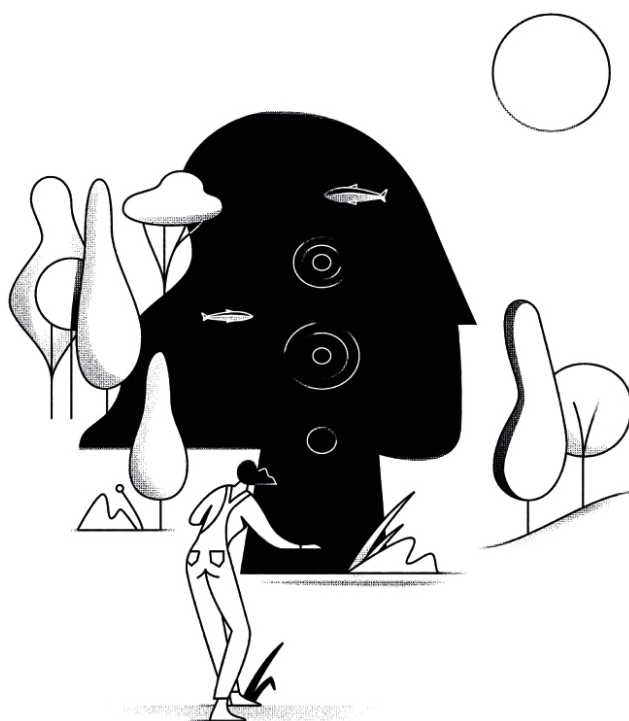


A WHIMSY OF THE WORLD



By Amor Towles

A WHIMSY OF THE WORLD

For My Sister

1.

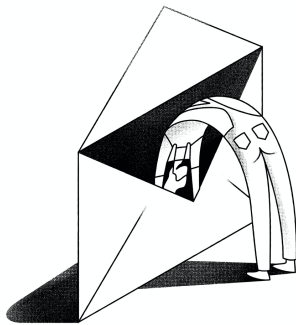
For as long as the town of Morgen could remember, Ellie Matthiessen had been a spirited sort. On her way to the general store to pick up some safety pins for her mother, Ellie could easily take a left instead of a right, and end up on the banks of the Tanner River throwing stones at the silvery shadows of trout. And while getting dressed for the Sunday social, she could suddenly put on her brother's overalls instead of her new yellow dress—despite her brother being four years older and two inches taller.

With a shake of the head, Aunt Betty from Missouri liked to say that Ellie was “contrary”, by which she meant that Ellie was predisposed to do the opposite of whatever she'd been asked. But that wasn't quite fair. For Ellie wasn't *disinclined* to do what she was told. It's just that when the moment came to do a particular thing, she was often *inclined* to do something else altogether. In fact, that Ellie did not always do what she'd been told, generally came as much as a surprise to Ellie as to anyone else. Because having been asked to do a particular thing, up until the very last moment, Ellie had every intention of doing it—so help her, God, cross her heart and hope to die.

Simply put, Ellie Matthiessen was her own person. And to speculate on why she did what she did when she did it, one might just as well wonder why a monarch butterfly, having flown all the way from Mexico to Nebraska in the month of May, happens to land on one flower instead of another.

2.

Then one day in September, 1936, after a particularly tedious instruction in grammar (dealing with the suitable uses of the past participle), as Ellie and her classmates were writing letters to their pen pals in England, Ellie suddenly lost her whimsy.



Looking back, she could almost pinpoint the exact moment it had happened. For having signed and sealed her letter, when Ellie went to place the stamp on the envelope, she did so in the upper right-hand corner, even though—as Marvin Eddlesby, the longstanding postmaster of the Morgen post office, could personally attest—Ellie generally chose to place her stamps in one of the other three corners on the face of an envelope and, upon occasion, had even been known to place it on the back! But as I say, on this particular day, when Ellie leaned over the envelope with the appropriate postage in hand, it suddenly seemed to her that there

was no more sensible spot for the affixing of a stamp than above and to the right of the address. So, that's where she affixed it—with two quick thumps of the fist, no less.

And just like that, she was a girl without a whim.

3.

In the days that followed, friends and family alike took notice of the transformation. Suddenly, in any given situation, Ellie was prone to do exactly what any well-behaved child would do in a similar situation. And what was even more surprising, Ellie seemed to do so without the slightest hesitation or remorse.

