

## TOURING

The old village is awake near the sea, drinking coffee from a chipped white demitasse and speaking Italian to its bees, which move from flower to flower in numbered order, thinking always of the way home.

••

Mikail and Olesya arrived in Italy on the overnight train from Budapest. By this time they felt as hollowed-out and bankrupt as the New Russia they'd left behind. To save money, they had been told, travel at night. Sleep on the trains and use your backpacks as pillows to avoid theft, but twice now they had been robbed of everything they owned while sleeping on the train. A body will shift unconsciously as it dreams. A head rolls free of its possessions. Arms fall restless and alone to the floor. By morning, their backpacks were gone, their money, their passports, train tickets, clothing. They were put off the train again by the conductor, short of their intended destination.

The first time this happened, in the Ukraine, they were put off in a wheat field, and now, entering Italy from the north, on a goat trail leading down to a village by the sea.

"I am so tired of thieves!" Olesya shouted to the sky. Her name, pronounced "All-yes-yuh." This was Mikail's joke: "Olesya, I'll undress ya."

"Say it in Russian," she said.

"It doesn't work in Russian," he told her. "Let me teach you English while we're riding on the trains," he offered.

Then he explained to her in Russian what it meant, and she smiled.

No one pronounced her name correctly outside of Russia. "I don't care if people can say my name," she told him. "Our passports are gone again. Work on that."

They walked to the village by the sea. They looked for the name of the town but there were no signs posted. A place, too, without a passport. The village paid them no mind. The village sat in a white wicker chair and ate its breakfast, and over the mountains to the east a warm summer sun broke free of the earth like a child's balloon.

In the arms of the Adriatic, large pleasure boats slept at anchor, in a deep blue bay so beautiful it seemed to Mikail to be a computer-aided photograph. The boats were too large to be trailered ashore, and therefore had spent their entire lives at sea. Their clean white linen curtains were drawn closed against the ragged likes of Mikail and Olesya. Their smooth teak railings were polished for no reason except to reflect the summer's bright clouds. Their dark wooden steps, rising from one deck to the next like a map of love seeking the object of its affection.

"Let's find a park bench and get some sleep," Mikail said.

Olesya had noticed, when problems grew too large for Mikail to take on, he became tired and slept. "You sleep," she told him, "I'm going to go do something."

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Something."

She gripped his shirt and kissed him squarely on the mouth and walked away, her eyes as blue and unreal as the bay and its boats, her hair, bleached blond with store-bought treatments, harsh and unforgettable, dancing from side to side as she walked.

They'd been touring and sleeping together for a month. Mikail had found her name posted on a bulletin board in Moscow, matching up people who wanted to travel together to save

on expenses. They had talked by phone and arranged to meet at the train station. If it felt right, they agreed, they would leave that day. It was summertime and warm and they slept outside in fields and parks, and on the trains, and once a week they found a small hotel in a village along the way for a hot shower and a night together in a real bed.

Mikail stood a foot taller than Olesya, and very thin—so thin that people looked twice at him to consider: Was his body growing properly? Had he been in an accident? Could he have an eating disorder?

In fact he suffered from a broken heart, as the saying goes. A girl who had left him in Moscow, he confided in Olesya. He had also broken his leg badly, years before that, and still felt pain when he sat for a long time in one position.

“Why do you rub your thigh?” Olesya asked him, their first night together on the train. He told her the story then of his father, a very large and powerful man, who fell one day on Mikail while they were ice-skating in Gorky Park, and snapped his femur in two like a chicken bone. His father had forced him to stand up on his good leg and try to skate again and not create a scene in the park.

“Let me rub it for you,” she told him.

His hair was long—black and unruly the way she liked it—a wild and czar-ish look. He wore the clothing she’d bought for him in towns along the way—a pair of tight black jeans and a black Ukrainian T-shirt, with a black leather belt made in Hungary, studded with silver points from one end around to the other. He looked like a failed rock musician now, a drummer tormented by his visions of art, corrupted. “That’s the look I’m going for, anyway,” she told him.

“I’ve always loved musicians,” she said.

“I’m a welder,” he said.

“You’ve got the rest of your life to learn music,” she told him.

