

TOM BISSELL

A Bridge Under Water

FROM *Agni*

"SO," HE SAID, after having vacuumed up a plate of penne all'arrabiata, drunk in three swallows a glass of Nero D'Avola, and single-handedly consumed half a basket of breadsticks, "do you want to hit another church or see the Borghese Gallery?"

She had plunged her fork exactly ten times into her strawberry risotto and taken two birdfeeder sips from the glass of Gewürztraminer that her waiter (a genius, clearly) had recommended pairing with it. She glanced up and smiled at him (more or less) genuinely. The man put away everything from foie gras to a Wendy's single with the joyless efficiency of a twelve-year-old. He never appeared to taste anything. The plate now before him looked licked clean. When he return-serve smiled, she tried not to notice his red-pepper-and-wine-stained teeth or the breadcrumbs distributed throughout his short beard. They were sitting on the AstroTurfed outdoor patio of an otherwise pleasing restaurant found right behind the American Embassy in Rome. They had been married for three and a half days.

Again she pushed her fork into the risotto and watched steam rise from its disturbed center. "Think I may be a little churched out."

He snapped up another breadstick, leaned back, and rubbed his mouth. This succeeded, perhaps accidentally, in clearing the perimeter of breadcrumbs around his mouth. He had small eyes whose irises were as hard as green marbles, a crooked wide nose, and an uncommonly large chin. His thick and tinder-dry brown hair sat upon his head with shaggy indifference due to how quickly

they had cleared out of their hotel room this morning after his rushed shower. She did not mind that he had overslept. The only reason she had not overslept was that she had never fallen asleep to begin with. His plum-colored linen shirt was unbuttoned to his sternum, showcasing a pearl-white chest covered in pubically corkscrewed hair. She felt a sudden urge to lean forward and button him up but did not want the doing of such small tasks ever to fall to her.

He bit the end off his breadstick. "It's not a church, strictly speaking. It's more like a crypt." Now that he was gesturing, the breadstick resembled a wand. "Mark Twain wrote something really funny about it when he visited Rome. Apparently it's decorated with the bones of all the monks who've lived there. Like four centuries' worth. The chandeliers are bones, the gates, everything. All bones. It's supposed to be really creepy."

"A crypt made of monk bones. Why didn't you say so? Let's do that."

His smile softened in a pleased way that made her realize how falsely polite his earlier, larger smile had been. "Funny girl," he said. The thing he liked most about her, he enjoyed telling people when she was in earshot, was her sense of humor. He was the only man who had ever said she was funny, and she wondered, suddenly, if that was one of the reasons why she married him. She was, in fact, very funny.

It had been a good morning, uncontaminated by the reactor-leak conversation of the previous night. They had hardly talked about things today, but she knew both of them were aware they would have to. It was the lone solid thing in their day's otherwise formless future. It was the train they would have to catch.

"Okay," he said, setting down his breadstick with an air of tragic relinquishment, "I'd really like to see the creepy bone crypt."

She put her hands on her only slightly rounded belly and gave it a crystal-ball rubbing. "Let the record show that the pregnant lady would like to see the Borghese Gallery."

The single drum of his fingers on the tabletop made a sound like a gallop. "One way to settle it."

She slammed her fork to the table with mock finality. "I'm not playing. Seriously. I won't do it."

He was nodding. "One way to settle it."

The man loved games of all kinds. Obscure board games, video games manufactured prior to 1990, any and all word games, but he also enjoyed purely biophysical games such as rock, paper, scissors—the “essential fairness” of which he claimed to particularly admire. He was, however, miserably bad at rock, paper, scissors, the reason being that he almost always took paper. She had once been told, as a girl, by some forgotten Hebrew school playmate, that while playing rock, paper, scissors you were allowed, once in your life, the option of a fourth component. This was fire, which was signified by turning up your hand on the third beat and wiggling your fingers. Fire destroyed everything. That this thermonuclear gambit could be used only once was a rule so mystically stern that its validity seemed impossible to question. She had told him of the fire rule when he first challenged her to rock, paper, scissors on their earliest date, which was not that long ago. At issue had been what movie to go see.

Now she said to him, “You do realize you always lose? You’re aware of this.”

He readied his playing stance: back against the chair, eyes full of blank concentration, right fist set upon the small shelf of his left hand.

She picked up her fork again and began to eat. Probably she would indulge him. “I’m not playing because it’s boring. And it’s boring because you always pick paper.”

“I like its quiet efficiency. I could ask you why you always take scissors.”

“Because you always take paper!”

“I am aware that you believe that, which means I’m actually taking paper to psych you out. Statistically I can’t keep it up.”

“But you *do*. The last time we played you took paper *four* throws in a row.”

“I know. And I can’t possibly keep it up. Or can I? Now, best out of three. No. Five. Three. Best out of fthree.” He was smiling again, his teeth no longer quite so stained by the wine and pepper oil. She loved him, she had to admit, a lot right now.

He threw paper for the first two throws. She threw rock for her first just to make the game interesting. After his second paper she fished an ice cube out of her hitherto untouched water glass and threw it at him. On the third throw she was astonished to see her husband wiggling his fingers.

“Fire,” he said, extending his still-wiggling fingers so that they burned harmlessly beneath her nose. What he said next was sung in hair-metal falsetto: “Motherfucking fire!”

She pushed his hand away. “You didn’t even know about fire until I told you about it!”

