



*It's as though his oars were broken,
though of course they weren't.*

from Juked #7, Spring 2010

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A WOMAN ON THE TRAIN

After a day spent walking from fountain to fountain through the old city of Aix, stopping in expensive shoe stores and for dry, crumbly sandwiches at a tourist trap, John and his sister Grace boarded the six o'clock train for Italy. They were among a crowd of Australians who shoved past them up the steps and down, thankfully, into another car. John watched them disappear through the dirty glass, glad they were gone, but wishing, in a way, he could've just joined their rollicking stupidity. It was what one admired so much about Australians: they were a bunch of beautiful idiots and so happy about it.

In her seat Grace arranged her long black skirt carefully, patting her lap as though calming a small dog, the kind everyone but its owner wants secretly to kick. John thought this was the kind of woman she was now: a lady with a little dog. Or small dog. Depending on how much irony one wanted to introduce. If in fact that was irony; he wasn't quite sure.

He flopped his legs into the aisle. The seats were a cool light blue and the train was clean, but traveling, he'd found, now that he was twenty-nine, made him feel perpetually hungover. Too old. Or maybe too unwilling, too self-absorbed. He was traveling with his sister because she'd called him six months after her husband had died in the shower of an aneurysm and said, "Do you want to come with me to Europe? I'm serious. I mean, I'd love for you to come along." So he quit his job, which hadn't paid much, which he'd been meaning to leave for years, and they flew together out of JFK.

What, he'd asked himself daily and did so now again, as the train began to move out of the station, did he want from the trip? To help his sister. To keep her company at the very least. She was a widow at thirty-two. Also: to reconnect with her. She'd changed drastically when, at twenty-six, she'd married Michael, a lawyer, a Christian. Suddenly she was a churchgoer and wore long, demure skirts and all her friends, the reporter for the socialist newspaper in Queens, the arty women she'd worked with in the gallery in Soho, the painters who hung there, all were gone, never to be seen again, at least by John. Instead, on the two occasions he'd visited her over the past six years, her friends now seemed to consist of bankers, lawyers and her priest, with his thin, veiny hands and womanly paunch stretching the crotch of his black polyester pants.

John had never liked Michael and had felt inappropriate bubbles of relief swell up after the man died. Perhaps now his sister could become again the fun-loving person whom, for most of his life he'd thought of as his best friend. That's really why he'd come to Europe. To see if this could be true. Why couldn't it? Surely it could. But it wasn't. She was still Michael's Grace. A silver cross hung around her neck. She insisted they visit a church in every town. She actually went in and knelt and bowed her head and whispered prayers. He'd learned to wait these sessions out in cafés, or bars. Watching her walk uphill (the churches were always atop hills), long skirt swinging around her boxy black shoes, hair pinned severely back, he sometimes pitied her. He wanted her to be happy and it was literally inconceivable one could be happy like this: fearing God, praying and so on.

There were only two other people in their train car: an old woman with a bulging plastic bag, two bottles of wine precariously balanced at the top, and a pretty younger woman with dark hair cut in a bob. The young woman wore a cropped blue jean jacket. Lifting her bag to the overhead rack her shirt rode up, exposing a smooth, tanned stomach.

He glanced at Grace to see if she'd noticed him staring. What he wanted was for her to say it was all right to go off for a night, do his own thing. They'd get separate hotel rooms (he could even pay for his, though not for too many nights: she'd been paying for everything, except the occasional beer or wine or coffee). Perhaps in Levanto—the first stop in Italy she'd planned—he'd suggest they do this. The young woman's arm, free of its jean jacket, poked into the aisle. Probably Grace wouldn't mind. Obviously she wouldn't want to be hooking up with strangers, but . . . These thoughts made one thing very clear. He was an immoral idiot. But at least he was alive. At least he wanted to live. At least he wasn't escaping down some narrow hole of thought—and, apparently, he was cruel.

The train shuttled along the coastline past small bright towns. He flipped through the British guidebook Grace kept pressuring him to read. The authors were snobs who hated Americans and possibly the French as well.

Several hours later they arrived in Nice. He watched the Australians bound down, off to explore. Maybe he and Grace should go and see the coast, too. But she was deep into one of her books—*The Ambassadors*—and, anyway, they'd already seen Matisse's paintings in Paris of birds in windows overlooking the water, so why go down now past laundromats with fat mothers folding sheets while red-faced children howled and kicked in the sticky bucket seats? They were better off right here, waiting patiently, side by side, to get the hell out of there, like strangers, as though she wasn't his sister, the one person he truly felt he loved deeply in the world. No, she was just another woman on the train.