“Anyway, you’re not a welder now,” she said.

This was on the train from Budapest, in the middle of the night, before their backpacks were stolen for the second time. Now they were nobody again, standing in the streets of a village without a name somewhere along the Adriatic Sea. Her bleach-blond hair walked away from him and he looked for a place to sleep nearby and she passed the local citizens lounging in their weathered chairs, drinking from their small white cups. She could hear the bees in the hedgerows and the sunflowers along the lane, and she thought of how hard her mother had worked in Russia to grow a little food in the courtyard of their apartment building, where the sunlight slanted through to a small garden for a few hours each afternoon. Here in Italy, God threw sunshine away like confetti, littering driveways and backyards with it, lavishing olive groves and vineyards and lemon trees already awash in a surplus of heat and light.

For Olesya’s mother, growing summer vegetables in Moscow had been an exercise in futility. “At least it’s exercise,” she joked. She held up her old arms, like a bodybuilder, and pretended to flex her withered muscles.

“Do you have drinking money for me?” she asked. She was honest with her daughter about her alcoholism. No, she wasn’t going out to spend the evening with Mrs. N., or to look in on her aging parents. She was going out for a bottle of vodka.

From time to time she failed to come home until noon the following day, having spent the night somewhere with a man. She swore them both off, men and vodka, in the sober light of the afternoon, but it always came around again, the need to spend the night in a stupor of affection in the arms of a stranger.

It seemed, no matter what city Olesya walked into, she found the ghost of her mother sitting there, and the ghosts of the broken men she had loved. Some nights, looking into Mikail's eyes on the train, she saw her ghost in him.

••

"Here you are."

She dropped a pair of backpacks at Mikail's feet. He was laid out asleep on a bench at a bus stop a block from where she had left him. He squinted into the bright blue morning sky and located her silhouette, the loose top that hid her very nice figure from all the world but him, and the jeans that danced along when she walked, like a girl on a playground after school.

"What are these?" he asked, arranging himself on an elbow and taking a look.

"Sit up, babe." She slapped at his legs to make room for herself on the bench, and he swung himself into a vertical position. He rubbed his thigh out of habit, before the pain began.

"I'm done with being nice," she said. She sat down firmly beside him.

"What did you do?" he asked.

"I went to the train station, and I stole us two nice backpacks."

"Jesus, Yesya!" he said.

"Don't Jesus me," she said. "I'm done with being nice."

She went through the backpacks while Mikail watched nervously for police. No one came for them. Not even the bus that was scheduled for the stop came for them. There was enough money in the backpacks to support them for a week, plus rail passes, cigarettes, music players, clothing. They found two passports, belonging to a couple of American college boys spending their summer in Europe, born in Boston, Massachusetts and White Plains, New York.

"We could return the passports to the train station," Mikail said.

"Are you crazy?" Olesya asked. She threw the passports into a nearby trash can. "They deserve it."

She looked out again at the sparkling Adriatic. "These towns look so much better to me when I have money for breakfast," she said.

Mikail sat silently.

"It's not the end of the world," she said, "stealing a backpack."

"We can sleep together in a proper bed tonight," she told him. "With proper sex and a shower."

Mikail looked out at the water. It seemed farther off to him than ever, the boats that spent their life at sea and the wooden stairs that climbed from deck to deck, seeking the object of their affection. Olesya put a hand to his face and pulled his gaze around to hers. She kissed him.

"Forget her, babe," she said. "You've got me now."

••

Waiting at the locked gates of the Russian Consulate in Trieste the following morning, Olesya sat on the curb and watched the sparrows at her feet, playing dangerously in traffic and driving each other off with small attacks.

"You think songbirds are happy," she said, "but you look at them, it's one fight after another, over crumbs."

"Songbird," she said to them, urging an end to the skirmish.

She reached out and took Mikail's hand in hers. "We'll be alright," she told him. "You and me." She squeezed his hand warmly and smiled. "Believe it."

••

The girl whom Mikail could not forget, who had broken his heart in Moscow, was in fact his twin sister, with whom he'd shared an apartment for three years. Since the age of 16, she'd been very sick with bone cancer, and she should have lived at home until the very end, with their parents, but she begged Mikail, "I want to know what it's like to live in the world."

