



# THE THREE AGES OF WOMAN

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Once a man promised to wait all day for me at Rome's Piazza della Repubblica, to wait all day and into the night for me to arrive. I was taking an overnight bus from Prague to Venice, then a water taxi from the bus to the train station, and finally a train from Venice to Rome. We had no idea how long it would take.

He found his spot on the edge of a fountain where statues of water nymphs wrapped their lithe bodies around sea gods, and he set about waiting. He wore black gloves with the fingers cut off so he could draw, and he carried a shoulder bag he'd picked up while passing through Finland. He was a bearded, twenty-four-year-old architecture student from Cincinnati in search of great buildings. I was a twenty-six-year-old backpacker wandering alone for a year in Europe. I'd left my corporate job — measuring the satisfaction levels of electric-utility customers — sold my car, and stowed my belongings in a friend's attic. I couldn't have told you exactly why I was spending a year alone far from everyone I knew, but I was sure I wanted my future to be more interesting than the life I'd been living.

The man and I had met a month earlier in Poland, at a bank in Krakow's main square, where both of us had been trying to exchange our traveler's checks for the rapidly declining Polish zloty. We'd walked from bank to bank and stood in long lines swapping stories until finally one teller had accepted our checks. Then we ate pirogies together and made plans to meet again that evening, but it never happened.

The next day we ran into each other on the platform of a train headed to Prague. I'd been using Prague as a home base for three months, sharing a flat filled with a family's things, and I offered to show the man the city. Somewhere between drinking heavy beer and waiting for a tram, we realized we'd been staring at each other. Our romance was whirlwind, and when he left to continue his travels, we parted without promises.

Weeks later he called me as I was busy packing my bag.

"I miss you," he said.

"I'm leaving tonight on an overnight bus to Venice."

"I'm in Rome. I'll meet you there."

"No, stay," I said. "I'll come to you."

Piazza della Repubblica is less a meeting place than a traffic roundabout. Cars and scooters and buses circle its fountain day and night, and diesel fumes and the whine of Vespa motors fill the air. In a city of luscious piazzas, this one is noxious by comparison. When the Fountain of the Naiads was unveiled at its center in 1911, some Italians railed against the indecency of its sculptures: naked women draped across creatures from the deep.

Today I'm back in Rome for the first time in thirteen years, and I've come to the piazza half expecting to find my younger self sitting on the fountain's edge next to a man she is starting to love. But the fountain is turned off, and its marble rim is nearly empty of visitors. A newspaper has sunk to the bottom, its headlines legible through the quiet water.

Chris, my boyfriend of several years, is in Sicily right now with his teenage daughter. I'll meet them there soon, and next

week Chris and I will attend a friend's wedding in Abruzzo. But first I have five days alone in Rome.

Nothing is as I remember it. Rome is a jumble of Italians wearing metallic sneakers and barking into cellphones and Americans following tour guides hoisting signs shaped like Mickey Mouse ears. A banner advertising Aveda cosmetics flaps next to Keats's house on the Spanish Steps. It wasn't like this more than a decade ago, when a man waited for me at a fountain and we spent ten days here, holding hands as we walked the streets and stepping into incense-laden churches to escape the rain. We were struck silly by our luck at having found each other, and everything in the city confirmed our good fortune. That December, Rome was a theater piece staged just for us. Women peeled artichokes in the alleys off Piazza Navona. The barista at our favorite morning coffee bar learned our names. Once a lone saxophonist played in the street below our hotel room, and we swayed together to the music.

Now it is June, and the heat and masses of people strike me as an affront. At the Vatican I pass through metal detectors, then fight for a place before Michelangelo's *Pietà*. Groups of disaffected teenagers crowd the steps of churches where the man and I went to see Caravaggio's. The Borromini chapel, with its undulating curves of white stone, seems flatter without the man's excitement at finally seeing it. I walk until my feet ache. Surely somewhere there is something for me to connect with in this crowded city. The steps around the Trevi Fountain are so packed that I am jostled by bodies. The legend says tossing a coin into the water will ensure your return to the city. Thirteen years ago I tossed several. This time I pause with the coin in my hand. Rome no longer feels like a place I want to come back to.

After our meeting at the piazza, the man and I walked to the hotel where he'd been staying — Papa Germano's, a *pensione* with dorms for international backpackers. The jovial proprietor offered us a double room with a private bath and a view of the street, where a market was set up most mornings. We shyly put our clothes into drawers and took turns cleaning up in the bathroom. I think both of us had fantasized about this meeting, but now that we were alone together, we were timid, as if a sudden move might make it all disappear.

