## Kristin Inciardi

## **Sbalordito**

Attilio met them at Space Electronique, a discotheque popular with Americans studying abroad. He was the bartender. Polaroids of him hung behind the bar, his arm around one girl or another, lips planted on her cheek while she beamed at the camera as if to say I love this country. They couldn't speak Italian very well. They asked him to trill r's in words never meant to be trilled. Sometimes he'd have sex with them in the storage closet, their pelvises balancing on a case of Peroni. Other times he woke up in 15th century villas chopped into dorm rooms. He never invited them home because he lived with his father, and the American girls didn't understand why a man would still live at home well into his thirties.

They had the best intentions of becoming fluent in Italian during their semesters. They insisted on banning English from their dates with him. They had no trouble ordering another round or asking for the bill, but when they tried to describe their life goals and what made them vulnerable, their vocabulary fell short: they said things like "I want to be a *studentessa di Medici*" when they really meant *studentessa di medicina*. He didn't tell them the Medici were an Italian dynasty. He spoke only in present tense and

asked them what they liked about Rome. They all liked the same things: pizza, the Pietà, dining al fresco in a piazza. Their Italian never improved. He would switch to English, but they gradually lost interest in talking to him in either language. They thanked him for an affair to remember, or just stopped calling, as if he ceased to exist.

Attilio got older but the girls stayed twenty-two. It wasn't as much fun as his married brothers thought it must be. He stopped bringing girls into the storage room because he'd notice mouse droppings collecting in the corners, stopped waking up in 15th century villas after the morning he opened his eyes to a collage of puppies and male Calvin Klein models taped to the walls. But he liked to think back on those few first exchange students, when he was their age and had no idea what was coming next in life. He remembered their last names: Booth, Cho, MacDonald, Herman. He found them on the internet.

Booth was the curator of a repertory film festival. Cho had three kids. MacDonald was in a band that opened for Radiohead, twice. Herman was a human rights lawyer. Attilio was a bartender. Still. He wanted to believe it was the girls who were holding him back.

Running a bar was all he knew, but he knew how to do it well. Attilio quit Space Electronique to open his own place. It was much smaller than the discotheque, with room for only ten stools around the bar. Customers could also sit at one of the eight distressed, wooden tables that he'd found at consignment shops. The tables wobbled a bit, but the floorboards were warped, so everything came into balance somehow and drinks didn't spill. They sat no more than two or three people each. A ledge beneath the large window served as a seat for three more people. He lined it with cushions that he had covered with a fabric that matched the curtains his mother sewed for their windows when he was a child.

He banned from his jukebox the sort of Europop played at Space Electronique by filling it with jazz and blues standards. The discotheque's customers had liked mixed drinks, but they liked them cheap. Attilio now had a proper top shelf for quality liquor. He dusted the bottles every other day, from the Belvedere's etched glass to the Maker's Mark bottleneck rimmed with dripping wax. He painted the walls a red that made the place warm and homey. He kept the lights low, but bright enough for someone to read a newspaper at the bar because that's the type of customer he wanted. The walls of Space Electronique had peeling black paint, the light an epileptic strobe.

He hung a topographic map of Italy behind the bar and drew a heart round Rome with a tube of lipstick one girl or another had left behind. He named his place Mappamondo.

Business was slow for the first few weeks, but he was hopeful. It was April, warm enough to keep the double doors open to the street, and from Attilio's perch at the bar he could see pedestrians slowing their gait to throw a glance his way. Their eyes circled the storefront like singling out a want ad in the newspaper, perhaps making a mental note of the bar's name. His brothers came by often after work before they went home to their wives and children. They expected free drinks, which of course Attilio provided, but when they pointed to the top shelf he shook his head. With the lease he'd signed for Mappamondo, he couldn't just give away the good stuff. They understood, but it made it easier for them to criticize the jukebox selections and the beers on tap.

But it was women who came in more often than men. Women in twos or threes, carrying designer messenger bags or department store bags or even grocery bags, a cocktail the final item on their shopping lists. They sipped their drinks languidly, as if these groceries were for tomorrow's meal, not tonight's, as if time stood still when they entered Mappamondo, and their perishables wouldn't spoil or melt.

One evening, two women sat together at one end of the bar. They wore their hair in tight ponytails and jewel-encrusted wedding bands on their fingers and talked about their children. Attilio uncorked a bottle of Pinot Grigio before they even asked. As he finished pouring their drinks, a woman who was undeniably not Italian walked into Mappamondo.

