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## **Albert found himself running down the stairs.**

It is not like he was actually running. No, he simply started noticing his flip flops slipping fast on the concrete steps, the folded towel on his arm swaying slightly and his eyeglasses bouncing on his nose. He stopped, wondering where the sudden rush was coming from. The answer came along with a strong sense of embarrassment. It was clear, he told himself, and he felt like a fool. So he fixed the white panama on his head, put the glasses straight back on his nose, and looked around. Nobody. No one on the stairs behind him, no one on the stairs in front of him, and no one in the hotel lobby. He then calmed down and, holding the hat with his hand, continued to descend slowly, a measured step after another, in the morning silence.

The spa tub reflected the room's soft lights in its signature cross-vein pattern. They were dancing on the dark floor and on the lower half of the black marble wall streaked with white. Albert stretched himself and sat in one of the two deckchairs crossing his feet and fanning himself with the newspaper – the arch of the emotional shower perfectly framing part of the tub and the light, a wrought iron cube hanging from a single exposed trellis which from the white ceiling casted a bullseye light and a warm drizzle.

But something rippled the quiet motion of the water.

On the opposite side from where he was, a figure emerged, placing their hands on the iron edge, pulling themselves up on their arms. Her black hair clung to the back and formed a perfect wave as she brought it in front of her face, squeezing it into the white cloth.

Like the previous day and the day before that, Albert studied the way the light was touching her face, how it formed that light shadow under her lower lip and how it made those black eyes appear even blacker. She was all tight in her one-piece swimsuit, but her shape wasn't that prominent. No, not in that sense. The waist shrunk in the right place and the line of the legs took it down to the knees and then down again, quickly, towards the ankles. That was enough for him, that was it. Her collarbones, he noticed that day, formed a perfect angle when she put on the bathrobe before taking it off again and spending the entire hour locked in the sauna. And, after the single light of the bath room had left, the matter was closed. The morning was done, so to speak. She had come out of the water and he had seen her. End of the story.

This is the reason for rushing, he said to himself without surprise. And he felt embarrassed again because, he thought, rushing is for when you are late for a date. But this was not a date.

He had only figured out what time to book the spa to see her, to be alone with her in that small relaxation area for two people, period.

**What he did was nothing more than look at someone through the holes of his eyes, trying to imprint her image in his brain.**

This wasn't a date at all. What was it called then? Work, he told himself. In the past, at least.

Once the show was over, as in the last few days, he opened the newspaper and hid behind the two gray pages.

But that day was not like the others.

"May I?" said a voice behind the newspaper he was reading. Albert lowered the paper. It was her, smiling. She pointed to the deckchair next to his.

"You're welcome," he replied, sitting up a little. A couple of seconds passed during which they both remained silent. He sat down, she as well, but facing him. "Do you know," she said, "that it's rude to stare?" Albert lowered the newspaper again slightly, looking at her through his glasses. "Yes I know. I apologize" he replied with a smile. The man returned his eyes to the newspaper and the girl remained staring at the tuft of black and gray hair coming out of his hat.

A whole minute passed. Neither of them spoke. "Are you on vacation?" she said. Albert, this time, folded the newspaper. "Yes. And you?" he answered. "Let's say I am on a break" Albert took off his hat and began waving it to fan himself. "On a break from what?" he asked. "From work. I'm a flight attendant. I landed the day before yesterday, I'm waiting for the next flight. And while I wait...". The man nodded, scratching his chest under his bathrobe. «It must be nice. Going from one place to another, I mean," he said. «Not at the beginning. Then you get used to it." They looked at each other. Her eyes as black as marble. Albert felt a strange warmth in his face. "I hate planes," he said. "Don't you like flying?" she asked. "Not at all" "And how did you get here?" "With Xanax," he replied smiling at her again. The girl laughed and he hated her, because she had a beautiful laugh. But she continued to laugh and he continued to wave. Then only silence and a few glances. "You are staring at me again," she said. "I am sorry". She tucked a damp hair behind her ear. "You speak Italian very well," she said. "Thank you" «Do you often come to Italy?»

«To Milan, yes. My mother was from here, but I've lived my whole life in America, which is where my father was born. And where he died, too».

"Where in America?" she said, curious.

"Chicago"

"Never been"

"You are not missing much"

"Really?"

"Yes. Otherwise, why would an American learn Italian?"

She laughed. Then she became quite serious again.

"Why do you do it?" she asked him.