On the balcony of an apartment building overlooking the tracks, nine or ten floors up, he saw a man kicking and punching a blue heavy bag that hung from the ceiling. The man wore only the smallest blue shorts and sweat glimmered all over him. Each time his leg lashed out and struck the bag the sound wouldn't reach down to John until the next kick or punch was already falling.

That's exactly what it's like being here with Grace, he thought. He wanted to be the bag, but felt against his will that he was the man. Each time he thought he was there to absorb the blow, the sadness, he was surprised to find himself striking out, making contact before he'd even heard what he'd done. The first such incident had happened at Notre Dame, when she'd knelt to pray and he'd laughed. Loud, as though she was performing for him, the way she used to at parties, the wildest of all her slightly insane friends, climbing on tables, out onto window ledges, into a dumpster to retrieve a broken office chair an artist had said he could use. But of course the kneeling wasn't a joke. She'd looked up at him, as though he'd just spit on the altar. Even that hadn't been enough to shut him up. "Come on, Grace, cut it out," he'd said, tugging on the shoulder of her shirt.

"Leave me alone," she'd said.

"Grace, I—"

"Get out of here," she'd whispered. "Please, just leave me alone." She'd looked as though, through the anger, she might cry.

That was their first day in Europe. He'd left, as they'd traveled down through the Chateau region to the Luberon, a trail of similarly distinguished actions behind him, like a dog pissing his way down the block. The idiot had been here. And here. And here. And like a dog he seemed to have no shortage of supply.

There'd been better moments in the trip, moments when he felt he could see, from beneath the smooth, shiny surface of Grace's new persona, her old self—playful, ironic, irreverent, witty.

After going to the European Photography Museum in Paris they'd gotten coffees and he'd asked if she would ever leave America, the way William Klein had.

"Of course not," she said, stirring a tube of sugar into the soft brown skim that marked the best coffees. "But then I'm not an angry young man."

"Like me," he said, unwrapping the tiny bitter chocolate and biting off a corner.

“Sort of. Though you’re not that young any more, sweetheart. Now you’re just an angry man.”

“Soon I’ll be an angry old man.”

“We call that being a grump,” she said, setting her spoon on the saucer with a clink.

“Who’s this *we*?”

“Me and the rest of reasonable society,” she said. It was when she smiled like this that her old self was closest to escaping.

“I’ve heard about that. But as far as I can tell it’s not the kind of thing I’d be interested in.”

“I believe that,” she said, taking a tiny sip.

He’d wanted this to go on, for the teasing and joking to continue. He remembered, then, at the café, one night when he’d come to the city from New Haven. This was pre-Michael. They’d gone to several bars and some parties in lofts and then walked home to her apartment on 24th Street. She slipped her arm through his, startled by two cats fighting under the swings in a small park. The streets were empty. He was drunk and happy.

“You seem happy, Grace,” he said, patting her arm.

“Maybe. I guess I’m happy. Are you happy?” Her voice was slurred with wine and she was looking back towards the cats.

“I’m not sure.”

“Well,” she squeezed his arm, “I think you should be.”

“Why?”

“Look at what a great sister you have. Not every sister helps get you laid, you know. You’re lucky.”

Back in her apartment he’d wanted to tell her that he knew he was lucky; that he loved her; that having her for a sister was the best thing in his life. He ran into the tiny bathroom and said, “You’re the best, Grace. You know that?”

She was brushing her teeth, moving the handle in a slow circle. She spat in the sink and straightened up, smacking her lips. “Well. Duh.”

"As long as you know," he said and went back to the couch, giddy, curling up beneath the sheets.

"Good night, dork," she'd said, getting into her bed, just ten feet away.

But there at the café in the Marais he couldn't think of anything to say, any way to continue the light-heartedness, and the moment was already gone.

As the train left Nice the young woman in his car picked up her bag and headed towards the door with *Café* stenciled on it.

"Are you hungry?" John said, turning to Grace.

