

## Strangers

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I'll never forget that day in December. It started out bright, warm and promising, a trick of the seasons. The chilly winter wind was no where to be found, the bitter bite of the normal temperatures wasn't even nibbling. As I walked through the train station I had no idea what would unfold that day. I had arrived at the train station, Santa Maria Novella, on my way to Florence from Rome. I had traveled to Florence to cover the opening of a special Art exhibit at the Uffizi on Botticelli. At the time, I was an aspiring painter and a columnist for the Artist's Journal. As an artist, I was a pretty decent observer of my surroundings and people in particular and as a writer I was a fairly good detective as to what the 'back story' was on the different people and places that fell into my path. As observant as I thought I was and as bright and "sherlockesque" as I thought my powers of perception to be; I wasn't prepared for what was about to unfold before my eyes that day in Florence. Where should I start? How should I begin to tell you my story? First of all, I should set the record straight and clear up the facts. The main one being that it isn't my story at all. I was merely an observer, an intruder actually. An intruder into a very personal story between two peoples shadows in the sight of the common passerby. I suppose that is where I should begin, with the shadows of two people, because that's really when I first came to realize the existence of these two people, these two transients in a type of Arcadia.

I had just exited the main train station and while I was struggling with my lug-

gage and rearranging my Panama hat, I heard a shout and suddenly the bustle of people, I looked up and there it was... Florence. I had never before, or since, been so utterly surprised and amazed by the buildings there in front of me. Not just buildings but relics of elegant centuries now past, of times almost forgotten and of histories and tragedies that have unfolded in front of those facades only to pass into memory and legend. The elegant stone carvings of the buildings were like fine lace accents on a wedding dress, the varying shades of the plaster on the buildings resembled the icing on cakes. It was an amazing sight. I had always heard of the city and how it took your breath away, but for everything I had heard and for all the photographs I had seen, nothing had prepared me for my first view of the city. As I looked on at the marvel before my eyes I rearranged my hat and my eye caught a shadow. It was a lovely shadow, if one can say such a thing of a shadow. The shadow outlined a long dress fluttering in the afternoon breeze. The long dress was accented by a shawl. The shadow was crowned by a head of long flowing curls. I lifted up my head to see who the owner of this most lovely of shadows was only to find that it belonged to one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen. As I looked at her the breeze caught her shawl and attempted to slip it off her slender shoulders. And a long delicate hand followed the shawl and brought it back up to her neck. I followed that lovely hand and saw her face. She had what some might call an ageless face. She was young but how young I couldn't tell, she could have been anywhere from twenty to thirty. Her lips were full and crimson and her glowing green eyes were framed by long, dark lashes. Her long, dark hair fell in luscious curls down her back. She had this beautiful expres-

sion on her face; it was part amazement, part excitement and part joy. She turned her head up towards the sun and slowly smiled. I couldn't help feeling both attracted to her and envious of that expression on her face. She looked completely happy, as if the whole world was at her finger tips and she had everything to enjoy and look forward to. No fear or stress, just complete contentment with the moment she was experiencing. I stared at her and my powers of deduction were kicked into high gear. Where was she from? Was she on a visit alone or was she meeting someone? To me, she seemed like a free-spirit type. That smile on her face had too much abandon to belong to a young woman of the 1950's. She then lowered her face and started to look around when she happened to look straight at me. She smiled and said "Buon Giorno." All I could do was weakly smile back and feel the blood rising in my cheeks as she greeted me. By the time I had collected myself and tipped my hat and said "Buon Giorno," she was gone. She had gathered up her suitcase and walked towards the bus stop at the end of the station. I laughed to myself as I realized how silly I must have looked to this young woman. I then followed suit and picked up my own luggage and walked to the taxi stop.

