

The Sugar Stuck to My Lips  
By Grace Grandprey

I remember once, when I was ten years old, in the cold air of my family's hotel room, my mother had stolen the sheets off my bed in the morning. I tucked my knees into my loose-fitting shirt as goosebumps slithered up my legs. Bright lights pierced my eyes as she drew the curtains. I retreated next to my sister, lying beside me, to block the light, or for some warmth at the very least. She just shoved me off, kicking her legs back like a bucking horse.

I scurried over to my ladybug suitcase, playing hot potato with the icy tiles under my feet. I pulled on two pairs of socks, neon yellow baggy basketball shorts, and an oversized hoodie. My mother peered at me, unamused.

“Really?” she said. I watched her bite back a tinge of distaste; she swallowed it, but a sour expression endured as if a lemon slice kept her mouth company. She threw her hands up—very Italian-like—and huffed and puffed out the door.

A light breeze brushed against my cheeks as I stepped outside. The cool morning of summer could misguide anyone into thinking the season had reversed. I still had dried drool on my chin from a deep slumber, and a line, which seemed permanent for the trip, rested heavily in between my eyebrows.

My mother had her reason for dragging us out of bed so early, even if I hadn't realized it at the time: a Florentine pastry called Bomboloni. She had taken us for the only hour of the day when it was fresh from the oven. After all, we were in Florence—the home of my mother.

Imagining its sweet, buttery scent, now makes my mouth water. Fluff in the clouds is the best way I can describe it—blanketed in a golden casing and rolled in sugar. Gently rip it apart and you'll see its open crumb stretch like intricate spider webs. If only you were small enough, you could crawl inside its warm interior and use it as a giant bed. A burst of raspberry filling in

the center ambushes your tongue. And, as in the case of my ten-year-old self, you spit it out into a napkin, biting just around the middle, consuming only the dough.

Ten years later, and eight months ago, when I learned I would be staying abroad in Europe for a semester of college, there was no doubt I would visit Florence—if not solely for the Bomboloni. I could already picture its sugar sticking to my lips and a satisfied wolf in my stomach after devouring this heavenly treat. This time, I would eat the raspberry filling, determined to like it. I craved its flavor, no matter how sweet or sour or jelly-like.

I have never found Bomboloni as good as that in America. I tried some in Köln, hoping it boiled down to the lack of processed ingredients in Europe, but it was regrettably brittle and dry. There was no fluff—no warm blanket to wrap around my tongue. The yellowjackets buzzing around the shop must have been ill-informed.

Fast-forward to the airport. I push my laptop toward my boyfriend, Jimmy, so he can see the screen. He hunches over, poking his chin far out of his chest and squinting his eyes at the word *Finisterrae*.

He sounds it out in a blatant American accent: “Fihn-ih-stir-ay.”

I say it properly: “Feen-ee-stair-ay.” He clicks between Google images, no idea of what he’s looking at.

Somehow, I am amazed Jimmy has never been to this particular establishment, or even the piazza it stands in, let alone the city of Florence. But the fact that he’s never tasted Bomboloni at all—he’s Italian, for god’s sake! But I guess his ancestry leads to the south, down to Calabria, which might excuse his ignorance.

Bomboloni is not native to the Tuscan region. It originated in the seventeenth century when Northern Italy—like Trentino, Veneto, and Friuli-Venezia Giulia—was under Austrian

rule. The Austrian pastry *krapfen* clearly inspired its Italian counterpart, traveling toward the center of Italy, where new interpretations sprouted. Jimmy and I are on our way there.

We fly into Florence from Prague. I have little memory of the flight, so I must have fallen asleep on his shoulder. I do remember it being surprisingly comfortable. As a child, neither of my parents was as plush a headrest. I wonder if it would be different now, leaning on them out of love rather than an adolescent's desperation for relief. Meanwhile, they probably needed the shoulder more than me.

Jimmy wakes me up when we land. I kiss him on the cheek. Lifting my suitcase down the plane's steps, I see a familiar little bus on the tarmac waiting to haul us away.

I remember a dense heat the first time I arrived in Florence; it was the dead of August, midday, and our plane was stuck on the landing runway. Shortly after the crew switched off the air conditioning, the plane transformed into a pot of boiling water, and us, its lobsters turning red. An older woman diagonally across from me asked me to make her a paper fan, like the one I was coloring on my tiny tray table. I remember she almost passed out later. Tension thickened the already stuffy air, and I could sense my mothers' composure melting. After a baby began to wail and his mother became weary, a gaggle of angry passengers banded together with my mother in its ranks. The first steps off the plane had brought no relief: I had never been exposed to sun so bruising before. People marched from both ends of the plane in lines like ants, piling into tiny transports, waiting to take us to the luggage belt. My mother gripped my wrist, the way she often did in crowded places. There were barely any seats on this bus, but I had whined to her, begging for a seat that didn't exist. I remember the displeased look on her face.