She looked up, dazed, from her pages and said, "No," as though she hadn't quite heard the question. He'd read that Henry James in college, he wanted to tell her, but then she'd ask how he'd liked it and he'd have to either lie ("His use of point of view is brilliant, I think") or else tell the dumb truth ("I couldn't finish it"). He'd had a writing professor who'd once told him that if he wanted to be a real writer he needed to learn to love Henry James. "If you can't do that, there's no hope for you." And the man meant the late James, not *The Portrait of a Lady*, which John had in fact loved, or at least liked a lot. Since he'd been a little boy he'd wanted to be a writer: first he'd wanted to write something like *The BFG*, later something like *The Lord of the Rings*, and later still something like *This Side of Paradise*. But, like most things in his life, this desire had fallen by the wayside. It was, it turned out, a lot of work. And really one had to be a romantic to imagine they could be a writer.

"Well, I'm going to get something. Up at the café."

She smiled vaguely and nodded. It was a shame: his sister was beautiful, but seemed now to want to cover that up. The covering up had started soon after she'd met Michael; as though he wanted to contain her, hide the truth so no one might think to steal her away, as John had so often wished someone would.

"No coffee, no beer?" he said, standing up. The girl was out of sight through the doors. "It's getting late, so we might miss the

restaurants in Levanto.”

“No, John. I’m fine.”

“Alright.” He was already hurrying up the aisle, touching the headrests lightly to keep his balance.

The girl was sitting alone at a table near the bar with a small waxy cup of coffee, flipping through a magazine, which, John noticed as he passed, was in English. Fate, he thought, ordering a beer from the snarling Frenchman behind the bar. The man didn’t open the beer for John and it wasn’t a twist off, but he had a bottle opener on his keychain (which he still carried though of course he didn’t need keys to anything here, but without them he felt somehow naked). He popped the top off, grinning at the bartender, who looked about to burst at this impudence, then walked over to the girl.

“Excuse me,” he said, setting the bottle on her table. “Is anyone sitting here?” There’d be no misinterpreting this, as all the other booths, except one where an obese man was slumped over a plate of cheese and crackers, were empty.

The woman squinted appraisingly at him, then smiled and shifted her shoulders in a flirty way. He slipped into the booth. Their knees were nearly touching.

“I saw your magazine,” he said, taking a sip. “English.”

“No,” the girl said with a delicate, beautiful accent, “French. But I live in London.” She closed her magazine. He wanted to pick up her arm and kiss her wrists, which were thin, delicate, but, he knew without touching, strong.

He’d always had this kind of success with women. He was, he knew, one of the few truly good-looking men: six-foot-one, slightly curly brown hair, eyes so light blue they were nearly gray, a thin nose, and perfectly distinct, strong jaw, not too square. His stubble had, he’d discovered with much horror, begun to sprout a few random white hairs, but other than that you’d be hard pressed to guess he was over twenty-six.

“I’ve been to London,” he said.

"Amazing," she said. "I thought Americans never left their churches, except to occasionally bomb Third World countries."

"Right," he said. "I agree. We're idiots. You want a beer or wine or something?"

When she squinted fine wrinkles spread around her eyes. She might be around his age, maybe a few years younger. She nodded and looked shyly down at her hands.

Could it be he was actually falling in love on a train in France with a beautiful woman he'd just talked to out of the blue while his widowed sister was reading, or maybe sleeping (it was James, after all) just a car away? It could be, he thought. Oh God let it be so.

It was dark when he surfaced, hours later, from the hazy fantasy he'd fallen into. There she was, the French woman, Simone, still sitting across from him and pressing her leg against his beneath the table. He'd surfaced because she'd asked, "So, you're traveling alone?" smiling hopefully.

"Why?" he said.

"Because," she said, giving that wonderful shrug again, "I'm just asking."

"Why are you asking?"

She squirmed a little, pressing her leg harder into his, "I was going to ask if you're free to come up to the lake, where I'm staying."

He looked at her, then reached across the table and put his hand over hers. This was exactly what skin should feel like, he thought.

"Actually, I'm traveling with my sister."

"Oh," Simone said, her hand beneath his jerked just a bit, as though wanting to pull away, but not quite committed to it yet. "Well. Where is she?"

"Back at our seats," John said, looking over his shoulder.

Simone used this chance to pull her hand away.

"But I'm sure she'll be up for coming to the lake," he said. He wasn't sure at all. How could he even suggest it? How would he

explain it?

"Well," Simone said. "I'm staying at a little bed and breakfast there and I'm sure there are still rooms." She reached into her bag and pulled out a cell phone. "I could call. It really is a part of Italy you should see, and which very few ever do. Especially you Americans. Though you'll have to not let your guidebooks find out. Rick Steves." She flipped the phone open.