Generally speaking, it would take an entire department of philosophy to write you a treatise on the difference between that which *seems* and that which *is*, but in this case, no such distinction needed to be made. For Ellie *felt* no hesitation or remorse. Since the affixing of the stamp, it had seemed perfectly natural to Ellie that one should make one's bed in the morning, arrive at school on time, remain attentive in class, see to one's chores in the afternoon, clear one's plate after supper, and brush one's teeth before bed. After all, hadn't these practices been carefully fashioned in ages past and handed down from generation to generation because experience had taught that to follow them step by step inevitably led to a life of health and happiness?

That all of this should be so, suddenly seemed as clear to Ellie as the fact that if you plotted two dots on an axis using the formula $y=2x+2$ and then connected them, you would initiate a line that anticipated all the other dots which that formula would dictate from here into eternity. Or, if you have allowed your memory of basic mathematics to lapse, suffice it to say that with the affixing of the stamp, Ellie had taken her first step on that path which is well-marked, well-trodden, and well-advised—much to the satisfaction of her parents, her pastor, and her principal.

4.

Months pass.

Not the months of summer, you understand, in which a single day seems to expand in every direction simultaneously, allowing one adventure to unfold into another without the slightest awareness of time. Rather, these were the months of autumn, those months in which the progress of the minutes was marked by the buzz of the alarm clock, the honk of the school bus, the clang of the bells in the schoolhouse, and the whistles of the coach in the gym—in other words, by all those musical notes that decisively end one phase of our day only to usher us without patience or ceremony into the next.

As you well might imagine, these clamorous sounds had often escaped Ellie's attention in autumn's past. When the school bus honked or the school bells clanged, the old Ellie might easily have failed to notice because she was too busy admiring all the fiery colors unleashed by the season upon the branches of the maples and elms.

But what with her new attentiveness to the daily ringing and dinging, the new Ellie hardly had time to notice the turning of the leaves before she was raking them off the ground.

5.

And thus might have been the progress of Ellie's life from season to season and year to year, up two and over one, henceforth and thenceforth, ashes to ashes and dust to dust.

But on the twelfth of December, as Ellie sat at her kitchen table reviewing her vocabulary words while eating a bowl of Corn Crispies, her attention was drawn to the three chimes from the wireless that signaled the beginning of the morning news. The lead story? On the preceding afternoon, King Edward VIII had abdicated his throne for the love of Wallis Simpson. Transmitting live from London, the American correspondent proceeded with his breathless account:

From the White Cliffs of Dover to the halls of Parliament, it has been no secret that since his ascension to the throne, King Edward has struggled with how to honor his duty to England on the one hand, and his love for the American divorcée on the other.

When the Prime Minister made it clear to the forty-two-year old king that no marriage to Simpson could be countenanced, all evidence seemed to suggest that Edward had resigned himself to putting his torrid affair behind him in service of the crown.

But on Wednesday, at approximately 3:00 PM Greenwich Mean Time, having just returned from an inspection of the Royal Guard, as Edward stood before his mirror in full regalia, he apparently turned to his trusted valet and said with a hint of surprise: "Prentice, my good man, instead of having tea with the bishop this afternoon, I think I shall give up the throne."

Upon hearing which, our heroine dropped her spoon. For in the suddenness of the King's decision, Ellie had recognized the handiwork of her whimsy.

And, as surprising as that may seem, Ellie was not mistaken...

6.

After that tedious grammar lesson back in September, Ellie's whimsy was feeling unusually restless. Not only had the various rules governing the use of the past participle seemed especially burdensome, Miss Penniworth had informed the class that after they had written their pen pals, they would be shifting their attention to the memorization of another Shakespearean sonnet.

Now, from the whimsy's point-of-view, the writing of romantic verses seemed a perfectly sensible use of time. And to have someone read to you the romantic verses which they had written on your behalf was even better! But to spend an afternoon memorizing a sonnet that someone long ago had written to somebody else, this seemed to miss the point of sonnet writing altogether.

"It's really just too much," thought the whimsy with his head in his hands. And on something of an impulse, after Ellie had finished writing her pen pal, he slipped himself into the envelope, game for a change of scenery.

I would be lying were I to suggest that in the following days Ellie's whimsy felt no regrets. After all, in the 1930s it took several weeks for a letter to find its way from a farmhouse in Nebraska to a townhouse in Belgravia, what with having to sail

across the Atlantic and such. Hundreds of hours of the whimsy's initial independence were spent folded inside an envelope, stuffed into a mailbag, and buried at the bottom of a hold.

"What have I done?" the whimsy reasonably asked himself, as he traveled at thirty knots over mid-Atlantic swells.

