

Affogato



FIGURE 1: *Espresso over gelato, hot and cold in the extreme.*

"AFFOGATO AL CAFFE" BY RICHARD HUBER IS LICENSED UNDER CC BY 3.0.

*she is earth, who made me hot and cold:
my laurels are bare, like the oaks and elms*

— PETRARCH

IN ITALIAN IT MEANS "drowned." Some say the meaning is closer to "choking." Struggling for breath. I would never have guessed this, sitting in Piazza del Popolo at a café where Hemingway was known to get hammered on Meletti, sitting there not alone but with you, as the waiter in his jacket and tails brought the soda glasses to our mint green table outside. I would never have guessed that a name so buoyant (say it: *affogato*), describing a dish so comforting and benign, could suggest such violence. But it makes sense. Espresso over vanilla gelato, sometimes with the almond burn of amaretto, if that's what you like. Hot and cold together in the extreme, energies clashing, ingredients slowly shifting from one state to another. Dramatically Italian: a Petrarchan sonnet with

a spoon. So painfully good, the name implies, one taste empties your lungs and leaves you gasping.

That day, after hours standing in the dry June heat, old men peering over your shoulder at the canvas and smiling or shrugging, everyone a critic, you were glad to sit and indulge in this dessert you remembered, that I'd heard of only from you. You were happy to share the knowledge of an exotic treat, you said (though you didn't know the meaning of the name either), just as you were happy to share your experience of the place itself: Ascoli Piceno, the small medieval city in central Italy where you had come for the summer with peers and professors to capture the olive groves and steep cobblestone *strade* in charcoal and oils. It was your second time there and you were my buffer and liaison, translator of my stuttering stabs at the language, my guide in that new place.

Ascoli: where I'd traveled to visit after weeks of feeling your absence like a sickness. Ascoli where you took me, first thing, to a fountain shaped like a horse's head so I could cup the cool gush to my mouth. Ascoli where we ate olives stuffed with sausage, tossed in truffle breading and fried. Where, in the piazzas, whole families linger past midnight, refugees from Ghana beg in the clearest English, and teenage girls with women's bodies flash strong, brown legs. Ascoli where we made love quietly, worried about thumping the wall and disturbing your roommate, her Bible on the nightstand in the next room. Ascoli, home of Chiesa di San Francesco, begun in the thirteenth century, where you lit a candle for my grandmother and where I sat one morning in the backmost pew, stunned, watching light pulse through stained glass and listening to the priest drone forth in Latin until the sound grew heavy, and I understood that Catholic trappings, even in the most glorious setting, will leave me cold. Beauty and history not enough. Ascoli where we drank sweet, airy cappuccinos and bitter red Negronis. Where we got lost at dusk, sidestepped Fiats and Vespas in narrow alleyways, swifts slicing above us like bats. Where, during my stay, a construction crew suspended work because they'd unearthed a human skeleton, hundreds of years old, perfectly intact and ringed

in stones, beneath the street. “I guess it happens a lot here,” you said.

Ascoli where you’d studied ten summers before with your sister, three-and-a-half years older, your fierce chaperone and impossible rival, who painted beautifully with her eyes like you paint beautifully with your gut, who loved you with difference and criticism, who told you that Italian men are sloppy kissers, leading with their tongues and hips.

Ascoli where, that day, sitting with our soda glasses at the mint green table, we watched a smiling man and woman stride toward the café, a couple who were not a couple. A cameraman followed—a scruffy, middle-aged Brit in flip-flops who tracked them through the viewfinder and paused beside our table.

“That looks tremendous!” the cameraman said to you, and you laughed (your laugh: so surprising, a cork burst, an accordion blast) and told him what it was. Then he nodded to me, almost fatherly, his eyes glinting with transnational goodwill, as if to say, *Yes, young American, you are doing something right.*

“Having an *affogato*,” said his assistant, another Englishman holding a boom mic, not looking at us but staring off into space. He was already there: a few hours into the future, hunched over a table with actors and crew after the silly romantic film wrapped for the afternoon, his spoon plunging deep, creamy coffee rolling in his mouth.