He wanted to tell her to call and book a room for Grace and him, though he could hardly imagine a world so disappointing in which he wouldn't end up in Simone's bed. But first he had to ask Grace. She'd been strict about keeping to her itinerary, as though it meant anything, as though it wasn't just an arbitrary catalog of places. And this lake, if Simone was right (how could she be wrong?), was probably much nicer than anything they'd see on their own, sticking to the tourist . . .

"I better ask my sister," he said.

Simone flipped the phone shut and squinted at him. "Of course you should."

"You'll be here?" he said.

"Right here," she said, patting the table lightly as he stood up and hurried through the car, glancing back to find her smiling after him.

In the hours that followed John would try over and over to figure out just what he'd seen as he opened the door to the car where Grace was waiting for him. He thought, thinking back, he'd seen three men running through the far door. He thought he'd heard them laughing. He thought they'd all been wearing leather jackets and he distinctly remembered a greasy, swinging ponytail flashing in the scattered lights that darted in and out from the highway they hurtled alongside. He thought he'd heard one of them shout. A name? Antonio? All he knew for sure was that, as the door closed behind the men, he'd stopped at the far end of the car, as though he'd known something bad had happened. He'd held his breath, straining to

listen, perhaps to that one word, that shout, and it was then he'd heard the sob and he'd known immediately it was Grace.

From that point everything was clearer. He ran to their seats and found his sister huddled against the window, pulling the torn folds of her shirt closed, her mouth moving, her body shaking. He said, "Jesus Christ, Grace. Oh shit." She looked up at him, mouth still moving, terrified, as though he was there to hurt her. Her legs were tucked up onto the seat and there was a cut, a scrape, from her right knee all the way to mid-calve. Her hair was a mess and strands of it stuck in her mouth. There were tears on her cheeks. Her body was stiff when he touched her arm, her back tense and rigid when he tried to hug her.

"Grace, what happened?" There were red marks around her neck and down her chest and the silver cross was gone. Her fingers no longer had the wedding and engagement rings. "Jesus Christ, Grace, tell me what happened."

She looked out the window, mouth moving, though he heard no words. The train was slowing into a station. Through the window he watched three men jump to the platform and run, laughing, smacking each other on the backs of their leather coats, to the dark mouth of a stairwell that swallowed them up.

"What happened, Grace?"

"They took my wallet," she said. Her voice was surprisingly calm, level, clear. "I was just sitting here. I was reading and they stopped right there," she pointed past him to the aisle, "and they just looked at me and then they grabbed me and took my bag and then they took my . . ." She stopped and looked down at her torn shirt. Her lips twisted, as though they didn't know how to shape the words.

"Grace," he said. "Did they hurt you?"

She smiled dimly, as though she was far away, as though she could hardly see him, for all the miles of air between. "Not really," she said.

The train let out a shuddering sigh and clanked back to life and glided forward.

“Grace,” he said, “I need to know what happened. What happened, Grace? You have to tell me.” He pulled her head to his chest so she wouldn’t see his tears.

It was Simone’s idea to contact the conductor and have him call the police. Grace didn’t want to.

“It’s just my purse,” she said, trying to pin her hair up away from her face.

“And your rings, and your cross,” John said. “And your passport.”

“I’ll get the conductor,” Simone said. She folded her arm across her chest and glared out at the highway. “Fucking bastards.” She continued to stare past Grace—who’d put on a new shirt and had stopped crying—as though they might spot the thieves there. She’d come from the café car when John didn’t return, looking for him, and had found him hugging his sister and she’d taken over where, it seemed, he could only flounder.

There was a small ball of fear in his stomach that Grace wasn’t telling the whole story, that more had happened. That the men had raped her. Or at least touched her, groped her. When he asked how her shirt had gotten torn she’d said, “I guess they thought I had, you know, one of those neck things.” She’d patted her neck lightly, then hung her hands at her sides as though now they needed washing.

When the train stopped at the next station (they were already in Italy), policemen came aboard and questioned Grace. What had they taken? How much was it worth? Her passport? They gave John a copy of the police report, frowning at him. What kind of a man was he? Letting his sister get attacked? Where had he been, they’d wanted to know, when this happened.

“In the café car,” he said, pointing towards it, but also at Simone. The guards smiled and nodded. They understood. He wasn’t fool-

ing anyone. Driven by his dick to abandon his sister. He was a coward, a jackass. The overhead fluorescent lights were on, making everyone, except Simone, look sickly green. The red marks on Grace's neck were more noticeable with the light, several of them were scratches, and her fear was obvious. Her eyes skittered from face to face, or stared blankly at her lap. She didn't look at John throughout the entire interview, as though he wasn't there, as though she was all alone, a young widow on a train who'd come to Europe to try to find some small happiness in the depths of all her loss and look what had happened. Look what the world was like. If only she had someone, someone she could trust, could rely on to help her, to make things a little bit easier, a little more pleasant, lighter, fuller. But she was alone.

