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ALISON KONECKI

Mother-Daughter Collisions in Italy

Swirling and tumbling, the music cascaded against the marble columns and washed over me in jubilant swells. Exultant strings wound their silvery threads through my ears and into my limbs. I closed my eyes and rode along the trilling gale of the soloist's crescendos, growing deliriously dizzy.

As the last note gave way to applause, I sank back down onto the hard, wooden pew. The flush of joy brought on by the music quickly evaporated. I felt guilty. The soprano in her elegant plum-colored gown, the church thickly iced in baroque swirls and furbelows, the regal flutter of the harpsichord—my mom would have loved it. But she was back in the hotel room. The persistent damp of the heavy rains and bone-seeping fog that had settled over Venice since our arrival had crept inside her chest and refused to budge. My mom and I parted ways that evening, so she could rest and I could continue exploring. So while she slept I'd headed to the concert, gliding along the Grand Canal and watching Venice unfurl in the vapor-softened, night time glow.

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For years my mother dreamed of showing me Italy. It was a place she loved deeply—its layers of treasures ancient and new. The sensuousness seemed to ooze out of its cobblestones and drip from its rooftop tiles, anointing the country with mystic gilding that bent the linear path of Time to a delicate curve forever looping into itself. She had only visited twice—to see a close friend, an Italian—yet it was a place that felt familiar on an elemental level, as if her roots traced a path through its soil. Her true familial ties had always been brittle, so the kinship she felt with Italy provided a connection for her soul that had long felt untethered and alone.

Although a series of setbacks early in life limited the physical expanse of her own world, my mom had always created for me a view that felt boundless. She read me books that split open planes of existence, expanding them into fully-formed realities. She cooked beautiful dishes that hailed from places she had never been and heritages to which she had no claim. She showed me art that ignited my neurons and brought life's colors to vivid saturation. My mom cultivated in me a love of the world and a sense that all of its stories, secrets, and experiences were mine to explore. So when we were finally able to take the trip to Italy together—a trip that had for too long been shelved with other “someday” plans—I vowed to repay the gifts she had given me and show her the world, even if only through Italy.

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The trip was my first to Italy, but in some ways I already felt acquainted with it. I knew not to squéeze the tomatoes at a market stall to feel if they were ripe, or pluck a grape to test its juiciness. *It's like saying you don't trust the vendor.* I knew that one drinks their cappuccino standing up, from a real cup, and only in the morning. *Yes, only in the morning—they'll laugh at you if your order one in the afternoon.* I knew you could walk out of the subway in Rome and almost smack your head on the Colosseum. *I mean, Alison, it's right there. Right there!* I knew that even its smallest, most unassuming churches were achingly beautiful inside. *Now that's the way to celebrate God!* My mom had been telling me about Italy for so many years that it already occupied a weighty, three-dimensional space in my mind's eye. This was particularly true of its cuisine.

I grew up being fed on Italy—carbonara with fat-crisped hunks of pancetta *Guanciale is traditional, but Wegmans doesn't carry it so pancetta will have to do,* chicken cacciatore, spicy amatriciana, and Sunday sauce so incredible that I ate it by the spoonful while it simmered on the stove. We weren't Italian, not a drop, but Italy was in our bones and our beings because we'd absorbed it through our bellies. We were tourists to Italy, but pilgrims to its cuisine. So it was hard to hide my disappointment when only a few days into our trip, my mom said she was exhausted and didn't feel up to venturing too far from the hotel for dinner.

Our day had started early at the Vatican, weaving through crowds and room upon room of museum treasures to reach the Sistine Chapel. We'd stood transfixed beneath the outstretched hand of Adam, feeling like we, too, were receiving and sharing creation's electric reverberations. But it had been the third day my mom had gone without an afternoon rest, and I knew she was tired. The first day, when we climbed the Spanish Steps, she clutched my arm to steady herself as we made the ascent. Touring a church where the bones of tiny seventeenth-century Capuchin monks warned against the fleeting nature of earthly time were buried, she joked that their bones had weathered better than hers. More than a few times, while we wandered over an hour looking for a jewelry shop hidden deep in the winding folds of the Roman alleyways, I saw her mouth pull into the tight, thin line that told me the constant ache in her hip had flamed to a sear. Still, I hated to think of her missing out on a good Roman meal.

Selected for its central location, not its atmosphere, our hotel was within blocks of Roma Termini station and surrounded by English-printed menus and specials on pizza. I was doubtful we'd find anything close to the cuisine our stomachs had been dreaming about.

Stepping from the hotel, my mom leaned heavily against her cane and hobbled forward, her eyes screwed up in a wince.

"Want me to try and find a cab?"

"No, no, I'm fine," she said, still hunched over.

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My heart felt thick and heavy. I hadn't even considered taking a cab; we were only walking a couple of blocks. I was surprised at the extent of my mom's pain. Her chronic illness developed when she was young, in her early forties. Had it always been this bad? Several years had passed since I'd lived at home. Maybe things had gotten worse. Maybe I'd just forgotten.

