

The Blue Sky

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Oliver dyed his shorn hair the color of a tennis ball. He said a tearful goodbye to his girlfriend, and the two of us boarded a plane for Italy. He was going to spend a semester at an American university in Florence. He was 23.

Unlike his older brother, Aaron, Oliver had never been away from home before. He never went to sleepaway camp. He commuted to a city university in Queens from our house in New Rochelle, battling the traffic on the Whitestone Bridge and making few friends.

I suggested the semester abroad. When I had gone to Paris at his age to study, it opened up my world in ways that going to Queens College and living at my parents' house hadn't. But Oliver was ambivalent.

His biggest concern was the pain that lingered in his knee after two operations that were meant to fix it. He wondered how he would manage with knee pain in a city like Florence. He didn't see the point. He didn't see the point of anything lately.

I was worried. I didn't know for sure until we got on the plane that he was even going to go.

Oliver and I arrived in Rome at 6 a.m., when it was already one hundred degrees. We walked to the Spanish Steps. At the Trevi Fountain, we got some pistachio gelato, and we each swooned a little at the intense flavor. The fountain was off, and the workers were sweeping the coins out of the basin, so we continued to the Pantheon. When a street vendor put a bracelet on Oliver's wrist, Oliver smiled. I gave the vendor five euros for that smile.

At the hotel, we unpacked and fell onto the king-sized bed. The sheets chilled by the air conditioning were so delightful that we napped for hours. At midnight, we looked at each other, and he asked, “Do you want to watch *Breaking Bad*?”

“Sure,” I said.

He opened his laptop and propped it between us. He got a bag of peanuts from the mini-fridge and poured some into my outstretched hand. Cold peanuts tasted good.

In New York, we had watched first *Better Call Saul* together and then *Breaking Bad*. He wanted me to see it, and I had always refused. I didn’t like suspense, so we had an agreement that he would warn me and tell me what was going to happen beforehand. I was up to the last season and already wishing the series wouldn’t end.

We visited the Colosseum and the Vatican. We went to restaurants. At one of the restaurants, on Via Margutta, the waiter poured a little wine in Oliver’s glass instead of mine, to taste.

Oliver looked at me alarmed.

“Taste it,” I whispered.

He did and gave the waiter a nod.

Afterward, I showed him how to stick his nose in, take a sip, swish it around in his mouth, and then slowly swallow it. This made him laugh with an abandon I hadn’t seen in so long. It was contagious. The more I demonstrated how to taste the wine, the more we laughed.

Oliver and I were once so close. He noticed things about me that were overlooked by everyone else, like when I got a manicure or changed my purse. He could finish my sentences, and he used to think I could read his mind, especially if I really concentrated. When we teamed

up for Pictionary during the outages caused by Hurricane Sandy, his father, Val, and Aaron could not beat us.

At six, when his bangs were even with his pupils, he loved to jump up and down and sing a song he made up called “Me and My Mommy.” He jumped, smiling at me, until he was out of breath. When he was eight, he had silky brown hair that fell to his shoulders, and he smelled like flowers. He seemed always to be ready for a hug. In middle school, when I dropped him off in the mornings, he leaned over, puckering his lips, eyes closed, to give me a kiss without caring if anyone would see. I was his focal point, and he made me laugh. We had days that were dedicated to only us. We went to Manhattan, to a museum, marveled at the starlings swooping over Central Park, ate at a hotdog stand, walked around the West Village, had hot chocolate at Caffè Reggio, and caught a movie at the Waverly.

At fifteen, seemingly overnight, I lost him. Although I knew it would happen, it was abrupt. It felt like a slap. He made friends in the woods, where he drank and got high. When I confronted him, there were harsh words and doors slammed so hard that paint chips drifted to the wood floor. Although I could read him better than anyone, I was never sure how he was going to react to me or when I was going to upset him. It was a little like poking a sleeping bear. I sometimes felt that he hated me for loving him so much. He eventually towered over my 5’2” frame. I tiptoed around him. Sometimes things were good, and I had a window of the Oliver I loved. Other times, he scared me.

During the roughest times, I found myself gazing at photos of him on my phone, at night in bed. I would scroll through as if I were mourning a child, even though he was a few feet away from me in the next room.

On this trip, without Val and Aaron, I was cautious, and yet things were going remarkably well. I had his attention. He relied on me again. What I said mattered.

We took the train to Florence. Oliver slept while the hilly countryside passed by. It was so green and went by so quickly at 300 kilometers an hour that I was tempted to wake him. I gazed out the window, instead.

