

Lost in the  
Spanish  
Quarter

*From: tectonic@tin.it*

*To: heddi@yahoo.com*

*Sent: November 22*

*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, so 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, or 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 utensils in my hand for a moment I have the desire to gouge 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.*

*Don't forgive me, don't answer, don't be sad. Be happy, have babies, write books, make mixed tapes, take 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.*

*p.*

# I

**H**<sup>EDDI.</sup>”

I heard my name pronounced as no one had said it 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 roll off the tongue with startling casualness. No other sound in all the Spanish Quarter, not a woman screaming bloody cheater or 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 centuries-old Istituto Universitario Orientale, so easy to get into and so much harder to graduate from. 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 actually 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 mind really. Heddi was before and Eddie was now.

“Music?” I asked, and he merely nodded awkwardly, his knuckles taut 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 toward 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 been whirling around him earlier was now gone. He tried to hide his embarrassment but I felt it all the same, a painful pinch followed by my own regret at 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.

"I should probably get going." He set 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?"

"Pietro." It was a rock of a name, straitlaced and somewhat hard, 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 chance 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 by the fireplace, slipping the tape into the pocket of my vintage suede miniskirt. The flames felt their way boldly up the scavenged firewood, fondling what had once been the leg of a proper 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.

“Pietro, 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 Sonia, the only other girl in our innermost circle.

Davide, now I remembered. Luca sometimes played in his band. Davide, Pietro, 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 that was cleansing a corrupt government and making a killing at the newsstands. Now and then a chunk of wood caved into the embers, triggering a showy display of sparks and a few *oohs* and *aaahs* 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 Tonino’s hairy hand reached for.

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

“No, Tonino, please!” said Sonia.

“Party’s over, children,” Tonino 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. Tonino’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 Tonino 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, Tonino possessed almost fine features that made him look, in a certain light, like my own brother.

Tonino sang that ballad like a heavy metal front man, 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.

Tonino handed over the guitar. “I’m not the fucking Neapolitan,” he said. 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 offered 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 simply Luca Falcone.

“This one’s for you.”

It took only the first few notes for me to figure out that he’d chosen Carosone’s old classic “Tu vuo’ 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, a low-class growl rising from even lower in the gut than his. To see if I could make him smile. For his benefit, I crooned comically and gesticulated like a fishmonger, magically transformed into one of those poor women standing in the doorway of a typical inner-city *vascio*, a street-level, one-room hovel that some called a storeroom, others a store, and yet others unfortunately called home. I was every bit her, that mother or sister or girlfriend waiting for that good-for-nothing to return, her eyes narrowed and ready to snap . . . or burst out laughing. Oh, he thinks he's a hotshot, all loose in the tongue from whiskey and soda and loose in the hips from rock 'n' roll, but I'll show him as soon as 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 slum: "Look at you! You're nothing but a Neapolitan! *Tu si napulitan'!*" and if he so much as dared to come back at me with a lame "*Ailoviu*" I would really lose it.

Apart from the last expression that was supposedly in English, the lyrics were in dialect so I wouldn't have been able to spell them—nor was there any academic standardization for, or even interest in, faithfully capturing those sawn-off endings and tight-lipped sounds that disfigured Italians' famously operatic vowels. I wouldn't even have dared utter the lyrics without music. They were vulgar and truthful and sharp with that satire that Neapolitans were so skilled at turning inward 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 channeled 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 Sonia. “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 butchered it, slurring the diphthongs and crumbling consonant clusters. Sonia and I climbed the spiral staircase beside the fireplace. The space was so tight and Sonia so tall that she 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.” Sonia hugged herself, adding in that Sardinian accent that was as crisp as the air, “So I guess you know Pietro.”

“Pietro? From tonight?”

“Yeah, Pietro.”

The name had rolled extraordinarily lightly off her tongue. It occurred to me, for an instant of folly, that we must be talking about two entirely different people.

“What do you think of him?”

“I don’t really know him.” 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 Sonia 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 second 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 that held 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.”

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

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

I loved Sonia’s sweet doodle of a grin, but the word *fool* used in connection with this stranger named Pietro somehow felt like an insult to my own sensibility and filled me with remorse. Sonia 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 free fall 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 toward 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 blared. I couldn’t tell which of the many ships it could have come from, vessels invisible but for their connect-the-dot lights

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 I almost believed I could will it back to life with my eyes.