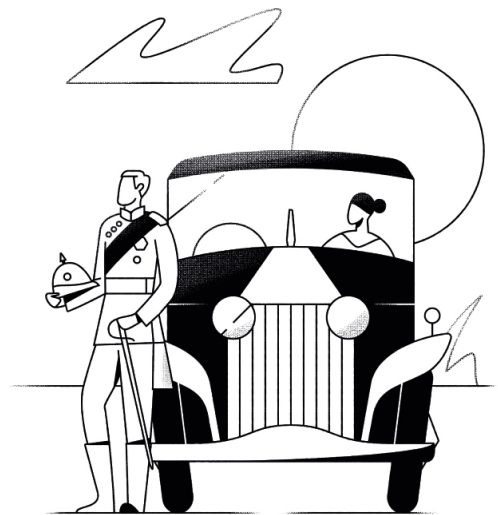
Upon his arrival in London, Ellie's whimsy had new cause for second thoughts. For while Ellie's pen pal, Abigail Abernathy, turned out to be just as friendly and sincere in person as she had been in print, she was not particularly adventurous. Her favorite pastime was to spend the day in bed rereading the works of Charles Dickens, whoever he was. And what's more, the young lady's household had a sense of propriety that made life in the Mathiessen house seem like a ride at the county fair. Take their tradition of tea. In *theory*, the notion of an afternoon snack, which includes a variety of tasty treats that you can freely choose from, should be music to a whimsical ear. But in *practice*, afternoon tea at the Abernathy house was something quite different. It was regimented in terms of the hour it was held, the food that was served, and the manner in which your teacup was supposed to be raised to your lips. Arriving a few minutes late generally prompted an admonishment, the slurping of your tea resulted in a reprimand, and the placing of strawberry jam on top of a cucumber sandwich was absolutely forbidden!

And what was the tenor of English scholarship? Well, if Ellie's whimsy thought grammar received undue attention in Nebraska, he was shocked—utterly shocked, I tell you—to find that the British grammatical primer was twice as long as the American one despite having much smaller print.

Then nearly three months after the whimsy's arrival, Abigail's class was given a reprieve from the rigors of the academy by going on a fieldtrip to see the changing of the guards at St. James's Palace; and as it happened, this was the very day that the King of England came to formally review those regiments that were entrusted with the defense of his well-being.

Excited by the resulting pomp and circumstance, every member of Abigail's class stood on their tiptoes to see over the shoulders of the tourists. But Ellie's whimsy, having watched the rigmarole for a few minutes and gotten the general idea, began aimlessly looking about, until he spied a Rolls Royce parked at the edge of the crowd with its door open. Naturally, Ellie's whimsy had never seen the inside of a Rolls Royce; but seeing the inside of a Rolls Royce struck Ellie's whimsy as just the sort of thing one should do without fail if given the chance. Breaking from his group, he weaved through the crowd and slipped inside—only to be joined a few minutes later by King Edward himself who, having instructed his chauffeur to return to Buckingham Palace, sat back and sighed.

Ellie's whimsy had always thought of himself as one who knew a thing or two about the vicissitudes of the human heart.



He was a whimsy of the world, as it were. But he was utterly taken aback by King Edward's sigh. For in his experience, a sigh was something one expressed when one finds that one is doing something that one has no inclination to do. And yet, wasn't the very definition of being a King that one could do whatever one wanted at the drop of the royal hat?

Setting finer formalities aside, Ellie's whimsy stuck out his hand, introduced himself, and expressed his surprise that a King, of all people, should utter such a sigh.

"Ah," said the King of England, with a mournful shake of the head. Then he explained to the whimsy that as heir to the throne, his entire life had been circumscribed by requirements of Court. Longstanding protocols dictated not only what he should do, but when he should do it, how he should do it, and even what attire he should do it in. Here the King gestured to the buttons and medals that festooned the royal jacket.

"It is as if, on the day you were born, you were handed a giant diary with a detailed account of that which was going to happen to you for the remainder of your life."

"No wonder the poor fellow looks so grim," thought the whimsy.

Then the King went on to explain the small matter of his affection for the American divorcée and the unanimous opinion held by his family, the members of parliament, and the Archbishop of Canterbury that he must put this love behind him.

"What is one to do?", asked the King, rhetorically.

But the whimsy, who was relatively deaf to rhetoric, assumed the King had asked his question in earnest. And without a moment's hesitation, he told the King exactly what one is to do under such a circumstance, going so far as to bolster his case with a few romantic lines from Shakespeare.