"I want to cut flowers for my own table," she told him.

"I want to work as an adult before I die."

"What do I say to that?" he asked his roommate, who stayed on with them for a month and then moved out.

She lived longer than anyone thought she would live, and when she died, she died without a sound as Mikail slept in his bedroom next to hers after a hard day of welding. He found her in the morning, her skin as fragile and strong as white bone china, and when he touched her face to say goodbye she seemed to shatter in his hands, like a dropped white cup, like songbirds scattered by traffic on a cobblestone street.

He hadn't worked a day since then, wandering Moscow like a twin soul in search of its grave. "It feels like a mirror has been taken from a wall that's always had a mirror," he told his friends. They left him alone in the end, unable to help.

An old Russian bureaucrat came out at last and greeted them at the Consulate gate. He smelled of ink and paper and he wore a solid scowl across his large, square face. He pulled the heavy iron fencing open and walked them in and they told him their story.

"Why are you in Trieste?" he said. "You are walking in the wrong direction."

"We thought—south," Mikail said, confused.

The bureaucrat nearly spit at them for not owning a map. They applied for their second replacement passport in two weeks. There were more questions this time around, more instructions on how to secure one's belongings while on holiday, but the result was the same—valid identification and peace of mind restored.

"To Rome!" Olesya said, back outside on the street.

"I have something to tell you on the way," Mikail said.

"Tell me now."

"On the train," he said.

Mikail had little experience with women other than Olesya, and he was surprised at what angered them. For instance. Leading her on to believe that he'd left a girlfriend behind in Moscow, when in fact it had been his twin sister, who had died. Keeping this to himself for a month. Omitting the important facts of his life.

He didn't care if she was angry with him. *He* felt better, getting the story out. Although he'd never seen this side of her—she yelled so loudly on the train to Rome, it prevented thieves, or anyone else, from approaching them. A thief is looking for a quiet mark. A *victim*. Not a tornado, screaming in Russian.

As her verbal storm blew itself out, he smiled at her. "Yesya. The names you call me will change nothing," he said. "I loved my sister, and I love you."

It was the first time he had told her he loved her, and it took her breath away.

••

“Tell me what she was like,” Olesya said. The train continued south to Rome without feelings for either of them, with feelings only for the steel tracks beneath its wheels.

“I can’t,” he told her.

“Tell me. It’s good for you to talk about it.”

“How can I describe a person in one conversation?” he asked.

“We have seven hours to Rome,” she said.

“It’s too difficult.”

She nodded, understanding grief. “What was her name? Tell me that much.”

“I can’t.”

“Only her name.”

“No.”

“Mikhail, what’s wrong with you? It’s me.”

“Her name was *Olesya!*”

Silence fell then, between them, as if the train were rolling to a stop at an empty station.

“Olesya,” she repeated.

“Yes.”

“Your sister had my name.”

“Yes.”

“That is too odd. How is it that we’re sitting here together?” She thought back. “You saw my name on the bulletin board in Moscow and you called me. You chose me for my name.”

“Yes.”

“That is sick. I think. In a way. I don’t know what to think. I don’t think I’m happy about it.”

“No. You aren’t, you shouldn’t be, I’m sorry,” he said.

“Let me think. Should we be touring together? Should we be *sleeping* together? Is this healthy for you?”

“It is! Only—you should change your name. To anything. What other names do you like?”

“I don’t know.”

“Think.”

“This is very odd.” She looked into her hands. They were empty.

“I like Bata,” she said.

“Bata.”

“Yes. When I was a young girl my mother called me Bata. I don’t know why. I hope it was for a good reason.”

“So,” Mikhail said. “Bata. That’s good. We can go on to Rome then.”

“Yes.”

“Together. You’re Bata now,” he said.

They looped their backpack straps through their belts as the bureaucrat at the Consulate had advised, and they shoved their passports into their underwear and fell asleep against each other, against the window glass, against Italy, dark and rolling by in its own, unnamable way.

..