My hands had turned to cool marble, yet I hadn't had my fill of Naples; I could have stayed there all night drinking in its scent and feasting my eyes. 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 fend off or even put my finger on. I'd given myself over to the city, maybe even betraying myself to do so, but 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 right then I whispered it to the night as the truest of truths. Then I collected the firewood before heading back downstairs.

*From: heddi@yahoo.com*

*To: tectonic@tin.it*

*Sent: November 30*

*Pietro,*

*I don't know what to say. It's been four long years since I last heard from you. Time makes everything bearable, even waiting. Or maybe I simply forgot what I was waiting for.*

*I still don't know why you did what you did. Sometimes at night I look at the stars hoping for some kind of explanation from them. It's crazy, I know, to think that the constellations could read like a sort of story with a beginning, middle, and maybe even a happy ending. But to be honest, I can't make any sense of them. I can't even recognize the simplest of constellations: the sky seems jumbled, upside down, unfamiliar. And yet I like looking at the stars anyway. Every single one of them is, after all, a trace of a luminous object that is unique and perfect and no longer exists. A luminous memory?*

*I've worked hard at forgetting everything to do with you. A kind of self-induced amnesia, which has been quite successful. Of course it helps not having people, places, or things around me that could remind me of you. Except the Roman figurine. But that's not something I could regift or throw away. Maybe it would make more sense to one day give it back to the land . . .*

*My cat's on my knee, she's digging her claws in. She has beautiful gray fur. I rescued her from an animal shelter, so in a way I saved her life. But I think it's more accurate to say that she saved mine.*

*Things are good. I've found a place where I fit in, I have a great job and new friends that only know as much about me and my past as I'd like them to know. It's good to hear from you. It's good to hear you say you're sorry. Or have I put words in your mouth?*

*h.*

## 2

THE DAY AFTER, the day of the hangover, I was sitting on my creaky bed turning the pages of my textbook when I heard Luca coming down the hallway toward me. I could tell it was him even before his voice broke through the mournful Bulgarian folk songs and the humming rain. It was the smell of his tobacco that gave him away. His smoke meandered in through my open door and danced before me as elusively as a wish.

For as long as I'd known him, Luca Falcone had always smoked those hand-rolled cigarettes: he was puffing on one when I was first introduced to him. Leaned against the dejected plaster outside the café across from my department, he was holding something very alcoholic and wearing out-of-fashion leather pants, seemingly oblivious to the historical era or the geographical location he'd wound up in. Luca was already in his third or fourth year and he was pockmarked, weathered like a traveler who had crossed the desert to get to that bar, that bourbon, that stopover.

That moment marked the beginning of my university life as I knew it now, for most unexpectedly Luca took a shine to me and slipped me into his inner circle—the alternative crowd majoring in Urdu or Swahili or Korean at the Department of Arabic-Islamic and Mediterranean Studies and the Department of Oriental Studies, whose remote Italian origins (Puglia, Basilicata, Sicily, Sardinia) branded them as outsiders too.

“The movie’s starting,” said Luca with the lilt of his native Varese, in the Lakes region.

“I’ll be right there. I’m just finishing the page.”

Up close, Luca smelled of lavender soap. He stamped a kiss on my forehead, a big one like he was farewelling me at the train station. Yet he didn’t leave. He lingered in the doorway to bore his eyes into me, as he sometimes did, as if to hypnotize me. That prolonged gaze always threw me into confusion while at the same time giving me the strange certainty, at least for as long as it lasted, that our friendship was not limited to this moment or these circumstances, that we had a bond which would outlast the rest. I knew it was ridiculous, and that I was no exception: everyone wanted a piece of Luca Falcone.

On either side of the now empty doorframe were some of my black-and-white photographs, taken with a macro lens, hand-printed and taped to the wall. They were good shots, though somewhat abstract. Through the window, sandwiched up against another building and transformed by the rain into a game board of Chutes and Ladders, I couldn’t even see my neighborhood being beaten down by the weather and by the passage of time. But it was Sunday and I knew that at that hour all the shops would be closed and the markets packed up, and every last soul would be back home for a marathon meal, followed by the compulsory nap. Sunday lunchtime was the only time when people felt *sorry* for me. Poor stray, so far from home.