I sat down next to the man on the bed, and he posed the question he must have been waiting to ask. "I hope you don't mind me asking," he began, "but have you gotten your period?"

During our brief time in Prague we'd had unprotected sex despite a package of condoms in the cabinet on the other side of the room. It was rash and out of character for both of us. We hadn't talked about it afterward. And, in fact, I hadn't gotten my period since. That alone wasn't unusual; I had irregular cycles. What was unusual was that a few nights before I'd left Prague, I'd been sitting at the kitchen table eating a roll and some cheese, and I'd stood up, walked to the bathroom, and vomited. I told the man this. Would he find the news exciting or terrifying? I had already spent an afternoon in an English-language bookshop reading up on early signs of pregnancy. And I'd decided that, if I was pregnant,

I would continue to travel awhile, then return home, have the baby, and raise it. Everything about our meeting felt destined to me, and if a child came of it, I was sure that was destiny, too.

"I guess we should find you a pregnancy test," he said, and I nodded.

Then we began planning a walk to see the Baths of Caracalla.

Chris and I have agreed to travel separately in Italy because the arrangement comes closest to meeting both our needs: I get to be a solo traveler again; he has some father-daughter time. Soon I'll fly to meet them, and we'll travel as a family of sorts. After that, we'll meet up with his daughter's mother, and they will go off while Chris and I go to the Adriatic Sea for the wedding and a romantic week in a medieval village in the hills.

Our plan is complicated, but we've grown accustomed to that. Our life together has been a constant balancing act. By the time we met, Chris was well into his forties, separated from his wife, and the father of an adolescent daughter. I was living alone in an apartment with a view of a park and a part-time job that left me plenty of freedom to write and travel. Neither of us was in a position to drop our life and rush into a new one. So we've built one slowly. Over the years we have tangoed in Buenos Aires and sat with his ex-wife at their daughter's middle-school graduation. We've created a home where salvias bloom and the cabinets are stocked with Cheerios. Not once have we been able to pretend the lives we had before we met were anything less than woven into the lives we've had since.

When we were wrangling over flights and hotel reservations and itineraries for this trip, Chris said, "I bet you'd be happy to spend some time alone in Rome." I admitted I would. And when he dropped me at the airport in the morning, before his own flight in the afternoon, he said, "I hope you have a wonderful time," and I knew he meant it.

After our ten days in Rome, the man flew home to Ohio and returned to school. I continued for another five months my solitary travels through Spain, France, England, and Ireland. Then I journeyed with a friend to India. I thought about the man the entire time. In every museum I wanted him to be standing next to me; in every restaurant I wanted him to taste the food. We wrote long letters and made scheduled calls on overpriced phone cards, and every few weeks we'd agree on a time to sit quietly and think about each other. I might find myself on a bench in Gaudí's Park Guell conjuring his sandy hair and blue eyes while I knew he was picturing me, at that same moment, in his apartment in Cincinnati.

When I finally flew home and came through customs at JFK, the man was waiting on the other side.

I wasn't sure what to do next, but the one certain thing in the uncertain life I'd returned to was that I was in love. So I moved to Cincinnati to wait while the man completed his architecture thesis. We rented the second floor of a crumbling

Victorian, made espresso in a pot on the stove, and threw vegetarian dinner parties. Our apartment had a light-filled turret and minimal furnishings: a futon on the floor, his childhood twin bed in the corner of the guest room. On the walls, matted but not framed, were photos from Rome. In one he stood amid the graffitied columns of the Coliseum, pink light streaming down on him. When I walked past it, I would often stop. He might at that moment have been on campus cutting chipboard into window mullions for a model, but for me he was squinting in the Italian sun.

One day in Rome the man and I found our way to the modern art museum, near the Villa Borghese. We walked there through a park filled with trees that reminded him of Dr. Seuss, and after the museum visit we picnicked on rolls and provolone in the grass. It was a perfect day of blue skies and families strolling the gravel paths.