So, perhaps, Miss Penniworth had been right, after all.

7.

When Ellie recognized her whimsy's handiwork in the actions of the King, as if woken from a slumber, she realized that the life she had been leading without her whimsy was not her own.

"He must have slipped into that letter back in September," she thought to herself. "But what to do about it now...?"

As fate would have it, at the very moment she was asking herself this question, she was staring at the back of her Corn Crispies box. And there, in a bright yellow square was a special announcement from the Corn Crispies Corporation of America. To celebrate the brand's new motto—*Even Christopher Columbus Ate Corn Crispies*—the company was awarding an all-expenses-paid trip to Europe to whomever submitted the most Corn Crispies box tops by the first of June!

Admittedly, should Ellie Mathiessen have set out to win this promotional contest just six months before, she would never have stood a chance. For, having initiated the effort with a youthful enthusiasm, before she had accumulated even ten box tops, she probably would have been distracted by some other noble inclination—such as the chasing of the rooster in the barnyard, or the reading of a Hardy Boys mystery while hanging upside down from a tree limb. But that was the *old* Ellie. Ever since the affixing of the stamp, Ellie had not only the pragmatic

vision, but the tireless determination necessary to see through an endeavor of this magnitude.

On the second day of her venture, Ellie saw that the prize would never be hers based upon her own consumption of Corn Crispies, even were she to eat them for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. That afternoon, she began knocking on the doors of her neighbors, and then her neighbor's neighbors asking if they happened to have any Corn Crispie box tops to spare.

In the weeks that followed, as Ellie worked her way from house to house, her mother and father expressed their full support. Having spent their entire lives on farms where one succeeded solely by the sweat of one's brow, they recognized the virtues of industry and persistence. That Ellie should set out on such a daunting endeavor with such determination at so young an age, struck them as a very promising sign, especially as she had been so whimsical as a child. Of course, they had no expectation that their daughter would win a trip to anywhere. After all, there were not enough box tops in all of Hallelujah County for someone to win a nationally advertised contest. But in the Mathiessens' opinion, the fact that their daughter had no chance of winning, simply added to the value of the lesson: That one should try one's hardest, even when the chances for victory are slim; and then take pride that one has given the venture one's all, even when one fails to emerge victorious.

Determined to show their support for their daughter, the Mathiessens did not draw her attention to the insufficiency of box tops in the county; but Ellie came to the same conclusion soon enough. For once on the outskirts of Morgen, the farmhouses were miles apart and, in many cases, the families didn't even eat cereal. So, for the second time in this story, Ellie sent a fateful letter.

This one was to her brother, Tom, who—having enlisted in the army the previous spring—was going through basic training at Fort Bragg in North Carolina. In the letter, Ellie expressed her desire to go to Europe, explained the nature of the contest, and wondered if, by any chance, Corn Crispies were eaten at Fort Bragg.

Although in reading the letter, Tom was somewhat taken aback by the correctness of his sister's grammar and the neatness of her script, he recognized the old spark which had so often prompted her to do the unexpected. Like any young man with a soft spot in his heart for his younger sister, Tom adopted Ellie's mission as his own. He told all the boys in the barracks about the contest, who in turn told the boys in the neighboring barracks, until the word had spread to every single regiment on the base.

As it happened, not only was the Corn Crispies Corporation of America an authorized supplier to the US Army, the enlisted men at Fort Bragg were allowed to eat as many bowls of cereal as they could stomach in the eighteen minutes they were given for breakfast. So, once the word had gone out that Corn Crispie box tops were needed to send a young Nebraskan on an all-expenses-paid trip to Europe, let's just say that over hill and over dale, as they hit the dusty trail, those caissons went rolling along.

And on the 23rd of May, just one week before the deadline of the contest, as Mr. and Mrs. Matthiessen looked on in dumb amazement, a convoy of four US Army trucks draped in dark green canvas rolled into the Mathiessen farm bearing 20,000 Corn Crispie box tops.

And let that be a lesson to you, parents and children alike.

8.

The notion of sending a sixteen-year-old girl to Europe unaccompanied was contrary to the instincts, upbringing, and moral education of the Matthiessens. (Never mind the question of who was going to do her chores in her absence!) But having encouraged their daughter in this endeavor, having sung the praises of endurance and persistence, having even gone so far as to paraphrase a Biblical passage or two, when Ellie actually won the trip, there was nothing for them to do but give her a few pieces of parting advice and ask her to write. And on the 25th of June, with her brand new suitcase in hand, Ellie took the train to New York where she boarded the *Queen Mary* for the transatlantic crossing.