*Home.* The word itself puzzled me. Didn’t *home* mean my dad grilling steaks or my psychotherapist stepmom doing her on-the-spot dream analysis? Wasn’t it my mom’s shiatsu foot rubs, her chilly but soft hands, or my brother plucking the bass? The cats? Apparently not, because for all the other out-of-town students home was a place. Colle Alto in the province of Benevento, Adelfia in the province of Bari. Home was a red dot on the map, a reference point that was so very small and yet able to contain, it seemed, *everything*. People appeared to take it for granted, as if it were just another basic human emotion—happy, sad, angry, home—and yet

their eyes lit up when they said the word. *Casa*. I struggled to grasp that extraplanetary sensation but in the end I couldn't really feel it. I had to resort to logical analysis to get my head around it.

I was from everywhere and from nowhere. Washington, DC, Maryland, Virginia Beach, the outskirts of Boston, Athens in Ohio, and a few other forgettable stop-offs. That was until, at sixteen, I was assigned a dot on the map by an international exchange program that landed me in the nation of Italy, the province of Naples, the town of Castellammare di Stabia, the apartment of a divorcée with two grown sons who told me to call her Mamma Rita. It was Rita, and not AFSAI, who begged me to stay on after the first year and who had the foresight to advise her "American daughter" to graduate from a *liceo linguistico*.

I became convinced that nothing in this world is random. It was that diploma, in fact, that got me into the Orientale. The admissions lady had narrowed her eyes. I wasn't Italian, but with that piece of paper I couldn't not be Italian. When she thumped my admission form with four glorious official stamps, she turned me into a university student like any other. And among Luca's friends, who were now mine too, the camouflage was almost perfect.

The boys and I had a fun little game, which would start with a request for a cold beer and usually end with a cup of hot tea.

"Ah, c'mon, gorgeous," pleaded Tonino that afternoon lying starfish on Luca's bed. In the spastic light of the TV, I could see that Tonino looked as miserable as the old wallpaper behind him, covered only partially by Luca's Arabic calligraphy. "If I don't inject more alcohol into my bloodstream, I'll never get rid of this bastard headache."

"You did ask for it," said Angelo.

"Like you asking for that bong . . ."

"Listen, boys," I said, putting on my sternest voice, in no way meant for Luca, who was rolling a cigarette. "You have class tomorrow, bright

and early. C'mon, boys, it's the last week before the break. You can do it! Honey or sugar?"

Tonino cursed half-heartedly in three dialects (Neapolitan, Sicilian, and his own), but they both gave in straightaway. I smiled to myself on my way to the kitchen, knowing full well that what those two really craved was not a drink at all but a bit of mothering. I paused in front of Angelo's cracked door, catching a peek at his black-and-white cowhide rug we often lay across sipping green tea from Japanese cups while deciphering our respective codes, kanji and Cyrillic. I climbed the staircase, which had lost its railing, swerving at the top to avoid stepping on the crack in the floor, just in case there was some reality to that childhood truth. The fracture started at the fireplace in the kitchen, half a meter out from the wall, and shot through to the end of the living room, dissecting the tiles to where they met the terrace. I wondered, as brazen as that crack was, why I hadn't noticed it when I'd moved in with the boys. I'd probably been too distracted by the aging beauty of the once luxurious apartment, by all its fireplaces, frescoes, and bas-reliefs flaking and fading in the shadows.

I carried back beer mugs of tea and a pack of cookies; the bed sagged in the middle under our weight. I'd missed the opening scenes, but then again it was a movie we'd watched over and over, a New Zealand film I knew only by the name *Una volta erano guerrieri*, and I was very familiar with the plot. Tattooed Maori thugs bashing each other at night in parking lots and bars and on green lawns, spattered with blood and foul language dubbed in proper Italian with a northern accent.

"Man, what an awesome place New Zealand must be . . ." said Angelo dreamily.

"Awesome my ass," Tonino spat back.

"It can't be all that dangerous. Look at those wide-open spaces, they can do whatever the hell they want. I'd love to go there one day."