"To communicate"

«No, not that»

"And what then?"

"Staring".

He paused. Then he answered her.

«Professional habit, I think».

The girl stopped to ponder.

"Are you a private investigator?" she asked curious.

He laughed.

"No. I was a photographer," he said.

She crossed her legs.

"You were?"

«I was, yes»

"Are you retired?"

"Christ, do I look that old?"

"No, no. Just... what do you mean you were?"

«That I don't do it anymore»

"And what are you doing now?"

"I am on vacation"

«Are you thinking of moving to Italy?»

"I already did"

"And where?"

"Here"

"In Milan?"

"Not here"

«At the Straf Hotel?»

«It's beautiful, isn't it? I can see the Duomo from my little balcony"

"Do you want to live in a hotel?"

“As long as I can afford it, your honor.”

Albert smiled at her.

“I am sorry. I didn’t want to be intrusive” she told him.

“I am the one who stares, you shouldn’t feel bad.”

The hydromassage in the tub turned off and with it the background buzz. Relaxing music was all they could hear.

«My name is Laura, by the way»

“Albert,” he said.

The man took his eyes off her and she stared at the wet floor. He knew what was supposed to happen next and maybe she did too. But Albert remained still.

## **This, he thought, looks a lot more like something you could hurry for.**

But introducing yourself is nothing. People introduce themselves every day. People introduce themselves even when they don’t have to. People...

“What do you do when you are not in the hotel?” she asked, interrupting his thoughts.

«I usually go out, admire the Duomo, then take a long walk to the Castle. I look at the ducks in the Parco Sempione lake and then I go straight to the gallery of the Brera Academy. Maybe you are right, I am old”

“Don’t say that.”

She didn’t say anything else. He didn’t speak either. But he had to. So he tried.

“How about we... ?” he only asked, holding his breath immediately afterwards.

Laura looked at him. Still silent, she stretched out her hand towards Albert’s, took the hat from his fingers and began to wave it to fan herself. There was no need for her to answer him, he told himself, she had already made up her mind. She had already decided what they would do next too. Women were always the ones who decided.

In the afternoon they walked among the beautiful buildings of the city, slaloming through the crowd, remaining enchanted in front of the entrance to the Sforzesco Castle and trampling on the green grass of the park that shone under the spring sun.

She had spoken, but without saying much. Albert had mostly answered her questions. It had been nice. Not just talking, everything else too. Her smell was good, the way she frowned at the paintings was funny, and her melancholy silences were curious. He didn't feel like he had to do anything, just stay beside her, lost in the moment, answering her questions. They were there, together, without telling each other that they were fine. They were together and remained there until the sunset colored everything with a purplish red and the city lights came on in every street. They were together initially outside the hotel, then inside in Albert's room, and in his bed.

It was already night when he was staring at her, naked, standing next to the bed, surrounded by the gray concrete wall, looking at some Polaroids on the black wooden desk.

"These are very beautiful," she said.

"Thank you. They're a bit old," he replied, stretched out on the bed in the center of the room, his knees folded.

"Albert?" she asked him.

"Tell me"

"Why did you stop?"

The man turned around, sighing. He took a long pause, looking at the long brass-colored painting with two stripes of different shades of bronze right behind her. At that moment those two colored rectangles running parallel seemed to bear their name.

«I've done it all my life. Shooting pictures. I shot every day, all the time. Landscapes, at first, then women. I've taken photos of so many beautiful women – if you put them next to each other they could fill all these rooms. And I liked it. I would come home and develop. And I was even happier because what I was doing was capturing every detail, all the details. Always. I was good. I am, I think. There is nothing else I am good at"

Laura remained silent, looking at him and then at the Polaroids. «But a few years ago I realized that it meant nothing. Once I started thinking this way I couldn't stop. Because it was true. It is true. What's the point of photographing a beautiful woman if every night you go to sleep alone? What's the point of having a pile of photographs of beautiful places, only to have it covered in dust? I had a house full of them. Full of faces to

which I couldn't attribute a voice and landscapes, taken from all angles, whose scent or temperature I couldn't remember. I was surrounded by nothing. I was living a lie, every day. I had relied too much on the eye in my hand and not on the eye in my head, you know? So I sold everything. My house too. My equipment. Everything. Now I'm trying... to really experience things. I don't know. I'm trying".

Laura handed him the Polaroids.

"And these?"

"I'm trying," Albert said, smiling, "but I don't always succeed."