She had coarse, curly red hair that circled her

head like a halo. It was the kind of hair she must have been teased unrelentingly about when she was a kid but as an adult made her so striking it would be tragic if she wore it any other way. Freckles stood out in scores on her skin. The shape of her arms revealed she lifted weights regularly, and her torso funneled toward a trim waist, but the fullness in her rear end and thighs was less defined. Her soft body distinguished her from the throngs of stick-figured native women that most other men desired—bodies like ribbons unfurled and held taut.

"Ciao," she greeted with a half laugh, as if she remembered a joke that she wanted to tell him. She put her purse on a stool at the center of the bar and remained standing.

She was not the first American to enter Mappamondo. He'd had a few tourists trickle in, looking weary but content after a day of sightseeing. Others had bypassed sightseeing altogether to spend a lazy day drinking. His place was too new to be listed in the guidebooks, so he wasn't sure how they decided upon it. He even got a few exchange students who came in with textbooks and drank a beer while doing homework. They kept to themselves except for when they settled their bill. These were the kind of students who probably held as much disdain for Space Electronique as he did.

Attilio put a coaster in front of the woman and nodded. "Hello. What would you like?" he asked in English.

She hesitated and drew a bit back from the bar, perhaps embarrassed that her ethnicity was so easy to uncover. "Dewar's, per favore," she said. "Col ghiacco."

He grabbed the bottle of whiskey from the top shelf. It was good of her to speak Italian, but *col ghiacco*—on the rocks—was jargon that every exchange student knew.

Still, she didn't look like she was young enough to be in college. She could have been anywhere between thirty and forty. Her hair was a shade or two more vibrant than what was probably her true red. The delicate skin beneath her eyes looked a bit too bright, as if she used a special makeup to hide dark circles. She wore no wedding ring, but on her middle finger was a chunky, silver band—something modestly extravagant, as if she had the means to buy it for herself. Her blue jeans fit her body well and showed off her curves. Finding the perfect pair of denim was something that was ingrained in an Italian woman's upbringing, but most young foreigners had no idea how to dress themselves.

He placed her drink on the bar. "Salut."

She sat down and smiled. "Grazie." She opened her bag and pulled out a leather-bound appointment book along with a map of Rome. With one finger she traced the path of the Metro while writing something next to an address in her book.

He heard the tinny chime of one of the other women's wedding bands tapping against an empty wine glass. They were speaking in exaggerated whispers about the redheaded foreigner, speculating that she was an American tourist whose husband had left her for a young

blond, and she was in Italy to reclaim her sexuality. That jab gave way to a story that had been in the news for weeks, about an exchange student who was accused of killing her roommate in a sex game gone wrong. The latest gossip: the girl had been seen shopping for lingerie the day after the murder.

Attilio glanced at the redhead. Her pen had paused mid-script. She was listening.

"I'm sorry," he said to her quietly so the other women wouldn't overhear. "Please, do not pay attention to that, and enjoy yourself." He preferred a local clientele, yes, but he wouldn't stand for rudeness.

She pursed her lips. "Abito a Livorno," she said to him. "Non sono un turista."

She lived in Livorno. All he knew about the city was that it was home to a military complex.

"Sei nei militari?"

The women had stopped talking and were staring at Attilio. He asked them if they needed anything else. They shook their heads, knocked back their Pinot, lay a Euro on the bar and left.

Yes, those women were insufferable, but he could empathize. There was no such thing as a quiet side street anymore, no such area a tourist wasn't willing to explore, thanks to guidebooks that promised off-the-beaten-path vacations. But he certainly couldn't turn down a paying customer when Mappamondo was still in its infancy, what with that lease he had signed.

She looked down at her drink. "Mi dispiace," she apologized. She took a large swig of her Dewar's, draining most of it. Moist marks from

her pale pink lipgloss rimmed the glass. He poured another drink for her before pouring one for himself.

"This one is on me," he said, "because of those women." He raised his glass to hers. "Salut," he said.

She smiled. "Salut."

Her name was Alyson. In patches of Italian peppered with English, she told him she worked for the Girl Scouts of America, organizing troops and activities for daughters of military families on bases throughout Europe. She was from New York City, but she'd been working in Belgium for six months before being recently transferred to Italy. She was in Rome for a week and had never been there before. So one could argue, she said, that she was indeed a tourist.

"And my Italian is not very good," she admitted, abandoning the language and looking discouraged for doing so.

