

SOMEWHERE I HAVE NEVER TRAVELLED

BY

CAITLYN ANN BINDSCHADLER

A Thesis Submitted to the Honors College

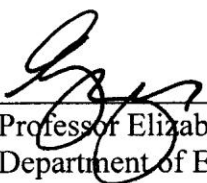
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Professor Elizabeth Evans
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Abstract

A collection of three short stories under the same title, “Somewhere I Have Never Travelled” blends together fiction and non-fiction travel writing. Each story takes one young college student studying abroad in Italy for the summer as its first-person subjective narrator. One character longs for connection, another grieves a death, while another wrestles with the guilt of betraying a loved one. Torn between their homes and the adventure they want to have (and sometimes torn between conflicting desires within themselves), each narrator makes their way through the events of a single night. They encounter one another and interact, giving their views on one another, other visiting American students, persons of different nationalities that they meet, and Italy itself. Within that night, these characters struggle to make meaning out of their lives, and what it means to them to be in Italy.

Introduction

It was in Orvieto, Italy, where I spent the summer before my senior year in college, that I first tried my hand at travel writing. I had signed up for the class thinking that there could be nothing better than to have a class where I had to go do fun things in Italy and then write about them. Being primarily a fiction writer, finding creative ways to tell the truth, having to deal with culpability and the pressure of getting details right was new to me. For the first time, I couldn't invent every little detail, I had to pay attention to the reality of them as well. I enjoyed the challenge, and I learned a lot, although I still preferred the fiction genre as a writer.

When I returned to America and sat down to work on my Honors Thesis, I was trying to come up with topics to write about, and I kept coming back to the idea of travel writing, and trying to explore my experiences in Italy in different ways. I wondered, could I blend together fiction and travel writing, write about a real place, but give myself the freedom of fiction to create characters that were based loosely on reality, events that might have happened or could have happened, and find a story there to tell? The answer was yes. Drawing from my real life experiences, I was able to create a narrative in three parts, exploring the events of a single day in the lives of three American students visiting a small town in Italy for the summer.

In the first draft, all three students were within the same narrative, but upon a second look, this felt constricted. However, the idea of perspective was important to me. I wanted to explore how three different people can experience one night in the same place, with the same events, in completely different ways. I love the complexity of human interaction and how differently three people could react to the same stimuli.

In addition, so much of travelling is about perspective. Though so many human experiences are universal, the expectations and practices of various cultures can vary

enormously. Italians have different traditions than Americans, different belief systems, and different ideas about what life is like. When I was travelling, I had to constantly practice looking at things from the perspective of someone entirely unlike me, skill that was extremely valuable, and I wanted to express that in my thesis to the best of my ability.

I ended up with a story in three parts—each told by a different American student. Each has their own reasons for visiting Italy, and each has their own pressures, whether from home, from within, or from the characters in the town itself. They have different relationships to one another, and they are all searching for different things. Their stories overlap at times, with multiple characters taking part in the same scenes, yet each has a different understanding of the scene and places different emphases on the events. One thing remains the same: they are all searching for connections, for intimacy in their personal relationships, for love, not just in the romantic sense, but love between two friends, two sisters, a parent and a child.

I borrowed liberally from my own experiences in Italy, from the experiences of other students that I met there, and I strove to accurately describe the country and its people, to reflect the generosity of mood and spirit that dwells there, the life, and the traditions. I ended with something that is travel literature of a sort, because it is based upon Orvieto, and what travelling there can be like. It is also fiction, with fictional structures, and a fiction writer's flexibility with details.

For examples and inspiration, I looked at travel literature such as *The Reluctant Tuscan*, by Phil Doran and *Travelers' Tales Guide: Italy*, edited by Anne Calcagna. I also studied short stories by writers such as Flannery O'Connor, Tim O'Brien, Joyce Carol Oates, Junot Diaz, Denis Johnson, Donald Barthelme, Susan Sontag and George Saunders. Finally, as more explicit inspiration, I used e.e.cummings' poem "Somewhere I Have Never Travelled, Gladly Beyond,"

from which my collection receives its title. This poem, which uses travelling as a metaphor for a relationship, reflected ideas I wanted to explore about intimacy and personal connections between people.

This project was a massive undertaking, not in the least because I was trying to keep three timelines consistent at once, and a single edit to one story often meant going back and editing all three to fit that one small change. I can only hope my attempts were successful, and that my readers are able to discover Italy as I did, to create relationships and observe the customs and find the personal connections that travel often brings, both between old friend, and between perfect strangers.

SOMEWHERE I HAVE NEVER TRAVELLED

Preface

*It's a town in Italy so small that when you say its name, people tilt their heads to the side, eyebrows drawn down low, and ask if that's near Rome. It perches precariously above the rolling hills of Umbria, with edges on every side. The only thing taller than the cathedral is the clock tower. It has two major streets and six gelato shops. Every afternoon, the older citizens put on their good shoes and walk through the widest of the narrow streets, perch on the edges of piazzas, and watch the world go by. It's famous for white wine, for the network of tunnels running through the rock under the town, and for the ancient necropolis marked clearly on the maps for tourists willing to walk fifteen minutes to the edge of town. There's a hole in the ground the Pope hid in once, but what small Italian town can't say that? It's a minor train stop, nothing more, its name printed in fine print on the time table next to the bold letters of **Roma** and **Firenze**. It's a peaceful place, quiet except for the clanging of a dozen different church bells every hour. Things are simple here, quiet. In the small university tucked into the corner of the piazza by the cathedral, students travel from halfway across the world to study every summer, to live in the town, to walk around its edges, drink its wine, and remember not to sleep through the quiet bell and single announcement that marks its stop on the train line. They become a part of this town, and it becomes a part of them. When they go home, they bring wine, pasta, specialty olive oils, pottery plates, maps, tickets, and scarves. They bring the town too, carrying it across oceans into the lives they left behind.*

Somewhere I Have Never Travelled: Alex

My apartment matches the town in size, being miniature to such an extent that the kitchen window is right up against the solid concrete wall of the building next door. The landlady had gotten her friend to paint a modern impressionistic painting on the rough face of the wall, echoing the true Italian countryside I see through the window on the other side of the apartment—about four steps away.

The painting is beautiful, but it's the real Italy outside the window that I can't stay away from, that amazes me, intoxicates me and inspires me. For this summer, when I'm twenty-one, before I have to go back and finish my last year of college and go out into the adult world, this is my home. I keep the quaint wooden shutters open whenever possible, allowing me to lean out and breathe the air, hear the church bells that ring every hour, on the hour, listen to the kids playing at the monastery across the street.

"You coming out to the bar tonight?" Michaela asks me from the bedroom we share, twisting her shoulder length blondish hair up behind her head and frowning at the effect in the mirror. It's a familiar sight. I've known Michaela for two years now, and in that time we've acted in a play together, shared a poetry class, and shared many bowls of ice cream in front of cheesy chick flicks, bowls Michaela inevitably left for me to wash.

"Come on, you hardly ever go with us. I promise it's fun," Michaela wheedles, grinning at me. "Besides, the British guys are in town for one more night. Don't you want to flirt with a cute foreign soldier just once in your life?" She winks at me, then returns to her reflection, pursing her lips at herself thoughtfully.

“Oh, well if cute soldiers with *accents* are going to be there...” Her childish excitement makes me smile. In reality, Michaela is only a year younger than me, but sometimes that year feels like ten. “Don’t you have a boyfriend?” I ask.

Michaela turns around to stick her tongue out at me. “That doesn’t mean I can’t have a little fun,” she tells me, swiveling her hips playfully and wiggling her eyebrows.

She turns back to the mirror, still toying with her hair. I’ve known Michaela long enough to know that cute boys and alcohol is not a good combination for her. If it was just me, I probably wouldn’t go, but I get an uneasy feeling in my stomach as I watch her open the top drawer of the dresser and go through her underwear to find her prettiest bra. Something about her enthusiasm and silliness, her willingness to let everything go and have a good time, it makes me feel like her older sister, someone who has to be there to take care of her.

Anyway, I’ve hardly gone out at all since we got to Italy. Walking around school, seeing everybody laughing and talking about what happened “last night, oh my god, it was the funniest thing, you had to be there,” it seems like I’m missing out on something. Isn’t that part of what studying abroad is about, getting outside your comfort zone and trying something new? And I didn’t want her to go alone.

Outside the window, the Italian afternoon is dying in a golden haze. It’s still early, and we won’t be leaving for the bar till after dark. While Michaela might be able to keep herself occupied with choosing a wardrobe for that amount of time, I hated being inside when I could be out experiencing everything I could about Italy.

“I’m going for a walk. Want to come?” I ask Michaela, more for politeness’ sake than out of a genuine desire for her company. It would be nice to have company because I feel like

even here, I'm always alone. At the same time, Michaela is not necessarily the person I want to be alone with.

“No, I think I'm just going to read and get ready.” Michaela smiles at me and waves goodbye as I head out the door.

I don't mind being alone. In an ideal world there would be someone who could walk along a street with me in a foreign city and who would know me well enough not to chatter the whole time, but I'm used to being on my own, and I doubt anyone like that exists. A narrow stairwell slips down through the building and through a big creaky door to the narrow street. Walking along these streets, the rounded unevenness of the stones, I always feel like I'm about to fall.

I don't pay attention to where I walk, heading vaguely towards the outer wall, passing under balconies exploding with flowers, windows spilling out the sounds of loud Italian television. Voices talk over the television, raised in laughter, anger, joy, pain. Italians are so eager in their emotions. They're always reaching towards one another to clasp hands, to touch, to embrace. I wrap my arms around myself as I reach the edge of their world.

Everything was supposed to change for me here, but so far it just seems like more of the same. Be better, be different, somehow this place was supposed make me better or different. To make life better and different. Former students talking up the program kept using the phrase “life-changing,” and looking ridiculously happy about it. They gushed about the things they saw, and the people they met. Everyone I told about my trip kept saying how travel would change me. They kept giving me guide books, bits of advice, telling me how I should see this site of historical importance, or that one.

I've been to museum after museum, seen thousands of famous artifacts and locations. We went to Rome last weekend, saw the Pantheon, the Spanish Steps, the Colosseum, the Forum, St. Peter's and the Vatican. I tried to talk to people, joked around with a few of my classmates, but when we went into the Sistine chapel, almost everyone slouched on the sidelines, nursing their hangovers, while I couldn't stop looking upwards, couldn't keep from crying. If there was anyone else who was moved at all, I didn't see them. They all seem to think the point of coming to Italy is the lower drinking age.

I don't know if I want to go out tonight. But if the soldiers are going to be there, I want to keep an eye on Michaela. Not that I don't trust her. But if she gets drunk and does something she's going to regret, I want to make sure I'm there to take care of her. And maybe I will meet someone, make a connection of some kind. I'll be there for my friend, and maybe I'll make a new one. Michaela might drive me crazy sometimes, but I can't help but care about her welfare. So I'm going out tonight.

Just once, I wish I could fit in like she does. Find out what that's like.

I don't know how long I've been walking, lost in thought, but it must have been a while because it's starting to get dark, and Italian days are much longer than American ones. I consider heading home, but I'll walk along the waist-high wall for a while first, and look out at the countryside, patterns of green lighter and darker and other shades, land that's been settled for thousands of years. There's only have so many nights when I can walk along this wall and feel this peaceful and see this much beauty. I'm glad I don't live here always, because if I did I might forget to notice. And I wonder if anyone else ever feels this way, or if I'm the only one.

The light is hazy, the sunshine decaying into amber smoke so nothing looks quite real. I still can't quite believe I'm here. Sometimes I think I'm making it all up in my head, so maybe that's why I'm so surprised to see Joseph when I do.

Joseph is one of the guys in the group of sixty or so college students who came from America with our group to spend the summer in Italy, exploring and taking classes. So far all I know about him is that he's funny and makes cynical comments about absolutely everything. He seems nice, though. He's ridiculously tall, with this bright coppery hair that stands out everywhere we go. Michaela and I made up a game so that whenever we get lost on one of our field trips, we just look for Joseph's hair, and we find our group again.

He's repeatedly kicking the stone wall that circles around the town.

"Jeez, Joseph, what did that wall ever do to you?" I ask.

He flinches and turns his head fast towards me and then away, but he doesn't respond to my lame joke. He does stop kicking the wall, though, which is good. I have a feeling the Italians might not like it if they saw him.

"Hey Alex," he says finally. It's hard to make out the words because he's mumbling and refusing to look at me. I don't know Joseph that well, but I'm pretty sure something's wrong. He's got to be upset about something.

"You okay?" I ask carefully, trying to gauge his response. I don't know if he's the kind of person that will want to talk or if I should just leave him alone.