As I stood waiting for a taxi, another shadow made an appearance. The shadow moved towards me and I looked around to find the owner to be a young man about thirty. The man smiled and asked me in heavily accented Italian if this was the stop for the taxi. Since I could tell from his very bad accent that he was in fact an inhabitant of the British Isles and not of the Apennine Peninsula, I responded in English that it was. He smiled a sigh of relief and thanked me

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for the information. I nodded and waited beside him at the taxi stop. As we both waited for a taxi he reached into his jacket pocket and took out a smart leather cigar case and lit a large Cuban cigar. As he did so I took notice of his appearance. He was smartly dressed in a well tailored suit. He was tall and had sharp, blue eyes that were a contrast to his lean, tanned face. He was just the type that I had known at the University. Well off, complacent, practical. He reminded me of a dozen friends I had known from those days.

As I made my way through the picturesque alleys of that magical city I forgot all about the Man and the Lady from the train station. I walked down the crowded lanes that weaved to and from. The small storefronts that greeted the tourists with beautifully arrayed windows displaying their wares, hand-blown glass in one window and sparkling gold jewelry in another. I finally made my way to my hotel and checked in. I walked up the numerous and winding stairs to my room and collapsed on my bed, exhausted from my long train ride. As I closed my eyes, I suddenly heard singing. Startled, I got up and went to the small window that was in my room. I opened the shutter and looked out to the street. The impromptu operatic performance was courtesy of a street performer entertaining some patrons of a nearby café. Just beyond the café I could see the banks of the Arno River and the famed Duomo Cathedral beyond it. Ah...Florence. As I strolled along the lanes of the ancient city I found myself ushered into a dark alley that seemed to lead nowhere when suddenly, it exploded into an arena of space and light. It was amazing. The stately piazza lined with its age old cobblestones worn smooth with time. It was the famed

Piazza della Signorina. I strolled along the side of the piazza and gazed at the bronze statues that were gathered under a portico; exquisite examples of the talent that had brought fame and fortune to the city. I walked a little farther and there it was, Florence's most famous citizen, The David. A large gathering of tourists had gathered around the statue and were doing what tourists always do best, taking photos. I lit one of my own modest cigars and took in the whole scene. My artist's eye took in the light and the angle of the buildings and the scale of the statue, while my male eye noticed the flutter of a dress and the glimpse of a shapely leg. My male eye won out and I turned my head slightly and saw that this shapely leg belonged to none other than the Lady from the train station. She was standing not far from me and was taking in the sights of the piazza as well. I admit that I was very curious about this Lady. I watched as those gorgeous green eyes of hers surveyed the piazza. I had this sudden impulse to go over and speak to her. But such bold moves weren't something that I was known for then or now. Instead, I merely watched as the goddess of the green eyes stood so elegantly not five yards from me. As I watched, I became aware that I wasn't the only watcher. A man had walked up behind her and was holding a large bouquet of Tuscan sunflowers. The man whistled at the Lady and she turned around. In a burst of sudden surprise and joy she seemed to leap into the arms of the man holding the flowers. He welcomed her with outstretched arms and the hem of her long white dress was caught gently in the breeze and trailed behind her like the train of a wedding dress. It was just the sort of scene one is always

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reading about in books or seeing at the end of a B-movie. The couple meets in a crowded piazza, he sees her, she sees him and suddenly they run to each others arms. End scene. It was a cliché scene perhaps, but a tender one.

I'm continually amazed at how small the world can be at times and looking back I was certainly amazed at the smallness of our planet then. What were the chances of seeing both of these people again in such a crowded city? I began to feel self-conscious as I watched the couple and so I walked away from the little scene that I had been privy to. I strolled along the streets of Florence for a time longer and then I found a small sidewalk restaurant with a view of one of those picturesque streets that are always finding themselves on the front of postcards. I ordered my meal and was just savoring a glass of excellent red wine when I heard a burst of laughter and saw that the Lady and the Man had just walked into the restaurant and were seating themselves at a table not far from mine. I looked on as they began to talk.

"I'm so happy!" An ecstatic smile radiated on the Lady's lovely face.

"I'm glad." The Man grinned and lit a cigar.