"Do you still like taking pictures?"

«Yes, but I feel guilty»

"Why?"

«Because I feel...» he didn't know how to continue.

«That you betrayed photography?» she said.

«Yes, in a certain sense. I abandoned her," he whispered.

«But these...»

«Sometimes I'm afraid of forgetting. There are things that are too beautiful, that I'm afraid I'll never see again" he told her looking into her eyes.

They were silent. Laura stretched out next to him. Albert noticed that she was gloomy. He could see it from her eyes.

"Do you want to take a picture of me?" she said, without looking at him.

"There's no need"

"Yes there is"

"What do you mean?"

The girl turned to him.

"My flight... is tomorrow morning," she said.

Albert remained still. A nervous smile spread across his face and he stared at his feet, immersed in the sheets.

"Do you want to remember me, Al?" she asked.

"Yes. I... yes" he said.

"Then take a picture of me."

Albert took her chin.

"And you?"

"Me?"

«Do you want to remember me?»

"Yes," she told him.



He rolled over and stretched out his arm towards the desk that served as the headboard of the bed. He opened a drawer and took out a black box. He blew on it and looked into one of the two holes. With his index finger he just pressed the red button.

«The film is still there»

“Yes?”

«Yes, even if I haven't used it for a while»

“How do you want to do it?” she asked.

Albert thought about it.

«You take one of me and I'll take one of you. But we don't look at them. It will take a while to develop. We write our names on the back and pick them up tomorrow morning. We just take them. We will only look at them when...”

“When we're far away,” she finished.

“Good. Are you on board?”

Laura was no longer gloomy. She focused her eyes on him, his chest colored slightly grey, in the center, and the camera clutched in his large hands. She stared into the camera and smiled. Even if she was sad.

The kiss at the Central Station didn't last long. After all, they had been kissing for less than twenty-four hours and their mouths hadn't had time to get used to each other. They didn't say much to each other, because neither of them knew exactly what to say. Like their mouths, they had known each other for a short time.

Albert waved at her when she got on the bus to Malpensa and Laura, in return, tried to smile at him, in her green uniform. The previous day had been a parenthesis, a brief aside made up of few words, but calibrated, intense, branded with fire.

**They looked at each other for as long as possible, as long as he was still able to see the light that sculpted her and she could follow the white hat in the crowd.**

Then, in a moment, both were lost. And it was over.

Albert walked to the parking, where the taxi that had accompanied them was waiting for him. He opened the back door and told the driver to take him back to the hotel. As soon as the car took off, he thrust his hand into his front pocket. They had been careful not to see the pictures. She had put hers in her bag, with her eyes closed, and he had done the same by putting his in his pocket. In the lobby he sank onto the large petrol green sofa. Now he could see the photo. It was time.

Chance happened that he pulled it out backwards. He saw the writing "Laura" made by her, with a heart nearby. He smiled. He counted to three. He turned it over. His heart stopped his breathing.

## **White.**

White was the only thing he saw. There were some gray streaks, yes, but the Polaroid was practically almost exclusively white. His brain began to move at the speed of light. The cartridge battery was loaded, yes, but it had been there for a long time. The acids, of course, could have expired in the meantime. It was a trivial, rookie mistake. A mistake he would never have made before, when...

Laura's words came back to him.

## **He had betrayed photography. And now photography betrayed him.**

He would never see Laura again. And, with her image, everything else would vanish. In time he would forget her black eyes, her hair, and the shadow under her lip. Her voice and laughter would blend in with everyone else's. Her perfume would have become yet another fragrance that hides in the back of the brain and only comes back when you perceive it again. But he would never smell it again. How many other Lauras would he have known?

And how many other Alberts would have heard her laugh? Her photo was also white, there, somewhere in the sky, on a plane. They were both white. Like the light that had fooled them, refusing to imprint itself on the film.

This is what he thought. But he also thought something else. There was a time when he shot for a living. And to live he had stopped shooting. He couldn't have learned nothing from his divorce with art. On the contrary, this was the test, his final exam. He went up to his room and looked out from the balcony, enjoying the Duomo. He closed his eyes and waited. He felt like the day before again, abandoned, but happy, for no particular reason. He opened his eyes and she wasn't there. Not there. But somewhere he could feel her. The Polaroid, then, seemed to him just a piece of paper. He tore it into pieces and threw it to the wind.

Only one thing was certain. He would no longer rush to go to the SPA.

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# **STRAFtellers**