


# Limoncello

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Writing Matters



Rebecca can barely hear the radio over the sound of the air conditioning, but the heat inside her car is suffocating nonetheless. Genoa is hostile towards foreign drivers, or maybe towards drivers of all kinds, to which the locals have apparently adapted by reinstalling the survival of the fittest as an unofficial ground rule. She's being passed and honked at repeatedly, gets stuck in wrong lanes, has trouble finding the way to the airport, and gets irrationally angry at herself for leaving so late.


She'd arrived two days ago and offered to pick Sam up at the airport. A stupid idea, as was this whole holiday. An accident, so to say. They'd been on the phone with each other, a few months back, Rebecca walking mindlessly through Vienna, Sam bustling around in the background, feeding Adrian's dog, preparing dinner, checking up on Marianne's homework...She'd laughed in the middle of it, exhausted, and said: "I wish I could beam us to the sea, just you and me, gorging on wine and cheese for days." And Rebecca had replied: "Let's do it. A proper holiday." She'd physically felt Sam tensing up on the other end of the line, wondered herself about what she'd just said. Reminiscing about old times, making vague hints to a distant future in which they'd have more time and fewer things on their plate – in which, by godly intervention, their lives would just naturally collide again, was a beloved ritual of their conversations. "I've seen a house just across the street you could move into", Sam would joke, and Rebecca would say "There's an opening at the mumok, you should check it out", and Sam would laugh and exclaim "I wish, I wish", because those changes they proposed were so fundamental and over the top that none would ever ask the other for such a thing.

Making specific plans was something else altogether. It had spiralled from there – Rebecca had proposed going to Italy at some point. Marianne, Sam’s stepdaughter, had scouts camp coming up, which freed Sam’s schedule, they set on a date (June, and June was a whole other world when planning in November), and then Rebecca had gone on AirBnB and just pressed ‘book now’. And here she is, this whole holiday off to a rocky start, because Rebecca’s going to be eaten up and spat out by Italian traffic.

She arrives at the airport parking lot twenty-five minutes too late, irritated, hot, and tired. Sam’s staring into the opposite direction, hand placed securely on her little trolley. From this angle, she looks less like a person and more like a cubist painting, all hard lines and composure, from her severely cut bob to the set of her shoulders – otherworldly, strange. Rebecca honks, once, and she turns around. Sam’s face lights up, her whole stance relaxes, and when she hurries towards her, the stranger dissolves and becomes fully Sam again, Sam at six, greeting her on the first day of school, Sam at 16, crying over a failed test, Sam at 22, puking on Rebecca’s favourite dress – Rebecca doesn’t have it in her to worry about them anymore, just gets out of the car, and hugs her tight, so tight, back sweat be damned.

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Sam’s dozing off on the way home, face pressed against the window, and Rebecca turns off the air conditioning, lets the evening air in and the voice of the radio moderator wash over them. It’s late at night when they reach the apartment at the outskirts of the city,



and they sit on their little balcony together, observing the street below, eating bread and cheese, talking in hushed tones about nothing, revelling in the easy camaraderie that comes from knowing somebody longer than one can remember.

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The trouble starts when they leave their little bubble to face reality. They take the subway into the city, and Sam's incredibly jittery, eying every passenger, texting Adrian, clutching her purse and her camera, that clunky black thing that just screams "tourist!", and checking, again and again, google maps, for fear of missing their stop, the website of the cathedral they want to visit, the weather app, even, although the sky is cloudless.

There are lulls in their conversation that didn't use to be there – Rebecca tells a story about a friend and realizes halfway through that Sam knows none of the people involved, Sam makes an off-hand comment about academics before realizing that Rebecca is one of them now, Rebecca's mocking the elder German couples clogging the square (because German's are everywhere, always, and they're so easy to spot, colour-coordinated, overweight, waving around their smartphones and complaining about the postcard prices), and Sam doesn't join in, just raises her camera to capture the same frame one can buy fifteen metres over at the tourist information. She realizes that Sam and Adrian, were they here together, would probably look like a younger, slightly more fashionable replica of the pensioners around them, and that in this game of "them" and "us" the line is drawn not between the young

and the old, but between the settlers and the single.