“Look on the bright side,” he said. “I can never use it again, and you’ve still got yours.”

“Please, honey, *please* button your shirt.”

They descended in silence the zigzag stairs of the apricot building she now knew was called the Capuchin Crypt, passing a dozen American student-tourists sitting on, around, and along its stone balustrade. The boys, clearly suffering the misapplications of energy that distinguished all educational field trips, spoke in hey-I’m-shouting voices to the bare-shouldered and sort of lusciously sweaty girls sitting two feet away from them. She was upsettingly conscious of the adult conservatism of her thinly striped collared shirt and black skirt—she was not yet showing so much that her wardrobe required any real overhaul—and her collar, moreover, had wilted in the heat. She felt like a sunbaked flower someone had overwatered in recompense, and wondered how much older she was than these girls, who seemed less young to her than another species altogether. And yet she was only twenty-six, her husband thirty-four. Two once-unimaginable objects, the first incubating in her stomach and the second closed around her ring finger, made her, she realized, unable to remember what being nineteen or twenty had felt like. Looking into the anime innocence of these American girls’ faces was to discover the power of new anxieties and the stubbornness of old ones.

At the bottom of the stairs three tanned and lithe young Italian women walked unknowably by. She often felt herself bend away from people who knew how good they looked, but these women had such costume-party exuberance it seemed a waste not to stare. The belt? Three hundred dollars, easy. She somehow counted five purses among them. She hated the farthest girl’s rimless aviatrix sunglasses only because she knew she could never wear them without fearing she looked ridiculous. It seemed impossible to her that the sun that turned these sprites clay brown was the same sun whose apparent gamma rays burned and peeled her. She looked down at her gray, pink-accented Pumas and then over at one of the

growingly distant Italian's sassy red pumps. She had worn the Pumas only because she felt marriage should annul the desire to impress strangers, a thought that made her feel at once happy and vaguely condemned.

"That *was* creepy," he said as they turned toward where Via Veneto terminated at Palazzo Barberini. "Those bones actually kind of freaked me out."

She was still staring at her stupid shoes. "We could have spent that time looking at Bernini sculptures."

His hand lit upon her back. "We could still do that. I'd be happy to."

"No, it's okay. I'm tired anyway."

"You want to go back to the hotel?" His hand sprang away from her back as he checked his watch. "It's not even three yet." The hand did not return.

She did not say anything, thus sealing their hotel-bound fate. The next block or so was passed in silence, and they turned onto a tight, unremarkable side street (if any street in Rome could be considered unremarkable) made even tighter by the chaotically fender-to-grill-parked cars along both curbs. This was as residential as central Rome had yet seemed to her: hugely ornate wooden double doors with five-pound brass knockers and black-barred ground-level windows. The only word she could think of to describe it was *post-imperial*, which she knew was not even close to being historically correct. She liked this about Rome: whether you knew anything at all about history—and she knew a little—it forced you to think about history, even if in variously crackpot ways. In many cities, history was a loud voice at a party at which one felt underdressed. In Rome she felt history pressing in on all sides of her but in a pleasant, consensual way. Rome's weight was without expectation.

"Not entirely sure I like it here," he suddenly said.

She turned to him. "That's not a nice thing to say."

"No, no. I like being here with *you*. I mean I'm not sure I like Rome. The city. In and of itself."

She supposed she would have to hear this out but let his opportunity for explanation dangle a moment longer than felt polite.

"Why not?"

"It really bothers me that everything is closed from noon to

four, for starters, and that if you order a cappuccino after breakfast you're a barbarian. And I realized yesterday that I don't like how Italians talk to one another. Everything is so *emotional*. Like those women sitting next to us on the stairs the other day. Listening to them was like overhearing a plot to kidnap the pope. And when I asked that kid what they'd been talking about, he said, 'Shoes.'"

"I thought that was funny."

"You know my friend who lived in Rome for a while? What I didn't tell you is that his first apartment burned down—I guess the wiring was all fucked up—and after the fire was finally put out he and some firemen went inside to see what survived. Exactly one wall did, in the middle of which was this scorched crucifix that had been hung at the insistence of his landlady. There were any number of reasons why this wall survived the fire, but when they saw it all the firemen dropped to their knees and started praying while my friend just stood there. He made the point that you'd have to be astonishingly simple to believe in a God who'd let someone's apartment burn down but magically intervene to save a three-dollar version of his own likeness. He also told me that Italians are basically the most complicated uninteresting people in the world."

"You're being really interesting yourself right now."

"I'm not trying to be interesting." His voice had a real snarl in it. "I'm trying to objectively describe my impressions and tell you about my friend." Then he calmed down, or at least hid his anger more cunningly. "I'm sorry I made fun of your book last night."

Before their argument, while at a restaurant and while she was in the ladies', he had fished out of her purse the travel book she was reading about Italy. Its author was an American woman. When she returned to the table he began to read aloud certain parts in a dopey voice. "Listen to what she has to say about Rome: 'It's like someone invented a city just to suit my specifications.' Considerate of the preceding twenty-seven hundred years of civilization, wasn't it? This is priceless: 'It's like the whole society is conspiring to teach me Italian. They'll even print their newspapers in Italian while I'm here; they don't mind!'" He tossed the book onto the table and stared at it as though it were an excised tumor. Finally he said, "That is, without question, the stupidest fucking book I've ever seen you read."