"It's better than you think," Attilio said. He detected the scent of watermelon coming from her—not that of a true watermelon, but of the manufactured kind, unmistakable to gum and candy.

Alyson's cheeks flushed. She slowly rocked her glass back and forth, making the ice cubes rattle against each other. The sound comforted Attilio, as if it promised that Mappamondo would one day soon be livelier, busier. A few more customers had arrived and gathered at the tables, but they were speaking in low voices. No one was even playing music on the jukebox. A few browsed the selections before losing interest. They approached

the bar one by one to buy a drink, as if they were at a butcher shop waiting for their numbers to be called.

"I would like to know, please," Attilio said, "why did you choose this bar for a drink?"

Alyson looked around the bar, grinning as her eyes swept over a framed collage of *lire* that he never exchanged for Euro. "You're near the Ghetto wall," she said. "My mother wanted me to take a picture of it, to show to friends at her synagogue."

"Ah, you are Jewish," he said.

"Raised that way, yes."

"You need to try *carciofi alla giudìa*. I do not know what they are called in English, but it is a famous Roman Jewish food." He could smell them cooking in the afternoons as he prepped the bar. They reminded him of something similar his mother had made. Hers had been stuffed with seasoned breadcrumbs and sweet soppressata.

"Artichokes," Alyson said. "Fried artichokes. I'll be sure to try them."

"Artichokes," Attilio repeated slowly. The syllables sputtered like an old car but still made his mouth water. He would never forget that word.

"But also," Alyson continued, "I came inside because this place looked really nice and inviting."

He smiled. "Thank you. The bar . . . she is mine. I am the owner. She's very new, open three weeks now." He knew *bar* was a masculine word, but Mappamondo just felt like a daughter to him.

"Really! Congratulations."

"Thank you," he repeated. He felt proud to

take ownership, to say it out loud.

She returned her map and appointment book to her bag and rested her elbow on the bar, leaning her head into her hand. "Sei tutta la notte qui?" she asked, uncurling the fingers on her free hand with each word, as if she was taking inventory of the Italian she knew. When she was out of fingers, she continued in English. "If not, would you like to have dinner with me?"

Attilio looked in his whiskey glass as if searching for an answer. At Space Electronique, a woman would have had to ask him three times before he heard her. The blasting club anthems made speech irrelevant, so he learned how to read lips. Therefore, he'd actually know what she asked the first time, but would pretend not to, until his ears truly picked up her words. It was a way to gauge the woman's interest in him.

A woman would also have had to grip her small space at the bar so as not to be elbowed out of the way, not to be offended when he abruptly walked off to attend to a customer, not be upset if someone spilled their drink on her while she waited for him to come back. She would try to stay afloat in the sweat and strobe and smoke, and if she hung on long enough, he would tow her in, when he was ready.

But now, it was only the two of them, without the chaos of Space Electronique to protect him. He thought it would be so easy to say *no* at Mappamondo. But if he did, he would be all alone in the sunlit quiet.

"Mi dispiace, I don't know anyone in Rome," Alyson said. "I just thought—I'm sorry."

"No," he said a little too loudly, and the drinkers at the tables turned their heads. "I mean yes, I am here all night. But tomorrow evening, I have another bartender working, because Sunday nights are the most slow. We could have dinner then?"

She smiled, closed her eyes and nodded. "Sounds wonderful."

"We will have good wine, I will show you the famous places, avremo fatto le ore piccole divertendosi."

Alyson squinted her eyes open. "We will . . . make the small hours amusing?"

Attilio laughed as he shook his head. "It must mean something else in English."

She smiled. "We'll make a night of it."

Alyson met him at Mappamondo the next evening, and they walked in a roundabout way to a wine bar so he could show her some of his city. As they neared the Trevi Fountain, Attilio picked up one of the shoeprint-stamped pamphlets that littered the street and recited some facts about the monument. "It is ancient," he said.

Alyson grabbed the pamphlet and scanned it. "It says it's 18th century!" she laughed. "That's no older than the States. It's not ancient. And if you ask me, it's gaudy."

"Gaudy?"
"Ugly."

It was a world-famous attraction, but something he always took for granted as part of the backdrop. He wondered if she felt the same way about the Statue of Liberty. He examined the fountain. It was just a mishmash of halfnaked men and horses sprouting wings. "Gaudy," he said slowly.

"You don't need to be my tour guide," she said. "I have to organize a field trip for the Girl Scouts to see all these things, anyway."

"So you will return to the city?"