Now, after a meal of gummy pizza, I walk through the same park to the same museum. In the galleries I seek out the work of futurist painter Giacomo Balla, whose family portraits surprised us with their tenderness. We loved the one of his daughter Luce, with her red shirt and subtle smile. Today I find the geometric abstracts that made Balla famous, but his portraits are on loan to a museum in Germany. I'm only slightly disappointed. What I'm really here for is Gustav Klimt's stunning painting *The Three Ages of Woman*. I can picture the wall it hung on, and how we stood before it a long time, mesmerized.

It's easy to find the Klimt: the museum has organized an exhibition on Symbolism, and that painting is on the cover of the brochure. I walk through the exhibit, tracing the history of the Symbolist movement, until it ends on a wide wall of electric blue with Klimt's painting shimmering in the middle. Three figures are bound by a border of gold: On the right a sleeping baby. In the center a young mother bent over that baby tucked in her arms, flowers tumbling into her hair. She is at one with all that shines. And to the left an old woman, breasts drooping, body gone loose and gray, her head sunk into her hands. Childhood, youth, old age. Infant, mother, crone.

The placard beside the painting assures me the image is not only about aging. It can be interpreted as a scene of rebirth, the older woman giving way to the younger, the younger to the baby, through the mystery of maternity. But I don't buy it. I am standing before this painting on the cusp of middle age, and I see only how we grow old, how the things we once thought we'd have can slip away.

The last time I stood here I was young, and the man's palm cradled my back. We were swirling in the heady rush of new love. For days we had walked hand in hand past pharmacies without stopping to buy a pregnancy test, leaving the question unanswered. Back then we would have found me in the center of the painting: the young mother gleaming with gold. Maybe soon there would be a baby for me to hold in my arms. Today I look for myself in the Klimt, but my place is less obvious. I am hidden somewhere in the painting, neither young nor old but perfectly in between.

I have no idea why I am in Rome by myself, watching crowds pass by while I eat overpriced pasta and drink a glass of wine. Chris sends e-mails about rambling through the ruins at Agrigento and wandering through cemetery vaults in Campo Fiorito in search of his grandmother's family. I want to be there with him — with them — creating new memories instead of excavating old ones. Rome has been a terrible disappointment. For years I imagined returning, and now I can't wait to leave.

In the morning I ask my hotelier to recommend a laundromat, and I follow his directions across wide boulevards and down quiet back streets. Once my clothes are washing, I step onto the sidewalk to look for a place to have an espresso. At the corner I slip into a coffee bar, and it hits me immediately: I am in the same place where the man and I came each morning to order *due cappuccini e due cornetti*, standing at the counter feeling proud to be known, if only here, as regulars. All these days of tracing the places we went, and now I have landed in one without trying. The old man who knew our names isn't here anymore, but the mirror behind the bar is the same, and the shelves of knickknacks beside it. I can't prove this is the place, but I know it in my body. And I know where I must go next. I finish my espresso, step outside, walk a block, turn left, and there it is: Papa Germano's.

I didn't think I would come here. I haven't even looked for it on the map. It's one thing to return to the places we loved in Rome and quite another to visit the hotel — the bedroom — of a love affair more than a decade in the past. It was here that we undressed each other; here that we stayed up late pouring out the stories of our lives; here that we first said, "I love you." It was also here, on the morning of his last day in Rome, that I took a pregnancy test that read negative. The answer we'd avoided came just before we said goodbye.

I enter the hotel now, walk the long hall to the reception desk, and say to the man seated there, "I am looking for Papa Germano."

"That is me!" he says. As soon as I hear it, I know it's true. The hair is grayer, but the smile is the same. He was among my favorite Italian characters, flirting and joking and singing to us when we came back to the hotel in the evenings.

"I stayed here thirteen years ago," I say.

"Oh, I was tall and handsome then!"

"I know you won't remember, but I'd met a man, and we fell in love while staying in one of the rooms upstairs," I tell him. "You were delighted."

"What happened?" he asks playfully. "Did he leave you for another woman?"

"Actually, he did!"

Papa Germano is stricken, but I can't stop laughing, and so he laughs, too.

"He was a fool, then," he says. I tell him he's right. Papa Germano is sorry that he doesn't remember me; many people come through his hotel. I assure him I understand.

"Do you still make wine downstairs?" I ask.

"Not anymore," he answers. "Things change." He sweeps his arm toward the expanded lobby, the Internet stations where young people tap at the keyboards. He's grown to fit the twenty-first century.

"That's too bad," I tell him. "I've always remembered your wine. You gave us a bottle."

