

With Birds Flying Below Her

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Where Muriel wants to be is sitting on a terrace, one on a mountain with a view of the ocean. Actually, the view of the ocean is negotiable: she just wants to be on a white-washed terrace somewhere in the sun, with a view of anything as long as it's below her. She wants birds to be flying below her. Is that too much to ask? Where she doesn't want to be, at this particular moment, is sitting at the end of this long table in the sun at this cheap restaurant in a small hot town in southern Italy, listening to Dr. Pam, one of the professors in this month-long program, talk about Matera, where they are headed tomorrow. Apparently it's one of the oldest cities in the world, inhabited since prehistoric times, by people living in caves or something. Dr. Pam and most of the students have glasses of wine in front of them—which they are asked to pay for separately—and are waiting for their orders.

At 7:00 the sunlight is slanted and a breeze occasionally plays across the table. Restaurants are still empty, waiting for later diners. Students sitting closer to Dr. Pam are in the shade of the building but Muriel, as usual, has taken a seat at the end of the table. She can hide her face under the wide-brimmed white hat she picked up in Rome, and pretend to study the menu or the people in the square and avoid conversation. It has been a long week of avoiding conversation, with another week to go. Luckily or unluckily, several of the students are masterful at keeping the conversation going, that irritating laugh of Josephine's, for example, at the other end of the table filling every

potentially silent moment, space when someone else might have a chance to speak. Or Olivia's constantly changing opinions dribbling forth. Muriel stands up and excuses herself. "Restroom," she murmurs, in case anyone is listening. Jared, the gawky pale boy sitting beside her, looks up at her through black glass frames and, for some reason, giggles, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down.

This wasn't what Muriel had imagined when she signed up for the Summer in Basilicata course. Her mother had suggested it as a way to earn back credits from one of the courses she'd dropped last spring. Muriel knew her mother didn't care about her daughter's lost and failed credits; she just wanted Muriel out of her hair so she could have noisy sex with Roger, her younger boyfriend. Muriel tries not to picture them in coitus, but it is hard not to when Roger insists on walking around without a shirt on, or when Muriel overhears disgusting noises from her mother's bedroom.

Something about the thought of people in caves makes Muriel feel sick to her stomach. Maybe it was that thought that brought the idea of the terrace to her mind, the opposite of a cave, and now she can't shake it. Muriel had been to Italy with her parents when she was young, and she remembers large terraces with city views of squares, palaces and monuments. Somewhere there must have been a terrace like the one she imagines now, one in the country: large umbrellas over small tables on which sit glasses of wine; a view looking over a clay-tiled roof to sweeping valleys far below. A sense of ease and exhilaration, with birds dipping and swooping below, out into the valley. The class had been staying in cheap hotels this trip; hostels, actually, this one on a side street at the base of the mountain on which

this town is built. A humming air conditioner in the window of the shared bedroom is a weak substitute for the breeze of higher elevations. The room has the mustiness of a cave, and one of the girls she has to share a room with snores.

Muriel washes her hands and steps into the hallway. She sees into the kitchen, where a young man chopping something on a wooden board looks up at her and holds her gaze briefly. A heavy wooden door next to her is slightly ajar. She pulls it open and steps outside. The air is cooler in the narrow shadowed alley. A young man, a waiter in a black shirt, stands smoking a cigarette, leaning against the wall. “*Bion giorno,*” he murmurs, smoke sliding in a thin, twisting stream out of his mouth. Muriel nods, and walks down the alley to where it turns left, feeling his eyes on her. She resists the impulse to tug down her jean shorts, and takes another left turn, heading uphill.

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She doesn't think about where she is going, and she tries not to think about Jared and Dr. Pam, about the eventual questions that will arise (*Muriel? She went to the bathroom, I think*), and then be put aside because Muriel, after all, who really misses her? Such a sourpuss, doesn't say anything at all. Until the questions rise again, Dr. Pam saying Olivia, why don't you go check on her in there, Olivia rising, sighing, knocking on the bathroom door, pushing it open...Muriel picks up her step, taking one of the narrow streets that curve up the hill, just out of sight of the street where their van is parked. She checks to see that her cellphone is still on airplane mode, receiving no incoming calls. Olivia was in her “Foundations of Art” class last semester, and Muriel couldn't stand the way she talked in class; it was as if she was trying out her opinions by

speaking them, sometimes changing topic or even her own opinion mid-stream. As the semester went on, Muriel suspected that Olivia knew of Muriel's dislike, and returned it. Muriel had been sorry to see her name on the list of students, but was glad to not be rooming with her at least. Instead she's with snoring Norah.