She smiled. "It's a four-hour train ride, but it's worth it."

They continued toward the wine bar. Attilio discussed the dearth of good Italian rock bands and the ubiquity of Roberto Begnini. When he joked that the only novel idea Italy had had since the Renaissance was fascism, she giggled and reached for his jacket cuff. They walked past the Colosseum, haunting in the darkness and spotlights, and he pointed to a cluster of cats peeking through one of its massive holes. That, Alyson said, was the sort of thing she had wanted to see.

She gave him a knowing smile once they were at the bar and he had ordered a bottle. "Do you bring women here often?" she asked. Her lips, glistening with the same lipgloss she had worn at Mappamondo, reflected flickers of candlelight.

Attilio gave a little chuckle and drummed his knuckles on the table. "I meet a lot of women as a bartender," he admitted. "More at the last place I worked, actually a lot of American women. But not like you. They never remained in Italy."

"So that explains why you're single."

He chuckled again. "Yes, it is."

Alyson placed her hand on top of his to stop the drumming. "It's okay, I'm just teasing." But he didn't respond because he noticed her hand. It was the hand of a woman much older than she: very dry, with wrinkles like weather-beaten bark. She pulled her hand away.

The sommelier arrived with their first bottle. He presented it with minimal flourish and poured a modest amount into their glasses. After he walked away, Alyson topped off their drinks.

"I am sorry if my relationships make me look like I am a, how do you say, a playboy." He swirled the wine in his glass and sniffed it, though he never much cared for the drink.

She shook her head. "Not at all. Besides, there's something exciting and passionate about having a love affair with an expiration date."

"Expiration date? What is that?"

"To expire. To finish, to come to an end. You know from the beginning that it will end." She wiped a drop of wine from her lip and slowly applied a new layer of lipgloss, looking very serious as she did so. The scent of synthetic watermelon hit his nose, and now he knew where it came from. He wanted to taste it.

She placed her hand on Attilio's thigh. All he felt was her warmth.

He brought her home that night, slipping past his delicate father asleep in the kitchen with a newspaper in his lap. "He looks so sweet," Alyson whispered. His father's earlobes quivered as he snored softly. They drooped more than they once did. His father was no longer getting old; he was an old man, at an age that made Attilio worry. He turned off the kitchen light.

"Won't your father hear us?" Alyson asked

him in his bedroom.

"I don't think so. He almost does not hear me when I talk to him."

Afterward, with their legs coiled, she fell asleep, her body heavy against his. It was late, but on the streets below his window, the bars had only just closed. His mind was not used to shutting down at two in the morning, and so he turned on his clock radio to listen to the news, keeping the volume low. He hoped the reports would distract him from his self-awareness: he was falling into a familiar pattern with another American woman. But the broadcaster's voice was deep, speaking in one note. Attilio heard neither the news nor his own, nagging conscience, and the voice pushed him into sleep.

Alyson was still asleep when he awoke to the sun rising. The light fell across her freckled shoulders. Her skin was so pale that Attilio worried the sun could someday have a detrimental—even lethal—effect on her.

She had to catch an early train back to Livorno, she told him over espresso. She asked for his number and said she would call the next time she was in Rome. He wrote it on the back of another man's business card that she found at the bottom of her purse, his pen catching on a crumb that clung to the card. When he gave it back to her, he noticed her abnormal hands once again, their texture like fish scales. But as she carefully wrote his name above his number and tucked the card into her wallet, he knew he would taste watermelon again.

By early May, Mappamondo had earned what

he hoped to call regulars: a cluster of retired men looking to escape home until their stomachs longed for what their wives were preparing for dinner. It was late afternoon, and once again Attilio allowed the sun to fill every corner of the bar. He was pouring a pint of beer for one of the retirees when he heard a chorus of giggles from the street. It was a small group of girls wearing green jumpers. Standing among them was Alyson. She wore a green sash with little patches on it, and he thought it was the funniest thing he'd ever seen. As she waved, the girls made kissing noises. Attilio sauntered to the doorway, leaned against the frame and whistled. "Ciao, ragazze," he said to the pre-teen crowd, exaggerating the trill in his r. He blew them a kiss. It made the girls touch their perfect, reddening cheeks, as if they understood what was cooking inside of them. Only then did he look at Alyson, who shook her head at his performance and smiled. He would have invited them in for sodas if he didn't think the uniformed girls would deter other drinkers from entering.

