

## *Pianoforte*

*A very bright and quiet apartment on the third floor (with lift) of a building located on Via Venezia in the Piazza San Marco zone in the historical center of Florence...the terrace from where you will have an incredible panoramic view of the entire city of Florence, which is also a spectacular place to relax.*

Their names are Carla and Roberto. I know this from their welcome sign in the kitchen. I also know that Moretti is their family name. That is the name on the Post-its that I find in one of the drawers. Professor Roberto Moretti. Maybe Professor Carla Moretti too.

I am not surprised that Roberto and maybe Carla are professors. The number of books in their apartment is enormous. In practically every room, there are floor to ceiling bookcases full of learned texts in music, art, philosophy, literature and several major reference sets and collections of fine editions. In the music room, there is also a grand piano. Perhaps that is Carla's. Or maybe they both play the piano. That is more likely from the looks of things around here.

I am getting to know them in this rather indirect fashion. Each day I learn something more and each time I look at something that I think I have seen before, I see something new. Today I notice that there are psychiatric journals in the upstairs family room. Maybe Professor Moretti is a psychiatrist. Or maybe Carla is and they share an office together.

Most of the books, however, are literary masterpieces--all the classic novels, many contemporary ones from every nation, all beautifully bound in Italian editions. I look about this place and ask: Have they really read all of this stuff? I also bemoan the fact that I do not know Italian. *Ces't la vie.*

What can one learn about a person from the place they live in, by looking at the objects they have put on their shelves and in their drawers, as well as the photographs and paintings that they have put up on the walls? They are the traces of their life that they have left here, traces that reveal a great deal about anyone in any place or time. The traces are real, they are brought into their homes and put somewhere by someone. They are not secondary accounts, or someone's recollections, or something you might be told if you asked about them.

This place clearly belongs to a learned family. I have no idea how old they are now, but that is not important. I know they have a family, or at least two children, whose beautifully framed photographs are hung on the walls of their bedroom. Their daughter is shown at various stages of her life, from a young child, through adolescence and as mature women. She is lovely and already I am much in love with her. She is in a reflective mood in the photograph. Her dark eyes are framed by equally dark shoulder length hair. Her wide forehead and full lips tell me that she will not be easily swayed. She is holding a feather lightly in her two hands, with her face turned away from the camera that has captured her in a distant reverie. She is thoroughly irresistible.

Nearby are three photos of what must surely be her brother. He is also shown at various stages of his life. In the most recent he has a full head of curly hair, is wearing glasses and appears to be a most studious fellow just like everyone else in this family. There is also a picture of a nicely dressed young man and woman, caught in an informal embrace. They are smiling and I think that is surely Carla and Roberto around the time they were married. What a handsome couple they were! They remind me a bit of how my wife and I might have looked when we were setting out together.

Pianoforte is in the university section of the Florence, although I think they do not teach there. If they did, surely they would be living in the apartment. I sense that there is more that is hidden from me. Why don't they live here? Their apartment is furnished so beautifully, with a fully equipped kitchen, two bedrooms and ample space for entertaining. Perhaps they have fallen on hard times and have had to move to more

modest quarters. But then again, perhaps they simply needed a place that had more bookshelves.

Their neighborhood is some distance from the Centro but not so far as to require a taxi or a car. When I walk down one street I pass by the meticulously maintained Botanical Gardens, while another route takes me by an equally well-tended garden of rare plants and herbs. In either case, I see serious looking young students and the numerous small bookstores they frequent. It appears they are largely devoted to the areas of law, art, architecture, and botany.

The other day I noticed the name of Alberti on the mailbox next to that of Moretti. Alberti? Who is this Alberti person? A few days later someone called to ask for Carla Alberti. Carla Alberti? Who is Carla Alberti? Is she the wife of Professor Roberto Moretti? The second wife? His mistress or lover? What is going on here? I could not really understand what the “someone” who asked for Carla Alberti was saying, but when he rang off, he made it clear that he was from the Bank of Siena. The mystery deepens. It is too deep for me now and I am not one to pry.

I have returned to Florence once again, as I have been doing every summer now for the past few years. I keep asking myself what was really so important about this place? I don't know anyone in Florence, cannot speak Italian, nor can I really do my research or writing here either. So what is it that keeps bringing me back to this city on the River Arno so far away from my home, family, and work?