As she crossed the ocean, Ellie did not think at any great length about what she would do upon her arrival in London. This is not because she was careless. Rather, in that fine Nebraskan fashion, her course of action had seemed to speak for itself: Upon her arrival, she would take a taxi to Buckingham Palace, ask to see Edward, and explain to him that, through no fault of his own, he had come into possession of a whimsy that wasn't his.

And this is exactly what she did—at least, the part about the taxi and the asking for Edward. But much to Ellie's consternation, the soldiers standing at attention in front of the Palace's gates wouldn't even deign to respond to her enquiry. Finding this behavior utterly unacceptable, Ellie hailed a constable who in turn tried to explain that the royal guard were not accustomed to admitting tourists to the royal palace.

"Tourists!" cried Ellie in indignation.

And when she launched into a heated description of the evidence that a certain king of a certain country had come into possession of a whimsy that wasn't his, rather than debate the integrity of the House of Windsor, the constable attempted to politely bring the dispute to its conclusion by pointing to a newsstand and noting that the abdicated king was currently in Gay Paree.

Sure enough, when Ellie picked up the latest issue of *Tatler*, on the cover she found a photograph of Edward and Mrs. Simpson enjoying themselves at a table for two under the canopy of the Café de la Rotonde on the corner of Boulevard du Montparnasse and Boulevard Raspail.

"Taxi!" called Ellie with a hand in the air.

9.

Ellie arrived at La Rotonde on a Tuesday night at nine. Seeing no sign of her whimsy in the seats outside, she entered the restaurant proper with its cushions of red velvet, amber lighting, and walls lined with portraits. Taking a seat at a table for two, Ellie signaled a waiter—who had just delivered a serving of foie gras to the tall, balding man dining alone in the corner booth.

"Do you speak English?" Ellie asked the waiter, hopefully.

"Oui," he admitted, begrudgingly.

"Were you working the night the abdicated king was here?"

"Of course."

Taking heart, Ellie asked if on that night, he had happened to see a whimsy in the café who was about her height and clean shaven.

The waiter rolled his eyes and responded that if he was given a franc for every whimsy that had entered the doors of La Rotonde, he would be dining on foie gras rather than delivering it. Then he continued on to the kitchen.

But even as Ellie was feeling her spirits sink, the tall, balding man from the corner booth appeared at her table.

"Excuse me," he said with a resonant voice. "Are you an American?"

"I am," said Ellie.

"I thought so." Then gesturing to the empty seat at Ellie's table, he asked if he might join her.

When Ellie's parents had given her their pieces of parting advice, the very first piece was to fend off any inquiries from unfamiliar men. But this stranger, who must have been 75 years old, struck her as a gentleman; and what's more, after admitting that he had inadvertently overheard her conversation with the waiter, he said he might be of some assistance in her quest.

"Please," she said, offering him the empty seat.

The gentleman, whose name was Harry Mathews, was actually an American. Born into a prominent family and educated in the Ivy League, Mr. Mathews's future in New York had been promising, to say the least.

"But like you," he said, "I had the desire to see the world..."

So, rather than join the Knickerbocker Club, he joined the Navy, and entered upon a peripatetic life.

"Yes, I have travelled far and wide, my friend. Though I have long maintained a small apartment here—just around the corner—one week I might shoot off to Vienna and the next to Madrid. I know most of the conductors on the European railways by name. I have explored the Greek Isles by boat, traversed the Sahara by camel, and crossed the Dolomites by hydrogen balloon. I once even travelled across Croatia in a gypsy caravan! So enamored with the roving life was I, when I arrived in a new city, I would always stay at the hotel closest to the station, so that at a moment's notice I could be on the very next train to wherever my wanderlust took me."

As Mr. Mathews recalled the adventures of his prime, his eyes grew bright and misty.

"Ah, the people I have known," he said with a shake of the head.

But then his voice grew deeper, graver.

"This July, it was my intention to take advantage of the long days by revisiting some of my favorite cities in Italy. After taking the ferry from Marseille to Ostia, I planned to begin in Rome, then make way to Florence, and from Florence to Venice... But a few nights ago, with my bags already packed and my passport in



hand, I came here for one more meal before setting out. And as I sat at one of the outside tables—watching the Montparnassens cross Raspail and Raspailans cross Montparnasse—I suddenly felt the desire to remain exactly where I was.”

He looked out into the intersection for a moment.