The book in question was currently a bestseller, and the only rea-

son she was reading it was that her mother had given it to her, just as she had given her (them) the gift of an Italian honeymoon. He too was a travel writer, though one who had never made it off what he sometimes called the "worstseller list." He had published three books (all before she had met him) and preferred writing about places, he had once said in an interview she was embarrassed for him to have given, with "adrenaline payoffs": Nigeria, Laos, Mongolia. (His honeymoon suggestion? Azerbaijan.) She admired his determination to love the unloved parts of the world, but, like all good qualities, it remained admirable only insofar as it was unacknowledged.

She decided to speak carefully. "I *like* that everything is closed from noon to four. It creates a little oasis in the middle of the day. I *like* that life in this city isn't based around my own convenience. I also like that people talk about dumb, pointless things like shoes with passion here. And I like Italians. They seem like totally lovely people."

"I guess what irks me," he said, speaking just as carefully, "is this fantasy that Italy exists only as a sensory paradise when it's got all these completely obvious *problems*."

"Okay. How about this: I hated your creepy bone church."

"Creepy bone *crypt*."

"In fact, I've hated every stupid church we've walked into." She knew she was asking for it here, and waited. He said nothing. Onward, then, into the dark. "You know I'm not comfortable in churches and yet you keep dragging me into them."

Five pounds of emotion seemed to encumber his face. "Please, let's at least lie down before we start talking about this again."

The hotel was many blocks away.

"Why," she asked, "do you want to take me into places you know I'm not comfortable in?"

His mouth set into an ugly little frown. "Because I think this discomfort of yours is ridiculous. I'm no more a Christian than you are. The ideology you suddenly feel so offended by is an ideology that would have had someone like me burning at the stake right next to you. That you can't separate the objectively aesthetic pleasure of churches from your own—" He stopped himself. Standing there, he began to rub his eyes. "Christ. Just forget it."

"My own what?" Now she had stopped too. They were outside

the gate-lowered entrance of a cheese store, whose owner was probably off banging his noontime mistress about now, and good for him.

He fixed upon her an envenomed look, clearly resisting what he wanted to say. *Religion*, she knew, was what he wanted to say.

He recklessly took her hands in his. When she made no effort to return his clasp he rubbed his thumb along the valley between her index and middle-finger knuckles. His voice turned soft. "I cannot understand why you're so attached to being Jewish when you don't even believe in God. And why all of this is only coming up now. Not to mention why we keep fighting about it."

"And I cannot understand your difficulty in understanding this. It has nothing to do with God and your position is absolutely bizarre to me." With this she twisted her hands around so that she was holding his. "And it makes me, I have to tell you, extremely worried and sad."

Last night, after the restaurant, after the confrontation over the stupidest fucking book he had ever seen her read, they had argued, again, for the first time since the wedding, about their child, due now in six months. They had told themselves, in the weeks leading up to the wedding, that her accidental pregnancy after four months of dating was not the reason they had decided to get married. But it was clear to both of them now that this was quite possibly not the case. She knew he felt betrayed. His atheism was one of the first things he had told her about himself, and once things became serious he had quizzed her about her feelings concerning God, and she had answered that she had no particular feelings about God, other than a strong suspicion he did not exist. And this made him happy at a time when his happiness seemed to her a most precious and mysterious thing. All of that had begun to unspool a week before the wedding, when she had mentioned (in passing) that it was important (to her) that their child would understand him- or herself (they had agreed on keeping the child's gender a surprise) as a Jew. She could not even remember the context in which this had come up—*that* was how uncontroversially she had regarded the matter. At hearing that his child would be Jewish, her husband had laughed, once and loudly, like a king at some forced merriment, before realizing his pregnant fiancée was not kidding. *We'll . . . talk about that later*, he had told her. She did

not let him, saying that it was beyond her ability to fathom how exactly this could bother him. What was there to talk about? She was Jewish, her parents were Jewish, her child would be Jewish. His position: Jewishness was and could be only a religion. It was not a race, because there were Chinese and Turkish and Indian Jews. He had met some himself. It was not a proper culture, because there were Sephardic Jews, for instance, whose culture was completely different from that of Ashkenazi Jews. He described to her—one of his less wise moments—some of those differences. It was not an ethnicity, because the idea of Jewishness being determined by matrilineal descent was a religious concept. Out came his feverishly marginaliaed New Revised Standard for citation. It was, therefore, only and solely a religion, and, he told her, he could not and in fact refused to live within a household, a family, in which religion played any role other than that of an occasionally bashed piñata. She could not argue against this reasoning, which part of her agreed with. She disliked Jewish tribalism as much as anyone and had managed to escape Hebrew school without learning how to read, speak, or write Hebrew. Once, after a nephew's bar mitzvah, the theme of which was Wall Street, and which her uncle had broadcastedly made known cost \$22,000, she had actually renounced her Jewishness (for two days). But she was having a child, and while she did not want to raise Menachim Begin, a Chabadnik, or a Settler, she did want to raise a Jew in the way she was a Jew, the formalities of which she knew almost nothing about. Being Jewish was, in her innerland, nothing more than a faint but definite light, and it offered her no more pride or direction than that of a faint but definite light. His refusal to grant her, and their child, that tiny, private awareness seemed to her insane.