She walks more slowly as she ascends, feeling the weight of the day. Her feet in the strappy flat sandals ache from walking through the museum and the churches of this town, over cobblestone streets, all the while listening to Dr. Pam's cheerful commentary on art or the nasally voice of Dr. Phil, the historian. Her mother warned her these shoes would get uncomfortable, but what was Muriel supposed to do, wear sneakers like a typical dorky American? The class does everything in a group: they wake in a group, walk in a group, stop to have gelato in a group, as if everyone's body rhythms are on the same beat and have the same tempo. She looks up to catch a glimpse of a bird, flying above the buildings, and her eye is caught by a large poster pasted to a wall. She's seen it before, without understanding it: a photo of a young woman, dark-haired and pretty, wearing a scarf twisted around her neck. The woman stares into the camera unsmiling. An advertisement for some sort of performance, perhaps. She doesn't understand the Italian words that scroll above and below the photo except "28 anni," her age, and her name, Giovanna, but something about the girl catches her eye. She looks...normal, not like she is posing for a publicity photo. She also looks slightly angry, something Muriel understands.

She has to turn onto a broader street to continue to the highest level of the town, toward the square where she knows the small cathedral is, and the old fort made into town offices. She steps over

fading flowers dropped on the road, some of them still wrapped around small plastic sticks as if from a florist arrangement. Earlier, the class had visited the church, taking in its ancient faded murals and lingering at the views in the square. White towns like this one glimmered, small lego constructions, on neighboring peaks. It was beautiful, but Jared had been beside her, trying to talk to her about some movie the scene reminded him of, or some movie made near here, she didn't know. She moves quickly up the narrow brick road now, looking back to make sure none of the group has come after her yet.

There are no cars parked on the road or in the square as there were earlier, but the square is full of people. They are dressed in dark clothes, standing and listening to a man's voice speaking over a loudspeaker. The crowd murmurs in response, the voices coming both from inside the church and from the crowd. Though Muriel can't understand a word, the sound is comforting and repetitious, circular. It is a church service, one that has gathered a crowd large enough to fill the square as well as the church. Organ music starts up from inside, a man's voice rising slowly, full of emotion. A woman at the edge of the crowd wipes her eyes.

Muriel walks along the edges of the square, toward one of the narrow alleys. This too is lined with people in dark clothes, leaning against the walls or sitting on steps, listening. Muriel sees the poster of the young woman again, and this time notices that there is an image of a lily on the poster, and a gold-colored cross. She watches her steps, keeping her face hidden from the people by the wide brim of her hat. The alley curves around the old houses in that strange way houses are built here, their shape conforming to the walkway instead

of the other way around. Around a corner and out of sight of the people—mourners?—is a narrow alley to her left, a dark space between two houses just wide enough for one person. It leads to another alley beyond, but Muriel stops at a door on her left, a black door on ground level. It is open a crack, ajar. Glancing around, she sees no one, hears only the voices from the square. She turns the knob and pushes the door open.

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Muriel feels like another person, standing in the dark cellar room with the ceiling just above her head. She is set free from that former person, and can look at her dispassionately: she was timid, a rule-follower like all the other sheep in the program, or like the other students in the college, for that matter. An introverted, geeky college student with acne and parent problems. She is no longer the daughter of her mother, who is prisoner to her brand-new sex life; or of her father, who is prisoner to his career and to his anger. She will leave all that behind her in this cave, and ascend. She is all freedom and stealth, going after what she wants. The house is quiet above her. She feels along the walls for a door.

Up a flight of low-ceilinged steps, she finds herself in the entry of a house. The heavy main door is closed, and the hallway is lit by a light high in a wall sconce. There is a faint scent of wine, of old stone; a patterned rug slides on a tile floor under her feet. Nothing bad can happen to her; in a sense, the universe understands: she belongs here. The hallway leads into a sitting room with upholstered furniture, antique bureau and china closet. There, straight ahead, through open French doors and fluttering white lace curtains, is the object of her desire: a white terrace wall, and sky.

She steps through the doors and sighs. There is the view she wanted, better than she could have imagined; hills rolling away in overlapping folds to the horizon, green and brown pattern. The deep blue of the sky is paling, with sunset colors layered above the far mountains. Birds swoop below her, some rising swiftly into the sky not far above her head. She doesn't know what they are, those birds with pointed wings—swallows? Swifts? They move so fast, their paths crossing, as if they are playing with one another, or fighting. One whistles past close to her, just above her head. She takes her hat off, shaking her hair loose. The air feels wonderful.

She sits on a wooden chair by a small table, and lifts her face to feel the sun. On the low terrace wall overlooking the valley, plaster busts of plump Italian men look at her complacently, approvingly. She won't stay long, and then she will creep out of this house, go back to the hostel, and all will be as before, except for this one sparkling moment of freedom. She will keep it private, telling no one.

