



THE THREE AGES OF WOMAN

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Once a man promised to wait all day for me at Rome's Piazza della Repubblica, to wait all day and into the night for me to arrive. I was taking an overnight bus from Prague to Venice, then a water taxi from the bus to the train station, and finally a train from Venice to Rome. We had no idea how long it would take.

He found his spot on the edge of a fountain where statues of water nymphs wrapped their lithe bodies around sea gods, and he set about waiting. He wore black gloves with the fingers cut off so he could draw, and he carried a shoulder bag he'd picked up while passing through Finland. He was a bearded, twenty-four-year-old architecture student from Cincinnati in search of great buildings. I was a twenty-six-year-old backpacker wandering alone for a year in Europe. I'd left my corporate job — measuring the satisfaction levels of electric-utility customers — sold my car, and stowed my belongings in a friend's attic. I couldn't have told you exactly why I was spending a year alone far from everyone I knew, but I was sure I wanted my future to be more interesting than the life I'd been living.

The man and I had met a month earlier in Poland, at a bank in Krakow's main square, where both of us had been trying to exchange our traveler's checks for the rapidly declining Polish zloty. We'd walked from bank to bank and stood in long lines swapping stories until finally one teller had accepted our checks. Then we ate pirogies together and made plans to meet again that evening, but it never happened.

The next day we ran into each other on the platform of a train headed to Prague. I'd been using Prague as a home base for three months, sharing a flat filled with a family's things, and I offered to show the man the city. Somewhere between drinking heavy beer and waiting for a tram, we realized we'd been staring at each other. Our romance was whirlwind, and when he left to continue his travels, we parted without promises.

Weeks later he called me as I was busy packing my bag.

"I miss you," he said.

"I'm leaving tonight on an overnight bus to Venice."

"I'm in Rome. I'll meet you there."

"No, stay," I said. "I'll come to you."

Piazza della Repubblica is less a meeting place than a traffic roundabout. Cars and scooters and buses circle its fountain day and night, and diesel fumes and the whine of Vespa motors fill the air. In a city of luscious piazzas, this one is noxious by comparison. When the Fountain of the Naiads was unveiled at its center in 1911, some Italians railed against the indecency of its sculptures: naked women draped across creatures from the deep.

Today I'm back in Rome for the first time in thirteen years, and I've come to the piazza half expecting to find my younger self sitting on the fountain's edge next to a man she is starting to love. But the fountain is turned off, and its marble rim is nearly empty of visitors. A newspaper has sunk to the bottom, its headlines legible through the quiet water.

Chris, my boyfriend of several years, is in Sicily right now with his teenage daughter. I'll meet them there soon, and next

week Chris and I will attend a friend's wedding in Abruzzo. But first I have five days alone in Rome.

Nothing is as I remember it. Rome is a jumble of Italians wearing metallic sneakers and barking into cellphones and Americans following tour guides hoisting signs shaped like Mickey Mouse ears. A banner advertising Aveda cosmetics flaps next to Keats's house on the Spanish Steps. It wasn't like this more than a decade ago, when a man waited for me at a fountain and we spent ten days here, holding hands as we walked the streets and stepping into incense-laden churches to escape the rain. We were struck silly by our luck at having found each other, and everything in the city confirmed our good fortune. That December, Rome was a theater piece staged just for us. Women peeled artichokes in the alleys off Piazza Navona. The barista at our favorite morning coffee bar learned our names. Once a lone saxophonist played in the street below our hotel room, and we swayed together to the music.

Now it is June, and the heat and masses of people strike me as an affront. At the Vatican I pass through metal detectors, then fight for a place before Michelangelo's *Pietà*. Groups of disaffected teenagers crowd the steps of churches where the man and I went to see Caravaggios. The Borromini chapel, with its undulating curves of white stone, seems flatter without the man's excitement at finally seeing it. I walk until my feet ache. Surely somewhere there is something for me to connect with in this crowded city. The steps around the Trevi Fountain are so packed that I am jostled by bodies. The legend says tossing a coin into the water will ensure your return to the city. Thirteen years ago I tossed several. This time I pause with the coin in my hand. Rome no longer feels like a place I want to come back to.

After our meeting at the piazza, the man and I walked to the hotel where he'd been staying — Papa Germano's, a *pensione* with dorms for international backpackers. The jovial proprietor offered us a double room with a private bath and a view of the street, where a market was set up most mornings. We shyly put our clothes into drawers and took turns cleaning up in the bathroom. I think both of us had fantasized about this meeting, but now that we were alone together, we were timid, as if a sudden move might make it all disappear.

I sat down next to the man on the bed, and he posed the question he must have been waiting to ask. "I hope you don't mind me asking," he began, "but have you gotten your period?"