Since their first argument, she had found herself doing and thinking things that she previously never could have envisioned: feeling unfamiliar pangs while eating pork, writing *G-d* instead of *god* in e-mails, sneering at strangers' pendant crucifixes, resenting churches, discovering within herself an out-of-nowhere identification with A Certain Small Country She Had Never Been To And Did Not Ever Want To Visit. She had no explanation for these things.

They stood holding each other's hand outside the cheese store. There seemed no place for this already battle-weary argument to

go, other than deeper into a bunker, where it might just as well blow its own brains out. Suddenly she was crying. His forehead lurched forward, lightly bumping hers. "Don't cry," he said.

She shook her head. "I feel like I've disappointed you in a way I can't even control."

"I'm not disappointed. Disappointment is a beautiful woman reading Ayn Rand. This is not disappointment. This is something we can get through."

"But what if we can't?"

"Then I guess it's a bridge under water."

At the same time they squeezed each other's hand. His brother, a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps, had over the last five years of his eventful service become quite a collector of military-grade phraseology: *unimprovised road*, *northeasterlyward*, *shrapmetal*, *validify*, and *increasely*. "A bridge under water," which a gunnery sergeant had once used to describe to her husband's brother a particularly bad Ramadi neighborhood, was, as her husband knew, her personal favorite. She loved his brother.

She hugged him now with real love, its smoldering edges suddenly extinguished. "I hope it's not a bridge under water. It would be a real blow to my parade if it were."

His arms reached around her back. When he spoke into her hair his voice was unfamiliarly husky. "No need to reinvent the clock."

When they reached their room she slept in her clothes for the rest of the afternoon and awoke around seven to find him writing in His Notebook. She admired that about him too. He could write anywhere. He claimed to have once written an entire op-ed in the bathroom at a friend's birthday party. But she knew that he had not been writing much lately. He told her a while ago that he felt convinced the time of the American voice was over, which sounded even more pretentious when he said it.

She watched him for a little while, then said, "Hey," a drowsy creak in her voice breaking the word in two. "What are you doing?"

"Writing," he said.

"I gathered. What about?"

"A monkey with an unusual level of curiosity. This gets him into trouble in the short term but consistently results in long-term

gains for those around him. I think this is due to the purity of his motivation, though I have to admit, I'm just getting to know the character."

When he got like this she really enjoyed throwing things at him and now launched across the room her big supernaturally downy pillow. He absorbed the blow and continued writing. She sat up and looked around the room, which was absurd, beginning with the fact that it did not have a number but rather a symbol. (The floors did not have numbers either; they had colors; they were on Green.) Their room's symbol resembled a Celtic cross. Upon check-in, they had been given a sheet with peel-away representations of this symbol, which they were supposed to affix to all relevant bills. It was apparently some sort of "art hotel," and everything in the room had a gadgety double function. The shower's clear glass door turned discreetly opaque when the water was running. The wall-hung flat-screen television could be pulled out from its steel rigging on some sort of extender arm and angled this way or that, allowing guests to see the screen from literally any point in the room. The day they arrived they had engaged in a long discussion about whether this last innovation was "worthless" or "next to worthless." The décor itself was Modern Android, everything shiny and smooth, with drawers and closets that made no sound when you opened them. She actually kind of loved it here.

She looked at him. "Do you want to order room service and do it like teenagers?"

He crossed something out, glanced over at her, and frowned in a hard-to-read way. They had not made love since the first night they were here, though they had tried. They had even tried last night, after arguing, and the effort had ended, quite literally for her, in tears. When they first got together it was not unusual for them to do it three times a day. Not that unusual, no, but they did it in cabs, in the kitchen, and once with her leaning out their opened living room window at night with all the lights on. Since the argument, they did it only before bed, and only in bed, and as far as she knew, he had not come once. And this was a man who took the greatest and sincerest pleasure in the sight of his own orgasm of anyone she had ever been with. Post-argument, the moment she came he would kiss her, withdraw, and roll over to sleep. The one time she asked him about this he had denied it, and then, she was

sure, began faking his orgasms. Twice now he had made his coming noises and after he fell asleep she had squatted on the toilet with her hand cupped beneath her, to no avail. Last night he had not been able to get hard at all, which he blamed on the wine, and then the argument, and then the wine. She wondered why they were otherwise getting along so well, and had the brief, horrified thought that maybe couples in newly dead marriages got along in a way akin to the cheerfulness of people about to kill themselves.

"Honey?" She was wounded, a little, by his lack of response. "Room service?"

Still writing. "Sure, if you want."

She picked up the phone and listened to the harsh European dial tone, so unlike the organic lushness of the North American dial tone. She thought about what to order, then looked over at him again. "What do you suppose is considered a good tip for room service here? Two Celtic crosses or three?"

He did not look up. "I think you use real money for that, sweetie."

She replaced the phone and began to unbutton her shirt. Off came her skirt. Underwear, be gone. Her socks were last. Amazingly, he had not yet noticed, though two-thirds of his back was to her. She swung her legs to the floor and walked softly over to him, careful now to stay out of his peripheral vision, appalled by the sudden determination of her . . . lust? No. She did not even feel particularly wanton. She just needed to know if he still wanted her. She was self-conscious of her stomach, both proud of and slightly concerned by it (she touched it sometimes, when she was alone, as though it were an heirloom of uncertain provenance), and she wondered if this was why he refused to come, if somewhere within him was an animal self that considered her body territory that had already been marked. She was upon her husband now and began rubbing his shoulders. He had a big dog's dumb love of rubs and scratchings and at once his body went slumpy in his chair. His writing fist opened and his pencil toppled over and rolled to the bottom of the page.