A few minutes after the policemen left the train rolled on again.

"We're almost to Genoa," Simone said, leaning across the aisle from the seat she'd taken. Her jean jacket was buttoned all the way up. "I have a car reserved there and we could go up to the lake. If you're interested."

Grace looked at Simone as though she wasn't quite real, an illusion, a figment of her frightened mind.

"We're going to Levanto," Grace finally said, as though it was the answer to a difficult math question.

"I know," he said. "But I was talking to Simone," he winced at this reference to the past, but Grace didn't seem to register the connection, "and she says she knows of a lake, up near Genoa. She says it's better than the Cinqueterre. Less touristy, anyway." His sister frowned skeptically, so he looked at Simone. "Right?"

"Sure, though Levanto is nice, too," Simone said, straightening out in her seat. "If you already have plans, maybe you should go there."

John knew if he protested too much it'd look like all he wanted, even now that his sister had just been mugged (and maybe more) on the train, was to chase after some beautiful French woman. But that

wasn't it. He didn't want to be left alone with Grace. Not only was it clear he couldn't protect her, but he knew he couldn't give her whatever it was she needed now, after. Hadn't this trip made that clear: he was incapable of helping her, though it was what he most wanted, below the surface. But then the surface was the problem. The surface was all he ever really saw. He could so rarely get beneath the sun-warmed upper layers. The same writing professor who'd admonished him about James had diagnosed this problem in his writing: you've got plenty of plot here, but there's nothing beneath it to give it meaning. This was true, not only of his fiction, but of his self, his life. It was an awful truth to live with, but you learned, gradually, to do so. But it wasn't enough for his sister, for his sister whom he loved. They needed someone around to guide them and Simone was, obviously, the only option. Sure, it was a bonus that she was beautiful and just two and a half hours ago had been sitting across from him pressing her leg . . .

Fortunately, as his thoughts spooled out and tangled, Grace said, "OK. We can always go to Levanto afterwards, right?"

"Absolutely," he said. He wanted to hug her, to thank her. He felt such relief. He wanted Grace to know that he just wanted what was best for her, that he just wanted her to be happy, that he just wanted her to be OK. And he wanted to die knowing that, just a few hours ago, he'd left her here and . . . "Of course we can."

Both women smiled at him and he felt sure he was missing the meaning in each look.

It was as though his oars were broken, though of course they weren't. He lifted them out of the water and stared at their flat, glimmering wood faces. The boat shook, bobbed. Bobbed, he thought, was the wrong word. It implied softness; the way the boat pitched was anything but soft, as though any moment they might tip over and be tossed into the water. The boat with Grace, rowed by one of Simone's

two British male friends—fresh, they'd said proudly, out of Cambridge—had receded into the haze ahead.

John let his oars splash back into the water and then, though he wanted to surrender, began pulling again. That's what one did in a rowboat, one rowed.

This morning, two hours ago, in the library of the bed and breakfast she'd taken them to last night, Simone had come up behind him and run a hand around his stomach (he'd quickly sucked it in) and said, "Good morning," then kissed his cheek, as though they'd spent the night having long, excellent sex, instead of the truth: John had slept in his room with Grace, too worried to leave her alone. In the library Simone had gone to the shelves and pulled down a book and tossed it to him. She was wearing small white shorts and a white tank top, over which she wore a loose beige cotton cardigan with big, brown buttons. "You should read that, being an American and all." It was *A Farewell to Arms*. He told her he'd read it. Now, on the water, he remembered the scene when the narrator escapes to Switzerland by rowing for thirty-six hours straight. Hemingway's men were ridiculous. But then, it turned out, so was he.

At breakfast, Simone had introduced Grace and him to her friends, Ivan and Paul. They looked like brothers with their freshly ironed shirts opened two buttons down the front, providing glimpses of hairless, tanned chests. One was taller than the other, and thinner, with thick brown hair that somehow rose up in a wave atop his forehead. The other had curly, bright red hair and freckles spilling down the bridge of his nose. The two talked all through the meal, apparently unconcerned about who these Americans were or why they were with Simone and then they said why didn't they all row across the lake to the villa? Brilliant idea.