"Sure, blondie, better to get an ass whipping from a Maori gang than a kneecapping from the Mafia."

Angelo frowned, defiantly pulling up the plaid blanket. He had a nose ring and a proud Sicilian accent that should have lent him an air of toughness. But, whatever the situation, Angelo was like a kid in a candy shop and this was something Tonino just couldn't let him get away with. It certainly didn't help matters that Angelo had the complexion of a Swede, a washed-out color that didn't stop at his face and hair. I only knew this because I'd nursed him back to health once when he was suffering from excruciating neck pain. Angelo had turned facedown onto that cow rug and pulled down his pants; quickly, before I lost the nerve, I jabbed the syringe of anti-inflammatory into his right buttock.

"Well, one day I'm gonna go there," Angelo reiterated through a mouthful.

"You're as baked as that cookie," said Tonino.

"You should go. The world is a book . . ."

That last enigmatic sentence emerged from Luca's smoke. I hadn't even realized he'd been listening. Yet another night scene plunged the room into darkness, but Luca's Arabic pendant, carved out of what looked like bone, shone as if reflecting light from an unknown source.

"New Zealand's too far," I said, and in fact I preferred destinations like Sardinia, Umbria, the Netherlands, Kiev, Vienna—with or without my family. Or better yet, Capri, Procida, the Phlegraean Fields, the streets of Naples. "Who wants to come with me to the Maria Santissima del Carmine Church during the break?" I suggested. Another one of my "field trips," as the boys called them.

"A church over Easter?" said Angelo. "I'll pass. I'd rather be sitting around a table stuffing my face with cassata."

"It's also known as the Fontanelle Cemetery," said Luca. "Definitely worth a visit."

Hope swelled up inside me. Maybe, just maybe, this time Luca would set aside his band practice or research for his thesis to wander with me through the city that was his by right of blood. But he said nothing more and slipped definitively back into the darkness.

“Well, I wouldn’t be able to go for all the pussy in the world,” Tonino said. “March is when we prune our olive trees . . . Oh, that’s right, you intellectuals wouldn’t want your hands getting dirty, now would you? But it would actually do you some good. Check out these muscles. You think they’re just for show?”

The boys burst out laughing and I sat up with a jolt. *Pietro*. I hadn’t even looked at the tape since he’d given it to me the night before. I had a habit of doing that, setting aside letters and packages from home, sometimes for days on end, savoring the anticipation of opening them. Or maybe I’d just wanted to forget all about it after Sonia’s confession. But now I was beset by a sense of urgency. Where had I put it?

“Hey, where are you going?” Angelo called out behind me. “This is the part where Nig gets initiated into the gang!”

My suede skirt hadn’t forgotten last night: it smelled like a bonfire and was still holding on to the fragile little package I’d entrusted it with. In good lighting I could now see that the neatly written song list was framed by cartoonish drawings of ladybugs and fish in rust-colored ink, a detail of such playfulness, kindness, and undeniable intimacy as to make my head spin.

I sat on the bed and put the cassette into the tape deck. The first song was Aretha Franklin’s version of “Son of a Preacher Man.” I let out a sigh. My love life up until then had been a series of melodramas and misunderstandings.

In Castellammare di Stabia I met Franco, a rookie in the Camorra, the local Mafia. At the time it felt a lot like love. Or a movie about love, with scenes of gripping his thick waist on the back of a Vespa that snaked through the ruins of his ghostly neighborhood, which over the centuries had taken one too many punches from earthquakes and landslides. Watching his mother in their poorly lit *vascio* wail with chronic pain in legs as swollen as tree trunks. Listening to the story of how his friend had

been shot dead by a rival gang. Holding Franco in my arms as he broke every code of honor to cry and cry against the backdrop of a friend's uninhabited apartment that didn't even have electricity. I was sixteen and I wanted to save him. One day without an explanation he broke it off. The ending was unsurprising, even desirable. After that, those adolescent sunsets over the polluted sea became even more beautiful and raw, like blood oranges.

