

The Perfect Housewife

Luke pressed the buzzer for Ellen's fourth-floor apartment, then stepped back into a slice of afternoon sun that lingered in the narrow cobblestone street. He had been warming himself on a bench in the piazza, and was sorry to have to come inside with an hour of daylight remaining. When a low grumble around the corner announced the approach of a Fiat 500, Luke retreated to the building's shady stoop to allow its passing. The car zipped by and disappeared around the next bend, and the entryway finally clicked open.

Luke was relieved to find the lobby bare when he entered. A few days ago, Luke had had to tip-toe through at least two dozen flower baskets that covered the floor; several of the Mediterranean blooms were similar to those at his uncle's flower shop back home in Vermont. Apparently, a long-standing tenant and revered professor of Dante had died the day before. Ellen had been watching a dubbed Stallone movie, and just as a thunderous explosion collapsed the Holland Tunnel, an elderly man knocked at her door. Giuseppe Torrellini had just gone away, the man said—Ellen was specific about this; undoubtedly she liked how he'd used the Italian phrase "gone away" instead of "died"—and would she please keep the noise down? Ellen finished the movie on mute.

The building's owners, a family of noble ancestry, had some years ago retrofitted it with an elevator. It barely accommodated Luke, though he was only 5'8", and it groaned with each trip, so he climbed the stairs. Each stair was solid marble, white speckled with black, with smooth dips in the middle where two hundred years of feet had worn them away. Still, this building was not nearly the oldest in Macerata. The city dated to 1320, a span difficult to fathom even for Luke, who could trace his roots to New Amsterdam. Such history had com-

pelled Luke apply for this graduate architecture program. He admired the immortality of Italy, the permanence of place that would allow him and Ellen to bring their children to the same sites in twenty years. Surely by then he would have settled down into the role of husband and father.

Luke passed a few small, bent Italian women going about their daily shopping. They invariably lifted their heads from drab overcoats to study him, and he quickened his pace. He wanted to chat with these world-wise women, to be a part of their community, but every broken syllable he uttered worked against him. Instead, he marveled at these coats he had seen everyone over fifty wearing since his arrival a month ago on Labor Day. The broad array of colors the younger generations wore, even the men, seemed no less peculiar. But Luke received curious looks, too, when he strode through town in cargo shorts and a t-shirt. These glances held no animosity—far from it—but clearly, few Americans found their way to this little town.

On an ordinary day, the younger women wore strange and alluring combinations of purples and yellows the likes of which Luke had only seen on theater majors in the U.S. Linen and silk replaced the usual American cottons and plaid wool. Ellen had embraced this fashion sea change wholeheartedly. Every Wednesday before class, she searched for deals along the winding streets of downtown, and she rarely touched her American wardrobe. Luke considered this overhaul a plus.

Luke thought himself lucky to have come overseas with an evolving Italian fashionista, because, in a way, he felt he had been tricked. Other students, family friends, guide books—each had said that all the women in Italy were surpassingly beautiful. Such uniform beauty, though tantalizing, hadn't seemed possible, but he had heard it so many times that he began to believe it. But he had seen only normal people thus far—some pretty, some ugly, but most in-

between. This should not have surprised him, but he felt compelled to turn to the consistent beauty of art and architecture. Although Ellen never wanted to come on his extended walking tours, he sometimes insisted; he wanted them to experience this beauty together.

On the fourth floor, Luke approached the sturdy oak doors to his left, paused a moment to catch his breath, and pressed the button under "ROSSETTI." A tinny buzzing came through the tall, narrow double doors and filled the landing. It was a much more irritating and impatient sound than American doorbells.

Two other apartments completed this floor, each with high sets of doors as imperious as Ellen's. Luke had never seen anyone come in or out. He tried in vain to read the brass nameplates from where he stood. The outer wall's one thick pane of crown glass cast a perpetual dusk upon the landing. He tapped his foot on the ground and combed down his curly hair with his fingers.

"*Chi è?*" Ellen said from the other side.

"It's me," Luke said. "You just buzzed me up."

She often used Italian with him, thinking he needed the practice. And he did, but felt baffled enough dealing with old ladies and market vendors without having to decipher his girlfriend, too.

Bolts slid up from the floor and down from the ceiling, and the door on the right swung partially open. Ellen had already disappeared somewhere, leaving Luke to the burgundy entryway. The landlord was a man of thirty or so, but perhaps his mother had died here and left him the apartment. If so, he had not disturbed her old upholstery and carpets, out of respect or indifference. The apartment's best feature was at the end of the long central hallway: a series of hexagonal windows in Ellen's bedroom, overlooking Piazza della Libertà and the rolling hills of the countryside a mile away.