"I can't believe that we're both really here, together again. I've dreamt about this day for so long. I almost thought it wouldn't happen. But here we are!"

"Yes, darling, it's wonderful, isn't it?" The Man leaned forward in his chair and gently took the Lady's hand. The Lady leaned forward in her chair and seemed so at ease, so confidently happy.

"Yes, it is." The Lady smiled back and squeezed the Man's hand. "Did you buy the train tickets?" The Lady smiled inquiringly.

"Eh...well, no, I've had a bit of a problem getting my hands on the money for it."

"The nice people at the bank don't trust you?" She smiled in a teasing way.

"I suppose not! But on Monday I'll get my check and I can definitely buy them then." His smile faded slightly.

"It's all right. Don't worry about it. Tomorrow, next Monday, it's just time and days and I don't care about either one as long as we're together."

The Man smiled as he said, "I don't think you realize how beautiful you look when you smile."

"Oh, stop!"

"No, I'm serious.

Just when I think you can't look any prettier you smile and I stand corrected."

The Lady stopped smiling and looked into the Man's eyes. As they looked into each other's eyes you could see that there were the only two people who existed for each other at the present time. They seemed so utterly happy, so untouched by all the hustle and bustle of the world around them.

I couldn't help but feel jealous not only of the way that the Lady looked at the Man, but of the whole scene. They were content. That contentment was something that I envied. They were so at ease with each other so unaware of other cares and worries. The fact that they loved each other was enough. Everything else seemed to be irrelevant. The Lady looked across the piazza at the venerable church that was there. "Darling, look at that church. Doesn't it look solemn somehow? "Most churches do."

"But I mean sometimes they look happy

or inviting and this one looks solemn and sad. I don't know why." She frowned.

"Can we order champagne?"

"Champagne? Isn't that a little extravagant for a Tuesday afternoon?"

"Is it? Well, I guess it is. I just feel like celebrating!" She shrugged her shoulders up and giggled.

"Well, darling, if I haven't got the

money to buy train tickets then I certainly don't have the money to buy champagne."

"Oh! Yes, I forgot.

She frowned again.

"Money is such a troublesome thing."

"Only when you don't have it."

"I guess. I wish you wouldn't think about it so much."

The Man squinted as he looked at her.

"What would you have

me think about then? The birds in the piazza?"

His sarcasm was lost on the Lady.

"They are beautiful aren't they?"

"What?"

"The birds! They're beautiful in their own way. I mean not physically, they all sort of look the same, but look at them, they're free! They're not bound by anything or anybody. They just fly where they please! She cupped her head in her hands as she placed her elbows on the table."

"I've never thought about it that way. They've always just seemed like a nuisance more than anything else."

"You would think that. But it's all right.

That's why I'm here. To help you see the shades of grey in things."

"You may see the 'shades of grey' but you don't see the black and white at all." There was a certain bitterness that had crept into the Man's tone.

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As the couple had been talking the stunning Tuscan skyline had become a touch greyer and the gentle breeze that had fanned tourists all day had now developed a slight chill.

The Lady unaware of this softly creeping turn, started to hum a selection from Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As she hummed, the Man suddenly put his fist down on the table and simply said, "Stop."

"What?"

"Stop humming. Stop talking, stop daydreaming. Just stop. Startled, the Lady asked in a somewhat frightened voice, "Why?"

"I'm not going to buy the train tickets, not Monday, not ever. It just won't work. It just won't. Things are beautiful and fun now. But you and I aren't the same person. You're a dreamer, darling, and dreamers aren't practical people. And that's just what you can't seem to understand, the practicality of our situation. The Man looked searchingly into the Lady's eyes and sighed. His jaw tightened as he continued to speak, "All of this has been a fairytale in a way. Just like the ones that you read, tales about love conquering all. But that's not how it is in real life. And you just don't see that our fairytale will have to end sometime." The Man leaned back in his chair and roughly rubbed his chin.