“Who can explain it? Perhaps it was the raindrops falling on the canopy, or the streetlamp flickering on the corner, or the empty oyster shells resting on my plate, but suddenly I thought: *This is where I belong*. And what an extraordinary revelation that is, my dear, as you will no doubt discover in your own time. But even as I was coming to this conclusion, I had the awareness that my wanderlust had left me...”

Ellie leaned back in her chair, seeing it all.

“With my whimsy,” she said.

“Yes,” he replied, “with your whimsy.”

Mr. Mathews explained how after the visit of the abdicated king, her whimsy had begun frequenting the café and on more than one occasion had joined him and his wanderlust for a late supper.

“But then, on the night of my epiphany, as I was suddenly lost in reflection, my wanderlust excused himself. Only half attentive, I watched as he crossed the café and pulled up a chair at your whimsy’s table. Together they ordered a round of Chartreuse. They whispered like conspirators and laughed like old friends. And twenty minutes later, they were gone.”

“Did they say where they were going?”

Mr. Mathews shook his head.

“I never had the chance to ask. But in all the time that we were together, not once did my wanderlust fail to follow through on a journey we had planned. As such, I would say with near certainty that the two are headed for Rome...”

When Ellie nodded and pulled back her chair, Mr. Mathews produced a tall leather billfold from which he withdrew his tickets for the train to Marseille and the ferry to Ostia along with fifteen thousand lire.

“Here,” he said. “Take these. They are no longer of use to me.”

Ellie thanked the old man and even gave him a parting kiss on the cheek. But as she walked away from the table, Mr. Mathews called out “Wait!”, as if he’d suddenly remembered one last detail upon which the whole enterprise hinged.

“Yes?” said Ellie.

“Be advised, my dear, that your whimsy is no longer clean shaven! He now wears a goatee.”

10.

When Ellie emerged from the terminus in Rome, she was immediately confronted by a quandary: Now that she was here, what was she to do? If, in fact, all roads lead to Rome, then it seemed axiomatic that all roads must lead away from it as well. But in which direction should she venture? Would her whimsy and Mr. Mathews’s wanderlust head into the countryside, or would they visit the traditional sites of the city? Should she go the Coliseum or the Sistine Chapel and hope to find them among the throngs of tourists? But even as she looked out across the traffic in this state of uncertainty, her gaze lit upon the entrance of an international hotel not a thousand feet away.

“Of course!” she said to herself.

Why hadn't she thought of it before? Mr. Mathews had explicitly informed her that he always stayed in the hotel closest to the train station, so that he could be ready to leave at a moment's notice. Surely, his wanderlust would live by the same cardinal rule. Dodging a pair of light blue Vespas, Ellie dashed across the street and through the doors of the hotel.

Upon entering the lobby, Ellie felt a pang of disappointment; for everyone in sight seemed to be acting just as you'd expect them to act. There were tourists taking last looks at *Baedekers* before heading out to pursue the day's itinerary without the slightest emendation. Bellhops were taking the luggage of new arrivals to the rooms that had been requested months before. And those settling their bill exhibited no expression of adverse surprise when they surveyed the itemized charges, having successfully lived within their budgets despite the hotel's temptations and the inevitable mistakes that one is bound to make when calculating exchange rates in one's head. Which is to say, no one in the lobby seemed the least affected by a whim.

But when she approached the concierge's desk to ask if there were other hotels in the immediate vicinity, Ellie found a harried young man who was talking into two separate phones at once.

"Si. No. No. Si. Grazie. Grazie. Prego. Prego."

When he hung them both up and Ellie asked about the other hotels in the area, he rolled his eyes and threw up his hands.

"How should I know what other hotels are in the area?"

"But aren't you the concierge?"

"Do I look like the concierge?"

In a flurry of Italian and English (with a bit of German cursing thrown in for good measure), the harried young man, who turned out to be the assistant to the assistant manager, explained that after fifteen years of service, Signor Raisanetti, the hotel's concierge, had quit his job on Thursday night without notice. And why had he quit? Not in some dispute with management over compensation; and not because he had received a competing offer from a competing hotel; rather, after helping two Americans with their train reservations, Signor Raisanetti walked into the manager's office and submitted his resignation—so that he could pursue his dream of singing in the opera.

"And as a tenor, no less!"

Ellie's eyes widened.

"Were they headed to Florence?" she asked.

"Was who headed to Florence?"

"The two Americans."

"Yes, yes," he said with another roll of the eyes. "They were headed to Florence. The birthplace of the renaissance. The Athens of the Middle Ages."