"Luke, come into the kitchen! Dinner's almost ready."

Luke lingered for a moment, wishing he could watch the approaching sunset. The sun was not yet visible, but Ellen's white dresser and bedspread glowed orange under its light. A painting of a knight mounted on his steed hung above the headboard, framed in matte-black. His visor was lifted, but no face showed behind; it seemed to be Italo Calvino's *Nonexistent Knight*. A pastel damsel on the wall opposite outstretched a white-gloved hand in greeting, but her attentions were not reciprocated. Luke feared she would soon turn her gaze on him and looked away.

If he had brought the ring with him, he might have chosen to propose here. The sea lay in the opposite direction, but beneath this bank of windows spread seemingly the whole of the Marche wine country. It promised an infinity equal to that of the diamond he had chosen for Ellen back home.

He had picked the ring out at the mall before they left, assisted by a twenty-something woman in a violet pantsuit. She had graduated from a fashion design and merchandising school in San Francisco, and although she was slightly overweight, she had still made herself attractive, so he trusted her advice on a ring. Luke had also asked Ellen's father for her hand, something that embarrassed him. But it had seemed something that Ellen would want to know he'd done. Her dad had listened politely but judiciously in his armchair as Luke explained how much he loved Ellen, and how he would always provide for her. After ten minutes, they shook on it, both of their hands slightly sweaty. In the end, though, Luke had left the ring in its display under the care of the woman in the pantsuit. He hadn't wanted to worry about it while traveling, or to have the pressure of having to evaluate the romantic potential of every place they went.

He returned to the kitchen and leaned against the doorframe. The TV was on now, blar-

ing Italian music videos. Ellen stood by the stove at the near end of the room, a long, narrow rectangle with a table hidden in a niche at the far end.

The room smelled heavily of onions and garlic, two of his favorite foods. Sometimes it was hard not to take Ellen for granted. He should have gone with her last night to the wine tasting in Montepulciano, rather than stay at home to do his homework; he should have spent last night with her. She had joined another couple from their architecture program, pretending to be interested in the countryside as Harlan sat across the bus aisle with Angela, his hand on her knee, and in the subtle differences of each red as Harlan and Angela shared a glass.

Ellen wore one of her market outfits tonight: her favorite pants—a tight pair of royal blue jeans she boasted felt like linen—and a thirty-euro royal blue "Italia" sweatshirt that Luke had seen elsewhere selling for five.

"Maddy's joining us for dinner, if that's all right." Ellen nodded her head toward the opposite corner of the room. "Her plans with Justine fell through."

A jolt moved through Luke, a series of chilling tingles that ran to the ends of his limbs. "What?"

A silky voice came from the far end of the kitchen. "Is that okay?"

Luke entered the kitchen proper and peered into the alcove: there sat Maddy, whom he had hoped he might avoid for two more months until they all returned to the U.S., where she would be three time zones away in Gig Harbor, Washington. But here she was, doe-eyed, her Italian textbook open before her.

His stomach tightened as Maddy—six feet, tall even in her chair—watched him with dun eyes. Those same eyes had penetrated his apartment's peephole the previous night, slightly glazed but wide open.

"Yeah," Luke said. "Sure."

"Where's Josh," Maddy had stated in slurred, quiet words on the other side of the peephole. Her wavy auburn hair lay about her shoulders.

Josh, Luke's roommate, was gone, but Luke opened the door. Maddy walked calmly toward him, murmured, "Josh," and lowered her head to kiss him. He held still a moment, then lifted his chin to meet her mouth, and Maddy's tongue left a trail of saliva across his upper lip. It tasted of Fernet-Branca. Luke knew the responsible thing to do: put her to bed in Josh's room. But Maddy was so drunk that she might vomit, maybe even suffocate in it. Her eyelids were drooping, her narrow nose flaring slightly as she breathed, her weight collapsing onto him. He put his arm through Maddy's and led her down the hall to his bed, laying her on top of his covers. She reached toward him, clutching at the air with her fingers, then let her arms drop. Her eyes fluttered open and closed. He settled into his chair across from her with a glass of red wine and a chapter on Ghiberti's bronze doors. He had finished two pages when Maddy's bra landed on his laptop keyboard. For a moment he stared at its cups, as deep as his wine glass and darker than its contents, then he swiveled around. Maddy was sprawled naked on his turquoise comforter.

