

London-by-the-sea

10:55 a.m.

I'm leaning back in a chair, by the sea, in the front garden of my summer house. I like the feeling of the afternoon sun on my face, I know that it will give me freckles, and burn my pale skin if I stay for too long - I never really tan. I have long red braided hair, and green eyes. I'm skinny and tall, and I don't have much breast. Because of my fair skin, and also because I'm more used to the London rain than to the Amalfi sun, I usually stay inside. But today is my birthday, so I'm enjoying the luxury of sunbathing. I'm wearing my new purple swimsuit for the first time, as I never go to the beach with my family. I feel the warmth of the sunrays on my closed eyelids, I'm discovering an unknown pleasure.

I'm quiet, and I feel uncomfortable with expansive displays of emotions. Sometimes I blame myself for being so shy: I'm not a teenager anymore, I shouldn't be afraid of people. I can be joyful, even funny sometimes, as long as I don't have the feeling I'm being judged. When I have dinner with my sister and Josie, my best friend, I can make some pretty good jokes. I really wish I dared to be outgoing with men or people I know less, so they could see who I really am.

When we went to the restaurant in Amalfi, the Italian women I saw made a strong impression on me. They seemed to be all that I'm not: joyful, natural, straightforward. They are better adapted to the world. I always get sunburnt, bitten by mosquitos, and I don't know how to behave whenever there's music.

This is a special day for me: I'm thirty. Tonight I'm going to the harbor. I'll be drinking chianti with the young Italians, and I shall say yes to the first boy who will ask me to dance!

11 a.m.

Vroom.

My parents and siblings are coming back from the beach. I can recognize the humming of their car behind the house. I guess my reverie is now over – it's always so ephemeral... I will make the most of these last seconds of freedom while they are taking all the beach stuff from the car.

The sun is baking my skin, I could be a brioche. There is just enough wind to keep me at the perfect temperature. Blissful moment.

"Happy Birrrrthday, Nora dear!" My father's powerful voice sounds near. I *have* to open my eyes now.

"Thank you so much daddy. How was the beach?"

"It was just great. We stumbled upon the Walker family, so we decided to invite them for your birthday dinner tonight. Josh is here too, so you'll get to catch up with him. Lovely, isn't it?"

"Glad to hear it!"

How hard to fake happiness... Of course, they didn't "stumble upon" the Walkers! Going to touristy beaches is all about staying with other British families. Some parts of Amalfi are London-by-the-sea.

The last person I want to see for my thirtieth birthday is that prig Josh Walker. Because our parents are friends and we are more or less the same age, we always have to pretend we are friends.

The truth is I hate him. Even a decade ago, at Cambridge, when he was doing maths and I was reading literature, I always did my best to avoid him and his spoiled friends. Now he's working in finance, and is about to get married, undoubtedly to a stupid posh girl who looks perfect. Of course, as loving as they can be, my parents can't help comparing us.

“Happy birthday No-no!” My little sister, Barbara, 13. She’s shooting at me with her pink water gun. Her hair is as red as mine, but her skin is a little bit darker: unlike me, she’s an outdoor person. She’s also very outgoing, and has lots of friends. Still, we really like each other.

I’m chasing her inside the house, while she cries and laughs: “Daddyyyyyy !”

11:30 am

The only Italian tradition English tourists seem to respect is food. My parents have been the Amalfi farmers’ market, and bought tremendous quantities of fresh pasta, *pomodoro*, basil, tender mozzarella *Di Bufala*, capers, and all you need to cook a delicious *Vitello tonato*. My favourite dish.

I’m in charge of making the starter. The tomatoes are in a brown bag, on the kitchen table. *Rip*... I’m tearing the bag, and five or six red and shiny fruits roll onto the tablecloth. They are heavy, their skin is soft and stretched, and they are still covered with dust. I close my eyes and take a deep breath: this is the smell of Italy. I have never had such vegetables anywhere else in the world. I’m washing the tomatoes “carefully”, as my mum recommends from the other side of the kitchen, with the cooking book before her eyes – god I hate the fact that she has to put so much effort into cooking... I’m laying the fruits on a cutting board; they are so juicy that when my knife spikes them, they splash all around the board. Dozens of seeds spread on the wooden board like tiny red insects trying to flee from me. But my hand is quicker, and I manage to gather them and put everything in the artisanal bowl before they reach the kitchen floor...

Then, I take the two plastic bags where the big mozzarella balls are floating, and cut a corner to pour the milky water into the sink. They are so big I can barely hold one mozzarella ball in my hand. Unlike the tomatoes, the texture is flabby and kind of sticky. From experience, I know that the inside is so creamy that it’s impossible not to lose half of this delicious core. So I grip the knife, and slice them directly over the bowl. The cheese slices are trickling on the tomatoes. The

shiny red and ivory white are matching perfectly... But suddenly, a different kind of red mingles with the mozzarella. My thumb is itching. I'm as clumsy as a child...