"God," he said. "Really needed that."

"Stressed out?" She glanced at the page on which he had been writing and saw her name several times. Unlike him, to turn in-

ward—to focus his writing upon his *wife*, of all people. Maybe the time of the American voice really *was* over. She looked away.

"I don't know. A little." She knew his eyes were closed. That he made no effort to conceal what he was writing made her less worried. "That feels *so* nice."

"It's supposed to."

For a while he did not say anything. Then: "While you were asleep"—his voice had changed, become somehow artificially official—"I was reading the guidebook. And I noticed we're not too far away from Rome's biggest synagogue." She realized that at his mention of "synagogue" she had begun to pincer his deltoid too aggressively. "So what I thought was that maybe tomorrow we could go there together. I thought maybe you'd like that. I'd like it too. Maybe seeing it will make me . . ."

"Make you what?" She was no longer rubbing him but was rather behind him, bent over, her hands behind her back, her chin set upon his shoulder, thrillingly conscious of the secret of her nakedness.

"Maybe it will help us." He started to turn around in his chair. "I should warn you that it's a synagogue designed by two Christian archi—Sweetie. You're naked."

"Sit back," she said.

He smiled in a worried way. "What are you doing?"

"Just sit back."

He did, and she went to her knees. She undid his belt with the poised delicacy of someone who already knew what the gift she was unwrapping contained. Without prompting, he lifted his ass off the seat, allowing her to tug off his jeans. She was relieved to find that he was already hard. It had been a hot day and he smelled like the skin underneath a not-recent bandage. She did not mind. She did not muck around, either. His cock was as warm as a mouthful of blood.

"Jesus," he said, and she felt his whole body flex. She was not a huge fan of performing oral sex and took a fairly workmanlike approach to the act. But now she imagined the inside of her mouth as being florally soft and smooth, and was conscious, suddenly, that she would never know what this felt like, disappearing into the mouth of another. The realization made her bizarrely excited. "Jewish girls like to fuck": a Catholic boyfriend of hers had said

that to her once. She certainly liked to fuck. But she had corrected the boyfriend: "Reform Jewish girls like to fuck." (Later, after they broke up but stayed friendly, he began dating a black woman and told her, "Black girls like to fuck." She was devastated.) She wondered if her husband did not want to come in her anymore because she was Jewish.

"Jesus," he said again. He was thrusting lightly. Even the most artful blowjob grows repetitive, and, as a thought experiment, she imagined getting divorced. She supposed she would have to if he refused to allow their child to be Jewish. But she wondered if she could. She knew the story of his parents' divorce. It was one of the first intimate stories about himself he had ever told her. His mother used to put him in the back seat of her caramel-colored Cadillac convertible—a car, he said, as long as a submarine—and drop by Ernie's Party Store (she remembered that name, its small-town perfection) for comic books. On the days she took him to Ernie's she always put the top up, and this was a woman who kept the top down even when it was sprinkling. While he read his comic books his mother parked out in front of a strange house in a neighborhood not terribly far from their house. She made sure to park in the shade, at a discreet diagonal angle from the strange house. She would be gone for only a little while, she would tell him, making sure to roll down his window before leaving him to his crime-fighting mutants and walking hurriedly toward the strange house. On the fifth or sixth time she took him here, he asked whom she was going to see inside the strange house. She said she was going to see a friend. After the eighth or ninth time he asked her what she had been doing with her friend, and she said, *It's a surprise. For Daddy. So please don't tell him.* What kind of surprise? She did not answer, so he had hazarded a child's guess: a surprise party? *Yes*, she had said, and started to cry. He naturally misunderstood her tears, and could not stand—no little boy could stand—being the secret sharer of such exciting information for long. When he told his father about the party, asking him to promise that he would pretend to be surprised, his father said he would, then asked a few short, expert questions, nodded, and walked from the room. His mother left the next day. So it was not surprising that the whole question of divorce was a rather knotty one for him. She wondered if he could divorce her. She had read once that every marriage was between a

royal and a peasant, a teacher and a student. She wondered what would have to happen for her to know for certain which one she was. She knew what he thought she was.

And with that, amid the pomp of some magnificent, Sasquatchian sounds, he was coming. She had never let anyone come in her mouth before and was not sure whether to swallow it or what. She was game, but the taste was not at all the seawater harshness she imagined it would be, but was rather something chemically nondegradable, like pool cleaner. Her mouth dropped open and what must have been half a cup of sperm and drool splatted against the carpet with water-balloon density. He looked down at her, breathing, his eyes crazed.

It was a weekday morning, but even so, the night had not been gentle to the streets of Rome. Bits of paper tumbleweeded down the swaybacked sidewalk along the Tiber River, and every twenty yards they came upon a little area that looked as though an ill-disciplined army had bivouacked there: Peroni beer bottles with a single stomach-turning swallow left in them, paper plates made transparent by pizza grease, panino wrappers, even a half-deflated soccer ball. The morning was clear and the sunlight seemed to bronze everything it caught, but the air blew with some strange microscopic grit.

The night had not been gentle with him either. She had actually slept well, but he had awakened her at five A.M. to describe the nightmare he had just experienced. In it he was somehow accepting the best director Academy Award for *Revenge of the Sith*, but no one could hear him speak over the music and then people began laughing at him. When she had told him that she would have laughed too were she in the audience, she could hear him sulk in the darkness.