He nods his head, once up and once down, but he still won't look at me. His whole body is tense. If he was a cartoon character, his outlines would all be trembling.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I try. He slumps forward slowly, his hands gripping the wall tightly, breathing, gasping, in and out. I take step forward, my hand outstretched.

“No,” he snaps. I can’t help but flinch at his tone, at the sudden loudness and my hand stings. All I was doing was trying to help, and I’m not sure why he’s being so mean to me. I lower my hand slowly. I should just leave. It feels wrong, though, somehow deeply wrong to leave him here in a foreign place all by himself. So instead I go over to the wall. “God, it’s beautiful here, isn’t it?” I say, the countryside sweeping over me, and the wind touching my face and the clouds floating and the light dying.

Joseph makes a funny gasping noise, because now he’s crying. He’s crying. I’ve never really had a guy cry in front of me before. I don’t know what to do. He’s gripping the edge of the wall and he’s crying, the tears are pouring down his face, his body is shaking with them, it feels like he’s going to come apart, his body is uncurling with each tear, he’s scaring me, so I reach out and grab hold of him to keep him still, wrapping my arms around the middle of him to stop my own shaking.

I don’t know what to do and his eyes are silent with grief and with tears.

“She’s dead,” he says, and I don’t know who he’s talking about. I try to see Joseph’s face, but he’s too tall, and it’s all too much and there’s not enough of me to contain him, so I just hold what I can reach of him. Joseph slowly collapses, pulling me down with him until we’re kneeling on the hard pebbled ground, the rocks sharp against my knees, legs tangled, his chin against my forehead, my face pressed into his collarbone, we’re rocking, back and forth, his arms are trapped between us, his hands limp against my stomach, we’re shaking together, how can one person feel this much pain, but I know he can’t and it spills over into me, all I can feel is shakiness and pain and grief and I can’t remember where the boundaries are between us and when his tears fall on my face I can’t tell the difference between his and mine.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers. “I’m sorry. Weak. Shouldn’t be crying.”

The words shock me, startle me into myself, it's lonely here and I'm furious. "Shut up," I say loudly. His tears are on my face, and I can feel how cold they are against my skin that contains only me and I'm still alone.

He looks me in the eye for the first time. "Don't apologize," I tell him. I think he might be about to say something else, his chest rises and his lips part, but he never gets a chance.

The crunch of footsteps interrupts, and we sway as an older Italian couple comes strolling picturesquely past us. They smile at us, holding hands, the woman leaning in gently towards her husband. Their simple togetherness, the way their fingers fold together like blankets, gentle and safe, leaves me gasping.

"*Bella notte*," the old man says, giving us a little nod of his silvery head.

I scramble for the little Italian I know, struggling for air.

"*Buena notte*." It's all I can manage.

They beam at us, the woman smiling conspiratorially at me, and I realize I'm still kneeling with my arms still wrapped around Joseph. The Italians are not a people to disapprove of public displays of affection. The couple is holding hands and their wrinkles match, and I'm suddenly ridiculously jealous of these random people I don't even know. I'm struck by the thought that I don't know if I'll ever be able to find someone who will be willing to walk along a road we've walked along every day for our entire lives, holding my hand, smiling his funny little laugh wrinkles at me.

The couple smiles at us, and goes on their quaint beautiful way, walking slowly and carefully, their steps in rhythm without trying and I'm left behind, still holding Joseph with nothing at all to say.

“Well, I should get going,” Joseph says, pulling away from me and standing up. Suddenly, my arms feel empty. I stand up too, wobbly, and step towards him, but I can’t touch him even though he’s so near, he just turns away from me and walks away fast, almost running down the street. It curves, and then he’s gone and I’m standing there empty, not sure what just happened, and I can’t help wondering what it was he would’ve said.

Somewhere in the middle of everything the sun has gone down and I walk home in the dark. Luckily, Italians are terrible drivers and every corner is blind so I have to pay attention as I walk, I can’t analyze or think and that’s good.

As I near my apartment I rub my fingers under my eyes, hoping they aren’t too bloodshot. I’m not sure how to explain what just happened to Michaela, and I don’t know if I want to. I don’t want her to turn what just happened into a cheap flirtation when it feels so much bigger. Luckily, when I get upstairs, she’s curled up on the couch with a book, and doesn’t look up until I’m safely in the bathroom. I wash my face and change my shirt and put some makeup on, more to hide the evidence of this afternoon than for vanity.

Michaela giggles and bounces as we make our way down the stairs. “This is going to be so much fun! I’m glad you’re coming out with me, you’ll see, it’s so much fun!” she chatters.

The door to the building clicks behind us in a finalistic way, and I sincerely hope she’s right. I only half listen as we walk to the bar. Michaela’s one of those people who chatters on and on, so that you only need to listen to one sentence out of seven or so. I only feel slightly guilty for my battery of “uh-huh’s,” “mmm’s,” and “really’s” against her stream of commentary.

The bar is only a few streets from our house, and on the way we walk past the cathedral, the biggest building in the town, and the second tallest behind the clock tower. While the big cathedral in Siena looks like a wedding cake, the kind that tastes like chalk and sawdust, and the

one in Florence is too big to comfortably take in, our cathedral is perfect. The façade is complicated and beautifully decorated, shimmering with mosaics and colors, while the sides are striped perfectly equidistant black-and-white stripes, no attempt at the graceful variety of narrow and wide striping of the Florentine cathedral. The effect is reminiscent of prison pajamas. The weird mixture of beauty and ugliness appeals to me, and makes me smile as we pass it.

“I know, it was so funny,” Michaela says, seeing my smile. I have no idea what she's talking about, so I nod, which seems to be sufficient.

When we get to the bar, it's already pretty crowded, and people are loud and loose from alcohol. I realize how out of my element I am. Parties I can do, on occasion, but I have no idea what protocol at a bar is.

Let's get a drink,” Michaela says, pulling me towards where the bartenders are busily serving thirty other people at once, but before we can get there, Joseph appears out of nowhere, all smiles, grabbing Michaela in a hug and flirting gently with her, holding her hand, and promising to save her from any Italian scoundrels with low intentions. His eyes slide away from mine when I try to look at him.

Before I can even fathom how to approach Joseph, how to say a single thing to him, Michaela is pulling me away, and Joseph moves on. Peeking at Michaela, I'm certain that my feelings are written all over my face, but she apparently doesn't notice anything weird. As we push our way to the front of the crowd around the bar and wait for her drink, she tells me a funny story about something Joseph said in class, how much fun he is to hang out with, and how she heard he hooked up with some girl in Rome last week. I try to look like a normal person, nodding like none of this means anything to me, Joseph's just a guy I don't even know that well. Which he is. That's what he is. I can't help but wonder if I'm actually good at hiding my

feelings or if Michaela really is this dense. Then I see her sneaking a glance outside to a group of the soldiers. She just isn't focused on me at all.

Once she has her drink, Michaela pushes her way outside, weaving her way through the crowd, expertly protecting her drink from being spilled. I follow her because I don't know anyone else well enough to talk to them. I smile at people I recognize, and they smile back, but with polite tolerance, not recognition. I doubt any of them remembers my name. Michaela makes her way over to the soldiers. They're laughing, and joking, she smiles at one in particular that she calls James, and before I know it, she's in the guy's lap.

Slightly to the side, I watch Michaela perching in James' lap, giggling and flirting, while all around me people perch and flirt and giggle. Girls flip their hair, flap their eyelashes up and down, legs are crossed and uncrossed, and there I am in the middle of it all, wondering what to do.

Just for once, I want to be like Michaela, smiling and laughing, and part of it all. Everyone here seems to know one another, and they all seem so happy. This is all so much fun for them.

I push in closer to Michaela, because she's the only one I know, and she grins at me and grabs my hand, but she's focused on James. The other girls at the table are equally immersed in flirting with their own soldiers. I rub my hands awkwardly against my clothes, shifting from foot to foot, wishing I had something to hold so my hands don't feel so strange. They remember to offer me a chair eventually, and I do my best to sit and talk and joke with them. Michaela drinks more and more, the guys sending emissary after emissary to the bar for round after round of drinks. The sky rumbles.

They offer me drinks, but I don't know the names of any of them, and I'm uncomfortable, so I say no. Michaela is swaying in her seat, her laughter wilder than usual, but I can't tell how drunk she is. I watch her out of the corner of my eye, worried. The soldiers buy a round of shots that they light on fire, grabbing them up and downing them before the plastic shot glasses melt. I pretend to spill mine, the sticky liquid cool against my leg.

James' hands are sliding into some questionable places, and his lips are against Michaela's neck. Other girls are making out with their soldiers now. My head spins a little as I get up and move away, unsteady on my feet even though I haven't had anything to drink.

Joseph surprises me by coming up behind me, his eyes on Michaela and James. "Is she okay? Maybe we should take her home," he says. I follow his gaze to where Michaela's face is tilted up to James', their lips just a breath away from kissing.

"I don't know." It bothers me a little that he seems to care so much about Michaela and James.

"Who's that guy she's with?" Joseph asks. "Does he know she has a boyfriend?" He eyes James. "I don't trust him." He makes as though to walk over to them, and I grab his arm to stop him. I surprise myself, touching him, and I pull my hand away fast.

"She's my friend, let me take care of it," I tell him. It's convenient how tall he is, I have to exert effort to look him in the eye. I leave Joseph by the wall and go over to Michaela, bending down so I'm close to her face. "Hey, how are you feeling?" Her eyes are bloodshot.

She smiles at me, and almost tips out of her chair. "I'm so good, so much fun," she slurs.

She can't seem to open her eyes all the way, and there's an odd slackness in her expression. "Are you sure?" I ask, biting my lower lip.

I feel a pop of electricity against my arm as Joseph steps neatly past me and puts an arm around Michaela, pulling her up from her chair. “Hey, why don’t we get you some water?” He asks brightly. Before I can take a breath to scold him, to stop him, he is already half-carrying Michaela in the direction of the bar, calling over his shoulder, “We’ll be back!”

“Let go of me!” she exclaims, leaning back away from him. Anger flashes through me at his high-handedness.

He stumbles, trying to keep her upright, and I take advantage of his imbalance to put my own arm around Michaela on the other side so that I’m the one supporting her now. It’s my job to take care of Michaela, not Joseph’s.

“Something wrong?” James asks, pushing himself up from the table and eyeing Joseph.

The challenging glare creeping into James’ face doesn’t bode well. “Nope. Everything’s fine,” I tell him. “I just need to talk to Michaela here for a minute.” I shoot a warning glare at Joseph.

“I want to sit down again, where’s James?” Michaela slurs.

I drag her off to the side and prop her against a wall. “Michaela, are you okay?” I ask her, bending forwards to try to look her in the eye, which is hard because she doesn’t seem able to hold her head up. “What about Eric? Are you sure you want to be doing this?”

“Yes!” she cries. “Yes, I’m sure.”

“You’re drunk. Think about it again. Do you want me to take you home?” I squeeze her arm. I want nothing more than to take her home. All of my older sister instincts are raging, but I’m not sure if I should listen to them. I don’t want to take away her choice, just make sure she doesn’t do anything too stupid.

“No. No, I don’t want to go home.” Michaela pushes my hand away sharply, and manages to get her chin level. “I know what I’m doing, okay? I know, I know Eric is going to be upset, I know that. But I need this right now, okay? I know you don’t need anything, or anyone, but I need James tonight, so just back the fuck off already!”

My cheeks flush. She’s drunk, but I never thought Michaela would talk to me like that. I’ve seen her lose her temper before, but it was always at people who deserved it and needed to be snapped at. All I was doing was trying to help her. When Joseph interrupts again, this time, I don’t argue. “Hey, let’s get you some water, okay?” he says again, his voice gentle and pulls her away from me and into the bar.

The chair next to James is empty, so I sink into it.

“Is she okay? Where did she go with that guy? Do you know him?” James drills me. He glares in the direction Joseph and Michaela went. “I don’t trust him.”

“Oh my god!” I shout. I’m so sick of this game and I’m so sick of Michaela’s bullshit and I’m so sick of all of it. I push through the crowd, sick of the way everyone is laughing and drinking, and sleeping around and it was supposed to be different here, but everyone is the same. Joseph is jealous of James and James is jealous of Joseph and guys are the same from every country, and girls are no better. I came here to escape from all of this shallowness, this limited mindset of what life could be like, and it followed me here and it seems like someone betrayed me at some point but I’m not sure who it was, I just know that everything was supposed to change, because that’s what travelling abroad is all about, and absolutely nothing has, and I’m still standing on the sidelines by myself.