They visit the Cattedrale di San Lorenzo, get ridiculously overpriced ice cream afterwards, and let themselves drift away from the crowds. Sam keeps up a stream of mindless chatter, and Rebecca lets it wash over them, enjoys her presence, her enthusiasm when spotting a particularly stunning building, a group of street musicians, or a loose dog coming towards them. She's calm, with Sam at her side, in a way she hasn't been in a long while.

They round another street corner and suddenly find themselves in an alley that's seedy at best – the same houses as before, but run down, grey facades, windows hanging uselessly from frames. In front, there are black men, and only men, faces ageless, assessing them coolly. Rebecca hates how frightened she feels – they're not doing anything. This is a harbour city, there were bound to be immigrants. (A small voice in her head reminds her that she herself protested for their right to be here, in Europe, just last week). She pulls her shoulders back, plans on crossing the street, keeping up the appearance of being unbothered, at least. But Sam already grabs her upper arm in an iron grip and pulls them right back to where they came from, into the safety of the white wealthy masses.

Their holiday mood is tainted, and Rebecca gets angry – at her own reaction, but at Sam, too, who has treated her like a kid in need of protection from her own naiveté. They don't acknowledge the situation at all, what's there to say, anyway, but spend the rest of the day just going through the motions, like actors in a play called “two best friends in Genoa”, the lightness all gone.



“What’s up?” Sam asks in the evening, while they’re preparing to go out for dinner. She’s hovering in the bathroom door, vibrating with nervousness.

“Nothing”, says Rebecca, and gives her a little smile. It’s meant to be reassuring, but Sam just shifts further into the room, reaching out her hand to place it on Rebecca’s shoulder. She takes a step away, unwilling to be comforted.

Sam’s face falls, but she keeps on digging. “You can tell me, you know?”

After a pause “You’ve just...you’re acting...distant.”


Rebecca doesn’t bother smiling anymore, faces her and says: “I don’t want to fight.”

That, of course, doesn’t resolve anything, for fucks sake, how is this woman supposed to bring up a child if she cannot handle bad moods?

Sam blinks, once, twice, determination in her jaw, she wants to sit this one out. “Is it something I did?”

And Rebecca doesn’t even bother anymore, Sam’s been trying to open Pandora’s box, she’s warned her, she had it coming.

“Do you ever notice you act like forty? This constant planning ahead, your fear of everyone and everything – oh no, black



people! – the way you control me like a child.” She’s out of line here, she knows, but she doesn’t want to stop, this has been brewing the whole day, or maybe longer, maybe months, maybe since the first time Sam’s mentioned moving in with Adrian or when they’d suddenly found themselves in a conversation about ETFs – “You don’t have to be here. You arrive two days later than planned, since your time has suddenly become more important than anyone else’s, and then you don’t even pretend you care about my life, don’t bother acting as if you’re not too good for this and wouldn’t rather return to your stupid fucking picket fence home”.

Sam’s crying now, and how is she allowed to be the one crying when it’s Rebecca that loses out?


She feels remorse, followed closely by more anger, resulting in absolute disgust at her own behaviour.

“I didn’t mean it that way”, she says, “It’s not about you. I’m tired, is all”, and Sam nods, overwhelmed, and they go and make superficial, stifled conversation for the duration of their meal.

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By morning, Sam’s quiet desperation has turned into cold rage. She enters the kitchen in a series of quick, loud steps, gets all into Rebecca’s space and says “It is about me. You meant what you said.”

It sounds rehearsed. “Your choices-”, Rebecca can feel her reorganizing the words in her head, because



even now, Sam thinks about what she can and cannot take back later.

“I don’t have to understand them”, she continues, “if you want to continue living like a student, okay. By all means, go drinking three times a week, live with flatmates until you’re forty, I don’t care. But I don’t have to take your shit about my life, I don’t have to listen to you dragging down Adrian and Marianne and my job and my friends, okay?”

Rebecca wants to say something, then, about the fact that she actually liked Marianne the few times she met her, how she just wishes it hadn’t all gone so fast, the suburban induction-stove idyl swallowing up Sam and enhancing all her good, grownup characteristics to a degree where she’d grown afraid of the outside world. How she feels that it’s Sam who stopped thinking about them as equals a long time ago. She has the sentence in her head already, but she cannot take a breath, cannot fill her lungs enough to speak. She just stands there, quietly suffocating.

