

## *A Month in the Sun*

*The molten sun beat down mercilessly. The hot, slow afternoon was a furnace. The parks lay green and motionless. Pavements shimmered like burning lakes.*

In the beginning of my traveling days to Europe, Paris was always my preferred destination; now it is Florence. Traveling to Florence has also become something of a habit, the thing I do in June, the month when rainy cool days linger in Portland and often extend into July. I rent an apartment while I am there now, although in the beginning I used to stay in a hotel close by the Arno with an astonishing roof-top terrace overlooking all of Florence with a swimming pool no less.

Each morning I dined on that terrace as the sun came up over the Duomo. I used to wonder what the others were thinking about the aging man who came alone each day for his morning breakfast. Who was he? Why was he here? Why was he alone? What could he be doing?

I didn't dwell on these questions. But I wondered if they might have been asked. One morning I noticed a woman reading quietly by herself at a nearby table. She had her coffee and her book and seemed totally oblivious to anything else. What was she reading? Was she alone? I had not noticed her before. I thought about stopping to talk to her. But I am reserved and while I am usually drawn to women dining alone, I can never bring myself to say a word to them. What could I say? What could I offer them? Surely I would be regarded as an intruder.

In those days I spent a good portion of each day walking side by side my ruminations. Immediately after checking into the hotel, I left to wander through the neighborhood that I had come to know so well. Sometimes I stopped to gaze at a shop and then moved on to the next one, sauntering this way up and down the narrow streets that seemed as alive as ever. After breakfast I always headed out for the International Herald Tribune and returned for coffee at a *bar pasticceria* that I liked. The morning crowd was always the

same. As the days went by, I began to be warmly greeted and served my *Caffe Americano* without saying a word.

Occasionally I encountered another English speaking person who invariably asked if I was in Florence on business or pleasure. I found it difficult to say that it was for pleasure that I was there for a break. So instead I said it was for business, leaving open the question of what business could have possibly brought me to this city. The exchange was not unlike those that occur when someone asks what me now what I do for a living. Here again, I never knew how to respond. So I made up a story about teaching this or doing research on that, when in fact I really haven't the vaguest idea how to answer this sort of question.

This year I went to begin a project that I have wanted to work on for years. I knew if I came here, I would begin it at last. And I did. Not only that, I finished a goodly portion of it, at least the first draft. When I started, I didn't know there would be more than a single chapter or essay. It has since grown into a slim volume. That is the way Florence affects me.

When I arrived, I was once again overwhelmed by the incredible warmth in the air and the prospect of days of bright, sunny days in the 90s. I had not experienced such days in months, maybe years. Early in the morning I left my apartment and stepped outside on the via della Vigna to find myself engulfed by warm air and bright sunlight. I had to stop for a moment to take account of what this was. What it was was blissful. It was perfection. It was something I had forgotten still existed. And then the questioning began. Does it only exist here? Isn't there a place like this closer to home? I've been yearning for this all year and now I was in its midst.

It galvanized me into a frenzy of work that I've not known in years. Others wilt or find the heat oppressive; I flourish in it, especially when I'm in Italy. Robert Penn Warren once said that he liked to write in a foreign country "where the language is not your own and you are forced into yourself in a special way." A Paris Review interviewer asked

Tobias Wolff: “You’re just back from seven months in Rome. Why were you there?”

Wolff replies in a similar vein:

*I had no immediate reason for going. It wasn't to do research. I speak some Italian, but living in a country where I can't be completely aware of what people are saying around me puts this sort of bubble around the head, in which, for a time, not indefinitely, I find I'm able to work with more than the usual concentration and joy.*

My apartment was in a very swanky part of Florence, where all the top tier fashion designers have their stores—Armani, Gucci, Ferragamo. To my surprise, there was even a new Brooks Brothers store across the street. Intermixed with them all are merchants selling their wares, as well as craftsmen at work on their trade. That is the way it is in the Centro of Florence, a model of the so-called mixed-use neighborhood where cars are banned from many of the streets and where walking is the most common mode of transport.

There are thick flat bench-height stones that extend out from the walls of some of the old buildings of Florence. They are a miracle of architectural planning, although I do not know if they were originally designed as places to rest your weary feet. Regardless, that is how they are used today and that is how I used the one at the Palazzo Rucellai where my apartment was located. I would go there to picnic in the sun and later for an afternoon drink and then sometimes just to take in the passing scene. one afternoon when a man in a Vespa came by, waved to me and said: “*Giorno.*” He parked the Vespa a few yards down the street, turned back and greeted me again and then disappeared into a nearby café. Finally I recognized him. He was the person who works at the kiosk where I buy my papers each morning. If you live somewhere for long enough this is the way you begin to collect your urban friends.