There’s a curb by the street away from all the jealousy and stupidity, so that’s where I sit. There’s an Italian musician sitting down the curb a little, playing a guitar, completely alone, and

he looks content that way and I wish I could be content that way. Then a girl comes up to him, she's angry, her voice raised in Italian, scolding him, and he stand up and argues right back, they're glaring at one another, not backing down, and they're fighting and then suddenly, they're kissing, holding each other tightly, the guitar forgotten on the sidewalk. My arms feel empty, watching them. There's a pain in my chest, and I know that even though I want to wish for satisfaction in being alone, what I really want is the way that the musician and his girlfriend seem completely unaware of anyone else in the entire world, and nothing matters but each other. It's just that the alone thing is easier.

Again I feel that electric charge, and Joseph sits down next to me. My pulse speeds up automatically, and my hands are sweaty. I hate that my reaction to him is so sudden. I hate that I don't have a choice.

"Hey, so she's back over there with James, but if you want we can go get her. I'll carry her home," he says to me.

"It's none of your business," I snap at him, because now he's a part of the betrayal.

"Hey, okay." We sit there in silence, and suddenly the incident from that afternoon is right there with us, clearer than ever, and I can't get comfortable. The light's better here than inside, and now that I'm looking closely, his face looks bruised, his nose swollen. It wasn't like that this afternoon, and I'm wondering if he's hurt.

"I just wanted to ask..." I begin but then he leans towards me. For a split second, his face is close to mine and his eyes are right on mine, I can feel the intense fragility of my own skin, and how his slightest touch will crack me. The possibility is there, it's real. For a second.

"God, you're hot," Joseph tells me, his fingers trailing across my forearm, but his eyes are distant now, and I can't even feel that touch. "You've just got the most amazing eyes." He isn't

even looking at me when he says it. "You're like an angel," he says, but there's no heart in it. His finger slides down to my calf. "Wish there was somewhere we could go," he says.

The way his finger slides slickly against my skin, the way his eyes can't focus on me, and the way that even though he's coming on to me, he's sitting as far away as possible while still able to touch my leg with his finger, it's all fake. He just looks empty and I feel sick. I don't know what would happen if I said yes, let's go somewhere, let him press me up against a wall or something in some alley and let sex take over for actual intimacy. I don't know how that goes. All I have are books, movies, second-hand stories whispered in bathrooms, and my own imagination. I hope Michaela's not doing that now.

I can't be like them. I can't just let it all be on the surface so that nothing ever really touches me. Like Michaela, even though she has something real to go home to. Like Joseph, pretending he never cried on my shoulder about someone who died and all he wants is sex.

"Go to hell, Joseph," I tell him, and I walk away from him because it hurts and I really hate that a part of me wanted to say yes to him. Part of me wanted to try it, because anything is better than being alone. But the part that really sucks is that I'm not sure if I turned him down because I have integrity, or because I'm scared.

I sit at a table by myself and try to look like I want to be there, like I belong. There's a group of Italians standing nearby and they're laughing, and every one of them looks happier and braver than I am. But they have the same problems as Americans do. They do the same things, they have the same dramas. They fall in love, they make drunken mistakes late at night and they wake up the next morning. They tell their friends about their experiences, they go out and have more. They live. They aren't afraid to feel, aren't afraid to try, and I keep thinking about betrayal, my self-righteousness thick and sour on my tongue, safe and heavy and warm, but it

wasn't the Italians that betrayed me, it wasn't the American students who want to drink and sleep around, it wasn't Joseph and it wasn't Michaela. It was me. I was the one who betrayed myself and now I don't know how to go back.

And as the hopelessness and regret weighs heavy in my mind, cold against my skin, the world lights up in a flash of lightning, the sky cracks apart and the rain pours down, startling me out of my mind and back into the world.

Screams erupt, people run inside, but I stay under the umbrellas propped uselessly over the outdoor tables and watch the downpour. Several guys shout and run into it, dancing. And that's what I really envy, that in the midst of it all, they are brave enough to run out into the rain and not care. I can't quite join them yet. Then I see that Joseph is one of them. I can't help watching him, even though he disappointed me. I can see how he dances in circles, and how he dances harder than anyone, trying so hard.

All these people, laughing, dancing, chanting in the rain and the bar is crowded inside, before, everyone stood in the street, but now they all defy physics and the whole bar is breathing, moving, and the British guys are chanting together "Let's go fucking mental, let's go fucking mental fucking mental fucking mental" and jumping up and down, and they grab me so that I jump with them. There are people pressing in on me on all sides, hands gripping my arms, pulling me up until I fall back down, the floor jarring my feet every time I land. I don't understand how they all understand how to jump together, how to chant, how that agreement takes place without a common culture, sometimes without even a common language.

An Italian man grabs me and jumps with me, shouting something unintelligible at me, louder and louder until I shout back at him. He roars with laughter and lifts me off the ground, spinning me around.

When I land on my feet, I look around for Michaela but I don't see her anywhere. I keep telling myself she can take care of herself, but I don't really believe it. She's young, she's smart, but she's not smart about this. I can barely see, my view blocked by shoulders, necks, heads. I push my way through the bar all the way to the back but she's not in the bathrooms either. I have to dodge between people, into the miniscule gaps they leave, shouting "*scuzi*," into the air that smells of beer and sweat, and laughter. None of them seem to notice me pushing between them, they sway away from my body into other bodies, which sway again, and the whole room swirls around me, I just keeping moving because we might have turned into sharks and if I stop, I'll suffocate. When I finally make it to the door to breathe, it's still raining.

It takes a second for my eyes to adjust, but when they clear, I see Joseph. He's standing alone in the street, his hair is sticking to his forehead in the rain, and I can't see his eyes through the drops. I can't imagine what he's doing, out here alone in the rain with a face closed into fists but something pulls me closer to him, and the rain touches me.

Such fragility is hard to look at and I think maybe if I touch him he might close up, fold like petals and collapse beyond me so that I will never reach him again. But I fight through the rain and through the betrayal and the fear until I'm standing in front of him.

He tilts his head down towards mine, and the rain runs over his face, stroking his cheeks, his forehead, his lips.

"Have you seen Michaela? I can't find her," I ask him. As much as part of me wants to be the person who fills the emptiness I see in his cupped hands, she's the person I need to find right now.

"She's dead. My mom's dead. She got sick, and then she got sicker and then she died, and I couldn't save her, I couldn't make her better, she got sick and she died, I couldn't save her,

she's just gone.” Joseph stares right at me, his eyes on mine. “Alex, what am I going to do?” He bends forward then, and rests his head on my shoulder.

I stand there, his head heavy on my shoulder and the rain soft against my back, running over his face and mine, cradling us there together, holding us. I can't move, or I don't want to, and I'll find Michaela later. He's talking softly, and I listen to him tell me about his mom, about losing her, about loving her, these words are hard to hear, hard to bear, but they're true in a way nothing else he's said to me so far is. When he lifts his head and touches his lips against mine, it isn't hungry, it isn't full of lust or desire. It is simply that, his lips against my lips, for one split second of clarity, and then it's over. His face is still, wet, shining, serious. It looks like mine.

After the kiss my lips feel cold, but I'm not cold at all. It's very late, and the rain has slowed, so people are heading home now, walking out of the bar and into my intimate moment. Joseph seems suddenly charged with a strange kind of energy. He says something about his sweatshirt and charges back into the bar. I stand in the street, watching as people spill out of the bar into the shining streets, laughing, hands wrapped in hands, huddled together for warmth, everyone overlapping and blending into everyone else.

A group of older Italian women is standing off to the side, watching all of this as well. Their eyes longer on me as I wait. Then Joseph reappears, but his hands are empty.

“Joseph, it's time to go home, okay?” I say to him, because he's weaving slightly from drunkenness or exhaustion, and it really is late.

“*Bella notte!*” he shouts, spinning around ferociously. “*Ciao, bella, ciao,*” he adds to the group of women. They laugh at him.

“Go home,” one of them tells him cheerfully. “Take her home.”

“*Mi chiamo Giuseppe,*” Joseph introduces himself, going around and shaking their hands.

“La vita è buona,” he proclaims, spreading his arms wide. This seems to remind him of their emptiness. *“My sweatshirt,”* he cries, and charges back into the bar.

One of the women clicks her tongue, and, still smiling, crosses to where I'm shivering. She wraps her arms around me, saying something in rapid Italian that makes her friends laugh.

I just stand still, her arms around me, and I realize no one has hugged me since I left home. I haven't let anyone close enough. All this time, I was so busy deciding I was the one who was right, but when I walk through school no one knows my name, while Michaela and Joseph have shared stories, laughter, friendship.

This random Italian woman hugs me tighter, and her hand moves softly against my back, even though I'm soaking wet. She hugs me, and I lean into her. I wait for Joseph to come back out into the night. Tomorrow I'll find Michaela, I'll put my arms around her, and I'll listen to her tell me everything that happened, and I won't judge her. No matter how wet she is from the rain, I'll listen. The woman hums, her voice is right there, it's so close, she holds me and it feels like home.

Somewhere I Have Never Travelled: Joseph

It's as beautiful as my mom always said. It's also not. From the moment I got off the plane in Rome, I felt her standing next to me, seeing with me. When I noticed the graffiti, she noticed the artistry of the building it was smeared on. When I noticed the run-down, crumbling apartment buildings crammed full of poverty, she noticed the flowers spilling from every windowsill and tiny balcony. When my classes are boring, she reminds me that there's a whole country to explore outside the windows, and that what I learn is suddenly applicable to real life.

Back home, when I walk to my classes, there are always people that I know, people who look at me with their mouths twisted slightly to the sides, their eyes big and sad, their hands already stretched out. People who know me know this: my mom died this year from breast cancer, and since then, nothing has been the same.

I only went home once after it happened, for the funeral. It was better to stay at my house by campus. My dad and I aren't close. He works a lot, especially now. Going home was always something that reminded me of my mom. She was the one I told stories to. She was the one I could talk to about stuff. She was the one who smiled and dusted and cooked and made our house feel like it was somewhere I belonged.

Going to Italy was her dream, the place she wanted to visit more than anything. She and my dad had planned to go for their honeymoon, but he ended up getting a job he had to start right away after the wedding, so they had to cancel. When I told her there was a study abroad program I could get school credit for, she wouldn't stop until I promised I would go. She helped me pay for it. My dad thought it was ridiculous, extravagant and unnecessary and refused to help, but she kept sending me checks, and helping me find a cheap plane ticket, and looking up scholarships and stuff.

She would love this little town I'm staying in, where the streets are all curved and cobbled, and around every corner is a thousand-year-old church, or the ruins of an Etruscan temple that's over two thousand years old. I like to walk here, to see things and imagine her response to them. Sometimes I pretend I'm telling her stories.

"Hey, Mom," I say softly. I can feel her smile in response. Her eyes stay on the horizon, but she tilts her head towards me, listening.

"So I went to Rome last weekend," I say to her, "and I'm on this bus, okay? And I'm riding past all the slogans painted on the walls, just *Fcuk!* and *Fukc!* and *Fkuc!* smeared all over everything. I kind of like the graffiti, 'cause there's only so much picturesque beauty I can take before I really want to see a hobo."

She's shaking her head at that, but her eyes stay on the picturesque beauty in front of us.

I decide to push it further. "Like how we go to museums and they set all this cultural crap in front of us and label it so we know why it matters, but a lot of the time it's all just made up, and there's no truth in any of it."

At her funeral, there were all these pictures. All these pieces of her, sitting out on display. In the coffin, she had on this jewelry my dad gave her. Expensive, and she never wore it. Her dress was unfamiliarly formal. There were flowers in a vase he got out of some closet in our house. All this stuff that was supposed to add up to mean something, to mean her. People said how personal it all was. What a nice touch. But it's all bullshit.

"Like, yeah, you can show us the jewelry, and the mosaics and statues of gods and goddesses, but did who wore it, or gifted it, who commissioned it and why, and who really worshipped those statues and who just pretended to believe? There's no context for any of it. We just grab all this stuff and put it on display, but do we really understand it?" I'm a little

breathless. He picked her least favorite picture, this stiff formal thing he had taken for their anniversary one year, as the picture that sat in a frame next to the coffin while the preacher talked about ashes and dust.

“Human beings like to mess shit up,” I say loudly, trying to get a response out of her. She keeps staring out, she’s not smiling as much anymore, and her hands are holding on to the wall, like mine.

I wish I could reach out and touch her hand. Keep talking. “If you go into the cathedral in Siena, find the one little statue carved by Michelangelo, and if you look real close, the left foot of that little statue of some saint is worn away almost to a nub with how many people have touched it throughout history. Why do we always have to touch stuff? We can never let anything be.” I move my hand to the side, but hers remain out of reach. I touched the foot in the church too, but I don’t tell her that. Better to go on with the story.

