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Barry of Two Worlds, Briefly

Back home, ragged, half-frozen, hallucinating bums would be stumbling past Asian-fusion restaurants filled with harried men and women trying to cram another hour of business into an already strained day, winter winds would be whipping through the steep canyons of glass and concrete, a thousand cars would be choking through intersections looking for downtown's last three parking spaces, and Sharon would be quizzing the waiter on the origin of tonight's bluefin special.

But instead, here in Venice, the bums lounge on the steps of the train station with long, unkempt hair, battered backpacks, flip-flops, great tans, and girlfriends who laugh and toss back their hair that way girls do when they want to be noticed, while a spring breeze slips through the narrow streets in small sighs that don't even startle the pigeons, and gondoliers stand up in their boats, flirting with the backpackers' girlfriends while waiting for elderly tourists to hire their services, and Sharon says, "Barrett, ask the waiter if these mussels come from local waters."

"Local waters?" Barry tries to pay attention. He really does.

"Yes. We can't eat seafood caught in local waters because of the high levels of mercury."

"Whose local waters?" he asks.

"Any local waters."

Ah, zero to irritating in 3.5 seconds. Not a record, but definitely in her zone. And still, he feels compelled to egg her on.

"Aren't all the oceans and lakes and rivers on the earth local to somebody?" he asks. "Maybe the article you read only meant waters local to the United States. Maybe Italian waters are mercury-free."

"Would you look around? This place is filthy."

He looks around. It's a sidewalk café—a few metal tables and chairs, Heineken umbrellas swaying overhead, pedestrians wandering by in no particular hurry.

"There are *cats* under these tables, Barrett. *Cats*. The Health Department would have a fit. Their fish must be full of poisons."

"If they were, there might not be as many cats."

Across the canal, a young Italian man walks with two young women—one blond, one dark-haired. The man waves his hands in the air and flicks a spent cigarette into the canal in a rich caricature of a young Italian man flanked by beautiful girls. Barry watches them until they disappear around the corner.

"I don't think I should eat the mussels," Sharon says. "I wonder what kind of fish is in the Linguine Pescatore."

"Did you know Italians live longer than we do?" Barry asks. He doesn't know if they do or not. He doesn't care.

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"That's because of the red wine. That's why I drink a glass every night."

Note to self, he thinks: drink a whole bottle of red wine every night. He pivots in his seat but can't spot the waiter.

When he turns back around, four young women are settling into the chairs at the table beside him in a noisy cloud of screeching chair legs and laughter. He listens to their accents as Sharon goes on about some leather factory and how P.E.T.A must not have much presence in Italy or there wouldn't be nearly as much leather running around on the sidewalks. The women are speaking English, but in different accents. Two sound American, he decides. One's British, or maybe South African. He can never tell them apart. The fourth sounds Scandinavian. She's tall and blond. Definitely Scandinavian. Hopefully Swedish.

The waiter arrives to take his and Sharon's order. Barry stumbles through vocabulary he picked up from the "Italian on Your Lunch Hour" course that he listened to in his car. Sharon gave him a subscription to it for Christmas, but she wasn't interested in listening herself. Just as well. She wouldn't have had the patience.

"Did you ask him if the fish are from local waters?" she asks.

"Yes," Barry lies. "They're not. They're brought in fresh daily from Arctic fishing ranges."

The four women laugh. They're young—maybe college age. They all have daypacks and wear slim t-shirts and snug-fitting pants. They're probably traveling together, at least for a day or two here in Italy. Maybe they're sharing a hostel.

Barry's sister Meggy backpacked through Europe when she was in her early twenties. He remembers her stories of joining up with other travelers for a few days at a time—no strings, just shared moments. He imagines these women on a train, dozing, painting each other's toenails, flirting with the conductor. He checks their toes. None of them are wearing polish. He revises his fantasy so that now they're reading dangerous poetry to each other.

"Where should we go tomorrow?" Sharon asks. "A tour of villas on the Grand Canal starts at ten o'clock. Or a ferry can take us to the glass factory at nine. What do you want to do?"

The women are talking about Prague. "Look up," the Swedish one is saying. "You have to look up. The street level is all businesses and stores and people, like any city. But Prague is most beautiful above the street."

A glass of red wine appears before Barry, and he lifts it to his lips.

In his imagination, he's standing in the streets of Prague with the tall Swedish woman, and he's raising his gaze above the ground level of shop fronts and bank entrances and signs warning against forbidden actions. The spires soar out of the diesel exhaust of buses, cars, and motor-scooters. Gothic arches, rococo windows, and ancient walls lean into the sky. He listens, and above the din of a Prague afternoon, he hears someone practicing a violin, and the sound wraps in and around the spires.

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"Barrett."

He looks down, and Sharon is not blond or tall. Her lips are tight like they get when he forgets to listen to her.

"Yes, love?" he asks.

"What do you want to do tomorrow?"

He thinks for a minute. He really does.

"Why don't we go to Prague?" he says and looks away.