Cesare was an error in judgment I paid dearly for. In hindsight, I could have guessed that his brilliance and eccentricity were the early symptoms of schizophrenia. But at the time I was enamored with how enamored he was with me, his searing gaze, his crooked teeth. He was disheveled, possibly even ugly, but he possessed a blinding confidence and wrote terse, dense poetry that read like haiku. Cesare quickly betrayed signs of obsession: only later did I learn he'd given me the cheap, useless gift of his virginity. Long after he left the university to be hospitalized back in his hometown of Catanzaro, he continued to send me packages, even to my dad and Barbara's house in DC, containing self-published volumes of love poems or top-secret instructions for building a bomb. Those declarations of undying passion, which became more and more grandiose, intensified my bouts of cold sores and also my shame, verging on disgust, for how I'd played the part of the carefree girl and used sex as an intellectual experiment in carnality, for how careless I'd been and how easily my instinct for self-preservation had won out over my compassion.

And then there was Luca. Or rather, there wasn't. Late one night while watching a movie on his bed we'd drifted into sleep and he tangled himself around me. I woke up. The movie was over and Luca's torso was rising and falling in a faraway, untroubled rhythm that seemed extraordinary in itself. His hair had come loose from his ponytail and his lips were slightly parted, but even in his sleep Luca was still ruggedly handsome. I was only pretending to sleep. Paralyzed with pleasure and awe, I let the night tick away with the flashing green of Luca's digital clock as his pendant pressed its cryptic script onto my skin. I was afraid to

wake him. I wanted to lie next to him for as long as the universe had miraculously granted me, to absorb everything about him. His esoteric knowledge, his composure, his patience and faith in himself. During that long magical night, I gained an important insight: what I felt for Luca was not a crush, it was far more than that. I didn't want Luca Falcone, I wanted to *be* him.

I dropped back on my pillow and listened. There was a certain euphoria, and an unmistakable sensuality, to the song that I'd never noticed although I'd heard it a thousand times. I wondered if Pietro could fully understand the lyrics, if he was aware he'd given me a love song.

### 3

I COULDN'T QUITE picture Pietro's face. Our encounter had been so very brief and I'd even rushed it to a premature conclusion. The harder I tried to conjure up his image, the more it slipped away, until it was no more than a collection of indistinct features blending with the many eyes, noses, and mouths all around me, like those in the audience at my glottology lecture in the Astra Cinema. Fearing I would lose it forever in the crowd, I told myself not to dwell on it and to focus on my lesson instead.

The theater was warm and dark, womblike, the comfy seats upholstered in red velvet, my professor's voice a low frequency. I couldn't be dragged away from here even by wild horses, I thought to myself before realizing it was not a thought at all but a line from the second song, by the Rolling Stones, on Pietro's mixed tape.

I refocused on my notebook, where I was attempting to transcribe every word coming from the stage. "All the world's languages vary according to what we call taxa, or language families," I jotted down in tidy, compact letters. "Colors are a type of significant taxonomy: in fact, we might even say there is such a thing as ethnic chromatism . . ."

"Please shoot me now." The dark-haired girl next to me widened her made-up eyes, adding in a low whisper, "Signorelli's head looks like an Easter egg, don't you think?"

“He’s really good, though.” Actually, to me he seemed like a rock star.

“Sure, but he can’t teach. He just reads straight from the textbook.”

It wasn’t entirely true, but I found myself once more trying to shake the familiar fear that I’d enrolled in a university in shambles.

“I’ve seen you a bunch of times in Russian class. What’s your name?”

“Eddie, and yours?”

“Are you the foreigner?” My classmate leaned in close, too close, like I had something magical that could rub off on her. I didn’t know her but I recognized that hunger, so widespread in the Department of European Languages, that yearning to be beamed up to a galaxy far, far away. She fired breathless questions at me: “Where are you from? Are you German? Why did you come to *Naples*, of all places?”

“I’m from . . . the Spanish Quarter.”

*I Quartieri Spagnoli*. I knew how to lop off the final vowels and palatalize the *sp* in the Neapolitan manner and I’d learned to tame the awe in my eyes when I roamed the city, but there was no hiding my un-Italian features. In fact, the girl didn’t fall for it, but at least she steered her attention off me and back to my professor, who deserved it far more.

“. . . a distinction between bright white and dull, plain white. In Greek, *melas* is a radiant black, a concept that was completely lost in the shift from ancient to modern languages. And it’s not clear why. In antiquity there was a particular focus on luminosity . . .”