Suddenly, the two phones on the desk began ringing again and the assistant to the assistant manager raised one to each ear.

"Buongiorno! Buongiorno!"

Upon receiving the news that she was late once again, another traveler might have become dispirited, feeling that surely the Fates were lined up against her. But just as Sherlock Holmes, having experienced a minor setback, would dash out the door with his deerstalker on his head and the pronouncement that *the game was afoot*, Ellie left the hotel with renewed determination. For having been one step behind her whimsy ever since crossing the Atlantic, Ellie had decided it was time

to be one step ahead. Rather than take the train to Florence, she would fly straight to Venice.

11.

But Ellie was not one step ahead of her whimsy. For despite the Uffizi, the Duomo, and the Palazzo Vecchio, despite the Laurentian Library and the frescoes of Fra Angelico in the Convent of San Marco, Ellie's whimsy had spent less than twenty-four hours in the city of Florence. Even as Ellie's plane was approaching Marco Polo Airport, her whimsy was sitting in Harry's Bar just off the Grand Canal, in the highest of spirits.

Why was her whimsy in such a good mood? First, having stumbled upon this improbably named restaurant and finding it crowded, the last-minute cancellation of a reservation had resulted in his being swept to a table upstairs. Then, when his waiter approached having just spoken to a table of American tourists in perfect English, he addressed Ellie's whimsy in Italian. (*What do you think of that, Morgen, Nebraska!*) And finally, there was the food. After being welcomed with a concoction of peach juice and champagne, Ellie's whimsy was brought a tagliolini tossed with shrimp and zucchini followed by seared halibut in an orange sauce.

Peach juice and champagne? Shrimp and zucchini? Halibut and oranges? Surely, the chef was making it all up as he went along!

Leaving the restaurant in a state of satisfaction, Ellie's whimsy thought a ride in a gondola might be a nice way to spend an hour; but hearing a café orchestra tuning in the distance, he followed the sound and ended up on the Piazza San Marco where he took a seat at a table near the string section with a perfect view of the Basilica.

"Ah, Venice," said the whimsy, as so many had before. Then the waiter approached.

"Buonasera, signore."

"Buonasera."

"Will you be dining with us?"

"I'm afraid I have already dined."

"Then perhaps some gelato...?"

"You tempt me," said the whimsy with a smile. "But I think I shall just have an espresso."

"Right away."

But no sooner were these words out of the waiter's mouth than someone came bounding up with a shout of "There you are!"

The waiter and whimsy both looked up in surprise.

"Wanderlust!" said whimsy. "I was just ordering an espresso. Why don't you join me?"

"An espresso sounds delightful," said wanderlust. "And on any other night, I'd be the first to accept your offer. But I'm afraid we haven't the time."

Whimsy looked at wanderlust with a measure of disbelief.

"Haven't the time for an espresso?"

Whimsy gestured toward the Piazza, which admittedly had a four-hundred-year-old clock tower in a position of prominence, but which in no other respect would ever suggest that there was not enough time for an espresso—never mind that the very word *espresso* made it perfectly clear that to drink it would hardly

take any time at all. On this particular Piazza at this particular hour, you could tell without fear of contradiction that there was time for *everything*. You could tell it from the pace of the locals who were strolling arm-in-arm. You could tell it from the orchestra which had just struck up a waltz by Strauss. Even the clouds over the Basilica seemed stalled in their progress by divine intent.

Having gestured to indicate all of this, Ellie's whimsy smiled and said: "What could possibly be the rush?"

But with the flourish of a magician, wanderlust produced a fan of papers.

"Believe it or not," he announced with a grin, "I have just secured us a private berth on the Orient Express. And it leaves in thirteen minutes."

"The Orient Express..." whimsy said with a hint of disappointment.

"Exactly!" said wanderlust. "Belgrade, Sofia, Istanbul..."

"But we've only just arrived."

"What do you mean only just arrived?" said wanderlust. "We got here last night."

"Got here last night?" exclaimed the whimsy. "But that's my point, exactly."

"No." countered wanderlust, "that's *my* point, exactly."

For a moment, wanderlust stared at whimsy, and whimsy stared right back.

Admittedly, they had not known each other for very long. But when they had met at La Rotonde, it had seemed to Ellie's whimsy (who had grown a little tired of spending time on his own) that here might be the perfect travelling companion—a fellow who was always ready upon a moment's notice to head off on some new adventure. So, the night in the café when wanderlust had suggested that the two set off on a tour of Italy, he hadn't hesitated.