“Anyway, I’m on this bus, right? And I’m sitting there, and there’s a guy next to me, big hairy guy, and we start talking. I like to practice my Italian on random strangers. And he starts telling me how he’s a graffiti artist, how he painted the *Fcuk!*’s on everything. He’s real proud of himself for it, too, and he’s excited when he finds out I’m American and he wants a new profanity to write on everything. He wants to paint the side of every bus he can find with a new phrase.”

I’m trying not to laugh now, and her smile is back, she knows the punch line is coming, she always understands my stories.

“I could make something up, something profound, have it written all over the bus systems of Rome. It would travel and everyone would read it and think about it, and we would all

become deeper people, and life would have more meaning..." I let my voice trail off for effect. Maybe she'll chime in with a possibility. Maybe she'll turn and look at me.

"So I tell him to write *Rome is a Hot Slut*. I write it down so he'll remember." I wait for her burst of laughter, but there's just that silent sideways smile. I'm laughing now, desperately, hoping she'll join in.

"He loves it," I gasp between spurts of frantic laughter, "invites me to stay with him. We are forever bonded, the Brotherhood of the Hot Slut is born." I laugh, and laugh, and the louder I laugh, the more it dawns on me that I'm laughing my head off, standing by the wall of a small Italian town, and I'm alone. I'm laughing here, all alone, and I think I might be insane.

The town is up on a hilltop, so all around the edges of it are walls, about waist-high and covered in lichen. Standing at the edge of town, holding the wall in my hands, looking out at the countryside, I just know this is something she would love. I can feel her here, in the late afternoon sunlight, how it would glint off her red hair, how her eyes would devour the careless patterns of vineyards and farms shading the green landscape.

I'm suddenly furious to be standing here all by myself, so I kick the wall hard. The blow jars up through my leg. I kick it again. My toes ache like a distraction. Lichen is growing over the speckled rock. I kick the wall again. It's black and white and gray with little speckles in it. My foot slams into the speckles. Ants run away, I imagine them getting thrown sideways by the vibrations I'm causing within the stone. Kick. It's got sparkly bits, the rock. Kick. Pretty. Kick. My foot really hurts now. Good. It's a sharp pain, a sudden one. A new one. A better one. I wonder if I could break my foot from all this kicking.

"Jeez, Joseph, what did that wall ever do to you?"

I almost jump over the wall. I was not expecting anyone else to come along during my crazy time. I turn around slowly. Shit. Even worse, the witness to my insanity is someone I actually recognize. Alex is one of the girls on the trip, quiet, doesn't seem to get out much. Pretty enough, slim with her long dark hair. Smart. Just not the most fun individual. I have class with her roommate.

“Hey, Alex.”

“You okay?” she asks.

I nod noncommittally.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.” If I start talking I might not stop. Better to just avoid the whole ordeal.

“God, it's beautiful here, isn't it?” she asks, leaning her hands on the wall and pushing down on her palms. I try to focus on how the movement pushes her tits together. Can't do it.

Can't forget about how much I miss my mom. How much I want her to be standing next to me. How much I hate being here and knowing she isn't here with me. Knowing she never got to see the things I see. All I can remember is how a year ago, she was right there. I was holding her hand. Then she was gone.

I can't fight it off. Can't keep the feelings away. It's too close to me, pain and fear heavy and snow-like on my arms. Didn't cry at the funeral. Didn't cry alone, either. Didn't cry when they put her in the ground and lowered her 'til she was gone. My dad cried everywhere, sobbed, loud and violent. Embarrassing. He was never around. He wasn't in the hospital with her when she was the sickest. He was never there. God, it hurts, it hurts too much, it's all too much and Alex's arms go around me and I can't keep it in anymore. Can't do it, I don't have the strength, my arms so heavy under the gently descending snow.

“She's dead,” I say, and it's the first time I've said those words to anyone. Everyone back home already knows.

Alex doesn't say anything. Her arms still around me. Can't look at her eyes. Can't see the pity in them, the pity and the sadness. Don't want her pity. I wanted to come here. Wanted to meet people I can be around without seeing that knowing glance, that look that takes away my grief and makes it something public, something shared. It's none of their goddamn business.

I'll pull away. I will. But when I try, I just can't support myself anymore. I'm the guy, the strong one. The one who holds other people when they cry. I don't show this kind of weakness, I don't show it. I don't, but right now, I need Alex, I need this girl I barely know, and her arms around me. Can't keep standing by myself. Can't stand at all. Alex staggers, trying to hold up my weight. Her unsteady breathing, she doesn't let go as we slide to the ground. As her body presses into mine, as her tears fall on my collarbone. The pressure of her hands against my back. Her eyes that aren't full of pity. My dad, sobbing on his knees in a nice suit, another public display, another giant bouquet of roses to make up for another forgotten birthday. I wouldn't cry, but somehow this girl and her arms wrapped around me, she pulled the tears out of me.

There's this old Italian couple walking past us now, and they're smiling and Alex is talking to them, and my mom will never be that old because my mom is dead. Then they're gone. She's gone. Enough.

Don't know how I get up, but I do. Alex's tears still in my shirt when I walk away from her. The fabric sticks to me, heavy, slows my steps. But I don't stop walking, don't look back. I just keep walking. I can't say anything to Alex. I can't even look at her. I don't know what to say.

I lose track of where I'm walking, I just keep moving. I'm going home, I think, home to the apartment where Maria, an older woman shaped like a square and her even more square daughter lives with their four cats, photograph collection and the occasional exchange student. They don't speak English. They can't ask questions.

Everything looks confusing. I think I'm lost. The walls are blank, no street signs, or anything. No familiar buildings. It's actually hard to get lost in this town. Don't know how I managed it. You can blame pretty much everything on grief, I guess. I'm still trying to orient myself when I notice three guys walking towards me down the narrow curving street.

As they draw closer and I recognize them, I grit my teeth. For the last few days, there's been a whole bunch of British soldiers camped out in the army barracks in the city. This year was the 150th annual anniversary of Italy's unification as a country, and the Italians were going all out. Last weekend, when we were in Rome, all of the Via dei Fori Imperiali, the big street that ran between the Colosseum and the Piazza Venezia and right through the ancient Roman Forum, was partitioned off for the big parade. Part of the parade apparently included a group of England's finest gentlemen in red and white with their big silly hats. Rome doesn't have room for them, so they're staying in our little town, just an hour away.

Some of the soldiers are fine, they're nice. Others, like the group walking towards me seem perfectly happy to grope American girls, but do not want to have anything to do with me or any of the other guys on our trip. So far, I've risen above the jibes. Haven't started any trouble. But my eyes are dry from crying. My foot is still sore. Hands fisted. Silently, I dare them to try to start something.

"Hello, mate," one of the soldiers greets me, bumping his shoulder into mine, hard. His eyes are little and mean, squinty like pig's eyes.

“You're that American guy, right?” another asks, caveman brow pulled low over his glower.

The third, whose broad shoulders belie his short frame, grins a mouth full of crooked teeth at me and says nothing.

I want to punch them. This isn't the first time they've harassed me or the other guys. The teachers are on edge because of all the fights. We've gotten email after email warning us to stay inside at night, avoid the soldiers, and not to cause any problems. I should just walk away, let it go, diffuse and get out. I should be mature. I shouldn't cause any more problems.

Man, do I want to cause problems.

Pig-Eyes bumps me again, the shock of it rippling through my body. It doesn't hurt, it just adds to the hot twisted pit in my stomach. My mom always says I kept things inside too much. I'm done with that.

I don't remember swinging, but suddenly, my fist crunches into Pig-Eyes' face. Then everything is fists and grunts and panting, and grabbing for something, anything, and yanking on it, Caveman is punching me in the stomach, Tombstone Teeth twists my arms behind my back and that's when something slams into my face and I'm lying with my face on stone, watching the blood trickle slowly through the cracks in between the cobblestones, red against gray flecked with browns and whites and silvers and pinks. Then the red swallows them up, and there's only blood.

I don't know how long I stay there, watching my blood drain away down the hill, dripping slowly into the spaces between cobblestones. It looks like a lot, but it can't be that much because I'm still conscious, only a little light-headed. It takes me a few tries, but somehow I get upright and manage to stagger the rest of the way home. I let myself in through the gate

quietly. The cats are strewn around the lawn, basking in the sun, Leonardo, Matteo, Giovanni, and Pikachu. Maria's five-year-old grandson named the last one. They didn't much care for me, but they adored Maria, following her around the house everywhere, purring loudly and winding through her legs for attention.

I go through the front door and carefully tiptoe to the washing room. The apartment is basically a long hallway with rooms off to the sides, a tiny kitchen only big enough for one, a living room where Maria's grandchildren grin from every wall, and the photograph of her dead husband Arturo occupies the location of honor on the mantel, Maria's room, the small neat chamber that I was allotted, two bathrooms and a laundry room at the very end. I move as quickly as I can, hoping Maria is busy with something and won't come looking for me right away.

I'm lucky, and no one calls out to me as I hurry down the hallway. Safe in the laundry room, I strip off my bloody shirt and turn the sink on. The water washes pinkly through the fabric. I cup some in my hand to wash the dried blood off my lips. I feel my nose gingerly, trying to figure out how bad the damage is, if it's broken or just thoroughly bruised. Bruised, I decide. I have a cut on my lip too, and my knuckles are a mess.

"Dio Mio!"

The exclamation catches me off guard, and I jump, my hand connecting to my sore nose. I swear and grip the sink hard, eyes watering as I turn to look at my host mother. The corners of her face are rounded with surprise and concern, her heavy brows pulled all the way up to her hairline.

"Giuseppe!" she exclaims, and she goes off into a rapid-fire slew of Italian, gesturing wildly at the bloody shirt, my bare torso and my face in turn, her face flickering between anger,

concern, confusion and fear. I stand and listen, and as I listen to her berate me, I shrink, getting smaller and smaller until Maria, at five foot three, seems taller than my six feet and four inches. The feeling is uncomfortable, too close to how my mom could make me feel when she looked at me a certain way, when I knew I'd done something wrong.

“*Boh!*” she cries finally, throwing her hands up and marching away. I stand there for a few more minutes, uncertain of what to do. Then, as I go back to trying to clean my shirt, she runs back in and snatches it away from me, scrubbing at it furiously.

“*Grazie mille,*” I say carefully.

“*Boh,*” she replies, though it is much softer and kinder than before, and her scrubbing slows a little. “You...down, bed,” she adds with difficulty and mimes sleeping with her hands pressed up together against her ear. Her English is even rougher than my Italian. Conversations between us look like a game of charades and involve heavy use of the thick English-Italian dictionary sitting in the living room.

I go to my room and lie on the bed, but I can't sleep like she wants. I watch the sun set through the small window, and the streetlights come on outside the house. Everyone will be at the bar soon, if not already. I should stay here, in the warmth and the safety, but I need to be out, too. Can't stay safe forever. I grab the sweatshirt my mom bought me at freshman orientation and I go.

Outside, the air is cool and orange-tinted. The moon slides in and out of the clouds, glowing ferociously down at me. The trees rattle in the wind. The streets are deserted and quiet, but I can hear a buzzing noise that gets louder as I reach the bar. They're drunk off their asses, I can hear it in the slurred speech, the loud shrieks of laughter punching into the night. The bar is called Bar Duomo because it's right down the street from the famous cathedral in the town

called, as every famous cathedral in every Italian town is called—the Duomo. Even though this one doesn't have a dome at all. It's still beautiful. Even if it is stripy. I like the stripes. They're just ugly enough to contrast with the beauty of the façade perfectly.

I should go home, I should recognize that going to the bar tonight is a bad idea. I don't. I go up to the propped-open door, and inside into the crowded darkened space that makes it hard to see and order a shot. The alcohol sears my throat as I swallow, travelling into my stomach, and it's twisting, writhing. There's an inner battle but any better judgment I possess loses, and then there's the warmth. Warmth to take away the coldness of tears and weakness and blood. Warmth so I don't need my sweatshirt, I pull it off, take another shot. Warmth, and another shot, and the axis of the world, already skewed by untimely death and grief, tilts a little more.

Through the tilting, I see Alex. She's with her roommate, Michaela. The crowd pulses, shifts, and a pathway opens up. I am pushed towards them until I'm right there and I have to think of something to say. I can't say anything to Alex, her face is too bright, so I make something up. Thank God it's dim in the crowded bar, so they probably can't see any damage on my face from earlier.

“Just remember, if any of these guys tries something, the code word is *bananas*,” I blurt and Michaela laughs, so I guess I did something right. I decide to run with it. “Fake boyfriend, just like *that*.” I'm babbling, I don't even know what I'm going on about, what the hell is coming out of my mouth right now. “Bananas.”

