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Seventeen Years a Florentine

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It is customary to learn the idiomatic expressions of a language last. After you are already dreaming in the language, they are typically the icing on the linguistic cake. But in Florence, Italy, these colorful, figurative phrases seem exceptionally important details to maintain the palpability of life in this city. To commiserate with Florentines daily, I had to learn these first. This romance and reality is the actuality of living in Italy.

I do finally dream in Italian, occasionally. But my subconscious mind is quick to judge; these dreams are poorly articulated nightmares. After a decade of studying Latin, I had been trained to navigate a complex language, but it is one of a robust framework of rules. Italian is a language with a small dictionary and infinite exceptions to its grammatical rules. Florentines tell me all the time that they cannot explain the conjunctive because they are not sure if they understand it themselves. While this confession is meant to be reassuring, I always catch a glimpse of the stark message of the Florentine poet Dante Alighieri's gates of hell: *abandon all hope, ye who enter here.* Falling unceremoniously through the gate of hell, I still trip over pronoun combinations because the chart is the size of the periodic table of the elements. Thus, I have a fiery relationship with the conditional clause because the New Yorker in me is bred to be far more certain that things *will* happen. I have also given up hope that my Italian *gli* will ever sound anything other than soul-crushing to native speakers. However, I am proud to say that I can wax idiomatic with the best of them.

The first string of words that struck me as an essential expression of Florentine life was *porca misera*. Pig misery. Best sent upwards to the heavens; it is as guttural as the sweet sound of Italian can be, and this phrase remains endlessly useful. For example, what do you mean there is a city rule that the heat can't be turned on until November 1 and I'm supposed to open my bathroom window to circulate the air in my flat when I can see the frost hanging in the morning fog?

Porca miseria! *La dolce vita* is idiomatic and offers memories of the timelessly beautiful black and white film actor Marcello Mastriani. He looks perfectly deshevelled in a cloud of tobacco smoke while wearing his sunglasses at night, as only Italians can master such pizzazz. However, such idiomatic beauty is far less useful. But by all means, if you want to be stereotypical, pass the bottle of fine chianti and a cigarette for this yarn.

A soft, gray cloud of smoke does seem like a fitting veil to soften Florence's hard stone exterior to tell you that Stendhal syndrome—the psychosomatic disorder that causes a person to feel faint when exposed to unfathomable beauty—is also called Florentine syndrome. Stendhal was the pen name used by the 18th century Frenchman, Marie-Henri Beyle. This author experienced such an onslaught of emotion inside of the Basilica of Santa Croce that he could not breathe. Being surrounded by the tombs of Machiavelli, Galileo, and Michelangelo—while gazing at Giotto's emotional frescos of the life of Saint Francis (the largest, most impressive Franciscan church in the world)—was too much for his heart to bear. It seemed to burst. An Italian doctor named this syndrome in 1979, the year of my birth, after noticing a pattern of tourists suffering this malady of being "struck by beauty" arriving in Florentine hospitals. It seems Stendhal syndrome and I were born twins.

While I am Italian by ancestry, it took many years of endless patience to become more of a Florentine than a New Yorker. These days I am quite sure that I bleed the violet of the ACF Fiorentina jersey. Living here was a far more complicated proposition than merely earning a Ph.D. in Florence's history. People earn terminal degrees for a myriad of reasons; my quest was always a labor of love. I am one of those many study abroad students who spent a spring semester at the British Institute and shamelessly fell in love with Florence. I fell so deeply into a Stendhal coma that I braved ten years of graduate school. I sifted, like a canary in a mine shaft, through the archives and libraries. I grew roots in Florence even though I feel like Sisyphus rolling a boulder up a hill only to have it come tumbling down every time my 90 days runs out, and my American tourist visa only lasts so long. If only the path to residency was fluid and straight, but like life itself it mimics the cobblestone streets running into alleys, leaving the tourist befuddled. Life in the States was far more relaxed, but that ease offered little consolation.