The only problem, as whimsy soon discovered, was that wanderlust was *always* ready to head off on some new adventure. When they arrived in Marseille to make the crossing to Rome, what whimsy saw before him was a city with hundreds of idiosyncratic neighborhoods and a thousand little junctures at which point the spirited traveler intending to go right, could suddenly go left to great advantage.

And yet, before the night was out, wanderlust was ready to pack his bags. Not impulsively, you understand; not because the spirit had moved him; but because it was "time to go". Wanderlust's desire to move from one city to the next was almost as predictable as the railway timetables that he kept in his pocket. So inevitable was his desire to get up and go, that it verged on tyranny.

Unsure of what to do, whimsy turned his gaze from wanderlust to the waiter.

The waiter, who had his pad and pencil still in hand, simply raised his eyebrows, as much as to say: *Do you want the espresso, or not?*

Then whimsy turned from the waiter back to wanderlust who with their tickets in hand raised his eyebrows, as much as to say: *Belgrade, Sofia, Istanbul.*

The waltz the orchestra had been playing suddenly came to a close. The pigeons that had been milling about the café suddenly took flight. And Ellie's whimsy, letting his shoulders drop, turned back to the waiter and cancelled his coffee.

12.

Amelia Earhart once said that when she first went up in a plane at the age of twenty-three, she had that rarest of experiences: the sensing of astonishment and familiarity at the very same moment. On the one hand, she was astounded to find

herself 10,000 feet above the surface of the earth, but on the other, she felt so at home in the cockpit, it was as if she'd been flying all of her life. As I say, such an experience is rare. In fact, it may only happen once or twice. But when it does, pay close attention, because your life is about to change.

At any rate, this is the sensation that Ellie Matthiessen felt as her water taxi skipped across the waves and the city of Venice came into view. On the one hand, she was in a state of amazement that over a thousand years ago, a group of sailors and merchants had decided to build a city on the surface of the Adriatic Sea. And yet, at some essential level, Ellie thought: *of course*.

At the suggestion of the water taxi's driver, Ellie went straight to the Hotel Danieli, which was just a few hundred feet down the quay from the city's central landing. When Ellie approached the front desk in order to check in, she also described the two friends who would soon be arriving from Florence, and asked that she be notified at once upon their arrival. But the desk captain said this would not be necessary. Because he knew exactly who she was referring to; and having arrived from Florence the previous day, the two had checked out not fifteen minutes before.



Thus, does destiny takes us from highs to lows. Having just felt the transcendence of being in a place that was at once astonishing and familiar, upon discovering that she had missed her whimsy once again, Ellie felt distressed, distraught, and dismayed. (Oh, what a dispiriting prefix!) Since Mr. Mathews had only described his planned itinerary as far as Venice, Ellie had no idea where her whimsy might go next. And for the first time, she was forced to acknowledge that she might never see her whimsy again.

As if in a dream, she wandered out of the Danieli and along the quay, blindly falling in step with the evening's foot traffic as it spilled onto St. Mark's Square. Coming to a stop in the center of the Piazza, Ellie turned around,

conscious that all the people passing by were on their way to shops or museums, dinners or performances, assignments or vespers—which is to say, headed somewhere for some reason. But it seemed to Ellie that she had only one place left to go, and that was to Morgen, Nebraska where $y=2x+2$.

When suddenly, one hundred pigeons that were milling about the tables of a nearby café took flight all at once. In a flurry, they wheeled around the Campanile and returned to where they had started, only to take flight a moment later and make the same journey around the old bell tower, but in the opposite direction. And as Ellie watched them settling back on the stones around the café tables, she said aloud: "He's here."

13.

When we last left Ellie's whimsy, he had just cancelled his coffee in a state of resignation. After all, hadn't he always hoped to see Budapest one day? And didn't his travelling companion already have their tickets in hand? But as whimsy stood from the table, ready to follow wanderlust to the station, he noted that the nearby flock of pigeons that had taken flight and wheeled around the bell tower twice, were now settling once again in their spot beside the café.

"Yes," thought the whimsy. "That is it exactly."

So, having sent wanderlust on his way, Ellie's whimsy returned to his table, signaled the waiter, and ordered a gelato—just as his oldest friend in the world emerged inexplicably from the crowd.

And the very next day, when Ellie stopped at the concierge's desk at the Danieli to send a postcard home, rather than purchase one twenty-five-lire stamp, she purchased twenty-five one-lire stamps, and once she'd affixed them all over the card, there was just enough space to assure her parents that she was well, but not enough to indicate when she might be coming home.

Amor Towles
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