I Cannubi

I can’t believe it, but I’m hungry again. Dusk settling like purple terrycloth over my shoulders, I once again find myself on that bridge of raised earth between street and ditch; this is my path into Barolo, Italy, and, walking it for the second time today, I feel like a bar-regular. A paper bag, housing wine and grissini, grows heavy in my left arm, so I switch it to my right. Then it grows heavy in my right and I switch it back to my left. Aaah…

The swell of the Cannubi hill defines itself across the street, presses itself from the earth like a child trapped beneath a bedsheet. On my right is the narrow stone path that leads between the trees to I Cannubi restaurant. I’ve passed it so many times but have never ventured in. The sign at the street, plain white with black letters, grabs me by the shirt collar, communes with my paper bag. When the pull of the unknown drags me along the white-stitched path, the known gives me an encouraging shove from behind. Whose brother or sister am I going to meet now?

The fruit trees hug the path to their chests, obse persimmons dancing along my shoulders. Am I really up for this? It’s been enough of a day so far. Really. I should just go back to Il Gioco dell’Oca, the little farmhouse &a, but the persimmons have other ideas. Like a fairy-tale nightmare, a cautionary fable protecting its moral, if only for the time being, the round orange fruit close off the path behind me and whisper, forward, forward. The fright is wonderful, welcome, almost ticklish. I grasp my paper bag like a broken sword. The leaves spread in a wake before me, the damp foliage inflaming my nostrils into an oncoming sneeze. I try to hold it back, not wanting to give myself away, but… I let loose with a full-blown sneeze that nearly knocks out my wind with its sudden violence, nearly drops the bag from my hand.

I see her spider tattoo before I see her face. It’s on the back of her right hand, a fat-bodied camouflage-green spider crawling along a web that covers knuckle, wrist, all five fingers. For a second, I think she’s going to throw it at me.

“Ciao, ciao. Salute,” she says from far back in the throat, in a rasp usually reserved for the dying.

I run my eyes from her hand to her face and am arrested by her worn beauty. She must be forty or so, long black paintbrush hair going gray at the tips. She has the face of an old house; the only one in the neighborhood that survived that fire all those years ago. Her skin is more olive-pit than olive, but leathery, somehow soft and impenetrable at the same time. There are those rare times when you can tell the texture of something just by looking at it. It works with a few species of cacti, and it works with this woman’s face. She is dressed all in black, and her body seems assembled from the discarded broomsticks in some wicked witch’s dumpster. When she wraps her fingers around a red velvet menu, I can almost hear her bones click. She is the most beautiful corpse I’ve ever seen.

I wonder: how crazy can this crazy chef really be? Crazy enough to create for me, for no good reason, a spontaneous menu above and beyond what was printed between the set of red velvet covers.
In the kitchen lights, I can see the shadow of someone shaking his head and probably throwing his hands in the air.

“The chef,” Loredana says to me, “is a little crazy.”

I laugh and, despite the crazy chef’s insistence, we talk a bit. I tell her about my stay so far: my long-delayed flight from Chicago; my illegal, paperless job picking Nebbiolo wine grapes for a few local vintners; my six months of sleeping in a tent in Il Gioco dell’Oca’s garden.

Taking the unread menu from my hands, she says, “I bring you something nice.”

She walks into the light of I Cannubi’s interior and I expect her to fade like a ghost. Only two other courtyard tables are occupied: an old man in square glasses and brown brimmed hat hunches over a demitasse cup of espresso; on the other side of him, a young couple takes turns feeding each other spoonfuls of orange custard. I watch them and wonder what it would feel like to be fed in a courtyard like this. My eavesdropping is scored by I Cannubi’s strange dance music, a shrill woman’s voice struggling to be heard.

My laugh is so dry it becomes a cough, and my heart jumps from square to square to SKY BLUE. I sneeze again.