We settled on a restaurant around the corner and were seated outside on the heated street patio. English conversations filled my ears, as did the pulse of music from a hostel across the street getting a head start on the evening. I ordered the bucatini all'amatriciana. It was decent; my mom's was better.

About halfway through our meal, a young woman was seated at the vacant table next to us. She sat very straight, waiting for her dinner. As she waited, she took tiny, frequent sips of her wine, eyeing our table. I could tell she was listening to my mom and me as we chatted about our day. After a few minutes, when we stopped to take a bite, she jumped in.

"Did you enjoy the Vatican?"

My mom smiled at her. "The crowds were a bit much, but we loved it."

"Yeah, the crowds drove me nuts, too." Now that she was talking, her posture relaxed. She told us her name was Nicole.

"How long are you in Rome?" I asked.

"Just the weekend—I'm studying abroad in England. I came for my birthday."

"Well Happy Birthday!" my mom said, raising her glass in a toast. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

"Twenty-one!" I said, surprised. "I'm impressed. When I turned twenty-one, I didn't spend it enjoying a respectable glass of wine in a restaurant."

My mom rolled her eyes.

The two of them continued chatting. I was glad for the interruption to our dinner. My mom and I had become on edge with each other as the day stretched on. I knew it irritated her to be babied by her daughter, but I couldn't seem to stop nagging her to take out her cane and stand firm against the crush of tourists. She hated using her cane. I hated seeing her in pain. A neutral third-party was a welcome interruption.

I began sliding into the blue bog of melancholy that I'd been trying to avoid all day when I heard Nicole say something about a fiancé.

"So your fiancé is back at home?" my mom asked.

"Yeah, it's been tough. I almost didn't go to England at all."

"I imagine it must be difficult to be so far away from each other. Did he not want you to go?"

Nicole stiffened. Red blotches bloomed across her cheeks. She seemed about to cry, but composed herself with a deep breath.

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“No, he wanted me to go. It’s not that. It’s, uh, well, my father died three months ago.”

I felt socked in the gut. I didn’t know what to say. I looked to my mom to say something, the right thing. Her father died when she was young, too. Even younger. But she was still looking at Nicole.

“See, I’m the baby of the family. I’m the only one still living at home. I didn’t want to leave my mom by herself.”

“I bet your mom told you to go.” My mom’s voice was soft.

Nicole smiled a bit. “She did.”

“Well that’s what mommas do!” My mom laughed. Nicole’s smile grew.

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The rain that soaked our final day in Rome followed our train up to Venice. When we arrived at the station, we discovered that the city was also in the midst of *acqua alta*. Picking up pairs of disposable plastic booties (plastic bags with feet, really), strung across the station gift shop, we felt slightly giddy. We loved the idea that we’d be tromping the streets of Venice overtaken by the lagoon, as if it were a magical intermediary world not governed by the laws of land or sea—Atlantis risen.

Our first evening, under moonlight and the halo of rain-softened street lamps, we sloshed through narrow streets and hidden *campi* listening to tales of dramatic love affairs and murderous intrigue. The next day we took a cooking class where we learned to make risotto with the curling, purple-fingered Radicchio di Treviso. My mom was in her element, deftly navigating the small Italian kitchen. Unfortunately though, our pace, combined with the relentless rain, proved challenging for her. Her throat grew sore and she developed a cough. I grew frustrated.

Once, when she was tired from walking and we tried resting in the Caffè Florian with two of the thickest, most luxurious hot chocolates I’d ever had, she drank hers down and said she couldn’t sit any longer. Under an awning outside, an orchestra sweetly serenaded the evening as rain fell softly in the piazza. Inside, we were swaddled in sumptuousness—lavish paintings, plush red velvet, and a light made dazzling by the refractions of dozens of gilded mirrors. She couldn’t walk, she couldn’t sit. I didn’t know what to do for her.

Despite her fatigue and her worsening cold, we pushed on with an early morning visit to the *Basilica di San Marco*. The grand houses of worship in Italy were always a favorite of my mom’s. When we stepped inside, my breath caught in my chest. Outside the sky hung low, weighted by a gray, torpid cover of clouds. But under the sky-like expanse of the massive basilica ceiling there shimmered a beautiful golden light. The contrast was stunning. It was as if heaven itself resided inside. Leaning heavily on her cane, my mom made her way to the altar and dipped in genuflection in front of the crucifix.

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Although raised Catholic, I'd never been a good one. Still, when I saw that priests were available in the basilica to receive confession, I felt the latent tug to unburden myself. Sitting in a chair beside an aging priest in embroidered red and white vestments, I made the sign of the cross. The priest didn't speak English, and I didn't speak Italian, but it didn't matter—sacrament transcends language.

“Bless me father for I have sinned. It's been...” I paused, trying to remember. “...three years since my last confession.” I held up three fingers.

The priest nodded. I took a deep breath. No words seemed to come. My face flushed and my eyes grew hot.

“I'm sorry for being so impatient. I'm sorry I don't always understand.” Tears spilled down my cheeks. “She deserves better.”