“That’s all I can take; I’ll just read the book at home.” The girl closed her notebook, murmuring with palpable joy, “In Sala Consilina, that is. I’m catching the train tomorrow morning.”

“Sala Consilina . . .”

“It’s in the province of Salerno. You wouldn’t know it, it’s just a nothing town . . .”

I could see she was embarrassed. I wanted to tell her not to worry because if anyone was provincial it was me, having grown up in one characterless suburb after another. But she wouldn’t have understood.

It would have been an unthinkable concept for an Italian: hailing from the provinces was such a historical and deeply ingrained humiliation, but mine was a modern shame—tangled up with that typical American uneasiness of knowing that I was, on some fundamental level, one of the privileged.

“Have a safe trip then.”

“Happy Easter.”

I turned again to look at my professor. Excluding the bald head, I thought, one day that will be me. Signorelli truly was a brilliant man, endowed with the ability not only to convey fascinating tidbits on the evolution of language but also to trigger surprising insights into humanity itself. These nonverbal, or perhaps preverbal, inspirations would come to me during class or even in the most unlikely of settings, sparks of knowledge I could never catch hold of and write down before they were gone like fireflies.

But once in a while something amazing would happen. Several of those wordless sparks, which I'd been unable to capture but apparently hadn't left me for good, would start to gather on their own and whisper to one another. Secrets in a foreign language, maybe an animal language, that all together made a low, humming sound. Within seconds that buzzing would grow in intensity, a strange and exciting cacophony like instruments warming up before a concert. Gradually those unintelligible sounds would begin to slide into place and consolidate into one overriding idea that would explain everything. And it wouldn't be just a simple statement but a roar, something so unheard of, so astonishing, it might even be deafening. *The truth.*

If only I could hold my breath that long, I thought, for that crescendo of notes to meld into one whole and boom their mysterious message, then I would *know*. I would understand the primeval urges of man, the true reasons why people do what they do and are who they are, since the dawn of time. Art, war, religion . . . love.

I started humming “Wild Horses” to myself. All at once I felt trapped by my seat, by that windowless cinema. I wanted to break free, run home, and listen once more to the tape. To listen between the lines.

I got up and left. University students streamed out of cafés and used bookstores, forcing the cars to slow and bend to their will. Here the city was ours. From our tribe I spotted Costantino, a Japanese major, and Rina, who studied French, but unable to stop in the crowds we simply waved excitedly to each other. I was going against the current. It seemed almost as though all the other students were heading away from the center, toward the train station. By the end of tomorrow they would all be back in their hometowns. People brushed past me, even pushed me, but it was never done with malice, only familiarity. Yet I kept to my path, the street known as Spaccanapoli, a long and deliberate cut through the heart of Naples that would lead me back to the Spanish Quarter.

The Easter break freed me to visit the Carmine Church. I didn’t know the way there, so for once I’d taken the bus. The Sanità neighborhood felt run down, almost unwell. A knife struck a cutting board a few stories up, a motorbike stirred lethargically in the distance. Certainly not the kind of place to use my camera, the Minolta my dad had passed down to me. Instead I pulled out my well-worn map, waking it from its comfortable folds. Then I veered left.

The streets tightened around me like vises and had a mind of their own. With every step my shoes gave me away, clapping on those typical Neapolitan cobblestones—volcanic *basoli*, large flat slabs with chisel marks that turned the streets into giant, moth-eaten quilts. My footsteps were regular, almost a musical rhythm. I realized that I had, in fact, yet another of Pietro’s songs in my head, a U2 song that was dictating my pace: “Where the Streets Have No Name.”

I came to a stop before sheer yellow cliffs of volcanic tuff. It was like being inside a desert canyon. Everything there was the color of sand, but

the sun had no business here. Oozing from natural caves were houses, very poor dwellings without windows that appeared pinned down by the weight of the rock. A pregnant woman in her pajamas stood in a doorway. Sometimes, thinking myself invisible, I gave in to the luxury of staring. When she saw me coming, she shut the door.