She leads me out the back end of the tree tunnel, the persimmons spreading themselves into an open outdoor courtyard with clay-potted plants spilling white flowers. Low, bass-driven music pumps from the speakers, rattles the tables’ glassware. She seats me at the table closest to the restaurant’s entrance. I peer inside to the yellow walls lined with wine bottles, and sit in the wooden chair. As she sets the menu on the table, as if stimulating a sensor hidden in the tablecloth folds, a frenzied voice bellows from inside, “Loredana!”

I look to the right of the entrance and see two small open windows near the roof of the restaurant. They are lit cave-white, and from them, I hear the banging of skillets, the chop of knife through vegetable, the simmering of stock, the opening and closing of an oven door, and the wild mating call, “Loredana!”

“Uno momento, Ercole!” she shouts to the windows.

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over the swollen bass, shrieking, in accented-English refrain, 
*I’m horny, I’m horny... Where am I?*

A muffled argument sneaks through the kitchen windows. I close my eyes and let the sky go dark. By the time the music switches to Barry White, Loredana has brought me a 1990 Marchesi di Barolo.

“This is very good, uh, year. Very full of, uh, the mouth. You understand?”

“Si. I think so,” I say.

She pours my glass half full. I bring it to my nose and am taken to a scene of which I’ve never been a part—not in this life, anyway. I imagine myself as a child thrown into a burlap sack that once held potatoes or onions or both. It’s that mixture of burlap and absent vegetable that assaults my nose, chases any further sneeze back into the recesses of my brain. I sip and the sack opens. I look to the sky and expect it to rain rosemary. This wine is, indeed, full of the mouth.

“It is good,” Loredana rasps, wiping her forehead with the spider side of her hand.

I swallow. The stars come out.

“Yes,” I say. “Si,” I say again.

“Good. I tell Ercole. It is his selection, the wine. I tell him.”

“The chef,” I say.

“Yes,” she says, “He is crazy, but he know the wines.”

As she turns to go inside, I am struck with the desire to have her back at the table. It’s not loneliness, per se, but I feel as if her presence supports my own, like a fourth table leg.

“Loredana,” I call after her.

She twists around like a ribbon. “Yes?”

“Will you have a glass of wine with me?”

She smiles, reaches to some hidden shelf at the inside right of the entrance. I expect her to retrieve a brass jar containing her own soul, or her ashes. I expect to have a campfire story to tell.

It’s not a testament to her own death that she retrieves and holds out toward me, but a tight and shiny red can of Coke. Her smile, like theater curtains, drops closer to her mouth.

“You drink Cannubi Barolo,” she says, “I drink Coca-Cola.”

With that, she disappears into the restaurant and I sip the wine without her, awaiting the first course. Barry White’s voice holds out toward me, but a tight and shiny red can of Coke.

For a while I sit and smell the herbs in the air, finger a white petal curling from a clay pot. I am about to doze off, about to drool, when Loredana’s footsteps patter across I Cannubi’s wooden floor. She holds one plate in her hand. Hope running from my eyes, I look to her as a woman about to toss me an edible life-raft. Strangely, the colors of the plate define themselves only in the dark of the outdoors. In the plate’s center: jewels of rose stacked and folded over one another as if a napkin trick. At the plate’s edge, scrambling for space: an inverted cone of gelled cream. At first, it looks like dessert.

“Carne cruda,“ Loredana announces from the great beyond, “with parmigiano, uh, panna cotta, and the oil of tartufi bianchi.”

As she sets the plate down with a dull bass thump, Barry White vibrates, and I am attacked by the desire to lean in and kiss her spider. But instead, I bow my head and sniff the spider side of her hand.

“Yes,” she says, “The chef is very good. Ercole, he is invited to, uh, uh, food exhibit in Hong Kong in March. They know of him there. Very famous in Asia.”

I shake my head, barely find my fork with my fingers.

“Amazing,” I say.