*

I was very excited for the last part of our trip, the hill town of Montalcino in the Tuscany wine region. It had been my idea, and I'd planned it with gusto—booking a rental car, researching a snug home through Airbnb set right among the vineyards, arranging wine tastings, and even finding a truffle festival for us to attend.

By the time we headed down there though, my mom still hadn't improved. There was a fog over her eyes and her voice was raspy. Since I didn't know how to drive a manual, my mom, sick though she was, drove us to our rental home. She sat awkwardly forward on the seat, rigid. Her hip was still in incredible pain.

A gray mist clung to the hillsides, muting the countryside foliage. The stone house was cold, and my mom immediately crawled under the bedcovers to stave off the chills. I emailed the winery where we were scheduled to have a tasting of Brunello di Montalcino and told them we had to cancel. My mom was already half-asleep, and I knew she wouldn't feel up to dinner either. I gently nudged her shoulder through the blankets and told her I was going to walk to town.

“Have fun sweetie,” she murmured.

The next day the sky was clear and the sun had coaxed the reds and golds on the trees in the vineyards into a cheerful blaze. I prepared a cup of tea for my mom, feeling optimistic. She had gotten some rest and there was finally a break in the weather. When I went to wake her though, I found her hair damp and her cheeks a fever pink.

“I don't think I can manage the festival today,” she said, her voice thick.

I stood there, looking at her. I felt my frustration simmering. Inwardly, I yelled at myself to stop. Stop! But a gusty sigh burred up anyway.

An hour or so later we were driving toward the town where the festival was being held. My mom had had her tea, taken a shower, and said she felt well

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enough to drop me off. I didn't believe her, but I'd already made her feel bad, and pushing back would have just made things worse. She needed to feel like she was fine. She needed me to think she was fine. Not sick. Not in pain.

Nearing the town, I told my mom to pull over and I'd walk from there. But she didn't see a place to stop and quickly got swallowed up in the line of festival traffic flowing into the town.

"Mom, just pull over."

"I can't, Alison, there's no place to stop."

"Just pull over. It doesn't matter." My chest tightened as I watched my mom struggle with the clutch up the steep, narrow roads.

"Mom, seriously..."

"Alison! Enough!" She turned to me, her eyes flashing, her mouth pulled taut into the thin line that turned my stomach to jelly.

We kept climbing, my heart squeezing, squeezing.

"Mo—"

"ALISON! Stop telling me how to drive!"

We were well into the town at that point. Side streets had been cordoned off for the festival. We were closely flanked by old stone buildings on either side and had no choice but to follow the snaking line of traffic. As we edged toward another bend, I saw it coming. The corner of the building was too close, but my voice caught in my throat.

CRRRRUUUUNCH. The car gave a sharp, metallic screech that sent me into a full-body cringe. My mom jerked at the clutch.

"Stop! Stop!"

"Shut up Alison!"

I'd pushed too hard. I'd denied and denied. I hadn't wanted to believe that I'd been witnessing my mom's limitations. To me, she'd never had any limitations. Unconsciously I squinched my eyes shut, ardently appealing for a reverse-course, for things to be put back where they should be.

I had ruined everything.

*

I left my mom in Italy. I was heading home to California and she was heading south to visit her friend. She told me she spent the time mostly resting, recuperating before her flight back to New York a few days later. I missed her intensely. Before I'd left, I'd squeezed her tight and told her I loved her, but it hadn't felt like enough. Somehow, I still believed there was something I could have done—could do—that would make things better, that would make my mom better.

A couple months later it was Christmastime. As a gift, I decided to make my mom an album commemorating our trip. Our photos were numerous. My mom grinning goofily as she held up the menu from the Colosseum café

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that featured a gladiator digging into a huge plate of spaghetti. The two of us sporting our bright booties—her in aqua, me in orange—at a café table partially submerged by the *acqua alta*. Venice rooftops from the top of San Marco Campanile. Me licking a cone of gelato in the Villa Borghese where we'd managed to have a picnic before the rains set in. Photo after photo of beautiful places and of us smiling, happy to be in Italy, and happy to be with each other. I put them all in. I even put in a photo of the car with its big gouge across the back door and fender. My boyfriend questioned its inclusion, but I just shrugged—it was part of the trip, too.

We weren't able to get together for Christmas, so I sent the album in the mail. When my mom called, I asked if she liked the gift. She said she loved it, that she'd already paged through it several times.

“What did you think of the car photo? I almost didn't put it in, but I felt like I had to.”

My mom laughed. “We did have an adventure, didn't we?”

For a moment I didn't say anything. My throat felt tight.

“Mom? I'm really sorry. It was all my fault.”

My mom sighed. “It was my fault too, Alison. I should have just told you when I couldn't handle something.”

“There was just so much I wanted you to see. But maybe if I'd...I don't know...”

“Sweetie, there's nothing that you can do. This is just how it is.” She paused. “You don't have to worry you know—it's not going to stop me.”

For a few minutes neither of us spoke.

“Mom, did you like the trip? Did you have fun?”

“Of course I did—I was with you.”