and we do our best to follow her flag through the throngs as we make our way into a courtyard.

The whole thing is, in short, overwhelming. I surrender to it. I take in what information I can. I have so many questions I don’t ask. I would have to spend years here to begin to grasp the place. It’s as packed as Times Square after the Broadway shows get out on a Saturday night. Tour guides compete with each other in cheerful voices. Even though I have a little green earpiece that’s tuned into my tour guide’s microphone I have a hard time hearing her over all of the different things that are competing for my attention.

The art here is crazy. Art on art on art. It all blurs together which, is a pity. We journey on and eventually near the Sistine Chapel. Our tour guide gives us 15 minutes to use the restroom and look around before we meet up again and continue on to the basilica.

I rush. I’m nervous as soon as she is out of sight. I know it’s ridiculous but I feel a bit like a small child who’s lost their parent in a grocery store. I use the restroom and then proceed to where I think it is my guide has told us to meet her. I step into a temperature controlled room to see the densest crowd yet.

I am all business. I have a mission. Find-the-flag. I double check that I have all of my belongings and plunge into the crowd. I duck and weave and nimbly make my way through the throngs. I wonder how the Missouri couple is going to make their way through this. I’m struggling and I am a trained track and field athlete. My agility serves me well and I make it

across the crowded floor. I see the yellow flag. I am not the first to rejoin the group but I am not the last. I am slightly out of breath. Our guide turns to me with a twinkle in her eye, “beautiful, isn’t it?” It’s only then that I look up and realize that I am in the Sistine Chapel. I’d almost missed it.

While I am trying to soak up the ceiling from the far side of the room and chastising myself for being less than observant the remainder of the group assembles. We then move on to St. Peter’s Basilica.

And I had found the rest of the Vatican overwhelming. I had no idea. The place is crazy huge. It is always amazing to me that we aren’t overwhelmed by the vastness of the sky the same way we are by a domed ceiling. This place is crazy huge. Like, crazy. More reverence is in the air here. More space exists between people. Our guide gives us a quick overview of the place and then leaves us to explore. I wander.

I touch the feet of a Saint and say a prayer. I pray for my Dziadek in front of embalmed popes. I think of my grandmother. I describe myself as a Catholic girl with all of the guilt and none of the faith. Even though I am not particularly religious this place can’t help but inspire reverence. I wonder what my ancestors would feel like, knowing I was here. I check the line to go to the top of the dome. It’s not terribly long by some strange miracle. I buy a ticket for the elevator and make my way to the top of St. Peter’s.

The roof has two levels. On the lower of the two, there is a cafe and space to walk around. I wander in the sunshine to where steps become necessary. The view is honestly, utterly underwhelming. But hey, I’m here. I make my way back down to the cafe after a quick lap around the small, cramped, dome top. I purchase an espresso because I always need more coffee.

Always. It comes in a little plastic shot glass. I step outside back into the blaring light. It is hot and I laugh at myself for drinking a hot beverage in this heat. But I am the kind of person who sips espresso on the top of St. Peter's Basilica damn it. I am a badass...because that's badass? It's certainly instagram worthy. I try to snap a cute selfie and fail miserably. I take a sip. It is probably the worst espresso I've ever had. I take another selfie. It's as unflattering as the first. I force down the rest of my espresso. I can't stop grinning.

9

I can't help but feel like I'm in a movie. The scene before me isn't something that happens in real life. The air is perfect. It's cool but still full of the warmth of the heat of the day. As we walk through the hilly, narrow, cobbled streets of Positano the fading light has me feeling vaguely magical. We arrive at the hotel and are taken up to a terrace overlooking the sea. Noah and I exchange one of those, "I can't believe we're here right now" glances as Elena chats to our waiter in Italian. I wish I had dragonfly eyes and could look at everything at once.

The sea is dark and the town begins to light up as the sunlight fades. The city rises up the hillside, a bunch of tiny lights clinging to the rocks. The scene is reminiscent of an illustration of Bethlehem from one of my Children's Bibles that I was read a million or so years ago.

We are led to a large round table and I keep my face turned to the sea allowing the breeze to play with my hair. Elena gives us another run down of who's joining us tonight. Her mother and her Aunt and Uncle, who are of course not actually her Aunt and Uncle. I nod as if I

understand. They don't speak English very well I guess, but then again, why should they? I should feel bad for my utter lack of Italian language skills, not the other way around.