Here, in this speck of a town, in this tiny, contained utopia, in this restaurant at the base of the Cannubi hill, in the middle—dare I say—of nowhere... nay, in the middle of an as-yet- undiscovered Everywhere, lies a chef who is big in Asia. How, from Barolo, Italy, does the word get out?

“Have dinner now,” Loredana says, fingernails tracing through her hair, “Then Ercole want to meet you.”

I pick up my fork. The weight of the world is in my fingers. I reach for the plate, Barry White vocally beds yet another perfect woman, and Loredana, huntress-cum-waitress, stalks back into the restaurant.

My fork falls into the Parmesan flan like a penny into a pool, settles to the bottom and, miraculously, reemerges coated in cream. Rolling the forkful of flan over the beef, and swathing the bite in a paint-streak of white truffle oil, I hear the young couple at the other end of the courtyard mutually moaning over a plate of sugar cubes soaked in a green liqueur. I bite as they bite, our flavors commingling, our mouth-born moans floating together over our heads, coupling with the stars. We are all alive. We get to taste together. In this bite of carne cruda with Parmesan flan—this pinnacle of earth and animal—I am one step closer to my fellow human. Oh, baby.
On my last bite of my first course, the couple kisses with sugared and exhausted mouths. Come midnight, they will surely float off to the heavens as scraps of green paper. Ercole and Loredana are finally silent in the kitchen, the only argument being between what I imagine to be the caramelizing leeks and the shellfish stock. I wonder if I am right. I wonder what Ercole looks like. I wonder where this couple is going back to, the woman in her long black skirt and white blouse ruffled at the wrists, the man in his red sport coat with cowhide elbow patches. Are these their special-occasion clothes? Will I ever see gastrique, veal fillets in chervil, fillets in peach-moscato, Parmesan flan, fresh lasagnette with porcini slivers, pork if I am right. I wonder what Ercole looks like. I wonder what was printed between the set of red velvet covers. Crazy where this couple is going back to, the woman in her with sugared and exhausted mouths. Come midnight, I wonder…

I stare at my empty plate, baring itself wide open to the sky, its ribcage exposed and heaving, vulnerable, heroic, and I wonder…

Alone in I Cannubi’s courtyard, awaiting Ercole’s arrival at my table, I feel the air temperature drop quickly, as if the floor has collapsed beneath it. I wonder: how crazy can this crazy chef really be? Crazy enough to create for me, for no good reason, a spontaneous menu above and beyond what was printed between the set of red velvet covers. Crazy enough to stuff this crazy American full of carne cruda and Parmesan flavan, fresh lasagnette with porcini slivers, pork fillets in peach-moscato gastrique, veal fillets in chervil sauce, persimmon panna cotta (the fruits plucked straight from this courtyard), chocolate soufflé, almond, pear, and chocolate tarts with hazelnut cream…

I don’t know what to say. I don’t know what to do except lean back in my chair, stare the stars into hiding, and lick the slick graininess from my teeth. I consider for a second never brushing them again, never eating again, letting myself go the way of Loredana, my bones clicking me awake in the purgatory of night. This courtyard begins to become as cold as my tent, until a clicking me awake in the purgatory of night. This

A waterfall of Italian streams from his throat, and he ends it not with a period, but with the phrase, “Bill Clinton.”

His Is are extended as double, no, triple-Es, his O is longer than his fingers, and the name comes out as Beell Cleeetone.

“Si,” I say.

“Ahh!” Ercole cackles like a warlock finally successful in spawning the Armageddon.

A fire, and then turns to me.

He turns his face to the light of the restaurant and I notice a large scar on his cheek. “Ah, ah,” he shouts, drowning out the techno music blaring from the speakers, and kissing the air six quick times, “Bellisima!”

Shivering, I search the air around Ercole for lightning bolts, the source of his heat, and see that Loredana has disappeared into the nebula again. Ercole opens and closes his right hand. With three quick hand movements, each corresponding to a syllable of his speech, he says, “Bill Clinton.”

