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Thoughts from an Italian Park Bench

By Kathleen Stjernholm

It is difficult to capture the stony secrets hidden in these winding cobblestone streets. There is a sense of heaviness in the air, a weight of timeless history. The vendors in *il mercato*¹ have cheerful smiles—the lines on their faces wrinkled with persistence. An old woman peeks from the green shutters three stories above; she peers at me with an inscrutable beauty. Frozen statues adorn the sidewalks, only hinting of the elusive truths behind their molds. There is a rampant invasion of the heavenly aroma of fresh tomatoes, basil and garlic. The street is rich with commotion: the rush of the Vespas, the piercing sirens, and the golden coin-clink laughter of *i ragazzi*². All of my senses are heightened, tuned into these unforgettable sights, sounds, and smells. I sit on a bench in the middle of *la piazza*³, absorbing *la dolce vita*. Here in Italy, I am overcome with stillness in my soul; yet somehow, I have never felt so alive.

I am starting to comprehend why the Renaissance translates literally into ‘a time for new learning.’ I have come to appreciate the joy of uncertainty. I am separated from any traditional means of security and comfort. But I am embracing this unending chaos and exhaustion, in order to journey to the next destination of wonder. I am perplexed—my thoughts incessantly engaged in this new rendezvous with the Old World. This meeting of me and the ancients is fueled by espresso. But it is theirs, the old ones’, cup I use, as I sip on the simple things and mull over this appeasing new flavor of life. It is a constant thrill to venture without a map, rescuing myself from my past routine.

The former luxuries of my previous world seem distant and I am freed from their materialistic chains. I am released from the demand to fill my resume and liberated to instead fill my soul. Each weekend, I set out with only a backpack, a destination, and *amici*.⁴ Through the scenery along each lengthy train ride, I am reminded of God’s creativity. I think of the captivating sunrises and sunsets brushstroked across so many different hillsides and landscapes. With each genuine conversation, I come to grasp the innate goodness in people and the powerful, natural connection born in these moments. I am refreshed by authenticity and adventure. I am mysteriously and graciously numb to any insecurities, doubts or anxieties throughout these vibrant travels.

I have been somersaulting since the day I arrived – new perspectives are revealed with every move I make. Each morning, I wake up to a world in which I am unable to drown myself in distractions or monotony. Beyond the savory food and entrancing language, I am challenged to face my most basic self. Up until now, I could conceal anything I desired with the to-do lists, the checklists, and the plans. The “doing” never allowed me to focus on the “being.” I had been living in a stringent

¹ The market

² The children

³ The square

⁴ Friends

guidebook—an instruction manual plagued with structure and cluttered with text. I have allowed the ink to seep across crinkled pages, forming elegant strokes and eclectic scribbles. The pages of my life are now filled with poetry, crafting new meaning in each word.

How I adore the fact that drive-thrus and supermarket empires are replaced by a lattice of carts with *frutta e verdure*.⁵ No longer are there an infinite number of coffee shops that clone one another on each block. I drown in intrigue for every café, each with a distinct personality that is impossible to imitate. Sitting in the booth, I admire the spread of *paninis* and *dolci con fragole*.⁶ The *Italiani* pour into the café, bubbling with effervescence. They soak up each ray of such as a delicacy and saunter inside. Young men at the counter sip their espresso, radiating with curiosity and vitality. The older men, *i signori*, sit in serenity, veiled by their newspapers. They seem to hibernate under their heavy woolen sweaters and a hat that has survived the decades. Their pensive smile reveals a sense of nostalgia and contemplation. The women here possess a distinctive beauty. Their faces have an authentic glow and their eyes have a natural smolder. Their expressions are fierce but still poised, in the same manner of their stilettos. They fashionably clamber onto their mopeds with ease and whisk away, hair lifted by the wind. The Italians have a charismatic and effortless beauty. These aren't the glamorous faces I see on Hollywood billboards. Instead, these are faces I will never forget.

Intrigue and allure lurks among each train stop and alley way. Each stranger has a story waiting to be discovered over a cappuccino. I am romanced by this city to the point of intoxication. I ignore any trepidation and delve into these enchanted streets at what seems like 200 kilometers per hour. I am fulfilled in this moment and charmed by this Italian ambiance. As the golden Tuscan sun begins to set, I wonder if this newfound zest will remain in me, or set too, like the revolving sun. I contemplate whether this *amore* for each moment will withstand the steamroller of time.

I have buried my concerns of a 4.0 GPA and a perfect time in the 400m dash. I am harvesting gratitude, passion, and optimism—all of which are rooted much deeper than the momentary accolades I have tended so carefully in the past. I am beginning to unearth the things that are most important. I am finding that when I am not tangled in the cords of technology, I am able to connect with my own hopes and dreams with renewed clarity. Although my entire surroundings are foreign and precarious, I find refuge in this culture of contentment. The value of simplicity, the wisdom of art, and the emphasis on *la famiglia*⁷ revive me. A whim of eternal enthusiasm lingers around each building, hugging the corners of the antique bricks. They have charisma, character, and insight from enduring the ages. I can almost sense their amusement with my temporary transience in this life. I delight in the opportunity to exist in the midst of their knowledge. I wish these walls could tell their stories through the wind that caresses these streets. I yearn for a transparent revelation of their mysteries. If only I

⁵ Fruits and vegetables

⁶ Miniature pastries with strawberries.