Now, I look toward the back of a similar transport. Jimmy and I are the first to step on, and there is a row of empty seats. Jimmy gestures to the seats. An older woman groans as she

shuffles over to sit. I look back at Jimmy and smile, rolling my suitcase to the middle of the bus and leaning against the window.

The airport used to be such a drag as a child, lugging around a suitcase two-thirds my size as it bit at the backs of my heels. But I had to keep up with my parents' wide strides and frantic pace. Deal with their stress of getting from one place to the next, never making time to rest.

Here, the airport is small. I navigate us through pretty easily, the first time I find an airport fairly manageable. We follow signs to the taxis. Stepping out into the late night we see a line of white cabs curled around a long curb, each car a different shape and size. I almost wish we were in a cartoon with odd-shaped vehicles like cheese or a pumpkin, reflecting the whimsical personalities of the ride we were about to buy.

Two older ladies walk up to the first car; Jimmy and I are the only other customers in sight. Jimmy pauses to have a smoke while I balance on my suitcase for a seat. My parents had bought me this luggage for my semester abroad since my old ladybug-patterned one was worn and had mustered up a strange smell. This new one is beige, featuring a London Fog logo printed like small, sophisticated polka dots. I am no longer ten years old.

There's no rush to reach the hotel, as it has a 24-hour check-in. I find myself at peace in our relaxed pace. At this moment, I do not miss my mother's stress and intensity bugging under my nails; I do not miss the stress of being late when we are plenty early. One destination to the next. Always moving and never satisfied. When would contentment be allowed? I thought the plane had brought us to our destination already: What were we chasing? What obstacle did she need to plunder out of her way?

*My destination is here, my friend—in each living moment as it fleets on by.*

The following morning marks the first of four, echoing my sense of mindfulness. Breakfast is around the corner from our hotel, with tables arrayed in an open courtyard of a boarded-up church. Fresh orange juice, a warm-pressed caprese croissant, and a slice of yogurt cake make an excellent start to my day.

Jimmy orders a cappuccino. Normally, I never drink coffee, but I think, *why not have a little taste?* It's not that absurd of a notion after all, but I've tried to stay away from the reliance that many college students seem to find. But I am an adult, and most adults drink coffee. Don't they?

I grab the cup's warm handle, appreciating the presentation of a white foam, shaped in a heart atop light-brown froth. The nutty smell has always appealed to me. On Sunday afternoons my kitchen would fill with that delightful scent as my parents sat together with their drinks on the couch. I bring it close to my lips. Hovering over the rim, my lips begin to sweat. I take a leap, and a magical taste swirls around my mouth.

"That's dangerous," I say, placing it down carefully on its little plate. I slide it across the table, far away from me. I don't want to have to rely on anything but myself.

I breathe in the city's air: It feels good. I am finally back in Florence.

It's surprisingly warm enough in October that I don't need my winter coat. We wander over to Ponte Vecchio, a seven-hundred-year-old bridge made of *pietra forte*, a local brown stone, and concrete. It's configured over the Arno River with hanging houses and shops, each a different shade of yellow and beige. I recognize the aggressive sparkles of jewelry in the shop windows. Thankfully, the herd of people is significantly smaller than in the summertime. I remember chasing the shade of its arches. I had asked my mother the word for "shade" in Italian: "Ombra," she said. But the rest of the language has remained a mystery to me. Could I really call

myself Italian? My mother spoke a tongue alien to me. She'd laugh or she'd argue, and all I had was a sense of her emotion. And her family couldn't understand me, nor I them. I had felt out of place. It was the first time I felt disconnected from her.

Jimmy wraps his arms around me and gently kisses my forehead. As I gaze out at the river, I imagine this could be my home if I so chose. I can feel my mother's hand—the hand of a young woman whose world was about to change forever—guiding me as I try to make sense of my life.

For lunch, I inhale a meaty panini and share a bottle of wine with Jimmy. We sit on wooden boxes outside the shop, advertising its fresh bread and delicious honey, pesto, and prosciutto ingredients. The wine is dry and a bit sour, but I like it. I've been drinking more wine on this trip than usual, too, but a glass seems to complement every meal so easily.

We decide to squeeze in the Basilica of Santa Croce before it closes at 17:00. As soon as the street opens into the Piazza di Santa Croce, I recognize it as if ten years had never passed. I gaze up at the church's gothic architecture painted vibrantly against the blue sky. Its sharp details ingrain themselves into my memory where its image had once faded. I could maneuver around the area without a map: The hotel we stayed in would still be nestled into that side street.

To reach the Basilica's entrance, we walk past a certain pastry shop. As we get closer, I wrestle with whether to tell Jimmy, or if it's even worth checking inside. Glancing at my watch I thought, *better not*. I will wait for the right moment—until the early morning I drag him out here—and savor its purity in my memory a day or two longer. *We'll be back*, I whisper to the pastries decorating the display.