The duality of life in Florence has long been striking to many cultural commentators. Even in the post-war economic boom of the 1960s, it is evident that la dolce vitta was a stage show put on for the tourists. These foreigners longed for Italy, wanting to return, even though Luigi Barzini famously showed us clearly in his classic expose "The Italians" that the Italy they saw was a pretense, symbolic to fake towns seen in western movies. The piazza was—and is—a grand stage. And Fellini, the most celebrated Italian filmmaker, used "La Dolce Vita," to unravel the decadence of a morally adrift soulless modern age. Fifty years later, with the sordid economic troubles of Italy and social media chipping away at Italy's façade, one might think that Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook would be littered with reality checks. However, #Florence is a festival of gelato cones held up to the backdrop of Renaissance architectural masterpieces. No one seems to be complaining.

But I am complaining. The reality of living here has changed vastly in the last seventeen years because the tourists no longer go home even though Italy's most lucrative industry no longer rests on the purposefully depreciated Lira. It used to be that on a cold misty morning in February you could walk over a quiet Ponte Vecchio unmolested. Now, this reality is long gone. Last year I was sitting at a bar on Via de' Benci drinking Negroni with a Belgium friend who had to move back to Belgium due to the shortage of jobs in Florence for people with Ph.D.'s. Slurping high-octane cocktails—born thanks to the discerning taste of a Florentine count—we watched in horrified awe. We had long joked that this scene was the Via Americana, but it was deep into November, and it was not just the exchange students turning twenty-one again and again. We watched herds of tour groups bundled in puffy coats following limp, plastic flowers on sticks into the night. There is no longer any relief for those of us that live here.

Venice has gotten a great deal of press about how the cruise ships are destroying the city, both physically and metaphorically. The same thing is happening in Florence. You cannot see the towering ships looming on the horizon in Livorno, but they are insidiously destructive as they send bus after bus of tour groups forty people deep into Florence's fragile historic center. At the risk of sounding like Michael Corleone, every time an obscenely large group of people smash through Florence because they have been told that they have two hours to use the bathroom, buy a gelato, and take a picture with

the fake statue of David in front of Palazzo Vecchio, well Fredo, you broke my heart. I heard a guide turn to his charges with contempt and announce, in broken English, that Piazza Santa Croce is a shopping area. Abject horror. *Porca Miseria*.

Those on these shotgun tours are desperately in search of an authentic Florence during their minutes on the ground. I have been photographed dumping my trash, hanging clothes on the line outside my window, chatting with neighbors at the bus stop, waiting in the laundry mat. For some reason, everything here is seen as the old world. I am a historian, but I feel like I'm a historical actor on call every year since 2000. I can only hope that in forty years I'm a star on Instagram's "Not my Nonni" where adorable octogenarians are photographed sitting on benches talking with their hands and in various stages of plotting neighborhood domination.

Tourism in Florence is nothing new. Before it was photographed, the city was drawn and painted as part of the grand tour of Europe. This phenomenon was brought sweetly into the 20th century in the film *A Room with a View*. The film has long been a cult favorite for those of us who have Florence in our veins. A fiery Beethoven playing teenage Helena Bonham Carter goes to Florence with her spinster aunt who insists on a room with a view of the Arno river. That view is the backdrop of an Austenesque search for a suitable marriage. Recently, thirty years after the theatrical release of the film, the original cast gathered amidst great fanfare in Piazza Strozzi's Odeon theater to relish in the timeless appeal of the story and the city.

I may be alone in this belief, but my favorite part of the film is when Judy Dench—portraying a spunky novelist seeking stories—gets lost in the medieval alleys of Florence and tells a concerned Maggie Smith, matter-of-factly, that every city has a distinct smell. Upon taking a deep whiff, this rather proper British lady gags without saying a word: nail on the head. More than a 100-years after Foster's yarn hit the press, Florence still smells like a latrine. When I find myself assaulted with the stench of sulfur or sewage in other places, I miss her dearly. It simply smells like home.

I want to think that my wise and powerful dissertation advisor considered this smell when she suggested, many years ago, that I study the history of another city in the 15th century. Alas, I was young,

bright-eyed, and in love with the notion of being a Florentine. And I am still determined. Even as residents get priced out of the city center due to limited real estate that is shifting toward pricey tourist rentals and Airbnbs, I am a holdout. One day I may raise the white flag and take the *tramvia* to the burbs in Scandicci or Rifredi, but for now, I am content to hold on to my historically working-class neighborhood. If I don't, how will the tourists get their photos?