I walked along that far edge of the neighborhood until I came to a church. Although it too was half inside a cave and as yellow as the cliff above it, the church seemed not so much a product of the rock as an ornate statement of uprising against circumstance.

I went in seeking refuge more than anything; I doubted this was the right church. There was nothing out of the ordinary about the place: just the usual tinted marble and frankincense, a few old women sitting in the pews fingering rosaries. One of the women got up and made a beeline for me.

“You’re here for the dead, aren’t you, my dear?”

“Actually, I am.” How could she tell? From my breathless entrance, or the fact that I’d neglected to puncture the surface of the holy water with my fingers?

“I’ll take you down.” She talked in a manner typical of Neapolitan widows, drawing out the syllables as if to mourn each and every one of them, yet she was smiling generously. As I followed the woman toward the altar, she turned to say, “You’re not from here.”

“No.”

At the far end she took me down a stairwell. It was musty and so dark that my feet had to make tentative guesses until, at the bottom of the steps, they hit packed earth. As I got used to the dim light, the space grew before me. A dirt path carved through piles of what my eyes could only see as kindling, unstable mounds pushed hard against the sandy walls of the cave. Above was a single hole of sunlight, a square choked with weeds. In that swampy light the mounds gradually, horrifically, began to take their true shape.

“Whose are they?”

“Only the good Lord knows,” said the churchwoman, her voice echoing. “They’re the unnamed dead. Folks who died in earthquakes. Or the plague. People used to drop like flies back then.”

Among all those random pieces of people, I could make out thigh-bones, vertebra, and smaller bones that might have been fingers. Only once had I looked death in the eyes, at my step-grandmother’s funeral, and it had stared back at me blankly, like a mannequin. I wasn’t afraid of death but only of saying the wrong thing, of taking the wrong step.

“Our women here dedicate their prayers to these people,” the woman added, “in the hopes they’ll see them in a dream.”

I went up to a particularly slender, curved bone. What had she meant by *see them in a dream*? But when I turned around to ask her, she was gone.

Finally alone, I stepped deferentially through the cave. So the real church was down here. The path narrowed, the bones thickened. It was not scary but simply quiet, a stroll through a forest of felled pines, my trail scattered with branches, twigs, needles. But my imagination ran wild. Maybe one of Naples’s many cholera epidemics had killed a woman, perhaps married with two or three children, who then in the dead of night was thrown like a rag doll into that cave. Or maybe the volcano had sputtered during a Sunday market and a boy selling persimmons, hard new-season ones that make paper of your tongue, had suffocated in the poisonous gases. No, that was impossible: Mount Vesuvius had long been dormant; it was just a backdrop on the other side of the bay. Maybe an earthquake had toppled a wall on top of him, flicking the fruit like orange marbles across the street stones.

The dampness of the cave began to pinch my bones, an arthritic sort of feeling I knew well from years of living in unheated rooms where the paint peeled from the walls like bandages and the plaster still bore earthquake wounds that refused to heal over. I lingered in front of a coffin, built from wood that looked just as salvaged as the firewood the boys collected. I peered inside. Finding it empty filled me with gratitude mixed

with an unspeakable disappointment. But just behind it was a much smaller coffin in a more advanced state of rot, only big enough for a baby.

I didn't belong there, that was clear to me now. But I didn't stop, for my eyes were too hungry, and eventually I came to a stack of skulls. They shone like varnished wood, as if caressed daily over the years; some were housed individually in crude wooden boxes with crosses gouged into them. I kneeled before one.

The face, the only earthly access to the soul. Big black eyes looked at me, astonished by their fate, the mouth releasing one long scream that I couldn't hear. This was no longer an excursion and I no longer felt excited or even curious. I wanted to stay there with that person and find the courage to run my hand over their skull, like putting a baby to sleep, to watch over them as they slept. I wanted to prove that I wasn't afraid of death because fate knew what it was doing. Didn't it?

"Everything all right?" The churchwoman's voice punched through the stillness. She'd obviously come to check on me, and perhaps I wasn't even really allowed there on my own. "Each of these skulls is the responsibility of a parishioner," she explained with a slowness that I now understood was not mourning at all but simply the effort to speak in Italian. "They take one or two in their care. It's like they become part of the family. They clean the skull, build an altar. Every day they pray for that person to get out of purgatory."