The only woman Luke had ever seen naked before was Ellen, and she would only undress with the lights off, leaving Luke to see her with his hands. Then she would come alive, call his name, and hold him tight.

Maddy said nothing, but fixed her eyes upon him. His hands craved to explore this great beauty, manifested from *The Birth of Venus* and lying as if Botticelli had arranged her. Atop her long, slender neck, her head cocked ten degrees, and thick locks of her auburn hair outspread on his pillow as if blown. Her expression was serene—steady brown eyes, lips lightly met—a conscious calm that promised all of her body, in time. Her hands, meanwhile, apolo-

gized ambivalently, her right placed ineffectually across her breasts, her left fanning over her groin. Between them, the dips and curves of her stomach rippled with every short, shallow breath. Luke throbbed. No woman so beautiful would come to him like this again. He ached to make love to her, to touch her, to shape her on his bed as Botticelli did on canvas. This was the beauty he had come to Italy for. This moment. He stripped to his Jockey shorts and lay beside her, wanting and not wanting to move her hands. Wanting her to remain Venus. He moved the hand from her breast, but left the other. They kissed, slowly and deeply, quietly, until Maddy raised her head to Luke's ear. "Luke."

The throbbing stopped, and Luke saw anew the drunk girl beneath him. Had she moaned, or called him Josh, he could have gone on, sculpting her until she, and he, had crumbled. But now he thought of Ellen whispering his name; he smelled and tasted once more the alcohol on Maddy, and rose to pull on his pants.

Maddy sat at Ellen's kitchen table, her gaze returned to the Italian textbook spread before her. She had passed out soon after she spoke his name. By the time Josh returned from the disco near sunrise, Luke had moved her to his bed—where she had thrown up, not on Josh's comforter, but into a pair of tennis shoes on the floor alongside. Luke shuddered. The smell of vomit in the small room had been acrid. He went to Ellen and placed his hand on the small of her back as she stirred a pot of tomato sauce. Her chest fit snugly into his side.

"Smells good," he said.

"*Bene*. It needs to be good if I'm going to be making it for you for the rest of our lives."

When she turned to Luke and winked, it felt like a slap. But she often spoke of their future like that.

"Just another minute," she said.

But even with Ellen's gaze on her saucepan, and Maddy's on her textbook, Luke knew he had the better part of each girl's attention. The narrow kitchen felt claustrophobic. He could nearly touch both walls simultaneously, and the stovetop's rising steam turned opaque the thin windows looking onto the alley below. Only a dozen strides away he could be in Ellen's room, and track the arc of the falling sun across the clear bedroom windows. The final minutes of daylight on the piazza below were always beautiful; the sun's rays painted the pavement scarlet. Someone surely admired the scene now from the bench where Luke had been not half an hour ago.

The legs of Maddy's chair scraped across the floor. She approached Ellen at the stove, her slight hips swaying beneath her pastel skirt, and held out her book.

"Not now, Maddy," Ellen said. "I'm just about to take the sauce off."

"Just a quick question." She extended her arm farther. "How do you conjugate—"

"Maddy, just wait till after dinner." Ellen's voice deepened slightly.

Briefly, Luke hoped that Ellen might turn on Maddy, push her away; Ellen had always been stronger than Luke. But she only waved Maddy away with her stirring hand. A few spots of sauce spattered Maddy's lined pages.

Maddy turned to Luke with raised eyebrows, then winked and returned to her chair. Perhaps she didn't remember much. Or anything at all. He felt a strum of excitement in his hands as he thought of keeping the memory for himself. Despite his weakness and shame, for the rest of his life he would be able to recall Maddy's finely crafted body and his passion for it. As she returned to her book and her face relaxed, Luke once more saw the striking lines and silent beauty of Venus, and he wanted to lay her out upon the white linoleum.

Ellen's hand rested on his biceps. "Honey, would you grab the plates from the cupboard?"

"Of course, honey."

Ellen smiled. She loved pet names, although they felt empty to Luke; they were what TV actors said when they pretended to love each other. He used one now only to distance himself from Maddy. Maybe when he and Ellen married, he would devise his own pet name for her, something simple but unique, something he could believe in. *Linen*, maybe, like her pants. He watched as she stirred her sauce. *Ladle*. Yes, she would be his ladle, scooping him up.