Rome is a city built for its sights. You can walk into the Pantheon for free. You can take a long nap in the shade of the Coliseum and count the seven hills. It’s a stone city, though, and in the summer the stones give up their heat fiercely, all evening long, like a mad man with a fever.

The grass parks of the Villa Borghese are the only public places cool enough for a good night's sleep outdoors, among the bushes and fountains and the tall parasol trees that arch overhead like the Renaissance itself—sun-dappled cathedrals by day; the painted heavens by night.

One evening, late, in the park, an old bearded vagrant sat on the edge of a large, plain, circular fountain—not a famous fountain, but a reliable one—and he watched Mikail and Bata making love in near-darkness on the lawn nearby. When they were finished, they saw him and asked him to turn away so they could dress, and he turned away. Then he shuffled over to them and sat down gently on the lawn where they had just been lying together, and they talked.

He had been a professor of astronomy in Prague, he told them, and he spoke a little Russian. He had lost his job over a scandal in the department. He came to Rome because he had family here, but he preferred living in the park.

They stood and returned to the fountain together and sat with their feet cooling in the water and talked about how to find a good meal for free in Rome. The old man stared down Bata's shirt and ached for his youth until it was time for them to go their separate ways and find a safe place to in the park for the night.

Water was never a problem in Rome. It ran continuously from small spigots set into walls and sidewalk faucets throughout the city. Bread and meat were affordable at the small groceries in the quieter neighborhoods, usually with a bathroom available if you were a paying customer. At restaurants, at the outside tables, diners left good food behind when they stood to leave, if you got to it before the waiter returned to clear the dishes away. Untouched antipasti. Bread and olive oil. A fingerful of red wine left in a glass.

One night in seven, Mikail and Bata stayed at a youth hostel or a two-star hotel, where they showered and had proper sex, but most of these places had unclean beds and no air-conditioning and they could get a better night's sleep outdoors on the grass of the Villa Borghese.

They lived in Rome the rest of the summer. When they needed money, they lifted backpacks and purses from other tourists, as good Roman thieves would, best done in the early evening at outside tables, targeting Americans who ate dinner early and drank heavily and carried more cash than other tourists.

"It's not so difficult after awhile," Mikail said. "Borrowing from the rich."

"It's lovely here," Bata said.

"Could we ever live here?" she asked him. "Could we ever find work?"

They sat on the curb in the shadow of the Spanish Steps and watched a troupe of street performers dancing for money in the piazza near an old fountain. The fountain sagged in the shape of a small boat half-sunk and overflowing its sides.

"There is no point talking about work," Mikail said.

"Look at all these railings," Bata said. She pointed to the balconies of the city. "Someone must weld them all."

"You could learn to speak Italian," she told him. "The way you learned English."

He smiled. "My dear optimist," he said. They bumped their shoulders together as if they were two restaurant glasses, with a fingerful of wine between them, toasting their good fortune. She kissed him on the cheek.

"*Nazdrovia*," she said.

Then she held her arms above her head. "Help me up." Mikail stood and helped her to her feet. Their eyes met. Their young, dark, wounded eyes.

"I'm ready now," she said. "To go home with you to Russia."

Even that, however, would not be easy. A pair of American college boys, filled with an overdeveloped sense of justice, had spotted them wearing their backpacks and clothing, stolen at the train station in the village outside of Trieste, and they were making their way down the Spanish Steps now to intercept fate, near the troupe of innocent street performers, at the fountain half-sunk and overflowing its sides.

The interesting thing, Bata thought, watching the men rush toward Mikail and her—is when we are finished with this melee—when our injuries have healed—we might all become good friends and laugh about this over a glass of wine and a slice of bread and olive oil. It will lead perhaps to good jobs for Mikail and me. It will add to our knowledge of the rich—how to live like them and how to make our good luck as they do.

“I’m feeling strong,” Mikail told her, standing by the fountain of the old boat, watching the American men coming towards them. He flexed his muscles, a real bodybuilder, and she could see his energy had returned. His heart had mended and he was ready for a fight.

“We won’t run this time,” he told her.

“You are my new country,” she told him. “And I am your capital city.” She stared down the Americans as they reached Mikail. “Believe it!” she yelled, as the fight began.