When she hears the footsteps behind her, she has a brief flare of irritation; who is intruding on her private moment? This is quickly overtaken by other feelings, not least among them fear, as a different interpretation appears to her: she has broken into a private home, in a country where she doesn't speak the language. A man steps onto the patio and everything changes, too quickly for Muriel to comprehend. She is dressed all in black, in long pants, leather dress shoes. His head tilts suddenly as he stops and looks at her, sitting in the chair. He says something sharp in Italian.

Muriel stands up, feeling somehow that it is the thing to do. "Um...*Non parlo l'italiano.*" It was the one phrase she had learned; "I don't speak Italian."

He takes a step back, as if she is attacking him. "What...English? American?" He says something rapidly in Italian, a question.

She gestures helplessly at the view, *her* view. "I'll...just be going," she says, and begins to move past him, toward the door.

"No, no, no," he says, and grabs her forearm. "What are you doing here?" he asks in English. Holding her arm with one hand, he yanks her leather bag off the other arm and unzips it. He upends the contents onto the small table, and pushes his hand through them. Cell phone, tissues, wallet, lipstick, paperback book on Basilicata. He picks up her wallet and opens it. Flipping through her photos, cards, euros, he pulls her driver's license out. "So—*Muriel*," he says, mispronouncing her name in a way she thinks is intentional. "What are you doing here? What did you take?" He eyes her jean shorts, her loose blouse. She is afraid he is going to put his hands inside her clothing, to see what she stole.

She clutches her shirt. "Nothing, nothing, I promise. I just wanted to see the view. It's always so hot, and the crowd, and I'm always with them, and I just needed to be alone, and to be *here*." She knows she doesn't make sense, and to her horror and chagrin, she begins to cry. She sits back down on the chair, reaching for the crumpled tissue on the table in front of her.

The man stands, watching her cry. He walks over to the chair next to her then, and sits, crossing a leg over his knee. "So you just come into my house, like it is yours." He is young, maybe in his late 20's. He is handsome, but in a disheveled way, not the slick handsomeness of the waiters in the restaurant. "You are American, so you think you own the world. Right?"

“No, no, that’s not it.” She wipes her eyes, blows her nose into the damp tissue, thinks of the phrase *ugly crying*.

“Yes, I think that’s it. You think you can do anything you want. No one else is real to you. We are all just . . .” he waves his hands, looking for the word, “pretend, people in your own movie. Your own Hollywood movie.” He sits looking at Muriel, but there is nothing she can say. She can’t explain herself. She has no power, and she is stupid; how to explain stupidity? “I think I will call the police,” the man says in a quiet voice.

She looks at him, alarmed. Would he? She sees challenge in his look, and for the first time, she knows he could hurt her. He is a man, and she is a woman wearing shorts her mother warned her not to take to Italy. From around the corner in the square, Muriel hears voices, singing, filling up the courtyard; it seems the service is over. The man walks over to the side of the terrace and looks down, toward the square. “The world is not real to you,” he says, staring. He says something else in Italian, a murmur, a long ragged sentence full of an emotion she doesn’t understand.

“I will leave now,” Muriel says. She gathers her things into her purse, stands and walks to the doorway. “I’m sorry.” He does not lift his head.

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Muriel leaves the house the way she entered, and he does not follow. The air in the alley is cooler now. People no longer line the walls of the houses, but there is still a crowd in the square—all moving in the same direction, away from the church. Their voices murmur, a rising and falling in musical, incomprehensible Italian. She thinks she hears

someone crying, far ahead in the line. Muriel can't move past them through the crowd; it would draw attention to herself and be rude, and she can't do that, not now. She falls into step at the end of the line, walking with the slow pace of the others in dark colors, the line ahead of her moving and bobbing down the hill. From the top of the hill Muriel sees a big black car far away at the head of the line of walkers. It is a hearse, she thinks, carrying Giovanna's remains. An older woman next to her looks at her and smiles, a tired, kind smile. Muriel, ashamed, is not able to smile back.

As they walk slowly down the hill Muriel thinks of Jared's bobbing Adam's apple, of the bed in the hostel, Norah's soft snores and the hum of the air conditioner. They are real to her, aren't they? She doesn't like them but she knows they exist. At the moment, actually, Muriel doesn't know if she knows anything at all. She sees her mother in front of the mirror, looking uncertainly at herself in profile, and remembers the sounds coming from her bedroom. They sounded more like relief than passion. She wonders if she will be sent home. She raises a hand to her head, but she has left her hat on the terrace. □