During our brief time in Prague we'd had unprotected sex despite a package of condoms in the cabinet on the other side of the room. It was rash and out of character for both of us. We hadn't talked about it afterward. And, in fact, I hadn't gotten my period since. That alone wasn't unusual; I had irregular cycles. What was unusual was that a few nights before I'd left Prague, I'd been sitting at the kitchen table eating a roll and some cheese, and I'd stood up, walked to the bathroom, and vomited. I told the man this. Would he find the news exciting or terrifying? I had already spent an afternoon in an English-language bookshop reading up on early signs of pregnancy. And I'd decided that, if I was pregnant,

I would continue to travel awhile, then return home, have the baby, and raise it. Everything about our meeting felt destined to me, and if a child came of it, I was sure that was destiny, too.

"I guess we should find you a pregnancy test," he said, and I nodded.

Then we began planning a walk to see the Baths of Caracalla.

Chris and I have agreed to travel separately in Italy because the arrangement comes closest to meeting both our needs: I get to be a solo traveler again; he has some father-daughter time. Soon I'll fly to meet them, and we'll travel as a family of sorts. After that, we'll meet up with his daughter's mother, and they will go off while Chris and I go to the Adriatic Sea for the wedding and a romantic week in a medieval village in the hills.

Our plan is complicated, but we've grown accustomed to that. Our life together has been a constant balancing act. By the time we met, Chris was well into his forties, separated from his wife, and the father of an adolescent daughter. I was living alone in an apartment with a view of a park and a part-time job that left me plenty of freedom to write and travel. Neither of us was in a position to drop our life and rush into a new one. So we've built one slowly. Over the years we have tangoed in Buenos Aires and sat with his ex-wife at their daughter's middle-school graduation. We've created a home where salvias bloom and the cabinets are stocked with Cheerios. Not once have we been able to pretend the lives we had before we met were anything less than woven into the lives we've had since.

When we were wrangling over flights and hotel reservations and itineraries for this trip, Chris said, "I bet you'd be happy to spend some time alone in Rome." I admitted I would. And when he dropped me at the airport in the morning, before his own flight in the afternoon, he said, "I hope you have a wonderful time," and I knew he meant it.

After our ten days in Rome, the man flew home to Ohio and returned to school. I continued for another five months my solitary travels through Spain, France, England, and Ireland. Then I journeyed with a friend to India. I thought about the man the entire time. In every museum I wanted him to be standing next to me; in every restaurant I wanted him to taste the food. We wrote long letters and made scheduled calls on overpriced phone cards, and every few weeks we'd agree on a time to sit quietly and think about each other. I might find myself on a bench in Gaudi's Park Guell conjuring his sandy hair and blue eyes while I knew he was picturing me, at that same moment, in his apartment in Cincinnati.

When I finally flew home and came through customs at JFK, the man was waiting on the other side.

I wasn't sure what to do next, but the one certain thing in the uncertain life I'd returned to was that I was in love. So I moved to Cincinnati to wait while the man completed his architecture thesis. We rented the second floor of a crumbling

Victorian, made espresso in a pot on the stove, and threw vegetarian dinner parties. Our apartment had a light-filled turret and minimal furnishings: a futon on the floor, his childhood twin bed in the corner of the guest room. On the walls, matted but not framed, were photos from Rome. In one he stood amid the graffitied columns of the Coliseum, pink light streaming down on him. When I walked past it, I would often stop. He might at that moment have been on campus cutting chipboard into window mullions for a model, but for me he was squinting in the Italian sun.

One day in Rome the man and I found our way to the modern art museum, near the Villa Borghese. We walked there through a park filled with trees that reminded him of Dr. Seuss, and after the museum visit we picnicked on rolls and provolone in the grass. It was a perfect day of blue skies and families strolling the gravel paths.

Now, after a meal of gummy pizza, I walk through the same park to the same museum. In the galleries I seek out the work of futurist painter Giacomo Balla, whose family portraits surprised us with their tenderness. We loved the one of his daughter Luce, with her red shirt and subtle smile. Today I find the geometric abstracts that made Balla famous, but his portraits are on loan to a museum in Germany. I'm only slightly disappointed. What I'm really here for is Gustav Klimt's stunning painting *The Three Ages of Woman*. I can picture the wall it hung on, and how we stood before it a long time, mesmerized.

It's easy to find the Klimt: the museum has organized an exhibition on Symbolism, and that painting is on the cover of the brochure. I walk through the exhibit, tracing the history of the Symbolist movement, until it ends on a wide wall of electric blue with Klimt's painting shimmering in the middle. Three figures are bound by a border of gold: On the right a sleeping baby. In the center a young mother bent over that baby tucked in her arms, flowers tumbling into her hair. She is at one with all that shines. And to the left an old woman, breasts drooping, body gone loose and gray, her head sunk into her hands. Childhood, youth, old age. Infant, mother, crone.

The placard beside the painting assures me the image is not only about aging. It can be interpreted as a scene of rebirth, the older woman giving way to the younger, the younger to the baby, through the mystery of maternity. But I don't buy it. I am standing before this painting on the cusp of middle age, and I see only how we grow old, how the things we once thought we'd have can slip away.

(end of excerpt)