“I’m tired of you being jealous of me”, Sam continues.

“I’m tired of you projecting your own insecurities on me and calling me a racist or whatever just because I got us out of a situation. And I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry I’m trying to plan ahead. I’m sorry I looked online to see which pizza place is the best, I’m sorry I fucking came here on this stupid holiday to reassure you you’re important just so you could take out your bad moods on me for three days straight.”





Sam's done now, and she'll regret lashing out later, and one of them will probably apologize at one point, but right now the silence just hangs in the space between them. Sam clears her throat, once, twice, then gives up on it, grabs her purse and slips out the door. And Rebecca's left with a half-eaten breakfast and a feeling of hollowness in her chest that makes her want to puke.

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They'd planned on going to Cinque Terre today, and Rebecca's driving there alone now, purely out of spite, wondering whether Sam might have caught one of the line buses that take three hours for the same route.

She lets Siri's voice guide her, doesn't really pay attention to the traffic, just thinks about Sam's words, tries to assess whether she's right. Vernazza is breathtakingly beautiful, and it seems cruel that she'd come here in this mood. Rebecca starts walking, mindlessly following the other hikers, and after a while, she finds some calm in the motion. She doesn't think, is too focused on breathing and sweating and dodging people. She buys a postcard and a pen at a kiosk, sits down, facing the ocean, and writes.

A definite list of things I know to be true right now:

I like my life (most of the time).  
I don't want to move to the suburbs.  
I don't want to have a (step)child.  
Yet.

I think Sam is happy

I'm afraid there's no spot for me in her life anymore. I'm afraid she might not fit into my life anymore.

She stares at the last sentence for some time before crossing it out. Writes it again. And adds: But there must be.

And on the address line, the only free space left, she notes why.

Because I love her.

Because the reason I am so angry at her criticism is that it counts when it comes from her.

Because if this friendship were over and done with, it wouldn't hurt like that.

She stays there for a little while, watching the smooth ocean, the tourist masses. Sees what she hasn't seen before: How all these people are slightly annoyed with each other – the girl in the red pants struggles to keep up with her partner, that teenager clearly doesn't want her mother taking a picture of her but plays along anyways. They don't work smoothly together at all, but they still work.

It's a long road to her car, especially now that she just wants to get back back back. She's moving slowly, feet hurting, can feel a sunburn coming up, and it's past four when she arrives at the parking lot. There's a line bus blocking the exit, a group of twenty people



waving their tickets around and loading their bags. This is going to take ages and Sam doesn't even have an apartment key, does she?

She drums her fingers on the steering wheel and misses the figure breaking away from the crowd until she's knocking on the car window.

They walk back to the village together, not saying a word, but staying close to one another. Sit down, eyes fixed on the horizon.

It's Sam who speaks first. "I'm—" and Rebecca cuts her off. "You don't have to be."

"Okay." It's barely more than a whisper but she smiles when Rebecca turns to her.

"I'm proud of you, you know?" Rebecca says. "Like, I'm not part of your everyday life anymore, which sucks, but I still—I'm happy you're happy. But I miss you, too. And us."

"Me too", Sam says. And then she grins, a quick little thing passing over her face, and starts rummaging in a plastic bag, pulls out a bottle filled with bright yellow liquor. Rebecca has to smile, too, and says "I have the car."

It's a sensible remark, but Sam just goes on unscrewing the lid, pushes the bottle in her hand and says "Drink. We'll figure it out."



# WRITING MATTERS

Workshop Led by Jan Carson  
Coordinated by Dr. Petra Zaus & Antonios Smyrnaio

*The mission of the Writing Matters initiative is twofold: exploring “matters” pertaining to writing practices and underscoring that writing “matters” as a powerful means of engaging with the world.*

During the 2021 summer semester, the award-winning author Jan Carson convened a Writing Matters workshop for students at the JMU Würzburg. Carson emphasized developing structure, characterization, and narratology, but also community. When writing together, Carson observed, you find “a whole community of other people who see the world a little bit the same as you and suddenly it doesn’t feel as lonely anymore.” The short stories that emerged in this workshop are published here as chapbooks in the first of an ongoing series of publications that feature student work from the Writing Matters workshop series.

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