⁷ The family

could build myself into the stone wall and partake in this ambivalence. This scene seems changeless, as I am fully present in the breeze that warmed the face of Michelangelo and Dante.

I often ponder the timeless intricacies of the churches in Italy. As I marvel at the *Duomo*⁸, I sense a lost piety. I cannot begin to fathom the tedious labor that created such an ornate and lavish building. Tourists wind through the chambers, snapping photos and aimlessly admiring the tattered *frescos*. I imagine the time when this cathedral was the center of bustling life in Florence- fostering community, illustrating truth, and venerating something far greater. These days have faded, this virtuous atmosphere buried in time and dust. The more time I spend here, the more I come to understand what these walls stood for and the secrets they guard.

My favorite part of my week is when I walk through Florence without a destination. I get lost on purpose and delight in wherever my feet take me—which usually involves a *gelateria*.⁹ Each turn is filled with anticipation, exploring and inhaling the vivacity of the streets. During these meanders, I allow only my beating heart and living breath to validate me, rather than titles or roles. I identify myself as only me, instead of as a student, intern or athlete. I no longer see my life as a race, an endless and exhaustive effort to the finish line. It is not about whirring past our surroundings, but rather stopping and appreciating the creation and blessings around us. It is not about defeating others or comparing our trials, but rather embracing each other in our limitations.

Our unique journeys are entangled routes leading to something far beyond the finish line. Our prizes will never be enough if we only find them in expensive cars, trophies, grade point averages, and possessions that we use to find value in ourselves. This entire journey is not about how far in front or behind the others are, because we cannot look blindly at those around us as mere competitors. We must take the time to stray from the ordinary path and pick up those on the sidelines, even if it means sacrificing the first-place ribbon. We must strive forward without requirements and consider those who surround you. We must not focus on a quick race, but a fulfilling journey. I no longer want to live my life running in circles. These Italian hours have led me to a new course.

Structure, control, and consistency are replaced by impulse, art, and *amore*. In a beautifully disastrous fashion, nothing in Italy goes to plan. I feel truly accepted while being completely out of my element. While I have been removed from everything I have ever called comfortable, I am figuring out more about my most authentic self. Within these Tuscan walls lies a city of paradox. Everything about my life here is filled with irony. It is only until we lose ourselves that we are able to truly find ourselves. When we let go of control, our senses come alive and peace fills our hearts. This country is not for perfectionists who seek organization or convenience. Rather it is for those who can welcome the imperfections of humanity, seek knowledge at every opportunity, and find joy in daily pleasures. This

⁸ The cathedral in Florence

⁹ Ice cream shop

city has peeled away the layers of commotion and revealed the fruit inside, the indescribable truths. As I gather these seeds, I reflect on a quote: “Indeed there is more to be learned in one day of discomfort and anxiety than in a life time of apparent happiness, security, riches, and power.”

I am often asked about my time here and why it was so transformative – it’d be easier for me to condense it down and say that it was the shopping, the pasta, or the gelato. In truth, I was changed because each day I was able to experience my own personal Renaissance. The reality is that this place, once so unknown, has become a home for my heart to rest in. I have been immersed in a world of *gusto* and gratitude, one that delights in my contentment.

Like everyone who has caught a glimpse, I have fallen in love with the Tuscan countryside; selfishly, I harbor this admiration as if I am the only one who has witnessed its graceful splendor. I will depart with unfathomable experiences from this country and beyond, for which I am so thankful. I have walked in the Egyptian pyramids, witnessed the splendor of the mosques in Turkey, toured the grounds of Ephesus, paraded in the Venetian streets during Carnivale, stood in awe at the ruins of Pompeii, bathed in the Mediterranean and Red Sea, enjoyed the view from the summits of Mt. Vesuvius and Mt. Sinai, wandered the markets of Barcelona, and discovered the small towns that are the hidden gems of Austria. These snapshots hardly account for the missed trains, the nights slept on park benches, the cultural mishaps, and the lost-in-translation moments that enriched each voyage. After all, wasn’t *Il David di Michelangelo*¹⁰ himself created through angst and toil? However, while gazing at the masterpiece, one rarely thinks about the struggle of the process. These seemingly fleeting moments and stories have forever sculpted my heart. If only I could eloquently express this euphoria and capture it with the same mastery as the Renaissance artists. I gratefully conclude that memories are treasures, possibly the finest luxury in life. *La vita e’ una conquista continue, ma la vita e’ bella.*¹¹

¹⁰ The famous “David” sculpture by Michelangelo

¹¹ Life is a continuous struggle, but life is beautiful.