

Listening for Inspiration

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During January 2023, I had the incredible pleasure of participating in a travel course to Florence. My project while there was to use the inspiration from the city to create fictional short stories about tourists visiting the city. Despite what I had planned sitting in a café in Orange County, when I actually arrived in Florence I was overcome with the inspiration I had been missing from my daily life at home. What I had intended to write, stories about churches and chefs, all came from preconceived ideas about what I *would* experience in Florence. But the thing about inspiration is that it can't be forced. No amount of well-wishing will bring an idea to life. This, I truly understood upon my arrival.

The first of my stories came from my experience at Palazzo Vecchio. We stood outside the enormous stone building, preparing for the first of our many tours around Florence, chattering as our frozen breath rose into the cold winter air. Before I arrived, I had not prepared to write a story about Eleonora De Toledo, wife of Cosimo I. But our guide mentioned very briefly at the beginning of the tour that Eleonora longed for a garden. I paid no mind to it at first, but then, we were in a secret passageway behind a room all covered in Renaissance maps, where Eleonora would listen into political conversations taking place in the grand hall. As a woman, of course, she was not permitted to take part in government tidings. Once inside that room, we all craned our necks to peer into the great hall. The tour guide mentioned again that Eleonora continued to ask for a garden, and it made me realize that, in some way, she was dissatisfied with her life in Palazzo Vecchio. This struck me because her sentiments must have been so strong that her desire for a garden is still known today, some five centuries later. In my mind, I imagined that part of her craving for a garden was because she did not feel at home in Palazzo Vecchio. Her husband did not take her seriously enough to give her what she wanted

because he did not value her partnership. I tried to emulate her voice as a younger woman before this move, when she wishes to go home.

History remembers Eleonora as passionate and artistic. I wanted her voice to feel lively and, at the same time, forlorn, wishing for something that she didn't know she could have. After our trip to Palazzo Vecchio, we visited Palazzo Pitti and the Boboli Gardens. Already having the idea, I retroactively imagined what Eleonora would have asked for because I could now see what she got. It made me happy to know that, in the end, she got the garden she desired.

As I continued my journey around Florence, I wanted to look for contemporary things that caught my eye. The city is bustling with sights, shops, stands, people—even pigeons. I was overwhelmed with new stimuli, all providing incredible things to write about, pushing me out of what I see daily at home. I began to notice the intricacies of the city during my stay, one of which was the souvenir stores for all the tourists. All the leather bags, which Florence is often known for, were the same. In green circles, blue triangles, orange wallets, whatever it may be—thousands of identical purses scatter the city. Of course, there is a logical explanation: a lack of craftsmanship being traded in for more readily available commodities. Everybody wants a purse from Florence, and a factory somewhere in the world is producing identical purses for all the different stores. But I wanted to create another reason why, and we had just been looking at art for two weeks, so I decided the purse shops were a front for smuggling stolen artwork.

I like to make dark twists on seemingly innocuous things; so this felt like a perfect opportunity to explore the underbelly of Florence. “Tourist Trap” is about a woman who goes into a leather souvenir store and gets caught snooping. She learns that the bags are used to smuggle stolen artwork, and I used first person present tense to try and emulate intensity. What she is experiencing is happening in real time. Though it is short, I reflected on deep curiosity in this story. I thought of the intoxicating feeling of needing to know; so I created a story where the answer is discoverable but just out of reach. The protagonist is forced to decide whether she

wants answers or is content with never knowing.

After writing this story, I had a conversation with my professor, and he pointed out that my initial instinct for the story was to create something related to organized crime. Stereotypes about the mafia are deeply embedded in Hollywood culture, gangster pictures, the Godfather — all of it. As a screenwriter, I spend a lot of my time immersed in the world of make-believe and simultaneously being indoctrinated into those stereotypes. This offered an opportunity for reflection. The world I grew up watching was nothing like the world I was seeing. But my explanation for the endless amount of identical purses fell into the category of a Hollywood generalization. My intention for this story, however, is to show one explanation for why all these stores sell exact duplicate purses.