Alex is still standing too near, I'm not sure how to talk to her, how to look at her, all I can think about is that I cried in front of her, and she held me and it's the first legitimate comfort anyone has offered me all year. I don't know how to talk about any of that, I'm not sure I want to, so I avoid looking at her face. I can't help looking at her hands though, and I squeeze

Michaela's harder. "Remember, *bananas*." It's all I've got, and then they're moving away. They're walking, slipping away from me through the crowd, Alex's dark head and Michaela's lighter one and I'm alone. I can't stand being left with myself.

"Giuseppe!" a voice with an American accent calls out with belligerent friendliness.

"Cristoforo!" I shout back. This is what I need, guys to hang out with. Guys don't hug you, they don't pull you apart with the look on their face, with a touch. They're also more likely to beat the crap out of you.

Cristoforo's name is actually Christopher and he's the kind of Italian that comes from New Jersey, big attitude and bigger hair. The spikes rising from his head add an extra two or three inches to his height, easy. We clasp hands, pound backs, I try hard not to flinch as he hits a bruise I didn't know was there.

"My dear Lord Giuseppe, have your travels been fruitful as of late?" Chris asks loudly, clapping me on the back again and looking at me very seriously. This is normal behavior for him.

"Ah, Baron Cristoforo, I fear that my travels have been stunted and few," I answer, shaking my head theatrically.

"What you need, good sir, is a spectacular lay. Shall we choose a lass, eh?" Chris begins to scan the bar. "Ahh," he says, smiling as he nods towards the girl currently walking towards us.

Tatiana is in my writing class. Her thigh-length red dress matches her bright red lipstick, her hair is long and streaked with gold and she's smiling at me like she has been for a few weeks now. I wasn't going to do anything about it, I mean, I told myself coming over here that I wasn't

going to Italy to meet American girls. And it's a pretty tight group that came over here. Didn't want to start any drama.

"Hey guys," she says, brushing against my arm so that her tits touch me. It's got to be a deliberate move. She sees me look and rolls her shoulders back. Doesn't look away.

"Ana, hey, how's it going?" I ask. This is a bad idea, but I'm just drunk enough that I can feel a kind of logic in how having sex with this girl will make everything better.

"Oh, you know. There was this random guy hitting on me outside, so I'm trying to hide. You'll protect me if he comes in here, right?" She bats her eyelashes at me.

"Bananas," I answer.

We contemplate each other for a second, neither of us sure what to do. Then she steps closer, her hand sliding over my arm. "You want to get some air or something. It's kind of... crowded... in here," she says quietly, putting her lips up against my ear. She punctuates the statement by running her tongue around the edge of it. She's not subtle, but she's smooth.

I look at Chris over her head and he winks at me, bows his head and gestures out to me in generosity, one hand flung wide. She takes my hand, laces her fingers through mine, leads the way. All I have to do is follow her.

We're in an alleyway and her skin is warm, her lipstick sweetish and chalky, her mascara slightly smeared. She sways against me, her hand pushes against my stomach, fingernails pressing into me. My tongue in her mouth, my hands in her hair. The soreness of her face pressing against my nose. She's pushed up against the rough stone wall. I'm momentarily distracted by the contrast of her hair against that stone, brown and gold and red on gray. Did I push her there?

Her hands are under my waistband now, pulling the fabric tight, pinching me, fingernails scratching and reaching. I'm shaking because what guy backs away now, without even getting a feel. Then there's Alex's hands on my back, her body fitted against mine. The way her tears fell on my skin, the way her hair was smooth without being tangled against the stone, and the smoothness of her eyes. The way she held me, and I felt something solid I haven't felt since my mom closed her eyes in the hospital room and disappeared. I look at Tatiana's eyes. They're closed. Her eyelashes stand out like spikes. My mom's eyelashes were soft. They were blonde, almost invisible. I could see her freckles underneath them.

Tatiana reaches for me. I hold her wrists, the bones sharp. I push them away. They're too sharp, they stab into me. Her wrists and her eyelashes, and her ribs, stabbing into me, pushing too hard and asking for too much. I shove her away, she cries out, shouts, falls, and then I'm stumbling out of the alleyway. I'm out, I'm away, there's the bar, and the tables outside the bar. Tatiana's gone. Didn't follow me. Don't blame her.

There's Michaela, sitting at one of the tables, flushed and giggling, her face bent close to another one of those English guys, one I haven't seen before, her eyes too shiny and Alex is there too. Alex is standing nearby, not quite part of the group, watching Michaela. Her worried face stabs into me more gently and deeply than Tatiana's fingernails. How many times will I bleed tonight?

I aim towards Alex, speak in her ear. "Is she okay? Maybe we should take her home." I try not to look too eager for that plan.

"I don't know," she says. She's biting her lip, she's frowning. I have the strangest desire to stroke her eyebrow.

“Who’s that guy she's with? Does he know she has a boyfriend?” I ask. I look at Michaela, I see her leaning towards this soldier. Suddenly I'm furious. Furious that Michaela can make promises that she doesn't keep. Furious that she has someone waiting for her at home, but she's not waiting here, not waiting now. And I hate the soldier who's smirking into her face, sure he's going to score tonight. Michaela sways gently in the chair pushed up close to the soldier. I recognize that smug calm smile on his face. I'm thinking I don't trust him. I can't tell if I say that part out loud.

All I know is I want to get Michaela out of there. When I go to grab her, Alex pulls me back. Stops me from dragging Michaela out of her chair by force. She goes over to her roommate, bends over her, and I can't take it. The smirk on the soldier's face, his eyes sliding over Alex too, resting on her cleavage. I run over and grab hold of Michaela. Take her out of there. Before I can get too far with her, Alex is there, her hands touch mine for an instant, and I lose my grip on Michaela. It's too much, when Alex touches me. Whatever happened when she held me by the wall, when I cried and she cried with me, it makes everything different with her. I don't understand. My skin is tingling. I don't fight when Alex pulls Michaela away and takes her to the side, talking intently to her.

The random soldier and I eye one another. He's sitting and I'm standing, so I tower over him. Then again, I'm taller than most guys. I cross my arms and stare him down.

I'm halfway to considering starting another fight, sore face or no, when I hear Michaela snap at Alex, sharper than I've ever heard her yell, and I see Alex's face. She's hurt. I run over, grab Michaela again and pull her between the tables and into the bar, relying more on momentum than balance to keep the two of us upright. I say something about getting Michaela

water, but mostly do it so I won't have to look at Alex's face and see her pain and figure out what that means to me. What she means to me.

There are chairs in the back and a couple of them aren't taken. I set Michaela down and grab waters for both of us. Her eyes are unfocused and she's swaying in her red and black armchair.

"How much have you had to drink tonight, anyway?" I ask her.

"This many," she slurs, showing me her hand. I can't tell how many fingers she's holding up because they're all sort of curled over drunkenly. There was a phrase my mom came up with to describe the level of inebriation Michaela was currently experiencing, "drunk to their toenails," she called it, when the alcohol had taken away any semblance of motor control, and extremities kept misbehaving. She loved it, always pulled it out when I told her about my friends at school, and all the parties everyone was always going to. I can hear the funny way she would say it, how she would always laugh.

"Michaela, what are you doing? Don't you have a boyfriend? Why are you hitting on that guy, letting him touch you?" I ask her.

"Not about him," she mutters. "This... for me. Something for me. Something for me without him. Why not? Back off." She swings her arms pathetically towards me. "I'm going back," she adds, trying to stand up. I don't help her, but apparently determination wins over ability, because she manages to get upright and maneuver towards the door. I drain the rest of the water bottle I'm carrying. The coolness of the water shoots into me. I can see straight for the first time all night. I follow Michaela outside. She's back on top of Whatshisface, but I don't care anymore. Alex is sitting on the curb, her arms wrapped around her knees. Her slumped shoulders are heartbreaking. This is it. I have to do something. Make a choice.

I sit down next to her. Tell her where Michaela is. Offer to take her home again, but Alex seems angry for some reason, so I stop talking and we sit there. I can feel the words on my tongue. Words about my mom. Words I maybe can't say to anyone else, but I can't get them out. It won't happen. I can see the disappointment on my mother's face, how she looked at me when I let her down. I look away and lean in close to Alex.

Can't keep obsessing, got to get over this somehow. I touch her. It's not about needing her. It's not about connecting. It's not about her truth and her eyes and her freckled knees. It's about getting what I want and getting away. I say the lines, the one I've said before, late at night, in bars, to girls as drunk as I am. Girls who could be sold on the idea of a few hours of physical contact, girls who were gone long before morning. Girls I would forget about by the next weekend. I would forget. I lean in, and she's gone. She throws my pathetic offer back in my face, and when she tells me to go to hell, the anger in her voice cuts through the lies. She's gone.

Here's what I forgot. Alex isn't cheap. She can't be bought for any of that, and maybe I'm not enough for her. I sit on the curb for a moment longer, I look at the spaces between cobblestones, the spaces between people, the spaces between clouds hiding spaces between stars. Then I stand up.

Chris is inside with a bunch of other guys, and they're doing shots. I join the circle. They clap me on the shoulder, pass me a glass. I throw it back. This is for you, Mom. Another. This is for how you always knew what to say. Another, for all times you didn't judge me and listened to my stories with a sense of humor. Another for giving me my space, letting me find myself, making me eat my vegetables. The guys are singing drinking songs too loudly, and the bartender yells to keep it down.

We crash into the street, Chris passes me another and we clink glasses together, throw our heads back, let it burn. Put the glasses down on one of the tables, look up at the clouds. Dark. Orange streetlights. Maybe I can blame the blurriness of things lately on bad lighting, and not just being drunk to my own toenails.

The sky crashes open in a burst of lightning, and then it's raining. The rain is everywhere, washing it all clean, washing the streets and the stars and the spaces.

Rain, rain pounding down, beating on my head, and the shot burns less this time when I take it, and I can feel the rain. When two other guys run out into it, I follow them, because, hey, why not? Pull my shirt off because I don't want to feel anything and I want to feel everything. I can feel the water against my skin. Feel the burn of the alcohol. Then I'm dancing in the rain, singing and chanting like a crazy person, because maybe I am.

Can't believe I came on to Alex like that, but thought maybe sleeping with her would make it all easy again, make it all make sense.

My mom would have loved this, she would have danced even more ridiculously than I am, dancing in the rain. She would have laughed like I laugh, and she would have spun like I spin, she would have held her arms out wide and left herself open to life, and the pulse of the chanting in the bar goes through me like a heartbeat but her heart doesn't beat anymore.

So I'm outside now and it's raining hard and even dancing can't keep me warm. In the rain and the dark she's here. Her eyes are on me, looking right into me. I can't get away from them.

This is what I wanted, I wanted her eyes, I wanted her to look at me. I never stopped to think about what would happen if she didn't like what she saw. I can't breathe and I don't know

if it's guilt or anger or because it's cold and the raindrops keep running down my throat and making it hard to breathe.

Hard to breathe and Alex is standing in front of me, the smooth rain in her smooth hair. She's looking up at me, and I don't deserve this for a second. After tonight I don't. But she's here. She's right here in the rain and the feeling of falling, and my mother's eyes. I can't hear her anymore. I can't hear my mom. I can feel all of it rising up again. Spilling into the girl in front of me, into the shining puddles at her feet.

I can't stop now, and I don't want to. I can hear the laughing and cheering inside the bar, and the thunder is still stomping around overhead, but all that matters is how Alex is breathing and how she has the power to open or close me with the smallest gesture, the slightest will, and how the rain has such small hands, touching my skin everywhere, but hers are smaller. They go deeper, reach places the rain can't.

She looks at me, and I tell her. I tell her about my mom. I tell her about the woman who raised me and took care of me. I tell her about the diagnosis. How my mom kept her head up. How I held it up for her as she threw up from the chemo. Her soft hair slipping through my fingers. How she got thinner and thinner and her skin turned into paper, and her veins turned green through her skin. How she kept smiling, kept joking, how there was nothing I could do to protect her. Nothing I could do to save her. How her hand felt like sticks covered with tissue paper, an awful rendition of the art projects I used to make in kindergarten. How I held her hand when she died. No one looks at me the same anymore. Everything is different. Sometimes I pretend she's here next to me. Miss her. Need her. Why couldn't I save her?

Alex listens to me with a face as calm as snow, eyes deeper than the hidden center of a rose and when I kiss her it's not because I want her, or because I'm trying to get her. It's the only thing to do. If I don't, I might never stop talking.

It's just a moment, just a touch of her lips against mine, but it brings me back to myself. Her lips are smooth. They're real. They're true. I straighten back up. I don't know what to say, Alex is just standing there, her eyelashes flattened against her cheeks. She keeps them closed. I don't deserve her patience. To give myself time to think of what I want to do next, I remember the sweatshirt my mother gave me, the one I was wearing earlier that evening, and I have to go find it. Then I'll know what to say to Alex. I'll know what to do. But I need my mom's help.