Papa Germano and I talk for a few minutes before he needs to go: a new set of backpackers is gathering in the hallway. But first he tells me to stay right where I am. He walks into the back room and returns with a bottle of wine for me.

"Come see me again," he says. "Stay here next time you are in Rome."

Then, just as he did thirteen years ago when I left his hotel to catch a train bound for Florence, he leans forward and kisses me on both cheeks.

The man and I were together for three years. Then he met a woman at the ice-cream shop around the corner, and it was over.

It seemed exactly that sudden at the time, but now I know we'd started to unravel as soon as we'd become two people trying to keep house together instead of trying to remember how to order in Italian at the stainless-steel counter of a coffee bar in Rome. My coming back now to try to find us in this vast and crowded city is a repeat of what I did those years we were together in the U.S.: I tried to recreate something that had existed for ten days between two people young enough to believe they could shape the future to fit their longings. There was a kind of life we imagined, one that would allow us to stand rapturous before paintings and own only what we could carry on our backs. We could realize it in glimpses, but in the long run the vision proved untenable.

The woman he left me for was already pregnant with another man's baby. Within a month of his moving out, he was with her in the delivery room as she had the child. I walked through my days feeling far more confused than I'd been navigating foreign cities alone. A few weeks after the birth, he came by the apartment to pick up the last of his belongings. For two hours we talked and yelled and cried. He punched a wall. I called him a bastard. Then we got quiet, and I asked him a question that surprised even me: "Was it amazing in the delivery room?"

He nodded. Then he said, "I keep thinking about the baby we lost."

We were silent a long time.

"There was no baby," I whispered.

"There had to have been," he replied. "I felt so connected to you."

Our relationship had fallen apart because we'd been unable to reconcile the people we'd thought we were with the people we'd turned out to be. I'd thought it was because we hadn't kept traveling, because we'd let the banalities of choosing dish drainers at K-Mart become our reality, because we'd bickered over pillows left on the floor instead of placed decorously on the bed in the morning. Now I realized we had simply told ourselves different stories about Rome. I saw the man only a few more times after that night. Then I moved away.

Now I live in Texas with Chris; we have a vegetable garden and a drip coffee maker. The man lives somewhere in Ohio with his two sons.

The first time I walked to Piazza della Repubblica my heart was pounding in my chest. It was just past noon, and the man looked up and saw me crossing the street toward him. We kissed, letting Rome open out around us.

I've decided to make a final visit to the piazza tonight. Tomorrow I'm to board a plane to Sicily, where Chris and his daughter will fetch me at the airport. Next week we'll climb Mount Etna together and get lost in the winding streets of Catania. And a week later, after our friend's wedding, I'll discover that Chris has been carrying a ring in his suitcase. When he offers it to me on bended knee, my answer will come easily.

But first I return to this place where a man once promised to wait for me all day, to wait all day and into the night. He was young and excited and seated on the edge of a fountain in one of the world's most beautiful cities. In a closet I keep a sketch he made that day of one of the fountain's nymphs, her body all sensual curves.

On this final visit, my guidebook tells me the fountain's

sculptor modeled those figures after a set of twins who posed for him in his studio. When the work was unveiled to the public in 1911, upstanding Romans were scandalized by the flagrant sexuality, the wanton fleshliness of the nymphs' bodies. But the twins themselves never stopped loving the fountain. For their entire lives, well into the 1960s, they would visit the fountain regularly to remind themselves of their nubile youth.

With traffic on the Via Nazionale thundering before me, I remember how I walked to meet the man that December afternoon. I removed my backpack, sat down beside him, and held his hand in its fingerless glove. We didn't know what lay before us, what discoveries or disappointments. It didn't matter. The sun was bright; the water in the fountain rose and fell.

I imagine how those twins must have stood here, too, remembering their days in the studio and the fountain's unveiling. Here were their arched backs captured in bronze. Here were their full breasts, the soft twists of their hair. *Yes, they must have thought, I was once that beautiful. I was once that young.* ■

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## Christmas Eve, Almost Midnight

DAVID DENNY

Driving through the mist after delivering packages, I come upon a family of deer walking down the middle of the street. I cut my lights and engine and coast behind them awhile. They are cruising the neighborhood, nibbling the frosty lawns, looking for nasturtiums. I glide behind them around a corner and down another street, the only sound the crunching of newly formed ice beneath my tires, until they disappear onto the dark, soggy soccer fields of the middle school. I tell you I can count on one hand the number of times I've been happier.