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Our freelance tour guide in Padua was Sara, a thirty-year-old local woman in a white trench coat and thick black-plastic horn-rimmed eyeglasses, and she had wound her long dark hair into a face-lifting bun. She spoke almost impeccable English, explained almost nothing, and narrated everything she did, occasionally nodding at questions and ignoring them. "I will now pass to each of you a personal copy of the itinerary for tomorrow, which is Monday," she said, as she slowly made her way to the twelve Padua side-trippers scattered throughout the hotel's windowless Executive Business Event Conference Center, a blank room with one hundred red restaurant-supply dining chairs, a long table, and a pull-down movie screen. From my perch near a desktop computer at the back of the room, I noted that the doctor with the silver hair was missing. "While I am now passing out the prepared itinerary, I will remind you that we must meet in the lobby at 9:15 tomorrow morning after you have had time to enjoy a complimentary breakfast buffet of your choosing."

One of the wives asked for dinner recommendations.

"Yes," Sara said, "and you will notice there is no change from the itineraries you were issued in Venice except for the addition of details, including a local post office, which you can see is marked right here on the top left of the itinerary I am now holding up to show you in case you have some postal cards for that purpose."

Two of the husbands momentarily commandeered the event to complain about the private balconies, which weren't private but one long, undivided balcony, so anyone could walk the length of any floor and look into everybody else's room, as if you were staying in a motel.

"The balconies are reserved for paying guests at the front of the hotel," Sara said, "and there will be no flash cameras allowed inside the Scrovegni Chapel, which I point out now to your behalf on each itinerary, where you can see the marked *Arena Chapel*."

One of the women asked, "Which name do the locals use for the chapel?"

"Of course," Sara said, "the famous frescoes painted by Giotto more than seven-hundred years ago had no equal in the world, as you will see. Interesting for all of you is Dante, the greatest poet for all time. He tells everyone in *Divina Commedia*, the greatest poem for all the world, that Giotto was the greatest of all painters in the world, better even than his own master, Cimabue." Sara picked up an index card from the table behind her. "In painting, Cimabue thought to hold the field / Now Giotto is acclaimed by all / So that he has obscured the former's fame."

Mitchell would not have approved. Sara was reading from the Mandelbaum translation, which Mitchell considered authoritative but tame. He preferred the wilder, woollier early translations that delivered a more rousing narrative voice and served up plenty of errors and infelicities for him to annotate as he read. The reason I had been booked on this side-trip to Padua was for Mitchell to point out how heavily Giotto had leaned on Dante's ideas. Giotto was one of many answers to his title question, *Who Stole Dante?*

"Lucky," Sara said, "you will also see in the Bargello how Giotto painted a portrait of Dante."

A woman who'd found time to curl her hair into a perfect platinum flip asked, "But isn't the Bargello museum in Florence?"

"Both of these great artists were, how you say, *Fiorentino*."

The same woman said, "We actually say *Florentine*."

"*Si, si, si, Firenze*," Sara said.

"No, no, no, *Florence* is what we say. Like you say *Padova*, we say *Padua*."

Shelby swiveled in her seat near the front of the room. "Potato, *Padova*. Let's call the whole thing off."

"Agreed." The blonde conceded the point with a shake of her flip. "But we still don't know whether we should refer to it as the Arena Chapel or the Scrovegni Chapel."

"I will show you next this church of the Eremitani," Sara said, her voice a little shakier now. "Next, not walking too far," she stumbled on, sliding her finger down the map, "we will enjoy this ride on the tram for visiting the very holy basilica with the very holy tongue of St. Anthony looking even today almost like new, saving time to stop in many other famously beautiful chapels along the way."

This went on for fifteen minutes. The frustration in the room was palpable, but it was held in check by the anxiety evident in Sara's earnest performance. Shelby shot me a couple of exasperated looks from the front of the room, and I nodded, but I wasn't eager for the event to end. I was dreading my dinner with strangers, and then sitting alone Monday morning with some panicky assortment of sweet rolls and exotic-fruit nectar from that breakfast buffet, so I was hoping Sara would talk until Tuesday.