I run into the bar, it's emptier than before, the bartenders are starting to clean up the mess. Deep breaths. Gotta be brave. I can do this, say something meaningful, something that will make her realize... something. Make her realize I'm not just some jerk taking advantage of her. Back outside, Alex is standing by a group of Italian women. I have this incredible feeling of well-being. I run around, greet them in Italian. Let Alex see how I learned the language, how I take interest in the culture. I'm not just some guy here to get laid. I'm drunk, but I'm a fun drunk, a nice drunk. Overcome with a weird kind of joy, I shout, "*La vita è buona!*" and throw out my arms so I don't overbalance and fall. The cold night air against my still-damp skin reminds me that I really do want to find my sweatshirt, so I hurry inside the bar one more time.

This time, I notice Chris, slumped over a table by the window and our friend Leah, trying to get him upright. Her face is pinched and sad. I don't want anyone to be sad tonight.

"You okay?" I ask her.

She shakes her head. "He's too heavy for me. Joseph, can you help me get him home, please?"

I hesitate, but she looks exhausted, and Cristoforo is a big guy, so I agree. Hopefully I'm sober enough to support him. I look around the bar for my sweatshirt, but I can't find it. The bartenders agree to keep it for me if they find it. I go back to where Leah and Chris are and slide my arm under Chris's, holding him upright. It feels familiar, the weight of him draped across my shoulders, the support, the caretaking. Better than alcohol.

Outside, Alex is waiting still, shivering and wet, her hair falling in long dark strings. Leah is steering me away from her, and Chris isn't helping. I want to explain to Alex in person, but I can't maneuver Chris very easily. Alex sees me, and steps away from the Italian woman who was hugging her for some reason. She looks at Chris and at Leah, she sees me supporting Chris's weight. She nods at me, turns and walks away towards her apartment.

I watch her small form, walking out of the light of the streetlamps into the shadows, into the looming shape of the domeless cathedral. I turn. I walk away. I don't deserve her.

"Dude, you got laid tonight, right? You got laid, I know you did," Chris is talking in that loose drunken way of a guy who's done for the night. "Leah, you're so pretty, you're so nice, you're both so *nice*." He laughs, too long and high-pitched.

Leah rolls her eyes at me over his head. I just smile, because for the first time since my mom died, I feel like I'm doing something good, something that would make her proud. She always told me I was a caretaker, a protector, and now I'm doing it.

We take Chris to Leah's apartment, lay him on her couch. Her roommates are sleeping, their doors all shut and dark.

"Thank you so much, Joseph, I don't know what I would have done without you," she whispers, stepping close to me in the dark. She stands on tiptoes, one hand on the back of my neck, her lips touch mine, harsh, chapped. She presses herself there, hard. I can feel her need,

but I don't have any reassurance left in me. I'm not going to give myself away so easily this time.

I kiss her gently, goodbye. She bites her lip, nods. She knows a brush-off. Then I walk away. I go out into the dark street. Leave her standing there. I'm tired of leaving people behind. Being left.

At night, if you stay up late enough, the town shuts all the lights off and everything is dark, the stars jump into focus, and the moon can't stop shining. It reflects off the wet stones, the streets are shining fiercely silver, moonlight reflecting off of water over stone. The trees sparkle. I stop in front of the cathedral, the intricate carvings and mosaics that shine bright gold and colors in the sunlight, but at night it has a darker beauty. My mom loved the old gothic cathedrals. She wasn't religious, exactly, she liked the idea of them, she liked the thought of light, and of reaching, the church spires that reached up into the starry night sky for comfort and protection. Standing there, staring at the old church, I see a space on the side where the darkness is even deeper. A gap between stone door and stone wall. Someone left the door open.

The steps up to the church are slippery and wet, marked with diamond patterns around the edges. When I get to the door, I push it open, carefully. Go inside. Every step I make echoes into whispers all around me. I walk slowly into the middle of the cathedral, where the moonlight shines through the big rose window and falls in a fragmented circle on the floor. I stand in the middle, feeling the openness of the space around me, seeing the shadows around every stone. The moonlight glances off of something shiny. A pamphlet, one of those tourist things with "Top Ten Facts About This Historical Site!" or "Architectural Wonders of the Medieval World!" printed on it. I'm lucky. I have a pen in my pocket. There're only a few pews

for such a big church, all crowded up towards the altar. I sit on one, wood so smooth the grain's been rubbed out.

I turn the pamphlet over. Balance it against the pew in front of me. Press pen to shiny paper, form letters carefully. It's not long, the letter. Dear Mom. I write without thought. Let my hand move through the sadness and the anger and the grief. Through all of it. Till I run out of space. I write the last words. Then I stop. Love, Joseph.

There's a prayer box in the chapel, to the side, and I push the pamphlet through the little slot there, hold it with the very tips of my fingers until the last second. It makes a soft sound when it lands, rustling against other people's prayers.

I walk back out through the shadowy cathedral. I walk home through the silvery streets. I go in through the front gate. I'm walking through the garden. All I want to do is sleep. There's a sense of homecoming. I see the front door, the sheer familiarity of it. The knowledge that I will sleep, and tomorrow I will wake to the sound of a woman cooking in the kitchen, to life and flowers on the back stoop, and too many cats in the garden.

I hear a cat's meow and Giovanni rubs up against my legs. I stare down him, and he stares back, his eyes lost behind a sheen of moonlight. He rubs me one more time, gives me a little cat nod, and proceeds on his regal way. Halfway across the garden, he crouches, wiggles his behind, leaps for a mouse and misses.

I go inside. I'm about to walk past the living room to my bedroom when I hear something, a breath maybe. An inhalation in a still space.

Maria is sitting in her living room, in the dark. Her hands are all I can see, lit by the moonlight coming through the window, silver shining, and they're slim and graceful, small hands at odds with her solid form. They're holding something that shines brightly, glass over a picture.

I hesitate in the doorway, but she's bent over the picture, her eyes are closed, and her fingers are tracing the glass like she can feel him there underneath, slowly tracing across his face. Smooth circles on quiet glass.

Somewhere I Have Never Travelled: Michaela

The girl in the mirror has squinty eyes. Her lips are pushed way out into a pout so extreme it's more like a fish's face than a model's. She pulls them way back and growls, teeth glinting in the faintly yellow tinged light of the tiny lamps on the tiny tables next to the tiny beds in the tiny apartment in Italy. The girl's face widens into a smile at the thought of being in Italy. Her eyes widen to their normal shape, and for a second she looks really pretty. Then she just looks like me. Sometimes I don't even feel like myself.

I shove open the closet and sort through the clothes there. Backpacking through Europe sounded so glamorous when Alex and I decided that we wanted to study abroad in Italy over the summer. Pack everything in a backpack, take less, we wouldn't have to worry about giant suitcases or anything. I'm trying to be comforted by that thought, but my closet is too empty and bare. I really really wish I'd brought more dresses or something.

Alex doesn't seem to mind, but then again, she doesn't worry about clothes as much as I do. She's pretty happy in jeans and a t-shirt most of the time, but I like dressing up, feeling pretty. I love how you can wear a certain color, a particular style, and suddenly almost everything about you has changed.

But tonight, I want to be different. I want to be braver, prettier, louder, more sure of myself. I need something special, and I just don't know how that's going to happen with such a limited selection. I puff out my cheeks at myself. Great. Now I look twelve. And fat.

It's not like tonight is super important or anything. But I did meet this guy at the bar the other night. He's a soldier in the British army, and he's from South Africa, and he speaks three different languages. He's so cute. Which makes me feel a little guilty, because, well, there is Eric. My boyfriend from back home would probably not like it if he knew I was flirting with

some random guy I met in a foreign country. But hey, it's studying abroad. I mean, you're supposed to fall in love, or at least get kissed once or twice. That's what happens in every movie I've ever seen about studying abroad, and read about in every book.

I love Eric. I do. He's sweet and gentle and he loves me a lot and he would do anything for me. I know that. But James is just so hot. And he's from South Africa and I think he really likes me, he's not just trying to get into my pants. Not that I would ever let him. Because I do love Eric. I do. I pull the elastic out of my hair. It's better down, I think. I know boys like it that way better. Or anyway, that's what all the magazines say. Curly? I wish my hair was longer. I don't know what possessed me to cut it off so that it barely brushes my shoulders on a good day.

I know that Alex disapproves of James. She would never say anything, but I saw her face when I told her about meeting James last night, how she had to force a smile and pretend to be excited for me. She thinks I'm just like all the other girls, getting drunk and sleeping with anyone. But I'm not a slut. And I'm not mean. I just like how it feels when he looks at me. Besides, this is Italy, land of sexy men and sexy languages and passion and love and sex. Not that I'm going to have sex with anyone. I'm not a slut.

Is it so wrong to want to be a part of the stereotype for once? I may never look like one of the girls in movies that go abroad and meets the love of her life, but I can at least have kisses and flirtation from a cute foreign guy. Not that I've kissed him. Yet. Not that I'm going to.

Italy was my somewhere never travelled, the place I wanted to go more than any other. And I want to go beyond just visiting the country, I want to experience the romance of it. Especially with a cute guy with an accent who rubs his thumb around my knee, and looks deeply

and soulfully into my eyes and makes my stomach go all squirmy. And when I get home, I'll still have Eric. I don't see anything wrong with that.

Alex may not need people to look at her to feel like she matters, but I want this. Just for once, I want to be one of those girls and not be watching them and wishing. Alex will understand. I wish I brought more clothes.

#

I was leaving for Italy in only a few weeks, and I could already tell that packing was going to be a pain.

"Babe, do you have to go?" Eric asked me from where he was sitting on the floor of my bedroom.

"Well I already paid for the plane ticket, so... yeah. Think I have to," I told him, smiling.

Eric and I met at orientation my freshman year of college. Did I expect to wind up with a boyfriend and a relationship right away without ever really meeting anyone else? No. Did I regret not getting to do the whole dating thing like my friends did... no. Not really. Not most of the time.

Plus he was adorable. And fun. He was everything I could want. And as I was packing, he was sitting over there on my floor, playing with this little plastic dinosaur I'd had on my dresser, his brown hair falling in his face, trying to pretend like he wasn't that disappointed.

I went over and knelt next to him. For a second, I felt like a mother, bargaining with her child, kneeling next to the child playing with toys to cheer him up.

Eric tipped the dinosaur from side to side. I pressed my lips to his cheek and he looked at me in a way that was not in the least childlike. He kissed me, sliding his hand around behind my neck and pulling me close into him. There was a warmth there, not heat exactly, but something

solid. I felt solid when Eric touched me. For a second, I wasn't sure I wanted to go after all. Then I saw the poster of Italy posted on my wall, and I felt something stronger than that warmth rising in me. I wanted to go, I wanted to have adventures and do amazing things. For just a second, his hands were heavy on me, instead of reassuring.

#

“What do you think of my outfit?” I ask as Alex, my roommate, and one of my best friends since I met her, walks through the door. I really admire Alex for being so smart and caring so much about school, even if she does hardly ever go to parties or have fun with other people. And she's kind of anal-retentive about dishes.

She's been out walking all afternoon while I got ready for going out tonight. She does that a lot, walks through town by herself. So yeah, she's a little weird. I wait for her to comment on my outfit. I'm proud of myself. I've managed to turn one of my long skirts and a belt into a decent dress and I got my hair all awesome and curly. James is going to go crazy. I love it when I dress up and I feel like all my efforts paid off. Maybe it's shallow, but it makes me happy.

“You look pretty,” Alex answers. She sounds kind of funny, but when I turn around to look at her, she's already in the bathroom, blowing her nose and splashing water on her face.

“So are you coming out with me tonight?” I ask eagerly. Alex hardly ever gets out, and she's so pretty. But then again, she doesn't have a British soldier from South Africa texting her and trying to kiss her all the time. I think I'm going to let him kiss me tonight. I know, Eric would be upset, but I really want to. Anyway, he knows I kiss everybody when I get drunk.

“Yeah, I think so,” Alex answers, coming into the bedroom and pulling her shirt off so that she's just wearing a bra and jeans. I kind of hate her for being able to do that without feeling

self-conscious. I hate having people look at me with my shirt off, like at pool parties and stuff. I don't even let Eric see me like that.

Alex grabs another shirt and puts on some makeup while I read *Anna Karenina*. My goal this summer, along with finding my own personal love story, is to read as many classics as I can. Love in Russian novels is always so sad. Alex leans into the mirror to put on eyeliner, and suddenly her light brown eyes are bigger and darker. I look down at the page, but I can't concentrate on Levin visiting the peasants at a time like this. I notice chips in the polish on my toes. Maybe I still have time to fix them. It's probably not important, but I was feeling so good about my hair and my outfit, and now those tiny little chips are going to ruin everything. I'm about to get up and find my nail polish when Alex comes into the living room, her shirt flattering her curves, and her mascara making her eyelashes way longer than usual.