There is a photo of us from that day, one I took after I’d scooped the last milky dregs from my soda glass. We are leaning in, heads close, our hair changed by the heat: mine puffed into a mane, yours in wisps. It’s past noon—around us the piazza is clearing out, thinning to desolation after the bustling rush of morning, though you can’t tell from the photo. I am wearing a jokey T-shirt with the silhouette of a dinosaur failing to execute a pushup, his arms too short, with the words T-REX HATES PUSHUPS above the image, a shirt I’d never have bought for myself (too conspicuous, too young) but which I love, a Christmas gift from your sister and her soon-to-be husband, whose wedding we would attend two months later. Your sister who picked out a dress in ten minutes but who would fret over wildflowers, the two of you pulling bunches from buckets of water, swapping colors, binding stems with lace and wire. Your sister who would walk barefoot down a grass aisle on a farm in New Hampshire, a day full of light and sweat, torches and dancing and mosquitoes that would make the cold of November seem impossible.

In the photo from the café, the top of a soda glass is visible between us, its rim smeared with coffee and cream. Looming from it, silver and huge, the end of the spoon looks like it’s

pressed to my neck—a trick of perspective—threatening playfully, like we did when a man in Rome dressed as a centurion handed us his plastic sword and said, “Kill me! Kill me!” We took turns snapping pictures, each of us pointing the fake blade at his belly, before he stopped smiling and demanded twenty euros. You paid him but were so angry afterward, so disappointed in him, in yourself. Death a joke, a scam, a souvenir. “It’s okay,” I said. “Don’t worry. You can’t change it now.” I wanted to calm you down, to get back to how it was before, Peroni bottles and lemon gelato, everything brisk and easy.

How did it happen, November in Boston, the wind howling off the Charles and the oaks and elms already bare? Boston, where we met by chance and let our lives entangle and moved into a drafty, moth-besieged house beside the woods, where we live still. Boston where, in November, five months after Ascoli, we warmed our throats with cider and meandered through the Public Garden, a place you used to walk seven years earlier by yourself, back when you smoked Camels and drank cheap beer and lived with someone else, after your sister’s diagnosis. Now, with me, you needed a break from the hospital, from the waiting, from the ward where I visited and where you and your family camped for two weeks, the glass room where she burned with tumor fever, where you replenished her ice water and held the straw to her lips, where she struggled to stomach crackers, yogurt, Starbursts, anything, where she said “Don’t worry” again and again though she knew she was losing, had been all along, for seven years, all of you, losing. Everyone around her choking, fighting for breath.

Life in conflict with itself, energies clashing, a body slowly shifting from one state to another. Then quickly. No one could have guessed.

I stand in our bedroom, reading a poem I wrote to honor a marriage that would last three months, a poem about a future we all envisioned that will not happen. Not now. Thinking of your parents, married for almost four decades, and my parents, the same. Thinking of your brother-in-law, twenty-eight and a widower. *She is earth, who made me hot and cold.* Thinking of us, unmarried, hopeful but unsure of our place together, our places alone. Thinking of extremes. Knowing I love you but she is gone and you are different.

In the photo from the café, glowing now on my computer screen, we stare into the lens almost smiling, maybe too relaxed to smile. We are unconcerned with time, lulled by the pace of a city that has learned over centuries what Americans have not: the moment is everything; we can’t outrun ourselves. It is days before you will hug my neck and put me on a bus to Rome, weeks before your return to Boston and

months before November, before you will feel an emptiness I can understand with my mind but not my gut, never my gut, because I still have a sister. After leaving the piazza, we will climb the hill from the center of town, past smartly dressed women with bags of groceries and the last shopkeepers closing their shutters for *riposo*. *Buon giorno*, they will say. We will walk to your building with its brass door, up to the apartment where your roommates are already napping, and your room, quiet and bright, windows thrown open on a view of hanging clothes and mossy roofs. We will fall onto twin beds you've pushed together, stretch out like kids on school mats, and surrender to that crushing, Mediterranean fatigue, heavy as any sedative. After waking, we'll make lunch in the small

kitchen — sharp dry cheese, prosciutto thin as vellum, bread and the greenest olive oil — but not too soon, because you are full from the *affogato* that, unlike me, you couldn't finish. Too much, you said. Too much to take. You offered me the rest.

In the photo we look content. Sanguine, eyelids lazy, faces red from sun. A moment collapsing toward the future we can't know. The café wall is a marble slab behind our heads, and over my shoulder is a darkened window, reflecting fragments of the scene beyond the camera, beyond my outstretched arm: glimpses of ancient stones and warped pillars and muted blue sky, a foreign place in pieces, contours of what's in front of us. 🍷