

Affogato

I had never been to New York City before I met you, and I don't think I'll be going back any time soon. Everyone has places they can't go back to because they can't bear to find that the details they cherish in their mind don't exist anymore. Like driving past a childhood friend's house many years later only to realize the shingles have been repainted, and wishing you had taken the time to memorize every wooden panel before they were worn by the weather and the unrelenting erosion of time on remembering.

Your mom nudged my shoulder in the metallic smelling airport terminal for our flight into JFK.

"You'll be spoiled by this trip," she said, fumbling with the expensive lipstick in her purse and the thin receipt paper of our tickets. "I promise New York isn't all glitz and glamor." I thanked her again for taking me along.

"Oh, it's no bother." She looked me in the eye with the fondness of a woman who empathized with the sting of impermanence. "We love having you."

The flight was stuffy, thick air blowing through the cold vents with our backs pressed against the rear panel of the plane. When there was turbulence, you put your hand on my knee and I felt at the same time that I was suddenly soaring through the clouds and firmly planted on the soil. Would you like a coffee, sir? Yes, you replied, please. Black is fine. (You liked the simplicity of black coffee.)

When the cityscape came into view I gazed adoringly over the skyline, like an embarrassing tourist who couldn't resist the urge to show everyone how happy I was to finally be in the big city. I could feel your eyes on me and you weren't talking, just smiling and laughing at the joke I made about apples and how big they are.

We spent a lot of that first day navigating the city streets and settling into our rooms. It was opulent (that's the word you used). The ceiling stretched above my head, creased Greek pillars and shining tile as bright as the excitement in our eyes. I brought out the complementary, engraved club robe from the closet and slipped it on over my shirt, letting the ropes dangle around my waist as I danced around the room. You sat on the bed, watching, and I reached for your hands so we could move to the sound of silence. I loved seeing the awkwardness surrounding the absurdity of our situation slip out of your expression and melt into the carpet.

Your mom called for us to get ready a while later and we stood, tumbling over each other, scattered socks, and jackets. I asked you if my new boots would be good for walking. Of course, you said, why wouldn't they? You bent down and tied them for me.

We made our way down to 76th street and you pointed to one of the brownstones. The mortar blended into each other, every brick cemented in with the greatest care to keep out the winter chill. Your mom told us as we were walking how, when you were a baby, your family lived in number 307. I envisioned the two of us having children of our own inside one someday and loved how circular it all would be. If I squinted, I could even make out future versions of us standing on the porch in fleece jackets, old and worn like a child's stuffed animal from too much love, waiting hand in hand as we welcomed cars of family for Christmas. You were staring too, and I thought you might have had the same wish. Perhaps you were just noting the craftsmanship.

We approached Benoit, our steps echoed by the loud chatter of pedestrians and the honking of drivers swerving far too close to them. With each step, my boots began to chafe. I bit my lip and ignored the searing pain driving up my legs. You asked if I was okay and I gripped your arm a little tighter. There was blood — warm, sticky and

vulnerable inside my sock when I sat down at the table. I felt it trickle deeper into the boot, deflowering the light brown leather insoles that knew nothing of the pain they caused me.

“What are you thinking about for college, now that your first choice is off the table?” Your Dad asked, sipping on a molten red wine.

I gulped down my sip of water, which tasted of an unfamiliar tap. “Oh, I don’t know. Probably something liberal arts.”

“There’s always Northeastern,” your mother said.

Everyone knew there was another question she was asking and everyone had their own independent, ideal answer. I felt the blood clotting in my sock and shook my head. I could feel your eyes on me, telling me not to say yes because you hated the idea that I would throw away my dreams to follow you.

“No, I don’t think it would suit me,” I said, memorizing the way we were all seated together at the table for a little while longer. “They don’t have the writing program I’m looking for.”