On my trip through Florence, my expectations were exceeded regarding creative inspiration. Initially, I had preconceived ideas of what I would write about but quickly realized inspiration cannot be forced. As I explored the historic city, I found new ways to push myself out of my comfort zone and allow me to create unique and (hopefully) thought-provoking stories. Through my writing, I examined historical figures such as Eleonora De Toledo and contemporary issues such as organized crime and the tourist industry. This trip to Florence allowed me to reflect on my own preconceptions and stereotypes, ultimately leading to a deeper understanding and connection to the world around me. But more than anything, I learned there is no place like Florence.

Eleonora's Garden

Though my mother sometimes spoke of longing, I could not have known what she meant until I left. Only on the ride away from my home did I understand what the sinking feeling in my chest might come to mean. In Spain, soft heat bathed my gardens in light, and struck by its verdant beauty I would take comfortable strolls through the hanging trees, feel the grass under my toes, the white flower petals graze my fingertips. But here, in a cobbled city built of bricks and blood, chains tighten around me as the days pass. My new home, however, adorned in great frescos as it may be, holds not a place for me. At times, when I feel the sinking creeping in, I walk to my secret passageway. Lost behind maps of foreign lands is a balcony where green moss grows. After a flood of rain comes down upon our palace, often little clovers sprout from cracked tiles. This strange city is not my home, where my children run in the courtyard, where my servants talk to me in a language they think I don't understand. The warped tongue they speak, so strangely similar to my own, keeps me far away from ever truly belonging. No amount of grandiose windows can give me a rustling tree shaking in the night.

I plead of my husband, the man whose face lies molded in my children's, to give me a garden. A man who has everything but always wants more can never seem to hear me even before he leaves my bed. My garden would be great, I promise; long stone steps would split the green grass leading up a hill, and from that hill, tall hedges would form a maze, each guarding a different door to a different little world. Bushes would sway back and forth in gentle winds as statues would greet me in stone silence. Hundreds of trees would live together, weaving a quilt of leaves; tall, dark trees dancing with short light ones, some flowering and others giving soft shade to me as I walk. Hidden from the world, I could sit in a meadow and let the setting sun filter golden light through the branches, the only indication that any time had passed at all. I would be no mother, have no duties because I would be as a doe, lying in dewy grass or a bird feeling the breath of wind under my feathers. But, no such garden exists.

I'm struck with a deep yearning, aching in my bones like a second voice begging to get out. Wanting, wanting, wanting. Wishing once more to smell the smell of home. To roam the corridors of my youth beyond a fleeting memory, I am now a ghost. Here, where I haunt the walls of my prison or where the memories haunt me as I try to snatch them before they dissolve in my hands. And maybe, all of this would change if only I could have a garden. My husband might finally see me as though I were more than just another one of his conquests. With a garden, maybe I could resolve to stay here. But all I see is the door to my sister's quarters, where surely she writes in the window, as I do. Though I am stricken with guilt at the thought, I wish dearly that he had picked her instead of me.

Tourist Trap

The first few days in Florence have been exceptional. Some of the best moments of my life were spent gorging myself on carbs—which don't seem to hurt my stomach here—or touring the many buildings woven with history, hidden at every turn. The vibrancy, the richness of the city brought such peace to me that the thought of leaving made me quite sad. This revelation all comes to me as I'm brushing my teeth. How could I possibly leave this wonderful place? But the truth is, nobody wants to leave vacation. I put the toothbrush down and spit out the toothpaste. The problem now is that I have to buy souvenirs for my friends, the true hallmark of a vacation drawing to a close. Down the stone steps and onto the street, the bustling sidewalk throws me for a loop every day. The folks here are hurried, that's for sure. I often wonder where they are off to, with their scarves wrapped tight and cigarettes in hand (or on their lips). The sun is up, but a cloud cover sways the indecisive shadows back and forth like a pendulum across the beeping taxi cabs. People walk in the road here is something I've noticed, but then again, I've taken to noticing many things that are so foreign to me, though I'm the foreigner. I pass the man who has been serving me coffee: 2 Euros for a "caffé latte." No coffee for me today, or at least right now, because I have to buy some souvenirs! Drew wants a scarf, my dad wants a David statue, and my mom wants a purse. They are known for the leather here, and she wants one. The first storefront I walk by has more than a hundred purses of varying sizes, shapes, and colors. Duffle bags, handbags, tote bags, and more — wallets even. I shuffle into the store and observe, running my eyes over the variety. Nothing particularly to my liking. A man with gray hair wobbles toward me.