The waiter breezes by again and hands the three of us menus to pour over while we wait for the rest of our party. I let my eyes meander down the page, seeing what I can decipher. More words are recognizable to me every day, but I know that I am going to have to consult Elena. As if reading my mind she glances up at Noah and I. "Should I read some of it for you?" Noah looks up at her puzzled, "No, that's okay. Mine's in English." Elena looks at us and then lets out a laugh. "He must have known you were Americans just by looking at you." I double check my menu and then it's my turn to erupt in giggles. "Mine's in Italian," I say with pride.

Ellie and Noah both glance over my shoulder as if they don't believe me. Elena and I naturally, mercilessly turn on Noah and mock him for his American ways. Why they thought I was Italian, I have no idea (I thought I looked Polish) but I am proud of having this menu. Like a kid with a new toy, I refuse to set it down or give it up. I earned this compliment, and I will not trade it for an English menu, even though I know I'll just have to order whatever Elena's having to avoid looking foolish because honestly, I can't read much of what's in front of me. I end up with seafood pasta and it is utterly delicious. Absolutely no regrets.

10

I hold the small cup close to my face and smile. I want to savor this, crawl inside this small white cup of bliss. The espresso is a light caramel color on top with a dark rich brown underneath. I know that I am not supposed to let it sit too long, but I don't want to sip it too fast. The smell is

so perfect. It's fresh and earthy and as grounding, as it is ephemeral. I hold this warm little pocket of alertness close to me as I look down the cliffside.

The colorful houses are neatly nestled into the slanting landscape. The ocean, far below, glitters in the sunlight. I sit there, listening to the light Italian chatter around me, glancing down at the perfect croissant that I am about to enjoy. The layers of flaky sun colored bread mirror the warm layered colors of the landscape that surrounds me. I feel folded into the morning. Everything feels buttery and warm and light and close and safe. It's peaceful. I am a stranger here, but I don't feel like it. I feel like a visitor. That's a whole different thing.

As I glance around the cafe I try to give back as much light as I take in, but I know that I'll never be able to.

I laugh at myself a little. I only write poetry when I am traveling. That may be one of the most pretentious sentences ever, but it's true. There is just something about those little hotel notepads and pens. Who compares the landscape with a croissant. Really? It's a fairly accurate description though. I absorb the quiet around me like a sponge, enjoying my coffee. Coffee is my ritual, it's my consistency. It's the one thing I've carried from New Hampshire to New York to new territory entirely. I probably drink too much coffee. It makes me feel grounded, but even my addiction has changed as time has gone on.

Ever since I traveled to London briefly my first year of school I am an espresso kinda girl. I hear my best friend from home jokingly referring to me as pretentious. I smile. I wonder what she would think of all this. Of Ellie and Noah. They've yet to meet each other. I miss her. I try to absorb every air molecule around me as if I can bring them back home to her. I leave a few extra euros with my empty cup and make my way back to where my friends are sleeping.

My attention is torn between all of the cool things that surround me and trying to kick butt at virtual Risk. The three of us have become utterly addicted to the app version of the classic board game. I can't help marvel at the layers of history that surround me. We are a bit outside the city now, about to explore the catacombs. It's a Christian burial ground from back when Christianity wasn't super acceptable in Rome. Lots of blood was shed on this ground. The waiting area/museum is full of artifacts and is dark and cool. Haunted isn't the right word to describe it. Sacred isn't either. I can't wait to descend. The bright screen and vibrantly colored cartoon countries juxtapose the earthy somber tones that surround me. As the tour begins we pause the game and follow our guide underground.

The tombs are creepy and heartbreaking. A lot of love was laid to rest here. Poorer folks couldn't read so they would mark loved ones' graves with personal objects or just memorize where they were buried. Lots of tombs are heartbreakingly small, for children. I guess they used to have little dolls and toys left on them. I wonder if I would have been one of those kids if I'd grown up here so long ago. We used to all be so much closer to death, or at least so much more aware of that closeness. I want to weep for people I've never met. I am also grinning ear to ear because I am in the freaking catacombs. How cool is that?

The tombs along the tour are empty now, apparently, tourists used to steal the bones. Ellie, Noah and I look at each other in horror. Grave robbing kinda creeps me out as it is, although on a level I get it. I mean, what is a dead guy really gonna do with all of that gold? But... to steal

someone's bones? Yikes. Although, isn't that's what anthropologists do all the time? I don't know.

Ellie and Noah aren't big museum people. They aren't history nerds in the way that I am but they seem pretty into this, this makes me feel less guilty on insisting we travel all the way out here. Granted it's hard not to be invested in this place. The tunnels are a bit claustrophobic and dim. We keep close to our guide Ellie holds onto Noah tightly. Cuties. I can't imagine coming down here before electricity. It's a maze. You could easily get lost down here and join the ranks of sleeping dead.