From a distance it did not much resemble a synagogue. It had a square dome, for one. Closer up it did not much resemble a synagogue either. It kind of looked like a bank. But what did she know? The temples of her youth had looked like junior high schools. She disliked the similarity of Christian churches' bland majesty and had never really believed that they were built with love. There was something arctic about their devotion, and the brutal awe she felt inside the churches of Rome annoyed her—a (more or less) inno-

cent opinion, voiced on their first day here, to which her husband had responded with such a grenade of ire that he had apologized almost instantly.

It occurred to her, as they approached, that she did not really care to see Rome's synagogue. The notion that they might discover anything here together struck her as fancifully at odds with what she knew were his real feelings. She was being sinisterly coddled. She felt unwell. The only thing worse than going into this synagogue would be telling him she did not want to go into this synagogue. Perhaps, in her own way, she was coddling him. It was too soon, she felt, to have this many secret motivations.

Now she was standing before the synagogue and took in the penitentiary inelegance of its surrounding black gates, its eggshell marble, its colonnaded ledges and tiers, and its small but noticeable number of broken windows—no longer a bank at all, but the mansion of some once-wealthy eccentric who had gone broke in the middle of an ambitious and possibly demented renovation. All around the synagogue was a typical Roman neighborhood of sun-bleached buildings with windows covered by parsley-green wooden shutters. This neighborhood, she had read, had once been predominantly Jewish—it was indeed still called the Jewish Ghetto—but in recent years many of the Jews had been getting priced out. On the corner of the synagogue's block stood a Plexiglas box, inside of which a hatless police officer read a newspaper. As they walked toward what they guessed was the proper entrance, several signs let it be known that the Museo Ebraico di Roma was currently under AREA VIDEO SORVEGLIATA.

She waited at the bottom of a stone staircase while he went up to an unpromising black-tinted glass door. Before he could give the handle an experimental pull, a short, bald man, whose near-perfect caricature of squat Semitic brusqueness was offset only by his pink sweater, opened the door and asked, "You pay ticket?" When her husband said no, the man jerked his thumb in a vaguely obscene way toward another gate farther down the block. Here they found a doorbell, which she pressed. She hated doorbells that did not make a corresponding sound for the benefit of the doorbeller and, fearing it was broken, pressed again after fifteen seconds. With a disapproving buzz the gate popped open.

They walked without comment through an open-air, yellow-

walled corridor, the walls of which were affixed with chunks of old Sicilian synagogues, pieces of alms boxes, ancient fragments of synagogue doorjambs, all of them stamped with Hebrew letters, some of which she thought she might have recognized. All passed through her with no more moment than that of a parachutist through a cloud. He had already gone ahead into the lobby, where apparently tours were booked. The young woman who sat behind the ticket desk with a modest, makeupless presence informed her that entering the synagogue cost seven euros. "An English tour begins at seven fifteen," she said. "We will call you."

She paid, hoping he had not overheard this, but when she gave him his ticket he was smirking.

"It costs seven euros to get in?"

"It's a museum," she said.

"So's Saint Peter's. They don't charge you to go in there because it's still a functional place of worship."

She concentrated on not being angry. "The bone church cost money to get into."

"The bone *crypt* cost money to get into. The church above it was free. And the bone crypt asked for a donation, not seven euros."

She looked at him, nodding. "So you really plan on being a dick about this."

He winced in the stalwart way of a man being injected with something intended to benefit him. "Permission to apologize?"

"Authorization to forgive is pending." She poked him in the belly. "Behave and it might come through."

The museum's capsule history of Rome's Jewish community was set out on a series of large, thick, spot-glossed poster boards. While they stood before the first of these highly reflective plaques, dim and faceless ghost versions of themselves stared out as though from an inescapable dimension. She read one subject heading ("From Judaei to Jews: The Jews of Rome During the Middle Ages"), noted a quote from a twelfth-century visitor to Rome ("Two hundred Jews live there, who are very much respected"), and was not surprised by how quickly the story turned unhappy ("The burning of the Talmud in 1553 dealt a terrible blow to the tradition of Talmudic studies in Rome").

"I didn't know that," her husband said, reading a different section.

"What's that?"

"*Get* was the term for the segregation of man and woman, and that this may be where the word *ghetto* comes from."

She refocused. It was uncanny: every paragraph was filled with information vague enough to be uninteresting and precise enough to be soporific. She tried again, engaging in a little contest with herself to see how long she could hang in there: "The Italian *minhag* is also known as *minhag Kahal Italiani*. Its origins are closest to the land of Israel as are the German and the Romaniote Greek liturgy as well as an ancient French rite that oh my god oh my god boring boring boring."

She turned to the middle of the room, where a glass display case as high as her belly contained a thick old medieval Pentateuco. A book; it had that going for it, at least. Her husband was now across the room, and she joined him in his study of an old map of the city, done in the quaintly incompetent medieval cartographic style. He moved on, and she followed him to a piecrust-colored tombstone with a menorah on it. Next to it was a large glassed-in display of "The Jewish Home." Inside this was a table freighted with carafes, candleholders, menorahs, dreidels, a platter with what was possibly a real piece of bread on it, a dish of salt, a tiny clasped-shut book. She stood there looking at all these items, trying hard to be fascinated, or at least invested. She failed miserably and walked on past a reconstructed dowry, which *really* did not interest her. She resented not being able to tell him how bored she was. She was interested in the traditions, she thought, sort of, but not in the objects themselves. How could this be? She wondered if her husband might not in fact have a point. What *were* such traditions without the tent pegs of religious belief keeping them in place?