"Mi chiama," he said to Alyson, pantomiming a telephone receiver. But he knew she wouldn't. She'd been to Rome three weekends in a row and always just showed up at Mappamondo like they had a standing date. She nodded and steered the girls away, but not before a few of them got the courage to ask Attilio if they could take his picture.

She returned close to eight. His father was at the bar, sipping whiskey. He rarely spoke but Attilio knew he liked the company.

"Alyson," Attilio said, giving her a quick kiss. "Questo è mio padre. Papa, questo è Alyson."

His father nodded, looking at the hand she extended for a few beats before accepting it.

"Sono piaciuto conoscerlo!" Alyson greeted, using more syllables than necessary. Attilio wondered if her Italian faltered because she was nervous to meet his father, who was looking at him instead of returning her hello.

He put his face close to his father's and raised his voice. "Lei dice 'molto piacere," Attilio said to him.

"Should I speak louder?" Alyson asked.

"He has a problem with his ears, yes," Attilio said, "but I think he heard you fine. You greeted him different from what he uses."

She looked at his father again and squeezed his hand. "Mi dispiace," she said.

"Do not be sorry," Attilio said. "You are very easy to understand. He is just being a *stizzito*."

His father gave her a smile so slight that it barely pressed into the corners of his mouth. Alyson released her hand. "Scusi uno momento," she said to the both of them, and headed to the ladies' room.

"Un' altra studentessa?" Attilio's father asked, sucking on a whiskey-coated ice cube from his glass.

"No, lei è un' adulta," he replied.

"Americana."

"Sì, ma un' adulta. Abita a Livorno."

"Ebraica."

Attilio laughed. "Sì. Come hai saputo?"

His father tapped his chest. "La Stella di

David."

When Alyson returned, Attilio noticed her necklace. "Have you worn that always?" he asked, nodding at her star.

"Yes, why?"

"I do not remember seeing it before, but he noticed it immediately," he chuckled.

She held the star in her fingers like she was trying to protect it. "Does it bother him?"

"No." He gave his father a disapproving look, similar to one Attilio would receive as a boy when he didn't demonstrate good manners. "He is not very religious. He only attends mass on holidays. As I say, he is being *un stizzito*. I do not know what the word is in English, but believe me, he is one."

"Ercolino," his father said to him. It was his pet name for Attilio—little Hercules. "Una bevanda per la signorina." His father looked at Alyson. "Dewar's, s??" Alyson nodded and smiled. Attilio had told him earlier that this was her favorite drink, and he was glad the old man remembered.

He refilled his father's glass of whiskey and poured Alyson's drink. "I sometimes think he is not more friendly because a woman could make me leave home," he said. "I know he wants me to have a family, but he also would be very lonely."

"He could still live with you," Alyson whispered, as if she didn't believe his father was hard of hearing and unable to understand English.

"Certo, if the woman is okay with it." He looked at her to see if she reacted to this, but she was holding up her glass to his father.

"Salut," she said. His father gave a little chuckle and clinked his glass with hers. They drank in silence as Attilio tried to find more ways to bridge them together.

"Oh, Alyson!" he exclaimed. "Where is *la tua* fascia?" He ran his hand diagonally across his chest.

"My sash?" she asked. She opened her purse and took out the green fabric dotted with silky circles of pictures. "This?"

"Sì! Papa, guarda." Attilio took the sash from Alyson, handling it like it was something sacred. He lay it on the bar and smoothed it with his hands. "Can you explain it?" Attilio asked. "I will translate for Papa."

She smiled, looking slightly embarrassed. "A Girl Scout earns badges after she's completed a set of requirements," she said. She pointed at one that was a picture of an abacus, calculator and pencil. "This one means I'm good at math. Or at least, I was. This was my sash when I was a Girl Scout."

"So you used to be like those little girls in green?" Attilio asked.

She grinned. "I was."

"And you still have to wear this?"

"No, but the girls feel shy wearing their uniforms in public. I wear my old sash to show them it's something to be proud of."

Attilio translated her words. His father put on his glasses and leaned over to inspect the badges more closely. "Come la Stella?" he asked.

"Credo che sì," Attilio said. "He thinks they are symbols like your Star of David. I said I believe

they are, am I right?"

Alyson frowned. "I guess so," she said. "I mean, being a Girl Scout isn't like belonging to a religion. The badges just represent our skills, or things we've done. Like this one," she said, pointing to the gender symbol for female. "This one means 'women's stories.' I had to do things like interview a female role model, and write a story about what the first woman president would be like."