"Problems," Simone said from behind him. The water thudded like little feet against the side of the boat.

"No problem," he said. "Though I think there's a good chance we'll drown."

“Oh, no. Horrible.” Her hair was held back by a red handkerchief and a few strands had slipped loose and were blowing around her face.

“It will be when we’re dead,” he said, looking back at the sun-streaked lake.

How could you say what he was doing wrong? He was dipping the oars into the water – he did it again now – and then pulling back through his shoulders, but the boat didn’t seem to move, just jerked and thudded in the waves made rough by the wind that bent the trees along the shore, their narrow tips dipping in unsteady bows.

“Need help?”

“Sure.” He slapped the water with the oars.

She clambered up beside him, poking him in the leg to make room.

“Now,” she said, “I’ll take this one, you that one. I’ll count. We’ll pull on two.”

“Why not three?” he said. When he turned to look at her a strand of hair blew into his mouth and the sudden, shocking taste of it there, the bright smell of her shampoo, the curl that seemed to wrap itself around his tongue, made him blink and look down at her brown legs.

She unhooked her hair from his mouth and said, “Because I’ve decided on two. Now, take your oar.” On two they pulled. At first it felt as though they were still getting nowhere, but after a dozen strokes the shore began to fall away. The line of blowing trees coalesced into a darker line. Between them and the trees was the bright patch of water, crisps of light. After a minute he could see the boat with his sister in it.

“Faster!” Simone shouted, stomping her feet.

“Don’t sink us,” he said. Sweat ran down his face. The muscles in his arms burned.

“Shut up,” she said. “Pull harder.” She began to lean into her strokes and he followed, so they were leaning forward together and pulling back, the boat moving easily.

"I didn't," a voice shouted from nearby, "think you'd make it." It was the redheaded man, Paul or Ivan, sitting in the back of the boat beside Grace. The man and Grace both wore blue shirts, as though they'd planned it that way.

His sister was shielding her eyes and looking up towards the villa, perched on the hill. It was a museum, the British men had told them: Renaissance art. Grace had said she'd love to see it.

He wanted her to look at him, to nod, to acknowledge his presence. Last night, when he'd closed the door to their room, she'd stared at him for a moment as though she wanted to say something important. Her bottom lip had twitched a few times and he'd leaned against the door, wanting her to yell at him, to blame him, to ask what the fuck was wrong with him and why the hell were they up here at some stupid lake she'd never heard of with a woman he'd met on the train while she was being attacked? If she yelled at him, he could agree. Yes, it was his fault. Did she know how sorry he was? He was so sorry. So sorry for what had happened on the train and so sorry for what had happened to Michael and so sorry for judging her, for laughing at her in Notre Dame. So sorry for only calling every three, four, five months, for not writing back on email right away, for not knowing who she was, for not knowing what had happened to their friendship.

"Nice room," he said, though that's not what he meant to say. "Don't you think?"

She looked around, as though seeing the place for the first time, then nodded and looked at the open top of her pack, as though she needed something from it, but didn't have the energy to reach over.

"Maybe we should've just gone to Levanto," he said. He felt panicky, wanted her to say something.

All she said was, "Why?"

"I don't know," he said. "But I mean, we could still go, if you want." *I'll pay for it, I have credit cards*, he wanted to say. He didn't know what they were doing here any more than she did. But it could

be undone. Wasn't that the thing about life: you could undo so much of it. It's just that most people don't, or won't. For whatever reason.

"Don't be ridiculous, John," she said. "It's eleven o'clock."

"I know," he said, trying to smile. "Are you OK, Grace?"

"John," she said, her voice wavering.

"Because it's OK to be scared, Grace. Jesus Christ, I'm scared. I don't even know how we got up here. I'm sorry." He held his hands out as though he wanted her to take them. "I'm sorry we came here, Grace."

She didn't yell, or cry. She didn't say anything; just sighed, stood and walked into the bathroom. The shower started running. He sat on his bed and watched the end of a football game. She stayed in the bathroom for almost an hour and when she came out crawled right into bed and said, "Good night, John." That was it. That was all she'd said. It had been terrible. Just what he deserved.

Now, in the boat, while Simone and the British men shouted about where they should dock, he stared at his sister and thought, *Look at me. If you hate me, if you want me to leave you alone, just tell me. I will. I'll do whatever you want.*

She continued to shield her eyes and look into the distance and then Ivan or Paul started rowing again, shooting them over the water.