12:30 pm

I have to admit that, despite being fully British, my mum has cooked the veal perfectly. It's tender and tasty. As a whole, my birthday lunch is a success: we're a happy, joyful and beautiful family. In such moments, I just don't understand why everybody is telling me I need to leave my parents and sister, and "have a life of my own." Nonsense, *this* is my own life! I couldn't be happier building another family with a boring man like Josh.

As I'm finishing my glass of white wine, I'm starting to feel dizzy. I even chuckle at my sister's lousy jokes:

"No-no, no-no, please tell me: how do oceans say hello to one another?"

"I have no clue."

"They wave!"

"Oh. Funny. Now *you* tell me: where do fish keep their money?"

"In the river bank! Easy... Everybody knows that one, No-no!"

As she bursts out laughing, her silver braces are reflecting a ray of sun. I love her so much.

After lunch, we stay around the table a very long time, eating sweet apricots, and discussing. I talk about James Joyce with my mum, about Italy, about my father's job. Sometimes, we stop talking and all we do is listen to the silence of this very warm afternoon. The silence of the heat.

My mother is wearing a long flowery dress that she bought at Harrods' summer dress department, before leaving London. I remember that grey rainy day. I remember her saying with a shy smile, "I will really look like an Italian woman in this gown." (Of course, all she resembled was a middle-class lass from

Devonshire – which she is.) I smiled at her and said, “Si! La più bella della penisola!”, and so we laughed in the fitting room.

My parents are getting older. They had me early in their adult life, and Barbara followed much later on. Strange family. My sister is not raised the same way I was. Our parents are now wiser I guess, but on the other hand they still address her as if she were their baby girl. At her age, I was twice as mature as she is. Maybe the snag is I’m still not much of a grown up. Or maybe it’s my strength?

I shall always keep my thirtieth birthday’s lunch in memory. With my loved ones, my British loved ones. I sometimes feel ashamed of the thoughts I have: “I wish I was Mediterranean...” or “England is so uptight and boring...”

6:30pm

Time passes quickly when you’re having fun. I’m lying on a deckchair, eyes closed after the wine. Next thing I know, it’s half past six. I must have fallen asleep. The sun is setting. Summer colors are the most beautiful. At the beginning, there are just tiny ginger reflections in the golden light. But soon, the sky is all covered with a bright, and then bloody orange. When the last sun beam finally disappears below the horizon, it spits its last colors, disturbing purples and scarlet reds. Darkness has finally settled. It covers everything.

7pm

Shhhh. The shower is flowing. I’m standing naked outside the cabin, waiting for the water to reach the perfect temperature. As I finally step in, time stops. Thousands of lukewarm drops on my white skin.

7:30pm

As I’m finishing my makeup, I suddenly hear voices from my half-open window. The Walkers are here. Rupert Walker – the father – is speaking with my father.

I'm under the impression they feel obliged to talk loudly, make conventional jokes, mention the stock exchange, complain about Brexit, or ask each other questions about their jobs. As if they were not entitled to talk about their real feelings, or as if they were not entitled to *have* feelings of their own. Being a man seems to be demanding and constraining ...

I can also hear the mothers' small talk – less distinctly as they obviously speak lower. They mention my name. My mother seems embarrassed, and soon switches to another subject.

Vroom vroom. As I'm arriving in the garden to say hello, we all turn our heads towards the gate. A big motorcycle has just stopped in front. The driver takes off his helmet. It's Josh. He shakes his straight hair as if he was James Dean. Ridiculous.

But when the passenger finally takes her helmet off, releasing her long brown hair, I'm taken aback. She must be his fiancée. She has a tanned skin, and her small and skinny body is easy to imagine under her long black jumpsuit. She's wearing big earrings, and lots of gold jewelry. She must be a goddess.

“Lara love, welcome!” says Josh's mother. Lara. Just like Julie Christie in my favorite movie ever, *Doctor Zhivago*. I was probably 10 when I first saw this movie. Since then, I've always wished Lara was my name. In College, I even told everyone at a dinner that I was actually called Lara.

The Lara that is standing before my eyes seems like a brown-haired version of Julie Christie. They are both paragons of beauty, in two distinct categories.

Crap. Julie Christie and James Dean...

8pm

“Dinner time!” yells my mum from inside the house, “Everyone keeps their glasses.” My father directs us to our seats. Since it's my birthday, I'm lording it at the end of the table, but fortunately Lara is next to me. I'm both extremely happy and frightened. How will I manage to talk to her?

8:10pm

She's as intelligent and spirited as she's beautiful. My shyness has vanished with the appetizers (a crispy anchovy focaccia).

"And have you ever been to La Vità?" she asks.

"Oh, that bar on the beach? I've been during the day to have ice creams with my sister."

"Really? We should all go tonight. It's fairly typical, full of Italians... Sometimes, they even invite you home when the bar closes... Remember, Josh, last summer?"

I don't know how to tell her how much I would love to go to La Vità tonight...