I felt someone's hands on my shoulders.

"Have I managed to miss absolutely every tedious detail?" As I turned, the silver-haired doctor slid into the chair beside me. He had changed into a blue linen blazer and a starched white shirt, unbuttoned at the collar. He was at least six-feet tall, and his taut, pale skin was deeply etched around the eyes and mouth with tiny, dark age lines. When he leaned toward me, his severe, angular profile widened into a delighted grin. He whispered, "At this moment, we are the only people in Italy not having a drink." I got a whiff of gin and lemon and instinctively looked at my watch. It was almost seven. He nodded.

"Is there some questions at the back of this room?" Sara was peering at me.

Very loudly, the doctor said, "I suppose it might just be me, but — ." He paused so everyone had time to turn around. He leaned back, rocking a bit in his chair, staring at Sara. "I'm a little bit on pins and needles back here. I just know, at any moment now, you are going to toss away those eyeglasses, shake your hair loose, and turn into Gina Lollobrigida. You are so very beautiful."

One of the husbands yelped, "Exactly!" He started a round of applause that caught on as everyone laughed and nodded in agreement. Relief swept through the room like an unexpected wave, and as it receded, one of the wives said, "It really is true, Sara. You're just lovely."

Sara leaned back against the table, and waved her hand. "We can go enjoy the evening now." Soon, she was surrounded by the couples, and the doctor wagged his head, which was suggestive enough to make me follow him to the hotel bar, a counter with six steel stools tucked into a dark alcove between the kitchen and the restaurant.

"Gin okay?"

I nodded.

He nodded at the bartender, who pulled down two tall glasses from a shelf, scooped a tablespoon of frozen lemonade into each, added an incautious amount of gin, topped it off with tonic water and a slice of lemon, and shoved them our way. The doctor clinked his glass against mine and said, "To so-and-so, who invented this perfect marriage of sour and bitter."

It was a very good cocktail. "Who is so-and-so?"

"Long story," he said.

I said, "What's the drink called? It's delicious."

"We have time for two," he said. "St. Shelby volunteered to escort the two elderly sisters with the wigs to the restaurant, and that won't be a quick trip. The drink is called a Perfect Marriage. Is it Elizabeth or Betsy or Liz or Mrs.?"

"Oh," I said. "Me?" Either he talked too fast or I was drinking too fast.

He said, "I'll go with E. until further notice." He waved at the bartender.

I panicked. "You're not serious about a second?"

He urged the bartender to mix up another round. "Let's just agree that you're sad and I'm sad, and we're both old enough to have our reasons."

I said, "How old *are* you?"

"Jesus, I thought we were friends," he said.

I said, "I don't have friends anymore, so I'm out of practice." To make myself stop talking, I polished off my drink, which did not work. "I'm fifty-six," I said, as if that qualified as a boast. It was a lie. "Fifty-seven, I mean. What year is it? I'm at least fifty-six." To stem my rising anxiety, I just kept telling myself, *He's a doctor, he's a doctor, he's a doctor.*

"I would have guessed younger for you. Honestly. I'm fifty-four."

I was into the second drink. "What's your name?"

He said, "T."

I said, "As in tee-shirt?"

He said, "Before we go any further, I should warn you. The great restaurant in the Piazza del Erbe doesn't have a table for us. We'll be dining on pizza in the Piazza dei Fruitti. If that doesn't put you off, let's take one more sip and head out."

And we did.

We threaded our way through a couple of arcades and several short, tilty cobblestone streets that justified my espadrilles if not a third day in the block-print dress. The streets were filled with ambling families and pairs of men with their heads bent toward each other, often staring intently into a plate glass window of a small shop selling ties or cheese or shoes or cell phones, and then we were in a vast courtyard, and T. turned us toward a collection of ten

square tables under a yellow canopy and waved. "They look very happy to see us, which can't be a good sign."

That was the first sentence either of us had spoken outside of the hotel, as if we really were old friends already.