We got affogato for dessert, a delight I didn’t even know existed. I stared as the waiter poured the fragrant, steaming espresso onto the vanilla ice cream and couldn’t believe how fast it melted (I had a tendency for thinking things last longer than they do). I took my first bite and was sure it was the best thing I had ever tasted. You took my fork and had a bite of your own, a smudge of chocolate clinging to your lip. We raced to finish before the whole thing melted.

We walked back to the hotel a bit more than tipsy from the wine, laughing into the cigarette smoke on the sidewalks and being grateful for a burn in our lungs that wasn’t the cold. I was shivering, body racking against your arm that I was hanging on.

You took off your coat that I knew you needed and put it on my shoulders. I kissed you. I tasted the coffee. The flavor lingered. It still does when I think about that night.

Before bed, your parents insisted we see the boat room inside the club we were staying at. The walls were paneled with a rich mahogany, bronze hooks stretching out and holding detailed sculptures of sailboats. I imagined regency era couples dancing in tuxes and long, flowing gowns.

It's beautiful, I said, staring at a green and white boat.

It is, you said, squeezing my hand.

We sat in opposite, worn leather chairs beside the impressive fireplace that could have warmed a room twice the size. You were wearing a heavy, green, canvas field jacket that you opened next to me on your birthday and as you sat, the corners rested stiffly on the cushion. Under the coat, I knew you were wearing the soft sweater I had bought you on the same day. (It wasn't as expensive, but you liked gifts given with love too.) Your legs were crossed, contemplative. I had a vision of you as an old man, the maroon sweater resting on your shoulders and gray hair prickling at the edges of your forehead as you sat open and warm. I wanted very much to be with you in that vision someday. The grandfather clock in the corner struck eleven.

I peeled my boots off my feet and then my socks when we got to the room, seeing the weeping red spots along my ankles.

"That will scar", you said.

"I know."

We collapsed onto the sheets, exhausted from the day. I was sick to my stomach all of the sudden. Was there something wrong with the food? You asked, eyebrows furrowed. I memorized the way they turned. No, I said, I'll be okay. Just the nerves of

being in a new place. I took your hand and traced the lines in your palm, suddenly struck with the suffocating potential for forgetting.

“I’m glad you joined us on our trip,” your mom said the next morning, fresh baked bagel in her hands. I felt a warmth in her words I haven’t felt from anyone since. The kind of warmth someone gives you when they ask you to help set the table as a part of the family, and not as a guest. I wish I had told her how much her kindness meant to me, but no one ever admits something so risky when they think they have all the time in the world. I wish I had taken the time to remember how happy I felt.

It struck me in the airport on the way back, quietly making my way through baggage claim and looking over my shoulder to make sure you were still within reach, that I would never be with you on that side of the gate again. I wish I had taken a souvenir from New York to remember it by, perhaps a snow globe from an overpriced airport counter. That’s where we could still exist together untainted by the bitterness of heartbreak— tucked inside a snowglobe where the dust is always settled and we’re forever standing on the porch of a Brownstone.

We spoke only once after you ended things. We both happened to be in line at the same ice cream parlor and gave each other an awkward smile of acknowledgment that the local Richardson’s was a downgrade from french gelato. How is your mom, I asked. You said she was good and you looked at my boots.

“Still have the scars?” You asked, tentative. I was stunned by my lack of desire to comfort you.

“Where would they have gone?”

I think I’d like to return to New York if we ever make peace with each other. I’d like to walk the sidewalks we did that weekend and paint over the ghost of your

footprints with my own. I'd like to bring my children (who won't be yours) to Benoit where we had eaten affogato and were so in love and point to the chairs and dare them to tell me they don't see me sitting there *because I have the scars to prove it*.

I have reclaimed for myself the things I gave to you. I have mended my wounds and made new memories. I started drinking coffee again and listening to my music. I've scribbled over every other memory of you with bitterness because leaving made remembering too painful. The version of me who was with you in New York never wanted remembering to be painful; she wanted it to be beautiful. I don't want to go back to New York any time soon because I owe myself one beautiful memory. Maybe I owe it to you, too.