When I was seated outside the Palazzo I often noticed a few passersby stopping to look intently at the building while reading from their guidebook. At other times, I observed

one or more students seated on the curb opposite doing a sketch of the building. At first, I didn't think twice about any of this. But eventually I began to wonder if the building wasn't of some historical importance. Here I was, living in this building that was probably some kind of a Renaissance miracle of which I was completely ignorant. Typical. But in due course, I consulted my guidebook, only to learn that, yes, the Palazzo Rucellai is a building of some importance.

Apparently the building was built between 1446-1457 and is claimed to be one of the most ornate Renaissance places in Florence. What an idiot I am. Anyway it was said to be commissioned, as these things were in those times, by Giovanni Rucellai, whose wealth came from his family business that imported a "rare and costly red dye made from a lichen found only on Majorca. The dye was called *oricello*, from which the name of Rucellai is derived." There you have it. Well, not quite.

The reason there was and continues to be so much interest in the Palazzo is that the architect who designed it, one Leon Battista Alberti, conceived it as a textbook example of the major Classical architectural styles. At the ground level, the pilaster strips are Doric, those above are Ionic, and those on the top floor are Corinthian. There are also some symbols carved into the building that illustrate the close bond formed between the Rucellais and the Medici family. By golly. I would have never noticed any of this had I lived here another year or so. Fortunately I took notice of the tourists and the students and realized the rather special place in Florence where I stayed that year.

One afternoon I went to a lecture at the venerable British Institute of Florence. The Institute is a library, language school, and cultural center for the many English-speaking people of this city. The lecture dealt with the fate of the various bridges that cross the Arno during the German occupation of World War II. To be reminded of those times once again put me in a pretty gloomy mood, as it always does. And that night, as I was returning to my apartment, I stopped to look out at the Ponte Vecchio and wondered how that bridge managed to survive the war, when all the others, up and down the river, had been destroyed. What motivated the German general, a man who perhaps, had not lost all

good sense, to spare that bridge?

June 24 was a holiday in Florence to celebrate its very own patron saint. I would have never known about it had I not read the latest copy of the Florentine a new English Language newspaper that is published in Florence every other week on Thursday. The patron saint of Florence is San Giovanni. Naturally, I had no idea who he was or why he is held in such high esteem hereabouts. But Florentines had a party in his honor 24<sup>th</sup> day of June. Every Italian city has their very own patron saint; it makes for sustained merriment throughout the land. I suspect there is one such celebration somewhere in Italy every day of the year. There are a lot of saints, you know.

To celebrate the Florentines organized a traditional parade, a football match in the Piazza Santa Croce, music and food fairs in several neighborhoods and a fireworks display over the Arno. And for all the gelato lovers, it is the tradition to have a gelato after the fireworks. However, I can assure you that most of the festival-goers indulged themselves long before the fireworks were over, if not several times during the course of the day.

I celebrated by climbing to the top of the Duomo, an excursion I thought it was finally time to take, especially on such a festive day. Having survived, I am qualified to report it was an achievement of the first rank. I don't think I ever climbed more steps, unless it was St. Peter's and that was more than thirty years ago. I am in better shape now than I was then. Isn't that odd? I don't recall going outside when I reached the top of St. Peter's. Well, I did when I climbed the Duomo in Florence, Italy.

Once you get to the top of the cupola, whose Last Judgment frescos by Vasari have recently been brought back to life, there is still more to go. Quite a bit more as it turns out. Steep and narrow steps inside the dome, up to the top that has a circular outdoor portico for a 360 degree view of Florence and beyond. It was spectacular. On this final part of the climb I began to appreciate how clever Brunelleschi was in designing two shells, with the inner shell providing the support for the massive outer one.

I was rather pleased with myself, actually. Not a bit of puffing or need to stop, as was true for others. There was no doubt I was the oldest person at the summit. Most everyone else was as young as I was when I was in my climbing-cathedral-days. Throughout this trek, I wondered if I would drop dead from cardiac arrest. It was one of those climbs. However, I must confess I could not go near the railing at the peak. Each time I approached it, I immediately withdrew. It was a bit windy up there and I was sure I would be swept off into the street below, not a very seemly thing to do. And so after a while at the top, taking it all in, I descended to the street level, to sally forth immediately for a well-deserved peach gelato.