There was a small dock, already crowded with rowboats, at the foot of a thin trail. John, unable to maneuver to a spot, tossed his rope to one of the taller of the British men (Ivan, it turned out) and was pulled ashore. By the time he and Simone were out of the water, Grace and Paul had already disappeared up the path.

He wanted to run after her, make sure she was OK, but walked like a civilized person behind Simone and Ivan, whose conversation lapsed between French and English and occasionally into Italian so he couldn't follow much of it.

Clearly, this had been a mistake. He'd allowed Simone to bring them to this lake when they should've just stayed on straight to

Levanto. In Levanto, hiking the coast between the five towns, he and Grace could've been alone, could've talked about what had happened on the train. If he'd never met Simone none of this, of course, would've happened. Right? Or maybe the men would've just included him in the mugging. Maybe they'd have stuck a knife in his throat, or stomach, to shut him up, get him out of the way so they could get to his sister. But there they were with a bunch of strangers, hiking up into a piney forest along a slim, steep path that made him gasp for breath.

"Think you'll make it back there?" Simone said. Her right arm was tucked through Ivan's left. It was possible Ivan was her boyfriend. Or fiancé. Or husband, for Christ's sake. Maybe they were a bunch of perverts. Maybe this was all a game: lure a couple of innocent Americans up to a villa one of their father's owned and then, once they were inside, the doors locked, bring out the tray of instruments, the straps, the leather . . .

Couples strolled with museum-languor across the wide stone patio that overlooked the lake. The small town where they had rooms could only just be seen on the far side through the glare and haze. Through the villa's wide, tall clear windows he could see tapestries and paintings of square-faced saints and horse-mounted knights.

"Anyone need a drink?" Ivan said, pointing to a cart where a man was pouring wine.

Simone shook her head and John said, "I don't drink before eleven."

"Your mistake." Ivan smiled winningly and sauntered off.

Now that they were alone, Simone slipped her arm through his. One of the large, soft buttons of her sweater pressed into his arm. "Isn't it nice?"

"Nice?" John said. He didn't see Grace anywhere. The villa was three stories, balconies on each level. Grace could be anywhere, on any level, in any room, with a stranger.

"Yes, nice," she said, pinching his arm and leading him into the museum. He paid for both their tickets when she made no move for

her pockets.

"I wonder where Paul and Grace are," he said, interrupting one of Simone's lectures on the historical importance of a tapestry which looked just about the same as all the rest.

"Around here somewhere," she said, frowning at him. "Is she OK, your sister? After last night."

"I hope so," he said. He should've known the answer. He should've been able to say, *Of course she is, don't worry about it, she'll be fine.*

"It can be scary. I was recently robbed in London, in Soho, on my way to the theatre. We don't like to think that it happens all the time, but it does." She guided him along to another tapestry. He thought he saw Paul, but it turned out, when John hurried forward to look, to be a little redheaded boy, clinging to his father's back, laughing.

Was Simone suggesting there was no reason to get upset about what had happened on the train, that Grace was overreacting? It happened all the time. Grace should just pick herself up and he shouldn't fret about her, should focus his energies on flirting with this pretty young woman who was kind enough to give him, an American no less, her time. But what did Simone know about him, or his sister? Nothing. What if he told her the truth, all the details about his sister's life, about the fights with their parents when she'd gone to the Rhode Island School for Design instead of Harvard, about the sudden retreat into this whole other self when she'd married a lawyer who owned a brownstone in Brooklyn with a little garden out back full of miniature Japanese trees? How many details would it take for Simone to understand his sister, to know her, to feel compassion, empathy? Could John do it? He doubted it. And what did it matter? It didn't matter if no one else understood Grace; the problem was *he* didn't understand her. Even years ago, pre-Michael, he'd always drained her, taken things: take me to parties, set me up with her, I haven't been to that bar and on and on. Had he ever given anything back? The only person who could answer this, of course,

was Grace, but he couldn't ask her. That wasn't important. The important thing right now was to find her. Just to stay close to her. To make sure she was OK, or as OK as she could be, considering. Not to leave her alone with some arrogant Cambridge boy, out here in the middle of nowhere.

They reached the last room and Simone said, "Want to go to the next level? I can tell how thrilled you are by all this." She pulled her handkerchief off and combed fingers through her hair, smiling in a way she probably thought of as seductive. It was.

"I'd like to find my sister," he said. His anxiety had been building all through Simone's art lectures. This museum wasn't that big, so where the hell was Grace?