Attilio did his best to explain the difference between the badges and Alyson's star. But he had trouble understanding as well—not how Judaism differed from the Girl Scouts, of course, but simply why the act of collecting these "badges" was an organized movement. What did they really represent? He had once watched Alyson try to balance her checkbook and knew very well she wasn't good at math, so how was that badge still valid? It was as if the skills she had so dutifully acquired had expired, had come to an end.

Attilio did not say these things to his father, however. Attilio wanted him to like her as much as he did. Still, he could sense that his father found the badges to be beyond foreign—they were meaningless.

"Molto interessante," his father said. He patted Alyson's hand.

"Please, wear the sash!" Attilio said to her. "You are very sexy in it."

"I look ridiculous," she said, putting it on. It made her look much younger.

His father reached for his cap. "Ritorni a casa?" Attilio asked. His father nodded. "Va bene." He

kissed him on both cheeks, and then his father reached for Alyson's soft curls and kissed her cheeks before leaving.

"He likes you," Attilio said once he was gone.

When it was close to eleven, the bar was filled with people who had abandoned a wedding reception. Roses drooped from lapels and wrists, catching the drops of alcohol their wearers couldn't navigate into their mouths. Attilio stirred a batch of vodka martinis. He poured them into a line of chilled glasses that were each garnished with olives before pushing the glasses toward the wedding guests. There was a shot or two of martini left in the shaker. He poured it in a tumbler and gave it to Alyson, who had been sitting at the bar ever since his father left. He assumed the Girl Scouts were now asleep somewhere, but he didn't want to ask her who was taking care of them, as if the question would make her suddenly remember she had a job to get back to.

It was his busiest night so far, and yet he wished he could close early to take Alyson out for dinner. She was still wearing her sash. More than one customer tried to talk to her. They pointed to her sash as if they were asking about her breasts.

The wedding guests pushed aside the tables, and two couples started swing dancing to Duke Ellington on the jukebox. Their sharp heels left dimples in the floor. The people still sitting thudded their fists and glasses against the tables. And soon the bar counter itself was vibrating. The glasses shimmied back and forth in place.

The alcohol trembled like it was effervescent. Attilio put his hands on the bar, fearing if it slipped out of his grip it would spin away. He looked at Alyson. She had her hand on her chest like her heart had sped up to the rhythm of the chaos. He let go of the bar and placed his hand on top of hers. Don't leave me, he wanted to say. He needed her to tow him back in. He kissed her hard.

There was applause. Attilio thought he felt the bar tremble just a hair or two more. As he broke away from Alyson, Duke Ellington made his exit, and the bar came to rest again.

Exhausted as he was by closing time, he could not fall asleep once they returned home. Attilio turned to talk radio to be his lullaby. The reporter chattered in his ear, a little firmer than usual.

"He keeps saying *terremoto*," Alyson murmured. He didn't realize she was still awake. Her eyes were closed and her hair fell over her mouth. A few strands billowed up as she spoke. "What does that mean?" she asked.

He hadn't been paying attention, didn't know why the reporter was talking about a *terremoto*. But he grabbed two slats on his headboard and shook the entire bed. It made Alyson open her eyes wide and brush her hair from her face.

"Oh, *terre*—of course. Earthquake!" she said. "*Terremoto*. Moving earth."

He thought back to the swing dancers, how he'd thought it was them that had made the entire bar shake. "Do you remember that knocking at the bar tonight?" he asked. "That

was *il terremoto*. But it was far away, two or three hours away."

"Near Livorno?"

"No, a different direction."

"I've never been in an earthquake before."

"Sì. But we were not really in the earthquake. We did not experience it much, *solamente* a little of it. But people were too drunk to notice." He concentrated on the news report. "It destroyed a basilica, many centuries old," he said. "Ancient."

"That's awful." Alyson put her face closer to the radio and cupped her hand around it, as if searching for words she understood. "They say the community was . . . sbalordito?"

Sbalordito was a feeling that could be good or bad, always unexpected. It could make your body sweat, your heart race. He felt it when he was approved for a loan for Mappamondo after he thought he had no chance, and he felt it as a young man when his father had told him his mother had died. Attilio didn't know how to translate that.

He pulled her close. "It will be okay," he said. Her hand twitched as she removed it from the radio.