Partially I am here because of the warmth. Florence, at least when I am here, is so predictably and gloriously warm. It consoles and soothes me. There is nothing like it. A sense of well-being sweeps over me the moment I step off the plane. This year, to my delight, it is warm, blazingly so, throughout the time I am here. Everyone says the weather is crazy. I wish I could find a place in this country where it is always this crazy.

But I also wonder if it really matters? Will I be able to work as effectively in Florence as I am in the town that I have left? It is a question that has intrigued me for years. However, right away I come up against a stonewall. The resources that I need to look more deeply into the effect of the weather on behavior are not available to me here. I can't read Italian and the libraries don't have the books or academic journals that I feel I need to even begin to look into the question.

This kind of experience happens to me repeatedly in Florence. I am here; I have a question; but there is no way I can really answer it. And I always confront the brutal fact that there is nothing I can really do in Florence, not my research anyway. Doing my research still means a great deal to me. I need to be at home for that, or so I imagine and it isn't quite so easy to take my research files and boxes of books with me to Italy, to say nothing of the English language library that I still consider essential. How I yearn for the day when my work will no longer require all that baggage.

Lately I have been thinking it would be worthwhile to learn a little Italian, although I am also betwixt and between about that. I like the mystery of the unknown words and the lyrical music of the speech. I love the sound of those Italian words. And yet I wonder if I might enjoy my time here a little more if I knew some Italian. I conclude, why not give it a try by enrolling in a beginning Italian class this year.

Most of the students in the class are young kids from other European countries. On the first day of class I sit down next to a young man who I learn is from Austria. We speak for a while in halting English. Eventually the student asks me how old I am? The world comes crashing down upon me with that question. I had wondered how long it would take before it was asked. I reply that I am 31 and smile. The young Austrian doesn't get it. The message is thunderous.

As the class goes on my worst fears are realized. It is something I have worried about ever since I started thinking about trying to learn Italian. I am not catching all the words. I have trouble hearing many of them, they sound vague and unclear. I need more time to

get a handle on these strange new sounds. Soon I fall behind the rest of the students and while I try to mutter something in response to the teacher's questions, most of the time she needs to correct me. It is the first class, of course. But I can see what looms ahead. I really need to be a lot younger to master a new language.

I realize at once it is clearly too late to learn Italian, at least in that kind of classroom situation. Maybe I might be able to proceed more slowly with a tutor and a book. But, even then, it would take forever and I am not going to live that long. I conclude that I will have to marry an Italian woman to manage my affairs when I am in Florence.

I recall a passage from Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer*. Nathan, the aspiring writer asks the Lonoff, his literary idol: "How would you live now, if you had your way?" Lonoff replies, "I would live in a villa outside Florence." Nathan then asks: "Yes with whom?" "A woman of course." Clearly that is the solution—marry a beautiful Italian woman who can translate the research journals for me.

The Parco Delle Cascine is an enormous park on the western edge of Florence that stretches along the Arno for miles. Over the years I have gone there often, first as a runner, then as a walker, and now as a sunbather. Although you would not know it from this photo, probably taken one warm Sunday, I marvel at how few people I usually see in the Cascine. It is surely because the park is so vast and so heavily treed that the people are simply hidden in between the bushes and shrubs and down the long pathways that traverse the park from one end to the other.

A few miles into the park there is a public swimming pool, the Publico Piscina where I have been going of late. It is far from luxurious; I am reluctant to shower there. But it is the sun and surrounded by lovely tall trees and open fields. One day I realize that the sun that shines on the sunbathers at the Publico Piscina is the very same one that shines on the beautiful people by the pool at the Splendido in Portofino.

The Number 7 bus takes travels up into the hills above city to the little town of Fiesole that was first a Roman and later Etruscan village. On night I have dinner there in the central square where an Israeli student who speaks very fine English and is studying industrial design serves me. We have a fascinating series of exchanges. But even more were those that occur on the bus trip back when I sit down next to three young women who immediately try to engage me in conversation. I see at once that they are a little tipsy. So we have a lively conversation although they do not speak English and I do not speak Polish, their native language, or Italian which is what they are speaking or trying to speak to me.

Still we have a jolly time for a while, until, eventually another women approaches us and says with a note of exasperation that she can't stand listening to us any longer. So she begins translating what everyone is saying. She is a teacher of English in Florence and offers to help us along for a while, although I believe we were doing just fine before she comes to our "rescue."

