

The Difference Between Us

By Jeannette Lareau

I just bought a red rose from the slightly oily, intensely musky-smelling vendor who approached me at the side of the fountain Trevi. I hadn't bought any flowers here yet this time, just because I know from experience that the vendors try to cheat American tourists if they can; but tonight I needed to buy one. I wanted to smell its delicate red flesh, feel the tangibility of its stem and thorns against my fingers and face.

The stars are white, as white as the marble fountain. The sky is deep and blue and dark, very unlike the clear water that splashes down from stone fishes' mouths and puddles around the piles of bronze and silver coin. I don't know why I came to Italy alone. I wish you were here with me. But yes, as you told me, business won't slow down and something in the air here makes you sneeze.

"Excuse me, but will you take picture of me, please?"

A smiling Korean woman dressed in smart French-cut clothing holds her camera out to me, its red light flashing and ready. I take the camera and motion toward the center of the fountain's damp edge. She takes a step backwards and stands like a dancer, feet together and body elegantly straight.

"Smile!" I say to her, noting that her smile couldn't get broader than it is already.

"Stand there... okay, ready!" I hold my breath a little as I snap the photo; I don't want to jiggle the camera. I think that she was standing a little bit off to one side, but at least she'll get a good view of the fountain that way. The woman steps forward to take her camera back, then nods her head at me.

"Thank you, very much."

The smile never leaves her face.

As she is lost in the roar of tourists and flower vendors who have come to Trevi tonight (who probably come here every night they're in Rome), I sit down again on the wet marble. Its wetness is pleasant, like the wetness of biting into fruit. Especially Italian fruit, the kind that's piled behind the glass counter of the ice cream shop on a side street down from the Piazza Navona, only a few minutes walk from Trevi. At this shop they have big red strawberries, pungent cantaloupe, dripping, bright lemons and limes; the coconut is still milky, the peaches and apricots are the color of flame.

I go to this shop every evening after a long day of walking along countless dusty roads, and browsing through countless museums. I always order a milkshake with fruit in it, no whipped cream on top. Then I take my tall cup and stroll until I find an uncrowded place to sit and enjoy it. It's hard finding a place out of the way of the little mopeds favored by people that don't want the trouble of parking a car. But when I find a place with only a few people seated on the curb, I sit and relax and eat my fruit shake with a spoon. In the evenings, the shops, restaurants, hotels and homes that line the narrow streets have candles and lights in all their windows, glowing from all their doorways. I like the way the little lights in Roman doorways cast shadows on the faces of the others seated, like me, on the curb. It makes the city street look like a very honest masquerade.

Thinking about my fruit milkshakes has made me hungry. I look at my watch and it reads eleven; the ice cream shop closed at ten. I get up from the side of Trevi and weave my path through the throng of lovers and comen, intending to find something to eat at the restaurant next to my hotel. I particularly want bread and cheese, maybe with some hot chocolate. I think I can find some there that isn't very expensive, and of course it will be just what I want. The food I eat in Italy is always what I want, just as the sleep I get here is always refreshing. I know I was meant to live here; the city and I move on the same rhythm, undulating slowly and calmly. Not like where I come from, where I know you are setting up in our busy modern kitchen for another late night with your documents and a red pen. I pull my sweater tighter around my shoulders, because it isn't as warm as it used to be now that I'm away from all those lights and all those people. In fact, I can feel the heat of my sunburned cheeks and shoulders radiating into the cool night. I move down the cobbled street with a comfortable gait, my mind the only purposeful part of me as it keeps distant watch for pickpockets and listens for errant mopeds.

The restaurant next to my hotel is still alive at this late hour. All the tables in the courtyard outside are full, with groups of two or three seated together drinking cappuccino out of thick round cups. I would much rather go inside to eat than sit in the courtyard; I've been outside all night, and I'm ready for the steady warmth of indoor lighting. I go through the gate in the low wooden-slat fence surrounding the courtyard, and walk up to the open door.