He should have brought the ring. Its three-quarter carat, princess-cut diamond gleamed right now from the center of its dark purple cushion, an ocean away. He could almost feel the ring box against his thigh. Were it there, he would lead Ellen away from the stove and Maddy and the old ladies and out to the piazza, where, just as the sun sunk behind the clock tower, he would sit Ellen on the bench, kneel, and pledge himself to her.

Luke carried the plates to the table and set them out, placing one across Maddy's notebook. She smiled; she seemed to think he was being playful.

"What was it happened to your dinner plans?" Luke asked.

"Justine cancelled." Maddy thumped her pencil's pink eraser top on the tablecloth.

"Just like that, huh?"

Maddy shrugged her shoulders, smiling still. Luke noted for the first time a chip on one of her front teeth. "Just like that," she said.

Luke wondered how much time Maddy had spent alone with Ellen before he arrived. How far beyond pleasantries their conversation had gone. Some day, at least, perhaps when he had the ring, Ellen would have to know.

"Good thing Ellen always makes a lot."

"Yes, good thing," Ellen said, walking up with the pasta and sauce. "The perfect house-

wife."

A few weeks ago they had been studying pictures of the abbey in Tolentino, and she had stopped him midway through his explanation of its rose window. "You know I'm only studying this stuff because of you, right?" she'd asked.

The question took him aback, and she continued before he could think of what to say.

"Don't get me wrong," she said, placing a hand on his forearm, "it's interesting—but I'll be just as happy to stay at home while you go off to be the professor."

Luke's mother had stayed home until he was out of middle school, but he had been surprised to hear Ellen share this preference, especially given her excitement to be in Italy. A tidy house and a hot dinner every night would be lovely. But her world would be so small; he would live and grow, and she would languish. What would they talk about?

Now Ellen served each of them with her wooden spoon—not really a ladle, Luke realized—then set the dishes in the sink to soak.

The square table barely fit inside its niche; one of its sides was flush against the wall. Maddy and Ellen sat opposite each other, Luke in-between. A bare bulb layered with dust extended from the wall above. Luke let the girls take the first bites. Ellen had embellished her sauce with zucchini and eggplant, a recipe similar to something they had ordered at a restaurant the week before. He ate and sipped red wine for several minutes without looking up, half-listening as the girls discussed bits of Italian grammar.

"The pasta is wonderful," he said. "Don't you think so, Maddy?" But then he noticed that her plate was still nearly full.

"I don't like eggplant," she said. "It's too spongy."

"So eat around it."

"Ellen chopped it too small."

Luke leaned back in his chair and laughed. He had been foolish last night. Now, in the washed-out light of the alcove, she lacked glamour: her hair lay lifeless, and her face appeared slightly yellow.

Ellen raised her eyebrows. "If she doesn't like it, she doesn't have to eat it," she said.

"Good," Maddy said. "I won't."

They both turned to Luke.

"Maddy." He leaned forward. "Ellen probably spent four hours cooking this sauce."

"Two hours," Ellen said.

"Two hours!" Luke said. "And you're not going to eat it."

"It's not a big deal," Ellen said in the even tone she used when explaining a grammatical rule. "She just doesn't like eggplant."

"Well, I love it," he said. "Here." He pulled Maddy's plate over and cocooned his fork in spaghetti.

"What are you doing." Ellen's voice did not rise into a question.

"Not letting your pasta go to waste."

"Maddy was eating from that plate. That's gross."

"Why is that gross?" Maddy asked. "Do I have cooties?" Her smile seemed painted on—not the subtle, entrancing smile of Botticelli's Venus, but a grotesque rictus from a Goya canvas. Luke wished the ages to whisk by and wash away her crimson lips.

"Luke."

He looked at Ellen. "What?"

"Stop."

"Stop what?"

Ellen's cheeks were sucked in slightly. "Stop staring at her."

His eye had lingered too long. But he deserved her reproach, desired it even, and he did not protest. He twirled more pasta around his fork.

"Luke, stop." Ellen pushed her chair back a foot, preparing to rise—

"One more bite."

Ellen leaned forward and placed her hand on his wrist; her fingertips settled lightly on the back of his hand, with her knuckles arched. She pressed her lips together and squared her chin, and a slight horizontal line ran across her forehead. Her eyes were wide palettes of green. A gentle admonition.

Luke's hand lay tense under her touch. He wanted Ellen to press her flesh to his, to raise her voice. He wanted her to be angry. *I spent last night with Maddy*, he wanted to say.

But Ellen lifted her hand from his and began to eat in silence.