It takes me an hour to get ready, and all Alex does is change her shirt, put on a skirt, swipe on eyeliner and a little mascara and she suddenly look amazing. It's completely unfair.

We head out of the apartment. The streetlights are that funny orange color that makes everyone look terrible. Alex is being awfully quiet. I would ask her what's wrong, but she usually tells me when she's ready. I decide to wait. Besides, we'll be at the bar soon. Instead I talk about my plans for the weekend. Some girls and I want to go to Florence, go shopping, walk around, go to some of the museums, and we're trying to find a place to stay right now. One of the girls is being stubborn about that, but I'm on a budget, and so are a lot of us, so we're trying to talk her down to a cheaper hotel. This girl is ridiculous, and when I tell Alex about how she was being stubborn and I shot her down and everybody thanked me afterwards, she can't help but smile. I feel good about cheering her up.

We come around a corner and we're there. A bunch of tables with umbrellas over them are grouped around the outside of the bar. A bunch of people are already sitting or standing around them, and a whole crowd is blocking the street in front of the door. I do a quick scan, but I don't find James right away. I watch the tables outside from the corner of my eye as Alex and I work our way inside. Let him come to me if he wants. Besides, I don't want to look desperate. There are some girls from our class standing at the bar so I go over and say hi to them, hug them, make excited conversation. They're already drinking. My hands feel empty, so I move away again quickly. At parties, alcohol makes everyone my best friend. With a cup in my hand, laughing, talking, I feel at home. I look enough like everyone to fit in and different enough to stand out. I definitely need a drink.

It's mostly British and Americans in the bar right now. Italians eat dinner late and go out later. I'm a little sad I didn't manage to meet a hot Italian with a Vespa, but I guess I can live with a British soldier. Hot Italians are apparently harder to find than advertized. Mostly they seem to be short and hairy and old. It's disappointing.

James is sitting at our table outside. The same table we've sat at for the last two nights, flirting and talking, his hand drifting near my knee, his eyes lingering on me. I like the way it feels.

As Alex and I fight towards a clear spot at the bar, I spot Joseph, easily the tallest guy in the bar, so I go up to him. He's so nice, always making sure all the girls get home safe. He always walks me home when I ask him to.

I shout a greeting over the noise of the bar and he lifts me off my feet in response, making me laugh. He's already pretty drunk. He doesn't hug Alex. They aren't as good of friends, though. Joseph and I have class together and we always sit together and whisper in the

back. He's funny and good looking. So many girls on this trip are in love with him. It's funny. He told me he isn't into any of them. He's not here to sleep with Americans. That's what he said.

"Just remember, if any of these guys tries something, the code word is *bananas*," Joseph leans in close to tell us this. He grabs my hand and laces his fingers through mine. "Fake boyfriend, just like *that*," he says. "Bananas."

I laugh and squeeze his hand before letting go. "Thanks, but I think I'll be fine," I tell him. It's so like him to be protective like this. But I don't need any protection tonight. Alex is smiling too, but when she forgets to smile she looks worried. I elbow her and whisper at her to relax.

"Remember, *bananas*," he insists as I pull Alex away to the bar so I can finally get my drink.

"Joseph's so funny, isn't he?" I ask Alex. It's a good thing I do have a boyfriend, because he's cute, and really nice, and I'd be tempted. "He's so brave. He decided to go to Rome last weekend, no place to stay or anything. He said he slept in an abandoned building one night, and with this girl he met the next night. I guess he ran into her at a pub or something, and they were talking, and she let him crash at her apartment." I wink at Alex. "Bet she didn't make him sleep on the floor," I add, hip-bumping her. Alex needs me to loosen her up sometimes. "She was German, I think. I told him he should run a survey, find out which nationality it the best kissers." The bartender looks at me. I shout my order at him and glance at Alex. She shakes her head no. She doesn't drink very much. I think she'd be more comfortable with one, but hey, it's her life.

More and more people are trickling in. It's the last night the soldiers will be here, and almost everyone from our class is here. The Italians are starting to arrive. They're older, and they mostly stand together, drinking and talking loudly. The women all wear tall stiletto heels and have long dark hair to swish around, and the men wear v-necked shirts, showing off their chest hair, and tie sweaters around their shoulders. If we were back in the States, I would think they were gay, but here it's just the style.

I love the noise, the energy of this place and the people who live here. They're so unadulterated. And I love how they call everyone *bella*. They keep kissing one another on both cheeks. The women balance on the uneven ground in their heels, and one of the men whips his sweater off and wraps it around a woman a full head taller than him, pulling her down for a kiss, which she gives, loudly and laughing.

I sip my drink, which seems to be about four parts vodka to one part sprite, and cough. The Italian bartenders don't seem to understand the concept of mixed drinks. Oh well. I shrug, and swallow the burn of the alcohol. It's time to approach James' table.

He lights up when he sees me. The chairs are all taken, and almost all the other soldiers have a girl in their laps. I stand next to him, which I really don't mind. His friend Tim joins us, teases James about not making sure the pretty girl has a seat, but before James can stand up, Tim grabs me and sets me in James' lap, sending tingles across my skin. I hesitate for a moment, trying to decide if this is pushing the boundaries too far. I don't actually want to betray Eric, I just want to have some fun. But James smiles embarrassedly at me, and he's so cute, and I love how even though he's embarrassed, he looks hopeful too, so I take another drink of vodka and shrug back at him. What can it hurt?

Eric and I were at a party and we were still having a fight. When my friend Louis suggested a going-away party, I thought it would be a great idea. But it had turned into this thing where his roommates invited people and then it got crowded and I was having trouble fighting my way down the hallway to Louis's room, where my purse was, and more importantly, my lipstick.

Louis's house had uneven tiles that made it hard to walk down his hall in my heels, and the walls were wavering somewhat. I was drunk.

Eric was probably off sulking somewhere. I didn't even know what we were fighting about at this point. It started because he didn't go to a job interview for a summer job earlier in the week because he wanted to spend time with me. How someone could be so shortsighted was beyond me. And when I asked him flat out what he wanted to do with his life, he looked right at me and said, "Be with you." And I had nothing at all to say to that because it's really really sweet, but how on earth is that a valid life plan? Short-term fun is one thing, but you can't plan a life around nothing but a person. Apparently I had a lot of other things to say, though, and soon we were fighting, and then we were yelling, and I lost track of what was going on.

We had sort of made up in time for the party, but as soon as we got there, he grabbed a beer and disappeared, leaving me on my own. Luckily, Alex was standing in a corner talking to a couple of other girls. They were all pretty sober, and Alex is the person I tell everything to, especially about Eric, so she knew enough about the fight to make a sympathetic face at me, pour me a drink, and get the other girls talking about cute actors as a distraction while I poured my first drink.

"Everything okay?" she whispered as two of the girls debated heatedly over which of their favorite actors was the most attractive.

I shrugged. Alex was like an older sister to me. Even though she's a full year older than me, she's really been there for me since I sat down next to her in a poetry class we had together first semester freshman year. Moving away from home was really rough, and it was great to have someone who watched out for me, someone I could count on and never had to take care of.

She looked alarmed suddenly, her eyes shifting to somewhere over my shoulder, and when I turned around, there was Eric, clearly drunk. He grabbed my hand and pulled me towards the door to the backyard. I tried smile reassuringly at Alex as Eric yanked the door open and pulled me outside. The cool night air hit my skin with a shock, sending goose bumps rippling down my arms. I hugged myself. Normally, this would have prompted Eric to put an arm around me, or give me his jacket or something. Instead, he wheeled around to face me, waving his hands in my direction.

“Why are you going away?” he slurred. “You have to promise you're not going to forget me, and fuck some random Italian guy, you gotta promise me, Mickey.” His eyes were bloodshot, and he was having a hard time keeping them open and focused on me.

“Are you serious!” I exploded. “I'm going on this trip because I want to travel and see the world and experience some culture, not because I want to sleep with someone else, okay? God, you are so immature!” I couldn't even recognize the sweet, smart guy I fell in love with.

“I'm sorry,” he whimpered. He was already at the weepy and pathetic stage of drunkenness, and we'd only been at the party for a couple of hours. “I'm sorry, Mickey, I love you.” He wrapped his arms around me so tightly it made it hard to breathe and I shoved him off of me, because a hug is the last thing I wanted from Eric right then.

“I...I...” I sputtered, trying to think of something I could say that would punch through his drunkenness. “I can't believe you don't trust me!” Pathetic. Pathetic and cliché. I can't

believe that's the best comeback I can come up with. I turned away and yanked open the sliding glass door leading from the living room to the backyard and then slammed it behind me without looking to see if Eric was following me. Luckily, the party was way too loud inside for anyone to notice.

I scanned the room for someone, anyone, I knew. I spotted a couple girls who lived in my dorm my freshman year and went over to them. They had tequila, and they shared. I wasn't a huge drinker, I wasn't even twenty-one yet, but that night I wanted to drink until I couldn't feel anything anymore.

So that's how I ended up stumbling down the uneven tiles in the dark hallway until I found the doorknob to Louis' room, and I got the light switch on, which took more than a few tries. My purse was on his bed, and I opened it and dug through, trying to find my lipstick.

The door was pushed further open, and Louis came in, twisting his hands together a lot. "Hey, um, Michaela?" he said. Louis was a hesitator, one of those people who couldn't make it through a sentence without saying "um" at least once. Two or three times if it's a long sentence.

"Hey, Louis, I'm fine, don't worry about me," I said quickly, thinking he followed me because he knew Eric and I are fighting. He was sweet like that.

"No.... it's just...well, you're going away and, um," he stuttered.

"What?" I shouted. I was too drunk to be polite about it.

Even as it happened, even as he stepped forward, as he put his hand on my waist, another on my shoulder, as he leaned in closer, as his lips touched mine, wetly, awkwardly, I couldn't believe it was happening.

"Louis," I gasped, stumbling back.

The door opened and Alex stuck her head in.

“Hey, Michaela, I just wanted to let you know, Eric just took off. He said to tell you he went home,” she said, her eyes flicking between me and Louis. I ignored the judgment and looked at Louis. Usually Eric and I stay at my place after parties at Louis’s house, so there’s a chance Eric might have gone back there. He has the key.

“Are you sober enough to drive me home?” I asked. Louis nodded. He usually goes easy for the first half of a party in order to keep an eye on the house. “Okay, let’s go.” I looked at Alex. “Do you need a ride home?” I asked her, praying she would say yes. If Alex was in the car, Louis wouldn’t get a chance to be more awkward.

“Oh... yeah. Thanks, that would be great,” she said with a passable attempt at enthusiasm. “I’ll let my ride know.” She pulled out her phone.

I smiled at her, and we all headed out to Louis’ car. Alex sat in the backseat and I sat up front, both of us frozen in an impenetrable awkward silence. In an attempt to ease everyone’s pain, I turned up the music to an uncomfortable pitch. Unfortunately, Alex’s house was closer, so we dropped her off first.

“I’ll see you later, Michaela,” she said, her eyes still worried as she studied me.

“Yeah, I’ll text you.” There was no point in saying anything else. I resigned myself to the impending horribleness.

Louis drove very carefully to my apartment. His hands gripped the steering wheel tightly, his eyes stayed on the road. He was suspiciously quiet the whole way to my apartment. The lights weren’t on inside. He pulled up to the curb, put the car in park, and then turned to me, his seatbelt digging into the soft pale skin of his neck.

“Michaela, um, about what... happened,” he said slowly. He looked like he was being choked, but he didn’t back off.

“Nothing happened, okay? I need to get inside,” I said hastily and pushed the car door open, but before I could get away, I hear Louis say it.

“I love you. I just... I wanted you to, um, know before you... you know, left.”

I twisted around slowly and stared at him, with his limp hair and pudgy face and hopeful shining eyes. “I’m sorry,” I said. “Can we talk about this later?” I was a terrible friend. I was a terrible person. Louis was like one of those sweet innocent bunnies too dumb to keep from running into the road. I was like the giant gas-guzzling truck that just ran the bunny over and squished it into a million little red pieces all over the road.

He nodded, fast. “Of course... take your time.” He smiled at me, brightly. “Have a great, um, trip, and I’ll, um, see you when you get back. I’ll email you!”

“Great.” I tried to smile back at him, though I wasn’t sure it worked. Then I got out of the car and hurried inside. The front door was locked. I was still fairly tipsy, so it took me a minute to maneuver my keys into the lock, but I finally got it. My apartment was dark. There was no one on my couch. I went into my bedroom. The bed was empty. Then I heard a noise from the bathroom.