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“Si,” I say.

A liqueur,” I say.
“Si, si,” Loredana rasps, and I feel I’ve answered the bonus question and am now eligible for the really big money, “Of hazelnut.”

I look at the brown liquid.

“Does he make everything himself?” I ask.

“Yes,” she says, “he teach himself everything. To cook everything. He is the only person in the kitchen.”

She looks at Ercole with big eyes. I look at him too. His arms are folded, his gaze fixed on me. Loredana sets the three snifters on the table and the two of them pull up chairs. The sight of Ercole sitting shocks me. It is as incongruous as a roadrunner taking a nap.

Ercole snatches a snifter in his fingers as if bare-handing a foul ball, and raises it nearly to the persimmons.

“Billy, Billy!” he shouts, and we clink glasses.

The sip is like rolling the finest tobacco in the Dead Sea Scrolls and smoking it. This inky hazelnut liqueur—the mad genius invention of this mad genius chef—is intoxicating and informative all at once. It teaches my taste buds new things: to open like flowers, then lie down and accept their fate. Loredana swallows first.

“He is, uh, an obsession with Bill Clinton. He love how he, uh, do everything.”

Ercole begins rapping on Loredana’s shoulder and I expect her to break. He is asking her what she said. She tells him and he laughs, shooting a string of si—“Si, si, si, si,”—from his throat, a clogged faucet trying to expel its water.

I sip again, and then again, and soon, in the combination of Ercole’s vocal rapids, Loredana’s mist hovering over it all, and the sweet hazelnut running through me, I feel I am immersed in the most tepid and happy of the oceans. I feel pre-born.

I try, to the best of my Italian ability, to tell Ercole my story—how I got here, the tent, the grapes…

Ercole throws his head back with the mention of each vintner. He palms the air as if searching for a hidden doorknob and mutters, “…Uva, uva, uva. Che é uva in inglese?”

“Uva,” I say, “in inglese? Uva é grape.”

“Grape?!” Ercole exclaims as if it’s the most preposterous word he’s heard.

“Si,” I say.

“Grape?” Ercole questions, then pauses, thinks the word over, and says, “Oh, come grappa!” He pauses again, thinks about grappa, then says, “Desidera grappa?”

“Oh, no,” Loredana sighs, her spider-hand over her eyes, “He want to give you the grappa now. This is how his mind work.”

“Si, si,” Ercole says and springs from his chair.

Loredana and I watch the stars. He returns a minute later with tiny crystal grappa glasses and a tall bottle. As I learned the hard way in countless Italian restaurants, grappa is made from the grape mash: skins, branches, seeds; that leftover steaming junk resting untamed in cantina wheelbarrows throughout the country. Like certain cultures who use all parts of an animal after the hunt—the fat for lamp-oil, the skins for clothes—the Italians use all parts of the grape.

I have never sipped so much in my life, and I sip again; this sip of Nebbiolo grappa is the smoothest of its kind. If the earth were a grape, this would be the taste of its core.

The three of us talk long into the night, drink deep into the bottle of grappa. We talk of Chicago, of Hong Kong, of cooking and eating and drinking. They tell me to return to I Cannubi tomorrow night to apprentice for an hour or two in Ercole’s kitchen. I can’t believe it, or I’m too drunk to believe it, and when Ercole pours me yet another glass of grappa, Loredana now sleeping or pretending to sleep on the table, I have to wait until he averts his eyes, and dump my entire glassful into one of the neighboring clay pots. I can’t take any more. I am filled from belly to brain. I’m not even close to cold. Somehow, I don’t believe my grappa discard could have flown under Ercole’s radar, but he doesn’t let on; he just continues to stroke Loredana’s hair, fanned over the entire tablecloth, muttering, “Mia moglie, mia moglie…” My wife, my wife….”