The neighborhood near the Basilica of Santa Croce has been working-class since the Medici family booted the tanners and wool makers off the Ponte Vecchio in the 15th century. The ruling family found the run-off of dyes and leather sludge unsightly, and as a collective decided to replace these artisans with goldsmiths. Renaissance gentrification at its finest; after all, gold weighed more—literally and figuratively—than a leather satchel or hank of red yarn. It is still a working-class neighborhood, and I revel in this reality daily. Nope, no palaces to see here. Oh, you must be lost! The laundry mat is more global than the ads at the United Colors of Benetton. Over the years, I have received marriage proposals from men hailing from all of the nations of the former Soviet Bloc while waiting out the dryer cycle.

To fortify one's attachment to an Italian neighborhood, there is a definitive bucket list of associations, which must be carefully established. I will offer a bit of advice and suggest always starting these relationships with a salve. The formal greeting, which is the same in Latin, will announce your humility. Italian freely uses a precise tense unknown to Americans. With patience, one day, this greeting will be changed to an informal *ciao*. It will not be changed by you. That ringing bell of a syllable will make you officially a Florentine. The euphoria of the first *ciao* is the same as the wave of heat that follows a first kiss.

I am seeking the *ciao*. I hide away from the tourist in the side streets, where I try my best to recede into the framework of my neighborhood without creating a wake in my path. Off the sun-soaked piazza, in dark alleys, I have a fruit and vegetable vendor who always presents me with the gift of herbs and explicit cooking instructions. If she cannot cure my maladies, I have a British doctor who will use his means of western medicine to cure my physical ailments. I have a bicycle repairman who sits on the curb every day, all day, patching old tires. Repair is at the core of life in Italy. And to this end I have a dentist who, although he is an Italian Edward Scissorhands and most

likely failed bed-side manner in dental school, saved a tooth that I shattered due to a futile fight with a stubborn chestnut. I might have eaten that nut, but it took my tooth. I have a baker who likes to slip cookies in my daily paper sacks of *schiacciata* with a wink. I have a hairdresser with whom I have such chemistry that we need to smoke cigarettes after he completes his latest masterpiece. I have a seamstress who can fix anything, even a five-euro disaster of find from the bins at the Sant'Ambrogio Market. And I now have a bookbinder who works, almost invisibly, in the window of a postage-stamp-sized shop. He creates such beauty that I am convinced he is not of this world, but I have yet to see his wings.

As a collected unit, my Italian neighbors know me better than I know myself. And this myriad of places, smells, and people is why—despite the relentless tide of the 90-day visas taking me in and out—Florence will always be my home. Life, on the other side of the ocean does nothing but remind me that absence *does* make the heart grow fonder. Seeing Dante every day in Santa Croce is a poignant reminder of the pain of exile. The difference is that, unlike Dante, I would come back here as a penitent, even if it meant my demise. I would not be able to breathe my last breath in Ravenna. Down here, in the Arno valley, there is Dante's Italian, and then there is the Tuscan "c." Once I hear the "c," which sounds more like a breathy "h" hissing like a stormy wind through an overgrown olive grove, I know I am home.

While the life of an expat in Florence is a mixed bag punctuated by moments of abject frustration and astonishing beauty, it is the only place on earth that I have found presentism. I can be nowhere other than right here, right now in the audience of Michelangelo's David. I have visited him more times than I can count. I still cry upon first seeing the soaring grace of what had once been a mutilated piece of marble. He emerged triumphantly into the gorgeous expression of humanism. David is now locked, in time immemorial, under the dome at the Academia where he sits atop an anti-seismic pedestal and is protected from pigeons, but not men wielding hammers. David, triumphant, was a favorite symbol of Florence during the Renaissance. This beautiful young adolescent had managed to defeat a giant. Little Florence was tiny and inexperienced, but firm, wealthy, and standing on the heads of the much larger nation-states North of the Alps. She is, at her core, a proud city. This stoic classical David gives me the hope, with every perfect ringlet of hair, that Florence will survive the

pressures of the 21st century. I saw an image of David in a shop in Florence recently reimagined as being covered in tattoos. It does not get any more boldly modern than taking a beloved Old Testament Jew and freely include him in tats. I smiled proudly at this latest effort to give little David some street cred, but I am afraid that even covered in tattoos, this David is a screaming reminder that Florence is in danger of becoming Renaissance Disneyland. If that happens, I volunteer to go down with the ship.