For dinner, we sit on a balcony overlooking the old bridge and the river. I had overestimated how much warmth from the day would linger at night. The breeze reminds me of my mother pulling the sheets off my bed that distant morning. I find myself missing her.

But oh, how I've been looking forward to a menu like this! I settle on a classic spaghetti pomodoro for my first true Italian pasta dish of the trip. Jimmy orders spaghetti carbonara with crisp, juicy bacon, and he asks for the *tagliere*—a meat and cheese board—as an appetizer. I gulp down my dinner quickly, as if someone might come back to take it away at any moment. When I glance over, Jimmy's plate seems just as full as when it first arrived. I know Jimmy eats slowly, so this doesn't come as a surprise, but now I have to wait in the cold, while he swirls little pieces around his fork, chewing like a spoon-fed toddler. I don't want to rush him; I want him to enjoy his food. But, if Jimmy could see that his girlfriend is shivering and notice the effort she is trying to make to keep her mouth shut, maybe he would pick up the pace just a little. But I'm not Jimmy, and I don't want to inherit my mother's impatience. Instead, I imagine my Bomboloni: hot from the oven and its sugar stuck to my lips.

Bomboloni takes patience—patience that I never had as a child, and patience that I still struggle with today. Bomboloni is artisanal compared to the industrial donuts I am accustomed to at home. The recipe includes sugar, butter, Italian flour, eggs, and baking powder, and vegetable oil for frying. The dough takes a day and a half to prepare. Kneading it is sticky and challenging, and the entire process is lengthy and rather labor-intensive. A soft, fluffy pastry is a hard-earned reward. I am familiar with dedication, as consistency was battered into me as a child.

On our second morning in the dreamy city, Jimmy is sick. On the third morning, we sprint for a reservation to climb the 414 steps of the Campanile de Giotto, the bell tower of the Duomo. On the fourth morning, we pack up to check out of the hotel.

It is almost 13:00 by the time we're out the door. Jimmy still doesn't feel well, which means the fifteen-minute walk to the Bomboloni place can't happen until we get some food in his belly.

Surprise, surprise, Jimmy takes a while to eat. We have the day ahead of us, but with pressing time constraints. I want to take Jimmy to Piazza di Michelangelo for a view of the whole city at sunset, and he should really see the David, but the Accademia Gallery closes before 18:00. These two destinations are about a thirty-minute walk from each other, and the clock is ticking: Sunset is in less than three hours. I want him to experience the city drenched in the beautiful orange palette that precedes sunset—I want to give him the beauty I had missed out on my first time here—so we head to the lookout first.

With a clink of our Aperol Spritzes, I look out at the spiraling hills and country houses. My eyes wander over the red-clay roofs, a miniature Lego town, and extend to the mountains in the distance that are starting to shroud in misty purples and blues. Gradually, the sky reflects the orange hue in my glass.

As the city shifts from day to night, it is time for our last stop of the trip: the David, Michelangelo's marble-sculpted masterpiece from the Italian Renaissance. Google maps walks us through my dear friend, the Piazza di Santa Croce. The direction we head in is a straight shot past the pastry shop. As we approach, it reminds me of an optical illusion I experienced in Rome a few weeks earlier: Starting at the end of a road called via Niccolò Piccolomini, you can see Saint Peter's dome in the distance, but as you drive down the road, your sense of distance fades, and the closer you get to it, the smaller and smaller it appears, almost like a mirage. That's what this shop is to me: a mirage.

I stand alone in front of its dark green sign. *Finisterrae* roughly translates to “the end of the earth” or “the last point of land” as you journey across the wasteland. In other words, it is where Heaven awaits. The gold letters beckon to me. Looking down, I see a line of bustling customers extending out the door. *I just need to step inside*, I think, *even if it isn't here*. It's 17:13. I'm standing in front of this shop of sweets knowing full well that what I long for has vanished into the wombs of the lucky, unattainable to me until my next visit.

I walk in anyway. Squeezing through a small gap in the doorway, the store's dark-striped walls urge me onward. I peek between bodies to catch a glimpse of the pastry case, which showcases elegant citrus tarts, mandorla paste cookies, and little rainbow pastries called *pasticcini arcobaleno*, all arranged neatly and sparingly.

An orange glow beckons me further, toward the seating section in the back, where shaded lamps loom over smooth black tables. There is a second pastry case here, a smaller one. I watch the baker scoot over to place fresh items within. A last bit of hope remains. I walk up close to the glass, and the items, no matter how sweet and toothsome, do not embody the same plump shape or sugary coat of my Bomboloni.

It sinks in that I won't have its sugar to lick off my lips and wipe from my chin with a rough napkin. And I won't get to see Jimmy make a delightful mess of it either.

This *thing* that I've held onto, once within my grasp a mere day ago, is now finally out of reach again. But I shall reminisce, preserve, romanticize, and feen for it forever. Perhaps it's better this way, because in my mind I can savor it over and over again, never growing tired of it, and never needing to spit out its raspberry-flavored guts.