I listened without saying a word. I'd always pictured purgatory as something of a waiting room, and in my life I'd never known hell . . . or heaven, for that matter.

"Everybody needs somebody to look after them," the woman went on, letting out a bit of Neapolitan this time. "Someone to hassle the heavens for them." Some truths could only be spoken in dialect. If I'd been a Catholic I might have said *amen*. From my anthropological studies, I knew she was right—we are social creatures after all—yet I only grasped that her words were meant not for all of humanity but for me personally when she added in the raspy whisper of a smoker, "You got a boyfriend?"

“Me? No.”

It was the only possible answer, and yet at the same moment my heart leaped inside my chest. Because along with that no, which came out more like a protest than a fact, an image of Pietro had appeared before me with a clarity I didn't think my memory was capable of. His lean body and solid gaze, his distinguished and slightly crooked nose, his mouth sealing a mysterious pleasure.

“Pretty little thing like you. There's gotta be someone,” answered the woman, slipping into the dialect now like into a pair of old clogs and cradling my hand in hers, which were coarse and warm. “Someone's waitin' for you, I'd bet my bottom lira.”

A man waiting for me? I met the old woman's eyes. There was something in them, a warmth easily tapped into with true-born Neapolitans that made me almost want to trust this stranger, in the middle of a mass grave, with the story of how someone had given me a gift that I couldn't get out of my head. A young man whom I didn't know and would probably never see again but who must have seen something—in me, in *us*—that I simply couldn't see.

Instead I said, “I like being on my own.”

“On your own, huh?” She patted my hand—too hard, almost a slap—before letting it go. The moment was gone. And yet hadn't she just read my mind—and maybe even my future?

Outside the cemetery, the sun was unbearably bright and the neighborhood unbearably alive despite the premature siesta, the closed shutters, the lazy graffiti. Did the streets even have names here? A shield of tears—of discomfort or emotion, it was hard to tell—welled up in my eyes, turning the neighborhood into a molten, unreal landscape. Was the world bending to my vision or was it my own very atoms whirling like a dervish and fusing with the world around me? For an excruciating and beautiful instant there were no boundaries. Anything was possible.

*From: tectonic@tin.it*

*To: heddi@yahoo.com*

*Sent: January 3*

*Dear Heddi,*

*I should have written back earlier. I'm trying again now, for the hundredth time, unsure of whether I have mustered enough courage over the years to tell you the truth about my life.*

*I dislike the life I lead. For the past two years I've been working on an oil platform in the middle of the Adriatic Sea. I'm a laborer. I work fifteen days a month and then the other fifteen I'm free (so to speak). The work doesn't give me any form of gratification. I'm afraid of being the same person day in and day out.*

*I'm still looking for a job abroad, but every time I send off my résumé I spend entire days fantasizing about finding work somewhere not far from you and maybe popping over to your house for a cup of coffee and a chat.*

*I constantly think of the mistakes I've made, which all converge into a sort of large basin of failure. You're probably wondering what it is I want from you. I don't know. But you're the only woman I've ever really loved. I hurt you, and even after all these years I'm unable to find an explanation as to why I ran away from you. I can only find excuses with myself. I'm well aware that I threw away my only chance of a peaceful and happy life, with you. It's an awareness that grows deeper over the years, that I ferociously walked all over the feelings, respect, and love of the most beautiful person I've ever met and will ever meet. It's the certainty that I folded my cards at a time when I could have walked away with the whole pot.*

*This makes me come back to the question: What do I want from you? I want you to know that my self-esteem is reduced to a few scraps; I want you to know that there will never be another woman like you in my life. I've had a few flings, which I've come out of feeling more aware, more certain than*

*ever, of the amount of shit I've buried myself under. I want you to see what a useless existence I have; I want to be sure I've shown you that you were right.*

*It's good to know you haven't completely buried my name, it's good to hear a bit about you and your cat. It's a gift I don't deserve. I hope you'll want to tell me more. I'd love to be able to imagine you, what you do every day, where you buy your groceries, what you cook, how you spend your weekends. Please write soon. And in the meantime, say hello to those Mexican cowboys for me and, if you think it's not too inappropriate, to Barbara and your father.*

*p.*