The Lady's eyes widened and she gently shook her head. "What do you mean? What are you saying? This isn't happening." She smiled weakly. "You're just upset, that's all. We are in a fairytale. Our very own story, but what you don't see is that it's not like the books. There isn't an author deciding what happens on the next page! We decide! You and me.

We can choose to make our ending a happy one!" She paused as she looked intently at the Man whose face was turned away from hers. "Or an unhappy one." The Lady's green eyes were glistening with tears as she spoke those last words.

The Man looked at her finally and indignantly said, "Oh, Please! It's hard enough for me to tell you as it is! Don't make it worse by crying. I hate to see you cry. Please, please don't!"

The Lady's tears flowed freely now.

"I don't know why I asked you at all. I already know what you mean. I don't fit in with your little world, do I? I'm not an English lady. Is that it? Is that why?"

"NO! That's not why. It's just that it's not what's expected of me. I mean it's not something I can control, you know. I mean it's not my fault at all. It's just, family, you know titles and old names."

"No, I don't understand at all. I never thought I had to understand anything. I thought loving you was enough."

"I know! I feel like a coward to be telling you this, but there's just no way around it. There just isn't. It doesn't matter how much you say you love me, it just can't happen! There's nothing more to discuss. We have here and now and there's no future ahead. There just isn't." The Man looked pleadingly at the Lady, but she had turned her head to watch a couple that was looking at the display window of a jewelry shop. She rubbed her ring finger as she watched them. The Man leaned back in his chair and they were both silent. As the couple had been talking the stunning Tuscan skyline had become a touch greyer with clouds and the gentle breeze that had fanned tourists

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The Lady's green eyes were clouded with her tears as she softly whispered, "I love you." She got up and walked away from the table and walked out into the piazza without another word.

The man was startled by her sudden exit, but made no effort to follow her. He threw his cigar away in disgust and mumbled under his breath. As I saw the apparent end to the mini-drama before me the gathering clouds began to release their own tears onto the ancient city. The sun was now completely obscured by the army of ominous clouds that had invaded the momentary paradise of the city. The breeze was now a cold winter chill and the conjuring of Mother Nature was now over and the reality of the season was quickly upon us. Meanwhile, the Man had got up and paid his bill and also left.

I couldn't help but feel a sense of pity and regret after witnessing the couple. I finished my meal in a somber mood and also paid my bill and left the café. I walked under the gentle rain along the cobblestone roads. When, suddenly my ears were stabbed by a scream and the screeching sounds of a car breaking. People from all around were now filling into the street ahead of me to the location of the noise. I followed them and found the source of the clatter. There was a merchant's truck and a hysterical merchant yelling excitedly in Italian, "I didn't see! I just didn't see! Out of no where! The rain...the windshield was foggy...I couldn't stop, I couldn't react!" The man was wringing his hair in anguish ridden

I pushed my way through the crowd and caught my breath on the street wet and frozen and her face stained with blood. Now come upon me, I am coming to the Lac

and shook his head. He ordered people to back away as he next attended to the frightened merchant. I could feel my own tears burning in my eyes and the pressure building as I tried to keep them back. The Lady was still beautiful even in death. The rain now freely poured down on the city as I watched her. The streams of water ran through her hair washing the blood from her luscious curls. The blood that had started to cover her dress seemed to recede as the torrents of water buffeted against her. It was as if the rain was somehow protecting her from the horror of the blood, the awfulness of death.

As I took in the shocking scene I heard a man angrily order people out of his way as he approached the scene. It was the Man from the café. I'll never forget the look on his face as he bent down over her body, took hold of her lifeless hand and kissed it. It was a mixture of pain, regret, and anger. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small black case, opened it and extracted the tiny ring from within. He carefully slid it onto her slender finger and kissed it. As he did so, he began to weep.

I turned away and a tear ran down my cheek. I looked up at the boulevard and all I could see ahead of me was a lane filled with broken dreams. The buildings that had stood so proudly, that had seemed so magical to me before now appeared to have carvings like spider webs, plaster that gave the impression of decay. I turned my collar to the cold and damp and made my way through the