Inside, the restaurant smells of coffee. A dark-haired waiter in a long apron seats me at a table for one, right next to the window. He is quite handsome, I notice, as he straightens his bowtie and smooths his palms down the front of his apron. I order my bread and cheese from him, and a cup of cocoa. With a nod and a sly smile, he moves off to the kitchen. Watching him walk away is nice; he has a loose, long stride and a swing to his hips and arms. I avert my eyes when he turns around at the kitchen door to look back at me. When he brings me my food, he sets it on the table with a flourish, spreading my napkin in my lap first and filling my water glass. Then he puts his hand in an apron pocket and lifts out a white rose, beautiful and soft. He lays it on the table, next to the red one I bought at Trevi. The flowers press their plump, pliable bodies together; they snuggle there next to my plate like two exquisite puppies. When I look up, the waiter is gone.

I stay at my table for one until two in the morning. My waiter refills my water several times and brings me more chocolate, pausing after he delivers the steaming cup to let one of his long, dusky fingers glide over the petals of the two roses. As I finally get up to leave, draping my

sweater around my shoulders, I notice that the waiter is standing in the kitchen doorway buttoning the top buttons of a blue shirt. His shift is over. He waves to the man behind the counter, exchanges laughs with someone in the back room. I shiver as I hear his laugh; it is vibrant and fresh in the still, sleepy air of the dining room. I hear him walking toward the door, and knowing that I'm no match for his strides I make no effort to get there before he does. If he leaves before I do, all I have to do is wait a moment before leaving and I will be able to avoid him. I pick at invisible specks on my sweater sleeves, then yawn and make a trip to the ladies' room.

When I come out of the ladies' room, I pause slightly by the door because from that angle I can see outside into the courtyard. No sign of my waiter. I smile at the man behind the counter and head next door to my hotel. The air outside is a bit chilly, but my walk is short. I go into the hotel, pause in the lobby to order a wake-up call for eight o'clock, then trudge up the green-carpeted stairs to my room on the second floor. A hot shower and cotton sheets feel good already. I do not notice that an urgent sort of shadow has gotten up from one of the large chairs in the lobby and is following me at a small distance down the hallway.

Stopping at my door to get the room key out of my small purse, I am surprised by another abrupt stop a few feet away from me. I look up with a smile, ready to greet one of my fellow guests on the second floor. There stands my waiter, blue shirt open at the neck, chest rising and falling rapidly. His hair is tousled, his mouth is red. I do not know what to say, but my mouth falls open anyway; I drop my key and bend hastily to pick it up from between my feet. As I bend my roses fall on the floor as well, and he moves close to me as I gingerly curl my fingers around the necks of the flowers, where there are no thorns. When I straighten, he lunges and catches me in an embrace that makes my back arch and my neck go limp. His kiss spreads through my mouth like honey, like wonderful fertile nectar on my tongue. Suddenly I find myself pressed against the wall, my arms pinned beside me and thorns digging into my wrists. His mouth leaves mine and moves down my neck to the opening of my blouse, and my head rolls druggedly to one side; my eyes drift open a little and I see the components of a hotel hallway spinning in all directions.

I am sinking, sinking into a happy dream... I allow myself to be swayed by the tide until I hear a low moan come from his throat. Only then do I realize that the moan is unfamiliar. I just met this man tonight; he was my waiter. I don't even know his name, and I know how he sounds when he kisses a woman. I blink several times and shake my head, looking down at my hands that are resting on his broad shoulders as he kneels and lifts my skirt to kiss my legs. My fingers tighten on his shoulders, and I try weakly to move to the side, out of his reach. There is an awkward shuffle of skirt and arms and flower stems, ending with an open-armed gesture of confusion on his part and an apologetic closing of the door on mine. My roses are still out in the hall. I stand inside my hotel room, chest inflating and deflating with lessening speed. I am no longer sleepy.

After a while, I let my body slide down the firm wood of the door and onto the blue flowered carpet. The window, which I left open a little this morning so that the wind would keep the air in the room fresh, is banging quietly in the night breeze. My bed looks cold and flat because it has been sitting under that cool draft all evening. I twirl my key-ring around my finger

and look steadily at my five suitcases, which are packed and waiting by the door for tomorrow. My flight back home leaves at noon, and I packed early so that I could go for one more fruit shake tomorrow morning. Now, though, I think I won't. I just want to stay in and have some hot chocolate brought to me in my room. Tomorrow I'll finally be seeing you again; I'll be dropping my luggage to give you a big hug at the airport. You'll push my bags to the minivan for me, taking care of me as you always do. On the way home I'll tell you about my trip, about my love affair with the food and the atmosphere, and you'll tell me how much you and the dogs missed me.

I miss you, too.