The three Polish women are heading for a pizza restaurant a little below Fiesole and they invite me to join them there. I had just eaten enough lasagna for all four of us, so regrettably I decline. Had I not already had dinner, who knows what might have happened on a lovely Sunday evening in Italy that night in the summer of 2003? In retrospect I am glad that I had eaten a goodly portion of lasagna for dinner.

And so, other than momentary encounters like that, I lived for a few weeks in utter solitude in the apartment known as Painoforte that belongs to Carla and Roberto Moretti. I think I must be really weird to be enjoying this so much and wonder how many others would welcome an experience like this, at least how many other men? You don't really hear much about men, other than monks, who take a liking to living alone this way. Again the question this poses will have to remain unanswered for a while.

To be sure, "the silent apartment lies in wait" while I am roaming about the city. But that never seems to bother me. I feel much like the librarian in Martha Cooley's *The*

*Archivist* who confesses: “*But once again I’d tasted solitude as an alternative to the life I was leading, and the possibility of its permanence scared and attracted me.*” And yet for years I have resisted this feeling or been unaware of it, of finding the experience of solitude so congenial.

Yes, I like to be with others. I like to engage them in thoughtful, lively conversation, although I have found that such people are hard to come by. Nevertheless I enjoy them when they come my way and sometimes even learn something when they do. But it seems that the times I spend alone are also a considerable pleasure. Why deny it? That seems to be my nature whatever its sources and functions. And the only work that is left for me to do now can best be done alone. Martha Gelhorn wrote: “*I always live alone to work, cannot do it otherwise except as total immersion.*” Every writer says much the same. And writing is all I can and want to do now, even though I know I do it poorly and realize how hugely limited I am.

At least, I am more focused when alone or more *centered*. That's it. More centered. Less distracted by the demands to be sociable at home. There I am decentered. I find it hard to strike a balance between being alone and together. And so it is harder to concentrate, to have large blocks uninterrupted time for whatever it is that I am working on. But when I am alone, as I am in Florence, I seem to think more clearly. Indeed, I do my best, most unusual thinking here. The ideas just seem to flow.

Again the librarian in *The Archivist* speaks for me.

*He’s set out to find....the source of beauty and elegance....something you do by yourself. Not with other people. Other people muddy the waters.*

What is one to do when one begins to feel this way? I have been grappling with that question for years. And each time I come to Florence I realize that perhaps I am most myself in solitude. At home, my true self must come in and out of hiding, while here it can be out in the open continually. I wonder if this isn’t the same for everyone.

One day I decide to spend the weekend out in Chianti. The countryside is so lovely, quiet and uncrowded. I wonder how can this part of the world, one that has been lived in for centuries and is so beautiful, how can it be so uncrowded? I travel through small villages and towns. Each one is as charming as the next. Here and there is a vineyard, an olive grove, a stand of oaks, a golden field. The farms are meticulously maintained. I never see any litter. There are only a few cars on the roads—roads that curve and twist their way through the rolling hills. It takes forever to go a mile or two. But around each bend there is another farm, field or valley, as appealing as the one before. I think: How odd that that I should have discovered this place so late in life. I know that many other foreigners have also been drawn to this place, but you scarcely notice them or anyone else, for that matter.

As I prepare to return home, I am once again reminded that we are what our situations hand us. In Florence it is warm; at home it is cold. In Florence it is quiet; at home it is “noisy.” I am a different person in Florence. I am turned upside down mostly by the warmth that seems in some strange way to be remarkably therapeutic. Each time I go there I realize how much difference the temperature and light can make, how much they seem to matter to me, how *noticeable* they are. I walk around in sandals, a tank top and a smile. Is it any wonder I feel more at home here than anywhere else?

In the final analysis, however, Florence can only be for me much like Illiers was said to be for Proust.

*Illiers itself was simply a place where the young Proust dreamed of a better life to come. But, because the dream never came true, he had learned to love instead the place where the dream was born.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Andre Aciman. Letter from Illiers-Combray in *False Papers*, 2000. New York Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

While I return each year because I love being here, I know I cannot stay. And so while I never did learn much about Carla and Roberto, I did learn a great deal about myself that summer in their apartment in Florence. I thought isn't that what traveling is all about after all? We travel to learn a little bit more about ourselves, to break out of the mold, to recharge the batteries in a way that seems impossible to do at home. And so in that respect Florence has once again been good to me.