"You didn't see her?" Simone said, her smile turning into a flirtatious frown. "She went by with Paul, while I was telling you about Raphael."

"Where?"

"Out there," Simone pointed to the patio.

"Where?" he nearly bumped Simone, heading for the doors.

"I saw them, just a minute ago," she said, following.

Ivan was sitting with his feet up against the patio ledge, a glass of wine in one hand. He shouted, "Simone, come here and rub my shoulders. That rowing killed me."

John didn't see Grace. The patio was nearly deserted.

"Enjoy some of the art?" Ivan said, as though this was a joke.

"Have you seen Grace?" John wanted to knock that complacent, disingenuous smile off the man's face.

"Oh dear," Ivan said, putting a finger to his lips, as though deep in thought. "I think I might have seen them."

"Where?" John said. It came out as a shout. He didn't intend it, but there it was. Ivan smiled at him and nodded.

"Somewhere," the Englishman said, softly, then took a sip of wine. "Simone, you know Paul. Once he sets his mind on something there's no stopping him. It's his Irish blood." Ivan chuckled. "And I do think

he's set his mind on your American lady-friend. So, I wouldn't imagine you'd want to bother them just now."

Simone put a hand on John's arm and said, "I think . . ."

"Where are they?" John shouted, shrugging her hand off, stepping towards Ivan.

Ivan's eyes widened, as though realizing he might not in fact get the joke. "I—" he started, with his maddeningly slow voice.

"Just tell me where they are, you fucking asshole," John said.

"John," Simone said, touching his arm again. "Calm down."

"Just tell me where my sister is," John said, managing this time not to shout.

"What is wrong with this bloke?" Ivan said, turning his face towards the lake, as though he was done here.

John very nearly punched him then, but managed to just reach out, grab the wine glass from Ivan's long fingers and set it on the patio's ledge.

"Now, tell me where they are."

"John, please," Simone said.

"Who's talking to you?" he said, turning towards her, his hands balled into fists.

"Slowly, now," Ivan said, starting to stand.

Simone put a hand to her mouth and shook her head, then pointed to the path and said, "I think they went that way."

"Which way?" John said. He didn't want to take his eyes off Ivan, wouldn't have put it past the man to smash the wine glass over his head.

"Down, I think," Simone said, looking frightened.

John ran across the patio, not looking back, and down the gravel path. Couples were climbing towards him and he nearly bowled the first two over, running, arms out for balance and he didn't care; he needed to find Grace, to make sure she was safe. He wasn't going to leave her again, alone with some man they didn't know in the woods along a lake he didn't know the name of near a town he'd never

heard of. He should never have brought them here. His breath was coming short and it was hard, running at full speed, to keep his eyes on the path and eventually he slipped, falling onto his right knee, his pants tearing, pain shooting up his back as he tumbled into a bush.

For a moment he lay in the branches. Unfortunately, he was still alive. His knee grew a small heart and began thudding. When he opened his eyes he saw a couple watching him, clutching each other. They whispered, then hurried away up the hill.

As he climbed back to the path his shirt and hair caught in the branches. He tried to step firmly on his right leg but it nearly gave out and he stumbled to a tree for balance.

He wasn't far from the bottom, from the dock and managed, by hopping from tree to tree, to get down the last hundred yards. If he put full weight on his injured leg nausea rushed through his head, making him dizzy. When he emerged from the tree line he could see, out on the flashing water, a boat.

He stumbled up to the edge of the dock and let his shoe dangle into the water, staring out at the boat. There were two people in it. One at the oars, the other at the back. The sun off the waves seemed to poke at his eyes, but he ignored the dull headache and focused on the boat and could, after a minute, see that it was a man and a woman and the woman had long hair like Grace. The man, with his back to the dock, had red hair. The woman in the boat was at the oars. She was wearing a blue shirt, just like Grace's.

He knew it was Grace. There was no way to be sure, but he thought she was laughing. He thought she could probably see him, facing the dock as she was and he raised his arm and waved. The woman in the boat reached a hand up, but not to wave, to shield her eyes, as though trying to make out the shape on the shore.

"Grace," he shouted. "Grace, come here!" He tried to get to his feet, but his right leg seemed to have gone dead, was made now of stone, impossibly heavy. The woman on the boat lowered her hand and lifted the oars and pulled. Over and over Grace pulled and each

time the boat slipped a bit farther away, deeper into the blaze of light until, in less than a minute, faster than seemed possible, it was out of sight. ■