



Two Americans arrived by train, exhausted, weighed down by luggage and nervousness. The husband had a map with a highlighted path to the rented apartment, but now that he could see how small the town was, he decided to trust his instincts instead. He moved quickly, several steps ahead of his wife, with a false confidence she had seen too many times before, but they were too far from home to argue about it even though they passed the same corner three times already.

As they walked through the town, they saw few people and nothing appeared open, which made her nervous there wouldn't be a restaurant to eat at later. The wife couldn't quite figure out why this town was important enough to stop in on the way to Bologna, but her husband insisted it was "one of those magical places tourists didn't know about," which she translated as *cheap accommodations*.

They reached the street just as the sun was descending behind the mountains. As stated in the email, the landlord was waiting outside the apartment. He was handsome and much younger than they expected, wearing a perfectly cut suit and holding a set of keys. He hugged them both as if they were long lost friends and invited them upstairs. The husband saw that the landlord was sweating, which seemed to erase the insecurity he felt towards his good looks and the way his wife couldn't keep his eyes off of him.

The perfectly photographed angles in the apartment didn't translate well to real life. It looked like a long hallway, narrow with an opening in the center for a makeshift kitchen. The landlord opened the first door to reveal a bedroom and a private bath that made a cruise ship quarters look lofty.

He took their passports in the kitchen, asking questions about where they came from and where they're going. Because they were Americans on vacation, they had no complaints about anything. He said, "*Americans*. You happy with everything. Good for you." He started to write a passport number down and stopped. He said, "Not like us. Italians are miserable. We have traditions and they no change for nothing. It shames me."

Bells rang outside. The landlord looked at his watch and sighed. He returned their passports. The husband tried to pay, but he refused. "Pay later. No hurry." He hugged them both again and left.

Alone, the couple finally relaxed. Though not what they imagined, the apartment was respite from the overwhelming foreignness outside.

While his wife used the toilet, he decided to check out the apartment. He noticed that the windows were all barred from the outside. He opened one to let in some air. The sound of chanting came from a nearby church.

He walked down the long hallway, amazed at its length. At the other end were two doors. One of them was to another bedroom. He saw a pile of luggage and wondered if more guests were staying there. He wished the landlord would've mentioned that.

The other door was

*ajar.*

He stopped himself from pushing it open.

He didn't know why, only that his brain had gone electric and was suddenly reconnected to something irrational, something he hadn't felt since he was a child when things lived in closets and creatures stood outside his window at night, waiting patiently for children to move in their beds to signal their invitation.

He felt his skin go cold and his fingers began to tremble.

He turned around, surprised at the violence and quickness of his actions, and walked back. He forced himself to walk slowly – despite the sound of the door opening and the sound of something heavy and wet moving behind him – as an act of grown-up defiance and childish denial, and like that boy who would not stir in his bed, he would not turn around.

He was about to reach their bedroom, ready to acknowledge how ridiculous he was to let his imagination get the better of him, when his wife stepped out and looked over his shoulder. She was talking to him when she suddenly froze, her eyes locked at something behind him. The first few words out of her mouth were words – something about finding a shop – before being replaced by guttural sounds.

*“Hurk. Hurk. Hurrrrrk.”*

His throat grew tight.

He looked behind his wife to the front door and realized that the landlord had taken the keys with him, and with that, he knew they were locked in. What he initially thought to be etched patterns in the door were now clearly scratch marks from fingernails. The dark spots in the wood were patches of dried blood. It was so obvious he was ashamed for not having noticed it before.

His wife’s body shook violently as if she were being electrocuted and the black hair on her head curled and turned white in front of his eyes. He smelled urine – there was no time to know whose it was – before his nostrils became overwhelmed with the smell of something rotten, something ancient. The chanting outside grew louder. His wife’s eyes rolled back into her head and her body started to fall. He caught her and pressed her to him, her head landing on his shoulder. He could feel her brittle hair cracking between his fingers.

Tears stung his eyes and he was suddenly full of anger because he was denied one last moment with his wife. He couldn’t remember the last time she smiled at him, the last time he kissed her, the last time something between them wasn’t routine.

He heard the sound of a massive moist mouth opening and smelled the dark humidity of its breath escaping behind him. He felt his wife’s body reverberate with the sound of something crunching her skull. She was quiet now and her head lifted slightly off his shoulder as it was

lighter and could no longer retain its shape. He felt an avalanche of hot liquid running down his back and splattering on the floor.

He hoped the disintegration of her sanity acted as a sort of anesthesia. And seeing that last shred of hope, he prayed there'd be enough time to turn around for one last look before it took his life too.