"Children, you should go there tonight! My No-no is not much of a party girl, but she could meet her Italian prince charming for her thirtieth birthday. Who knows?" My mother has just saved my life.

Lara laughs with her pulpy lips wide open, and her white teeth showing. She puts a friendly hand on my shoulder: "Of course! Please, beautiful Nora, would you please do me the favour of inviting you to La Vità tonight?" I suddenly stop hearing everyone clapping and screaming "No-no, La Vità." I can only feel Her hand on my shoulder and her breath on my cheek. I blush in a cold sweat.

"O-ok!" All the guests applaud...

"Tanti auguri a te, tanti auguri a te, etc." From the depth of the kitchen rises the familiar melody.

I'm coming back to my senses.

10pm

Last drink of champagne in the garden. The soft hum of the night insects breaks the silence. The men are lighting Cuban cigars, and women are finishing the champagne bottles while sipping cups of herbal tea. Forgetting the set, and the costumes, we could be on a London Saturday night in my parents' house: the actors are the same, and play exactly the same parts. Everyone is in their places.

10:30pm

“It’s so good to spend this night together...” Blah blah blah. Lovely. Brilliant! God, I’m tired of these speeches. Deep inside, all I’m waiting for is the moment when we leave to go to the bar. I’ve already prepared my red lipstick in the pocket of my jacket. But of course, the whole assembly seems to have forgotten the invitation Lara made during the dinner. They talk as if the night had no end...

10:45pm

Apart from me, the only one who has her mind focused on going to La Vità is Barbara. She’s walking around, quietly asking my mum: “Mummy, could I go with them? Just for an hour, pleeeeeeease, mummy.” Of course, my mother says no.

Then I see her running to my dad. She’s now on his knees, whispering in his ear: “Daddy, dear daddy, could I gooooo?” “YES!” drops my father, and Barbara runs around in a victory dance. Spoiled brat!

11pm

There we are! Finally walking toward the bar. I can now hear the blaring music. An old Italian pop song sung by Rita Pavone or Mina.

As we get in, Josh, Lara, Barbara and I, everyone in the bar turns their heads. There are only Italians, so we sharply contrast with the other patrons. The only one of us who seems comfortable is Lara. But the Italians don’t really look aggressive. They are just slightly amused by our exoticism.

We order cocktails. I pick a margherita and an alcohol-free mojito for Barbara.

11:30pm

After a slow start, interspersed with long silences, the discussion is now in full swing. I have the feeling everybody is more laid back now than they were during the dinner, only because we are “between youngsters” – which seems silly

considering that, except from Barbara, we are all in our thirties. It must be the age: in their time, my parents had already been married for years. In 2019, you stay young until your mid-thirties. Or maybe I'm younger than my age, I mean, Josh and Lara are already engaged. Am I a freak?

As these thoughts are roaming around in my head, Lara and Barbara are searching for the perfect Italian boy for me. When the second margherita is brought to the table, their choice seems to go to a tall man. He's wearing a white shirt and white trousers, black leather shoes. His skin is extremely tanned, which contrasts with the whiteness of his clothes, and makes his teeth look immaculately white.

12am

Third margherita. The music is getting louder.

“Che confusione

Sara perche ti amo

E un'emozione

Che cresce piano piano...”

Lara and Barbara are now dancing, mixing with the Italian crowd. Josh and I are looking at them, with no desire to join the dance. But we both know that sooner or later we'll have to. Lara takes my hand, Barbara invites Josh, and this is it, we're dancing. As I'm awkwardly attempting some moves, I'm under the impression that everyone in the bar is looking at me. But at the end of the first song, I'm less self-conscious, partly because I realize no one is really paying attention to my clumsy dance, but also because of the tequila. “Una altra margherita, per favore.”

1am

I vaguely see Lara talking with the Italian guy in white, before disappearing into the crowd.

As the next song starts, I feel strong hands on my hips. The sounds, the lights, the sensations on my body, everybody is confused, but I can still feel these big hands, these big foreign hands, on my hips. These massive hands seem absurd, glued to my white hips that never danced. All I feel is this firm grip taking me to the beach, away from the bar lights, away from the sound of music, away from everyone.

1:25am

As I feel the cold sand in my summer shoes, and the alcohol breath of that man, telling me things in his language, things that I can't understand, and maybe it's better like that, as I feel the wet sand in my summer shoes and scratching my feet and the strong clinch and these tanned hands, I'm suddenly frightened. I try to scream but no one hears me, I'm not even sure that the cry really gets out of my throat, I try and try again but no one comes. Only the fading noise of the music and the sound of the waves breaking, over and over again.

11am

Light filters through the white shutters. I open my eyes and immediately feel an enormous headache. I'm naked, and I don't have the sensation of my body's limits. The bed is so perfectly warm that I feel I'm the size of the bed. I'm square. How did I come back home yesterday? I couldn't tell. The white bed sheets are unpleasantly scratching my skin. Sand. I'm lifting the duvet. On the bed sheet, big red stains.

THE END