Eric was kneeling on the floor next to the toilet, throwing up. I stood there and watched him, his face pale and sweaty, hair sticking to his forehead, hands clamped on the edge of the toilet, knees cushioned by one of the ruffled monogrammed hand towels my grandmother sends to everyone at Christmastime. Just past where his head is pressed to the edge of the toilet, I could see the non-stick turtle-shaped bathtub stickers he gave me when I moved in, smiling up from the bottom of my bathtub to keep me from slipping in the shower. He looked over at me, and even in his misery, his mouth curved up slightly like those stupid cartoon turtles. I couldn’t help myself.

I went over to him, I stroked his hair out of his face, and I held him as his body shuddered. When he was done, I cleaned him up and put him to bed, and he smiled at me like there was no one else in the world, his eyes on me, and this was something that was mine. I kissed his forehead and lay down next to him to sleep, and when I slept next to him, his body curved towards mine, and his arm slid around me and he pulled me close even as he slept.

#

The alcohol makes me brave, and it makes me lean closer to James, his hands on me, I'm dizzy with the feeling of being wanted like this, by someone who's only known me for a couple of days. Then hands grab me, pull me away from James, away from feeling wonderful and exciting. I know it's Alex, I hear her voice, and I try to focus on her face. I know she means well, but the last thing I want right now is someone to be watching me, policing me. Joseph is here too, and now his caretaking isn't sweet, it's annoying.

She and Joseph pull me back and forth, and I just want them both to stop, I want James' hands and the feeling of falling when I lean towards him and he catches me. Instead, Joseph tries to take me away from James, and then Alex grabs me. I'm glad to hold onto her for a moment, if only to steady myself, but she's not the one I want to be holding. She stops and leans in close, asking me if I want to go home, reminding me about Eric, but I don't want to remember. I just want the excitement, not the guilt. She's so worried and so sober and so perfectly right that I shout at her, let the words fall out and strike her in the face, I want to hurt her. I do it. I don't really know what I said, something about leaving me alone, but she's hurt.

The wall next to us is made of rough stone, old stone, her face blends into them for a moment, disappears into the aged rock. Her expression almost makes me apologize, I've never

tried to hurt her before. But then she leaves, and that's what I wanted, I wanted to be with James. The guilt is stifled under all the alcohol.

Before I can aim myself in the correct direction to return to James, someone's hands, large and male, wrap around my shoulders and drag me through the tables and into the bar. I'm hoping it's James, but when the hands ease me into a chair in the back room, and the person they belong too kneels down to look me in the face, I recognize Joseph, but I just want to go back to James, I want Joseph to leave me alone, and Alex to leave me alone, so I drink his water and answer his questions, and then I push him off and somehow manage to get to my feet.

The bar is hot and full of people. I use them for leverage, propping myself up and letting myself fall from body to body as I push my way to the door and outside. It's a nice night out, and it's much cooler outside, there's room to breathe.

James is still at the table, and for a moment I see three of him, sitting at three wire outdoor tables, a red umbrella overhead. I've never been this drunk before, part of me knows that, but the other part that's drunker than I've ever been is much louder, and much more fun. The other girls and their soldiers are gone, run off to enjoy one another's company and screw their brains out. I know a lot of them have boyfriends back home, but they took the soldiers home, took them into borrowed beds on borrowed time.

"There you are, beautiful," James says to me, reaching out and taking my hands. I manage to sit in the chair next to him without too much of a problem. James strokes my palm with his thumb, running his finger across my skin until it feels raw, but I don't stop him.

He's gentle with me, telling me stories about growing up in South Africa, about poverty and having to work yourself up from nothing, joining the army was his best chance for survival. He's calm about that choice, he sends money home to his mother and his younger siblings. I

can't help but think about Eric, who doesn't even have a job and doesn't seem to know what he wants out of life, except to be with me.

In the darkness, neither of us notices the rain clouds overhead until they burst, sending water pouring down on all of us. People run around, laughing and screaming, girls trying to cover their hair, boys jumping in puddles. I remember Alex being nearby, but when I look around she's nowhere to be found. In all the confusion, all I can think to do is run, too. James' hand is in mine, and I don't let go, we run, through the cobbled streets. We turn a corner, and we're alone, suddenly all the people around us from the bar are gone, and it's just the two of us, gasping under an shadowy archway, the streets reflecting the lamps from inside apartments, shimmering yellow globes of light refracting my vision, one yellowy streetlamp a few feet away.

James' face is in shadow. He walks towards me, slow, purposeful. He puts one hand around my waist and another to my cheek. I know this is when I'm supposed to turn away, but I lean in, and I keep my eyes open when he kisses me.

#

My first week of freshmen year was over. I'd had had all my classes, met so many new people my head was spinning, and I was holding hands with Eric, who I still couldn't believe wanted to date me. I hadn't seen him in person since orientation, but we'd been texting and talking online a lot, and now we were finally together. We were walking slowly down the curving sidewalk, our hands clasped. We weren't talking anymore, and I liked the quiet, liked walking side by side and feeling his palm pressing into mine, his fingers curled through mine. I could taste my tongue, like the strawberry ice cream I had gotten on our date, and I could see a smudge of chocolate on the corner of his mouth. It had to be the cutest chocolate smudge I've ever seen.

We stopped outside his dorm, a big brick building with columns and a wide-spread oak tree outside it. It looked like something out of a postcard, a photograph too beautiful and picturesque to be true. The hazy moonlight shone on Eric's hair, lighting him up even at night. I reached up to remove that smudge of chocolate, but he caught my hand. He smiled at me.

"I'm really glad I met you," he said to me softly.

Then he kissed me, the perfect moment. It was the best first kiss I ever had, tasting of chocolate and strawberries. The next day, I tell Alex the story, and she smiles, maybe she looks a little bit wistful and we both say how it was something I would remember forever. He's the perfect guy, I'm so lucky.

#

James' kiss tastes like licorice and alcohol and rain. His cheeks are stubbly and rough, his hands are bolder. Water drips from his hair onto my face, distracting me. I can hear the raindrops, and I wonder if Alex is trying to find me.

James presses me into the building, the pattern of the stones imprinting on my back and kisses me again, deeper, his hands sliding lower much more quickly than Eric's innocent wanderings had progressed. His kisses make me shivery, the contrast of the cool air on my hot skin, and as James stops kissing me for a second, the whole scene washes over me. I can see it in my head, like I'm looking at it from the outside.

There's a girl, standing under an archway in an Italian town with a handsome soldier's whose shirt is sticking to him, and that soldier is looking at that girl with the intensity that comes before he makes passionate love to her. She's uncertain, but he knows what he wants, and he'll do whatever it takes to get it.

It's official. My life is a movie.

He leans toward me again. “James, I have a boyfriend,” I blurt out. Here, in the rain and the dark, I want to be honest.

“I have a girlfriend,” he admits. We look at each other. Then he touches my face thoughtfully. “You are beautiful, Michaela,” he says, and somehow his accent makes it more true. I can’t remember that my stomach sticks out too far or that my makeup is probably running from the rain. I just feel beautiful. And in this moment, I know I don’t ever want to go home.

So when he leans forward I don’t stop him, and his hand is warm on my waist, and his lips change me somehow. The warmth of the alcohol makes me loose and brave, and I’m beautiful and I hope it never stops raining.

#

It was late at night, Eric and I were lying curled together in his twin bed in the dorm. His roommate was away for the weekend, so we had the room to ourselves. He was stroking my hair, very gently, and looking at me in a way no one ever had before. The lights right outside the window came through the gaps in the blinds, laid orange stripes across the bed, gave me enough light to make out Eric’s face and nothing else.

We’d been dating for four months, and I was so lucky. I listened to my friends from high school complain about how they can’t find a guy, or all the guys they date are shiteads or whatever the problem is that week, but I had Eric. I saw other girls look at him, flirt with him and I felt special. Even Alex, who was so independent and didn’t need a man, agreed Eric is the best boyfriend ever.

He was right there, right there with me in the darkness, and he pressed his forehead to mine. “I love you,” he whispered, safe and secret, and everything I had ever wanted.

#

“I love you,” James says, his tongue like licorice, his hands pushing below my waist, I push them back up, but he’s breathing heavily, pressed against me in the alleyway, and I can see myself again.

I’m not the tragic heroine of a love story than can never truly be. I’ve been living in a fantasy. I’m the girl being pushed up against a wall by a guy she just met, both still slightly drunk, clothes wet, hair limp, the desperate couple in the darkened alleyway about to have sex against the cold stone wall.

His hands push up under my skirt, the stones dig into my back, pressing, his mouth is on my neck. My balance is still off, but his press me into the wall, holding me upright. The streetlight nearby flickers, and goes out. It’s completely dark, nothing but hands and gasps and words. “I love you,” he whispers, trying to move my underwear out of the way, and I try to lean away but there’s that wall behind me, and his weight pressing against me, it’s dark, who’s to see, who’s to judge?

I’m not this kind of girl. That’s the thought I can’t shake. Because I wanted the romance, the glamour of a foreign fling, not some guy desperately trying to get me to have sex with him in a dark dirty alley by lying to me.

“No, you don’t,” I say, putting my hands on his chest and pushing so that he leans away, and I can wiggle free.

“You’re beautiful, Michaela, I love you,” he says, his hand gentling encircling my arm just above the elbow, starting to squeeze.

I put my hand up to his, and less gently pull it away. “Good night, James,” I say, and I walk away. When he calls my name, I don’t even look back. All I wanted was to be beautiful, to be wanted, I needed the affirmation. But the thing is, it’s dark out, and he can’t see me at all.

#

The airport was nearly deserted at six in the morning, so there was no one to witness our farewells. Saying goodbye to Eric was harder than I thought it would be. He wasn't crying, but I suspected it's a close thing from the way he kept squinting and swallowing. He hugged me tight, for a long time, and then kissed me. He hugged Alex too, and then she moved away a little, letting us have a moment.

Eric took my hand, turned the promise ring he gave me for our sixth month anniversary around once on my finger. "I love you," he said, like he has so many times before. But no matter how many times he says it, it still sends a little thrill down my spine to hear it, to know that someone loves me. To know that Eric is that someone, and suddenly, I wasn't sure who I was going to be without him there to hold my hand. I'd never had to be alone, to stand on my own two feet without a boyfriend there to hold my hand. And I wanted to try it, but I was scared. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to. I was afraid that without him there to catch me, all I would do was fall.

Alex is standing there waiting for us to be done, looking out at an airplane taking off into the sky, her face is open, eager. I'm going to have to be brave. Eric hugs me again. I can hear his heart beating, feel his chest rising and falling, feel the warmth of his blood, the solidity of his body.

"I'll come back," I promise, and he nods, taking my word for it.

#

When I get home to the tiny apartment, I climb the stairs slower than I ever have. Unlock the door as quietly as possible. It's very late. Alex might be sleeping. I hope.

I tiptoe into the apartment, closing the door as softly as possible. There are shadows everywhere. The bedroom door is open. I take a few steps in that direction when movement at the window makes me shriek in terror.

“Michaela, hi, I didn’t mean to scare you,” Alex says, eyes wide, getting up from her seat in front of the open window.

She's looking at me. I have a second of panic. But the darkness is safe. My mascara has run down onto my cheeks, my lipstick smeared all over my face, my clothes wet and clinging to me, my stomach sticking out too far, but at least the lights aren’t on to reveal all of that.

“You okay? I was worried,” Alex says. “I didn’t know where you were.”

I hesitate for a moment between contrition and defiance. I am ashamed, but I felt powerful tonight, and I'm not ready to give that up. “Look, you're not my mother. It’s not your job to know where I am all the time, okay? I'm an adult, and I make my own choices.”

“Okay. I didn’t mean to upset you.” Alex looks a little shocked.

“You can’t judge me, okay? I did what I did. I love Eric, and I'm going to tell him what happened and deal with the consequences, but I needed this, just once. You might not need that kind of reinforcement or affection or whatever, but I do. I'm not sorry.” I stand my ground. I hope she takes my word for it, because if Alex believes me, I might start to believe myself.

She nods. “Okay.” She studies me. “I do understand, okay? I'm not judging you.”

“Good.” I'm not ready to give up my stubbornness yet. “I only kissed him, you know. Nothing else.”

“I know,” she says. “And you're wrong, Michaela.” She looks small, diminished somehow. “I need to be noticed too.” Maybe it’s the way she's looking right at me, her face is

half in shadow, and she looks lonely there by the window, waiting for me to get home, but I believe her.

Something about her hunched shoulder makes me walk over to her and wrap my arms around her, even though I'm wet, even though I'm probably dripping mascara all over the place. I wrap my arms around her and hold her tightly, and suddenly, I desperately miss home. I miss the place that I recognize, the place where I know who I am, I feel shaken here, shaken and shivered to the edges of myself and into something new.

That scares me, but I hold on. This trip isn't over yet. There are still places we have not travelled.