Soon they were called and met their guide back in the lobby. His name was David, pronounced *Da-veed*. He had short brown hair, the hawkish Roman nose that had no Jewish or Gentilic preference, perfect pink ears, hydraulically sincere eyebrows, small, cat-like teeth, and a weirdly furrowed brow for someone so young. They joined the ten other English-speaking tourists who had already gathered around David, only two of whom looked American: a blinking, sport-coated father and his exquisitely manqué son, who wore cargo pants and a maroon Roma soccer jersey. They were from one of the overfed states, it looked like.

"Please don't take pictures," David began, "inside or outside. Yarmulkes are provided for the men to cover their heads. Women must cover their shoulders as well." With a smile he handed a shawl to an Asian woman old enough to know that her pink Hello Kitty tank top was one hundred percent unacceptable. The men then fished yarmulkes from a basket that David held out to them. Her husband looked at his with a chuckle and plopped it on his head with good-sport disdain. It looked even sillier on him than she was expecting. David proceeded to escort his troupe downstairs into the building's basement Sephardic synagogue, a room as colorful as a detonated rainbow. They sat in the first two rows of the uncomfortable wooden pews while David stood and waited in the middle of the synagogue.

"So we begin," David began, "our guided tour about the history of our community, which is unique among all the Jews of the West, including the United States. The Ashkenazi-Sephardic distinction does not entirely apply to our community." David spoke on, but she looked around, listening with a sonarlike part of her brain, hearing outlines and occasional distinctions, nothing more.

The altar was draped with bright blue, gold-tasseled rugs. Another rug with a gold menorah sewn onto its face was hung on the wall directly across from the altar. The thrones were cast of mottled red marble, their seats covered with thin red cushions. She had a vague sense that one of the thrones was where the Talmud was read during worship. No. All wrong. It was not an altar but a bema, and it faced east; it was also where the Torah, *not* the Talmud, was read. The thrones were where the Torah was *kept*. She actually had to stop herself from laughing. Years of Hebrew school and her husband doubtlessly knew more about Judaic ritual than she did. She tried to figure out which of her fellow tourists were Jewish and which were not, an impulse she would have found unforgivable in anyone but herself.

David was now taking questions. "Jews lived in the Ghetto for three hundred years," he told the Asian woman. "We Italian Jews also became the only Jewish community to be put back in a ghetto *after* being emancipated in 1798. We had to remain there until 1860, and this was long after almost all other members of European Jewry had been granted full legal rights. Florentine Jews suffered the same fate, earning their emancipation in 1808 but being returned to the ghetto in 1815."

Someone then asked about a gated area behind the pews. "That," David said, "is where women sit." Several hands instantly shot up. David laughed and, without calling on anyone, explained the religious reasons for this. That was when she noticed her husband slip off his yarmulke and search around his immediate area with the finicky distaste of someone working out where to stash a plug of chewed gum. He finally gave up and orphaned his yarmulke on the empty seat next to him.

She elbowed him. "Come on," she whispered. "Put it back on."

He whispered back: "Fuck that. They segregate the sexes? Fuck. That."

"I'm glad," she said, still whispering, "that you've found something to be angry about. But this is an Orthodox synagogue."

"I can't be angry?" He was no longer whispering.

"No, you can. What you're not allowed to be is surprised."

As they were leaving, the stout American father took a picture. David rushed over to him with frantically though still politely waving hands. "No photos, please. For security purposes."

The man said, "I'm just taking one of the rug here."

David smiled in what she recognized as tourist-honed, yeah-it-is-crazy ingratiation. "Our synagogue was once attacked, by terrorists, and so security is important to us. Please understand."

The man's mouth opened. "When was the synagogue attacked?" "In 1982."

Her husband burst out laughing.

"Security is important to us," David said to the man in a loud, dislocated voice she knew was directed at her husband. "Upstairs in the Orthodox synagogue you can see for yourself our broken windows. Those were shattered in the attack, and we have never repaired them to remind us of what happened here."

"Was it Muslims?" the man wanted to know.

David smiled. "Let's go upstairs to the Orthodox synagogue."

The trip took them briefly outside. Their feet made wet splashing noises on the gravel walkway that led to the Orthodox synagogue's wooden doors, which David held open for everyone, nodding in identical welcome at each person as he or she passed. Inside were dozens of rows of wooden pews, the baker's-chocolate-colored joinery of which was truly lovely. David allowed them all a few moments to walk around and explore. She saw that many individual seats were affixed with little gold plaques bearing the name

of the worshipper for whom they were reserved. She then noted that the entirety of the synagogue's first row was labeled EX DEPORTATO. She did not need any Italian to know who sat there and why. She looked up into the square dome, filled with a sparkling airborne cathedral of sunlight. And there they were—the synagogue's broken windows, through which shoots of bamboo-colored light beamed.

David began his tour. The synagogue was inaugurated in 1904. The columns were hewn from some rare marble, the name of which she neglected to catch. From the black candelabras and chandeliers to the boiled-milk marble, you could see that the synagogue's Christian architects had worked in what was called the Syrio-Babylonian style.