Alyson returned to his city every weekend, but not for the Girl Scouts; she came for him, for them. She introduced Attilio to new restaurants, beginning with a *trattoria* that served *carciofi alla giudìa*. She got him to push his fear of heights aside and climb the cupola at St. Peter's. When they kissed, she'd twist a lock of his curly hair with her pinkie finger. She never explained

why her hands were the way they were, but he understood it didn't matter, and she must have as well, because she stopped using so much lotion. She stayed awake with him to listen to talk radio and continued to press him for all the new words it revealed. She was speaking better in Italian every day.

They rented a car for a short trip to the Umbrian countryside. The first time away together was always the benchmark in a romance, Alyson explained, though Attilio didn't understand the word *benchmark*. He pieced it together, however: the first evening was still a world of soft-focus lighting where everything was bliss, but come the final morning, Alyson would have a clearer picture of the man she'd been sleeping with. During the drive, she fell for the low orange rooftops, the fields of leafy tomato plants, the rows of olive trees. Each was a near-perfect image of the next, their branches reaching a restrained distance.

But Attilio hated the countryside, hated its oversized dragonflies that clipped his ears, the slugs that clung limply onto slate walkways, the inevitable squish when his boot met with one hidden in the moss. He couldn't return to his city soon enough, but a flat tire delayed them. He didn't know what to do; he was only used to driving a moped that never suffered from deflated wheels. An American tourist passing by had to help them. He wore a sweatshirt with the word *Cincinnati* across the front, and Attilio pronounced it *chin-chin-atti*. Alyson and the American laughed like they were sharing an

inside joke and Attilio thought, this is it, here is your benchmark, here is your affair to remember. But after the tire was changed and the man said goodbye and Attilio dropped Alyson off at the nearest train to Livorno, she gave him a watermelon kiss, suggested they visit New York City in the fall, and she would see him next weekend. She hurried into the station, a widebrimmed hat sheltering her from the nascent summer sun. What he was feeling was very new, and he didn't know what to do with it.

One night it was Attilio's turn to fall asleep first, a heavy sleep brought on by a crowded night capped off with Amaro. He awoke not to the sound of talk radio, but to fingernails clicking on a computer keyboard. Alyson was sitting up in bed, the glow of her laptop illuminating her frown. She was on the internet, searching: *are abortions legal in Italy*.

Abortion was the only word he didn't immediately recognize, but it was dangerously close to aborto. Still, he hoped it was one of those anomalies, where similar words meant far different things. Like how morbido meant soft, but morbid in English meant something much more dark.

She looked at him and fidgeted with her hands, fingers turning over fingers, like games children played. They were so dry, shriveled like his mother's on the day of her wake. He imagined Alyson's hands gutting fish, or scooping cottage cheese out of a tub and feeding it to an invalid.

"I can't be a mom," she cried. "Not yet." He looked past her to a cigar box sitting on the bedside table. Inside were school pictures of his nieces and nephews. He received them every year, but he never knew what to do with them; the stiff, forced portraits were not the children he played soccer with on Easter Sundays. So he put them away, fitting their childhoods neatly into one box. But suddenly the act of filing them away to be forgotten seemed cruel, and he was ashamed. And yet, he still didn't know what to do with them. He didn't know what to do with a child.

She didn't get out of bed the next morning. He offered to pick her up a coffee, a hearty, American cup, but she didn't want one. If he spoke in Italian, her forehead would crease, even if he said words she knew and used herself. Sometimes she'd raise a hand to the light coming through the window, slowly flex her fingers before lowering it back to the bed. Attilio wondered if the baby would have her hands.

It was the first day of summer, and the Feast of St. John. Stalls were set up in the piazza in front of St. John's Basilica, selling roasted pig and stewed snails, and the celebrations carried through the streets into nearby districts. Cafés and bars opened early for those Romans who looked for any reason to take a day off. Mappamondo needed to celebrate the Feast of St. John.

"Mi chiama," he said, watching her frown once more. "Please, if you need anything."

The doorways on Mappamondo's block were decorated with luminarias despite it being a day that would see fifteen hours of sunlight. The smells from a falafel truck parked in an alley followed him inside.

Attilio added free credits to his jukebox and shuffled through his collection, but found nothing he wanted to hear. He shook out the cushions of the window seat. He dampened a towel and wiped down the bar, every stool, every table, every chair. He poured ice into the cooler beneath the bar, the cubes cascading into thunder. He sliced the lemons, sliced the limes, filled the garnish tray with maraschino cherries and olive brine. He dusted the top shelf liquor, straining to reach a slender bottle of grappa before knocking it to the floor. The glass broke into two large chunks, spilling the last few drops of the bitter liquid.

