

CARY FAGAN

## I'm Not Italian

“I’M GOING TO GROW A BEARD,” Austin said, rubbing the day’s stubble on his chin. “Yes, I think I will.”

“A beard wouldn’t suit you,” June said. They were in Assisi for a second day, longer than they needed. They had already seen the basilica with its Giotto frescoes, the sandal-clad Franciscans shouting, “*Silencio*.” They had climbed Il Rocca, had sipped capuccino in the piazza opposite the temple of Minerva, had ended their nights with gelato at the same café.

“A lot of Italian men have beards,” Austin said. “Have you noticed?”

“Not really.”

“They keep them short. They look quite sharp in my opinion.”

“But they’re Italian,” she said. “They aren’t dentists from Oakville considering early retirement.”

“A dentist with the soul of a poet. You really don’t think a beard would look good on me?”

“That’s not what I said. Not exactly, anyway.”

“Well, I’m growing it. I’m transforming my life and I’m growing a beard. That’s what we said this trip was about, right? Change?”

June sighed. “Transform away. I’m going to the museum.”

Three days later, in Spoleto, they saw a Polish production of *Oedipus Rex*. A late dinner, a walk, bed by midnight.

“I’m exhausted,” she said, yawning and turning away.

“Come here.”

She reluctantly turned back to him and he took her hand and rubbed it against his face. “See? It’s softer than I thought it would be.”

“Maybe that’s because it’s new.”

“Let’s have sex.”

“I’m really too tired.”

“We haven’t had sex since we got to Italy.”

“Don’t plead, I can’t stand that.”

“I’m not pleading. I’m just saying.”

“All right. But don’t take too long. I want to go to sleep.”

“Stroke my beard, will you?”

Two days later, they were in Orvieto. She was stepping out of the narrow shower, the hot water having turned cool after less than three minutes, and saw him standing in his underwear trying to unfog the little mirror over the sink with a square of toilet paper. In his other hand was a disposable razor.

“You’re shaving it?”

“No, just a trim. To make it neater. More elegant.”

She laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing.”

“What?”

“You have many fine qualities, dear. Elegance just doesn’t happen to be one of them.”

“I’d resent that if we weren’t transforming ourselves. Ouch.”

Two days later they were having pizza in Sienna. He poured her another glass of the thin house wine. “It’s a lot whiter than I thought,” Austin said.

“The Duomo?”

“No, my beard. I thought it would be more, you know, salt-and-pepper. But I have to face the truth, it’s white.”

She stared at his chin. “Uh-huh. Now can we talk about something else. Let’s find an internet place. I want to email the kids.”

“You know what I’m going to do? Trim it some more. Into one of those little beards. A goatee. It might look younger.”

“You’ll look like a fifty-four-year-old bicycle courier.”

“You,” he said haughtily, picking up his own wine glass, “do not understand a man and his beard.”

One-and-a-half days later they took the train back to Rome. In their room near the Pantheon, he dropped his suitcase into the corner. “One last day,” he said, as if informing the room.

“I miss the kids.” June was hanging her new linen jacket in the wardrobe.

He sat disconsolately on the edge of the bed. “It hasn’t been enough time.”

“It’s been over two weeks.”

“That isn’t enough time to transform yourself. I don’t feel transformed. Do you?”

"I never expected to."

He turned to look at her and she stopped fussing about with her things.

"I don't get it," Austin said.

"That was your idea. I just wanted to see Italy."

"You mean you never believed in it?"

"I ... I suppose not."

"Oh."

"Don't look so heartbroken."

"Well, I am."

"Let's go out. We won't look at the map for a change. It's our last day in Rome, after all.

Four hours later they returned to the room. He dropped his jacket on the back of a chair and went into the bathroom. He turned on the hot water, fiddled with the plug until the sink began to fill.

From the bedroom, June said, "That was a good dinner."

"Yes, it was."

"And you chose a nice wine."

"It was the waiter's suggestion."

"Well, it was good."

She came into the bathroom. He had shaving lather over his chin and a razor in his hand. "What are you doing?"

"Shaving, obviously."

"But why?"

"Because I don't look good in a beard. Because I'm not Italian. Because we aren't transformed. I don't know. Maybe just because it itches."

She put her hand over his. "Don't."

"Huh?"

She took the razor from him and then, using a small towel, wiped away the lather. She dipped the other end of the towel in the warm water and washed the little beard.

"Keep it," June said.

"You think so? Why?"

"I like it. It looks good on you."

"But we're not transformed."

"No, but you have a new beard."

"Yes, that's true."

"Now come to bed. For sleep, I mean. We've got to get up early to get to the airport in time."

"All right," he said. "Just give me a minute. He stood before the toilet, trying to urinate. He felt the need but nothing was happening. It was

the second or third time. He'd have to make an appointment with Seltzer when they got home. He gave up and went into the bedroom. He thought that she might be asleep already but she wasn't. She was awake, in the dark, waiting for him.