That night, we resumed our snacking and *Breaking Bad* watching. Two more episodes to go. It was intense, and we paused the show a lot to discuss. Jesse, a main character, was a hostage, held in a cage. I fidgeted.

“Ma, he is going to be OK.” Oliver handed me a peach.

The next morning, we headed over to the administrative office to get the keys to his apartment. We were each rolling one of his suitcases on the bumpy cobblestones, down narrow streets. He said his knee hurt. Then he said, like a declaration, “I shouldn’t have come.”

I winced. I said nothing, hoping this would pass. I imagined him coming home to New York with me as feelings of failure swept over me.

We turned a corner and found the building. Oliver’s apartment was seven stories up, on the top floor. It reminded me of the painting Van Gogh made of his room. It even had the chair by the window and the twin bed against the wall.

The chain of Oliver’s necklace broke while he was unpacking, and the Star of David pendant fell to the floor. I had bought him that Magen David in the ghetto in Venice when I was there with Aaron five years earlier, and Oliver never took it off. I picked it up and saw his sunken face.

“I know where I can fix it.” I zipped it into my wallet.

“I’m hungry,” he finally said, and we went around the corner for a bite.

During the meal, he hardly said a word. “Your neighborhood looks nice, less tourists,” I ventured. He ate his pasta and didn’t answer.

After lunch, he said he was going to nap in his own bed, and without a goodbye he walked away from me, shoulders slightly slumped, toward his apartment.

I wanted to ask him if we were going to see each other soon, if at all. I resisted grabbing his arm. I wished he looked happier.

I meandered through the open-air market. I dropped off the necklace to be repaired, listened to a man in the street singing opera, and then my phone pinged.

Oliver texted, “WYA” (Where You At).

“I’m about two blocks from the Duomo,” I answered quickly.

“I can’t sleep, I’ll come to you.”

I searched for him in the crowd, and then I spun around, and there he was. He was the blue sky, the core of the sun. We hugged, as if we hadn’t just seen each other.

Oliver and I sat on the curb and listened to the opera singer, and afterward he said, “That opera was amazing!”

I never thought Oliver would use the words *opera* and *amazing* in the same sentence. I stared at him. He looked cool and sophisticated.

“What?” he asked.

When I did not answer, he said, “I need shampoo.”

We walked into a pharmacy, bought some things, and he was off again. This time, I needed a nap.

I woke at midnight and watched more *Breaking Bad* on my phone. My room was freezing, and I got up to get my sweatshirt, which was dirty. I wondered if Oliver was sweltering

in his Van Gogh room. I ate a peach and missed him. The episode was stressful. I turned off my phone and tried to sleep.

The next day I took a bike tour of the city. I liked being on a bike. The tour guide stopped in front of Santa Croce basilica, and I asked her why there was a Star of David on top instead of a Cross. She explained that the architect was Jewish, and this made me smile. I touched the Magen David on my neck. I had picked up Oliver's chain that morning and wore it for safe keeping. We continued our guided tour around the city, and I felt like a kid again. After, I went back to the basilica and sat cross-legged on a stone bench on the piazza. I FaceTimed with my sister, and then Oliver called.

He sounded animated. He said he had dinner plans with friends. "Let's meet before dinner," he suggested.

I waited for him in the piazza. Someone was singing opera; a sudden wind whipped her scarf around her body, and she struggled to get it under control. The sun was setting, and the sky was pinkish. I thought of my mother and my own study abroad semester. How naïve I was; I hadn't even packed a winter coat.

I saw Oliver crossing the piazza, resplendent in his blue linen shirt with all that pink enveloping him. When he spotted me, he beamed his brilliant smile at me, and he was my boy again.

His eyes fell on the Star of David around my neck. "My necklace!"

I put it on him.

The following afternoon, Oliver came to my room so we could watch the last episode of our show together. He brought his laptop. It felt like a much-anticipated slumber party.

"Get the peanuts," I said, and he joined me on the bed.

The next day, after lunch, he said that we were going to say goodbye soon, and he curled his bottom lip down into a pout, a childish gesture for my benefit.

I walked him to his apartment. He seemed happy, and we hugged. I went halfway down the block and turned around, waved, and shouted, “Bye, Oliver.” I didn’t care if I embarrassed him, and he didn’t seem to care, either. He waved back, lingered a moment smiling, and stepped into his building.

Two days later, as I sat on the plane on the tarmac in Rome, I thought, *I have done it: He is on his way.* I felt my body loosen and let myself relish my good feelings. We had had a nice time together, just the two of us. I was leaving his time zone and hoped this new Oliver would be OK.

As I was about to turn off my phone, I got one last text from him: “I forgot to pack my winter jacket.”