Mappamondo was no longer a place one passed by on the street or entered by chance. It was a destination. People not only remembered the bar's name, but also his own. On the first day of summer, Mappamondo was a destination for businessmen and women with unbuttoned sleeves; for journalists and bloggers with laptop cases held close to their bodies; for people who worked with their hands. He saw the grime in the beds of their fingernails as they reached for their drinks. He thought of Alyson's nails: shiny and filed down to simple beauty, mocking the hands they were attached to.

Alyson's Girl Scout sash hung behind the bar because it was something that compelled customers to linger and discuss. Attilio looked at the badges to see if any of them proved she was capable of being a mother. By midday, he still

had not heard from her. He called his father, who said she hadn't emerged from the bedroom.

He could take care of both her and the baby. True, she'd have to quit her job, but after the baby, after a while, she could find new work. Or could she? She wasn't an EU citizen, she couldn't just find work like everyone else. So they would have to live on his income. But Mappamondo was still so young, still developing, and right now he only took home a bartender's salary. And although he had become so much more than a bartender, in that moment, he knew that's all he was.

She could find work if they were to marry and she became a resident alien, couldn't she? Christ, did he want all that? Six months ago all he wanted was his own bar.

He called Alyson's mobile phone. No answer. He took it to mean she had made some firm decision, and he would have to wait until the end of the night to find out what it was.

The evening approached, and a group of children lit the luminarias along the sidewalk. People who didn't take the day off trickled into Mappamondo, even more ready to celebrate than those who had been drinking for hours. Attilio's phone vibrated in his back pocket while he opened a bottle of wine.

"Pronto?" he greeted.

It wasn't Alyson; it was a reporter. She worked for the weekly city paper. Of course he was familiar with it, he said, he always had a stack of them at the end of his bar. She told him that the editors had named Mappamondo "Best New Bar." She wanted to stop by during the week with

a photographer and interview him. Mappamondo would be featured in the issue week after next.

He wrote their appointment on a cocktail napkin, leaving out the words Best New Bar. The title didn't seem real, and to write it felt like he was playing a joke on himself.

Still, "Best New Bar" would bring so much publicity, so many new customers. Maybe even a write-up in Rome travel guides. He imagined his income increasing steadily. As soon as he hung up with the reporter, he began to dial Alyson.

But Attilio hesitated before he finished pressing the numbers. He glanced around the room. Among the crowd, there was a group of men quibbling at the jukebox over what songs to choose. A young couple licked their fingers after finishing the falafel they'd bought at the cart in the alley. A retired man was trying to flirt with an American girl, who brushed him off.

Attilio put his phone away. He leaned in close to a man who sat at the corner of the bar by himself, scribbling in a notebook filled with handwriting. Attilio had seen him there before, and wondered if he was writing a book. The man always came in alone. In something not much louder than a whisper, Attilio told him the good news.

The man put down his pen and smiled. "Bravo!" he said. He quickly got up and stood with his feet on the bottom rung of the stool so he was a head or two taller than everyone else. He placed his hand on Attilio's shoulder for balance.

"Scusi, signori!" the man shouted to the other customers, slapping his hand on the bar to get

their attention. Attilio never even knew this man had a voice; he always ordered a bottle of Budweiser by pointing at it. Now, the quietest customer he had was announcing the new title Mappamondo had earned.

Everyone cheered and applauded with what foreigners might laud as Italian passion. They all had something to do with Mappamondo's success. Attilio held back tears and wrung a towel in his hands beneath the counter where they couldn't see.

His father was still awake when he made it home in the middle of the night. The TV was on and tuned to American sitcoms dubbed in Italian. His father didn't understand American humor, so Attilio knew he was waiting up for him. The old man said nothing as he stood in

the doorway, but gave a sad smile, pressed his hands together like he was praying and shook them once or twice. Alyson was no longer there.

He fell onto his bed with his clothes and shoes still on. Alyson's overnight bag was gone. Her laptop was gone. Her toothbrush and tampons and hair gel were gone. The drawer he'd cleared for her was empty. The last thing he thought of before he crashed into sleep was that he never did get her address in Livorno. He wouldn't be able to return her Girl Scout sash.

He slept until it was nearly time to open Mappamondo the next day. As he made his way toward his best new bar, he saw a flyer for Space Electronique pasted to a lamppost. It was written entirely in English, no Italian artifice about it. They knew their clientele.