We slowly start making our way back to the surface. Beneath the church that the tombs open up into, there is another archaeological treasure. Buried beneath the church are old Roman tombs of wealthy families. They are the size of tool sheds and are gorgeous. The paintings are faded but you can tell how detailed and vibrant they must have been once upon a time. Our guide points out some subtle Christian imagery and symbols that are present on the tombs. Maybe some early, secret converts to the faith? We can't know for certain. I can't imagine risking my life for something I can't see. For Ellie and Noah, of course. For God.....eh.

The tunnel emerges into yet another gorgeous place of worship. So many fantastic churches exist in Italy that I am almost becoming numb to them. Noah takes a goofy picture of me in front of a Bernini statue. I then make an offering to my Dziadek. I place the change I have in the box and light a candle. I am never quite sure if I do this right, but I've done it in multiple churches all over the world and no one has stopped me so... I think this is the procedure.

I light a candle and think of my Dziadek. He's gotten some representation in a bunch of pretty cool places. Churches wherever I've traveled. Churches all over the world. Places he'd

never been. Places his granddaughter, my mother will never see. I wonder what he would have thought. I wonder what he would have thought of me traveling like this. Without my parents or a husband. In a way my grandmother and my mother never have, and probably never will. It must have been strange to watch your children and their children and their children's children grow up in a country different than the one you did. To hear their first words in a language that was not your own. He died when I was twelve. Would he recognize me now? Would I?

We leave very somberly. We walk to a vast field nearby where one of our guides said there were some ruins. It's a clear summer day. The warmth and air are welcome after the dark density of the catacombs. We are all lost in our thoughts. Reflecting on mortality and morality and other serious things when I look up and blurt out, "It's the 'Oh fuck wall!'", thank God I didn't go through with my original plan of becoming a history teacher. My friends, drawn out of their thoughts, naturally ask me what in the world I am referring to.

"Okay, quick history lesson. Rome, right. Chillin'. Doin' great. Big empire. Feared by everyone. So, they get lazy and their walls fall into disrepair. Some time goes by and then the Romans receive some intelligence that some barbarians are going to attack them, and they're like "Oh fuck!" and they take apart a bunch of buildings and draft all of the able-bodied men in the city to build this emergency wall in preparation for the attack. I think they did okay but the wall fell apart again pretty quickly because it's not like they build it super well when they were rushing."

I rattle all of this off amid lots of violent hand gestures and facial expressions. I'm embarrassed that I don't remember more details, like specific dates and who the emperor was. I only read the story this morning. I should know more. I've used the word, "Fuck" more times in

the last 3 minutes than I had before my 2nd year of college. My roommates at the University of New Hampshire had to teach me how to swear so that I wouldn't trip over curse words in my acting class.

Noah and I take a bunch of pictures in front of the wall. I'm not even sure that this is the right wall, but I don't tell Ellie and Noah that. They seem amused and intrigued and that's really all that matters. Noah and I rush towards Ellie and she laughs, continuing to snap pictures of us as we pull her into a hug. In high school, I remember reading so many books where friends were described as if they were family. People you loved. I always thought that that was strange. Now I don't. I look back at the not so intimidating looking Roman wall.

I am the kind of person who gives a makeshift history lesson with the word, "Fuck" woven into every other sentence. I am the sort of person who drinks espresso on the top of St. Peter's Basilica even though it's God awful. I am the sort of person who is scared to death to fly back to the states alone but who is going to do it anyway. I am the kind of person who buys clothes that are too badass for her personality and will never ever admit she enjoyed smoking hookah. I am the kind of person who writes bad poetry in beautiful places and still worries about what her mother thinks. I am still the kind of person who is excited by catacombs and books and ancient things. I can't believe that I am here even though I am.

We make a lot of our walls quickly I think. They are makeshift and haphazard and they come down more easily than we care to admit. Who we are is so fluid. We describe it in terms of things we have or haven't done. Things we like and don't like. What we wear and don't wear.

I'm not sure I recognize this person standing in the sun in a meadow outside the city of Rome in a blue Target tank top. Elena calls my name. Our cab has finally arrived. My friends

smile at me and wave me over. I may not know who this person is, but Ellie and Noah seem to. And they seem to like her well enough. Enough to have her speak at their wedding as the “friend of both the bride and the groom”, oh fuck I have to start writing that on the plane home. I may not recognize myself right now, but the people that love me do, and for now that’s enough. That’s more than enough.