"And where do the women sit?" one of the other tourists, a small, bespectacled woman with a round face, asked. She looked the woman over: yellow smoker's fingers, trembling hamster nose, an intense grudge-seeking manner about her.

"Women," David answered, "can sit upstairs, behind the gate, if there's room."

"If there's room," her husband echoed loud enough for David to hear.

David looked at him and was about to answer when he noticed that her husband was no longer wearing his yarmulke. That their exchange would now be one of regulation rather than confrontation seemed to relax David. "Excuse me, sir—there are yarmulkes in back." He moved on to answer another question, but her husband did not budge. She felt her face grow warm as the rest of her body chilled like a licked finger raised into the wind. David looked back to her husband a minute later and, still smiling, said, "Sir, please help yourself to a yarmulke in back."

She said her husband's name and gently pushed him rearward, toward the yarmulke basket. Her hands were on his chest, and she realized he had never buttoned up his shirt. He still refused to move; she felt as though she were pushing one of the synagogue's thick marble columns.

They now had the full interest of the tour group. With a kind of herd-animal practicality, she found herself stepping away from her husband. She had felt their eyes picking holes in him, in her, in *them*. Remarkable: after putting only a few feet between her and

her husband, no one was looking at her anymore. She was ashamed by her own relief.

"Sir," David said again. There was no need to say anything else.

Watching her husband prepare for an argument was similar to watching a boxer throw off his robe. She knew what was coming but was still not fully prepared for the brazen impudence of what he said, or the sneering pride with which he said it: "So I'm not going to wear a yarmulke."

David blinked. She wondered if anything like this had happened to him before.

"Sir, you must cover your head."

Her husband answered in the same cruel voice he had used two nights ago to disparage her book. "And what's going to happen to me if I don't?"

She had the sense of watching someone fall down a flight of stairs in slow motion and noting the various stages of injury.

David was no longer smiling. "You will have to leave." His voice was tight; each word had a small, cold exactness.

One member of the group, an Englishman no older than twenty-five who was wearing a red Che Guevara T-shirt, said, "Christ, mate—cover your fucking head."

"Why should he?" This was the short, yellow-fingered woman.

"Out of respect," the young Englishman said.

It was to this young prole that her husband now turned. "I would happily cover my head if this synagogue allowed women to sit with men. It doesn't. I don't respect that or the god our friend David here thinks tells him this is right, so why *should* I cover my head?"

Her hand leapt up and landed with an open-palmed smack against her forehead. She said his name again, and again.

"Sir," David said. "This is our place of worship and community. You are here as our guest. If you don't cover your head, I will have to ask you to leave."

Her husband grinned as though this were exactly the argument he had been waiting for David to mount. "You charged me seven euros to come into your place of worship, so I think you kind of lose the right to tell me what I can or cannot wear while I'm in here."

"How does *that* work?" This was the American father in the sport coat. The man's son, she saw, was laughing.

David sighed and withdrew from his pocket a cellular phone. He speed-dialed, spoke a few words in Italian, then snapped shut the phone—a harsh, guillotine sound. He contemplated her husband now as though from a great height. “You will be escorted from this synagogue if you refuse to cover your head.”

Her husband’s smile was a fragment from some former, exploded confidence. “You’re throwing me out of the synagogue.”

David nodded. “You will be escorted from this synagogue if you—”

“Get rid of this douche bag!” The boy who a moment ago had been laughing said this. In fact, he was still laughing, which made her husband’s stand seem, at that moment, even more ludicrous. “Dude, like what is the matter with you?”

Her husband said nothing while his eyes wandered from one member of their group to another. He avoided her and David, which she hopefully took as an indication that he was about to apologize. Instead he told the group, with great gravity, “Social justice isn’t just about hating George Bush.”

The bald man in the pink sweater emerged from a room adjacent to the bema and began to walk toward her husband. At this her husband turned to her in something close to lip-licking panic. Not that he was being forcefully removed from a place of worship—she knew he would tell this story, with certain redactions, for years—but rather at the thought of everything else that had been set into motion here.

The man in the pink sweater was upon him. His lips were wet in a way that made her wonder if his lunch had just been interrupted. The man looked at her husband, then at her, and then back at her husband. “We leave now,” he said, relying, for the moment, on his presence as reason enough to leave. Her husband refused to look at the man. Instead he shook his head and muttered, “I paid my seven euros. I’m seeing the synagogue. Not leaving.” The man in the pink sweater, who seemed both covetous of and frightened by the opportunity to use force, was then summoned by David. They spoke in hushed, spiralingly fast Italian. David’s opinion, whatever that might be, seemed to win the day. The man in the pink sweater shook his head while David made another phone call. Soon enough, the hatless police officer from the corner cubicle outside entered the synagogue—and, oddly, crossed himself.

At the sound of the door opening, her husband turned. At the sight of the approaching, expressionless officer, he sighed. “Come on,” he said to her. His tone was light; she could nearly hear his mind rearranging what had just happened into nothing more than an amusing misunderstanding. “Let’s get thrown out of the synagogue together at least.”

He stuck out his hand: his old trick. She took the hand and walked with him past the officer. As the box of daylight at the end of the synagogue aisle grew larger and brighter, she was surprised by how quiet it was—and she knew this, this sound, this sound of different hopes collapsing; of separate divinities forming, of exclusion, of closed doors, of one story’s end.