I've never had a car in Florence. I don't need one. Getting about by walking, public transit or occasionally by taxi can readily meet every purpose owning one might serve. On the street around the corner from where I lived there were small shops that sold virtually everything I needed—fresh fruit, vegetables fish, bread and all the basic provisions. There was a hardware and stationary store, a bookstore and magazine stand. There is nothing that I could not obtain by strolling somewhere close by. If I needed a haircut, I walked two blocks to Guilanna's. To catch a film, it was an easy ten minute stroll over to the Odeon. To copy some documents, I need only cross over the Arno to Lory's on the Piazza Frescobaldi. The train and bus station were no more than 15 minutes away should I want to spend the weekend out of town or take the bus to Fiesole.

Yes, there are cars in Florence. And I must confess I usually take a taxi to the airport. And when I want to go out in the country for a day or two, I usually rent one from one of the several nearby rental agencies. I like not having a car and living in the center of a city where you can walk everywhere. All the errands that normally consume one's life become very few and you find yourself with great stretches of time for reading, wandering, and yes, working.

Toward the end of the trip I went down to Rome to think about staying there awhile. At once I realized how ridiculous that was. Doing much walking in Rome was all but impossible as the city is enormous and I found myself having to take taxis, instead of

walking from one to place to another. I didn't remain in Rome for more than a couple of days.

After a chamber music concert one evening, I walked over to Mamma Gina's for dinner. I was greeted by the same man who is always at the door, seated at the same table where I am always placed, and served by the same waiter who always takes good care of me. I recognize these people even though I only see them once or twice each year. I wonder if they recognize me in return? We are all a little older and all a little greyer but basically pretty much the same, just like the tasty food that is still served by Mamma Gina who I have never seen by the way.

A young couple sat by me at the next table. It appeared they were there for deserts only, as they each took two from the lavishly decked cart that they always roll around. Over by the window there was, as there always seems to be, a young family with three children who were perhaps on their own grand tour of Europe. I recalled, as I always do when I am there, the time my wife and I took our children to Europe and the dinner we had at Mamma Gina's as our son was recovering from a bad cold that I eventually caught hastening my return home with pneumonia.

And so I keep coming back to Florence. Florence remains a remarkable place, as does the surrounding countryside. So much of the coming here is the anticipation, the knowledge that there is this place in Italy where I would like to go. There aren't too many other places where I would like to go. The anticipation gets me through the winter, in the hope that I will be able to return once again. At times it consoles me, even warms me up a bit.

Whenever I leave, after being here a while, there is a certain sadness, of course. My time here is over. Many months of anticipation lie ahead, like the beginning of a long climb. Still the memory of my time here does linger for a while, not long, not long enough. And now there will be more time for staying inside, for reading and learning and a good deal of brooding. I don't brood much when I'm in Florence.

As I entered the airport lounge for the flight back, I saw a young woman waiting for the connecting flight to Paris. I thought she might be a college student. And she was lovely. She was wearing a white linen skirt, a white blouse and a short blue blazer. It was the white that caught my eye. Who wears white when they are traveling? Who dresses so well when they are traveling? She had twirled a long white scarf around her neck that fell almost to her waist. Afterwards I sadly realized it was all for the young man who would meet her at the airport in America.

Still I could not keep my eyes off her as I waited to board the flight. She was alone and quiet, looking at no one in particular, and seemed in a pensive mood in a world of her own. We got on the bus that took us to the plane parked out on the tarmac and I lost sight of her as we boarded. The plane was late in arriving in Paris so we had to hurry to catch the transatlantic flight. An airline representative was there to show us the way and a small group including the young woman in white followed us through an endless maze of buildings and corridors. I wondered, as we raced through De Gaulle, where she was headed, hoping that we might be on the same flight.

But we weren't and while I thought of her in the days after, I knew I would never see her again. Of course it didn't matter. I often had experiences like that—a lovely woman, almost always young and beautiful, and something a little strange or refined about her. That was the way my wife had been in the beginning and I know that these experiences are the only way now that I can recapture those times. It was difficult to remember how she had looked then. I knew she had been quite lovely, not unlike the young woman in white at the airport in Florence. All that I had left though were the photographs and vague memories of our early days together.

I was in Florence almost a month that summer of 2005. I am sure that is the longest period of any previous visit. Yes, I indulged myself once again. And I was warm, very warm, as the heat wave engulfed most of Italy during the later part of June. At a distance I always imagine living in Florence, looking for an apartment to buy. Once there, all that

is forgotten. I have arrived. That is enough. It is enough to be able to come to Florence, to stay for a while although the “a whiles” get a little longer with each succeeding visit. I am an exile in Florence, an expatriate from a place where I also feel much the same. But there I speak the language and there is also someone to whom I can speak it to every once in a while and so that is why I return.