"Ciao," I say.

"Anything I can help you with? Looking for a bag? Ours have the best price," he grabs a bag and puts it near my face. Given that he's so close to me, I can't help but notice the strange, electric blue scar under his right eyebrow.

"No grazie," I smile and walk out.

And again, I go to a store three blocks down the road, only to find the same merchandise. Now that I think about it, even the stands packed in the square or outside the Mercato Centrale are lined with all the same bags. Undoubtedly, they come from the same place.

“What would you like?” another man comes up to me, grinning before putting a backpack in my hand.

“Not this,” I laugh and push it back to him.

“Good price, good price,” he promises. He shows me a brown wallet with many flaps as he returns. Fascinating.

“I’m alright,” I say. I look at him. He has a blue scar under his right eyebrow as well. My curiosity is getting the best of me. I want to know what it is...should I ask? But I know the answer. Of course, I can’t... except I might. I put my hand up and walk away—no wallet for me.

After the third store, the darkening sky made me realize it is almost time to head home. I’m getting tired, but I need to get something. The David statue and scarf are in my purse, but now it’s time to get mom a bag. I find a reliable storefront, yet it has all the same purses wrapped around each other, busting from the door frame. All fighting to be purchased. I step through the door frame.

“Ciao,” I say politely. Nobody responds. I finger through the bags, feeling the quality of the make, running my thumb up the seams. There’s one that catches my eye. It’s perfect. A beautiful red bag: sturdy, with two handles and a flap that folds over to a golden clasp. I pick it off the shelf and turn it over in my hands. I stand by the counter, tapping my foot with the bag in my hand.

“Helloooo,” I call. But nobody is around, strangely enough. Where is the owner of this shop? It hardly seems like a sustainable business practice not to greet customers *and* not watch your merchandise. From seemingly out of nowhere, a woman pops up behind me. She has a matching blue scar. How absolutely strange.

“Hello,” I say, “this bag please.” Her eyes bug out of her head.

“Not this one!” she exclaims.

“What? Why?” I ask.

“Other one?” She gestures around the room.

“I want this one, please,” I say. She nods.

“Wait here,” she says and takes my bag.

“Excuse me!” I yell out after her, but she’s disappeared into the door behind the counter with *my* bag. I would leave, but that’s the one I want. Time seems to pass extra slowly when you are waiting for someone. I could have been standing there an hour for all I know. Right before I decided to leave, I heard some yelps coming from behind the door. There seemed to be faint screams inside the room in front of me now.

“I think I’m going to go,” I say. Still no response. Every part of me says to run, begging me to turn around and forget it ever happened, maybe even call the police, but I can’t. The smallest voice in me says, “go look.” I creep around the counter and press open the door. It folds open, revealing a dim staircase.

I suddenly understand what it’s like to be in a horror movie; my desire for knowing overpowers my logical thinking. Though I definitely don’t want to get axe murdered, I can’t leave without knowing where the woman with the blue scar disappeared and who was screaming. Each staircase is covered in dust, revealing fresh shoe prints descending but not coming back up. Soft taps of my footsteps echo through the stone hallway until I reach the bottom floor. It’s amazing how dark it is down here. I can barely see before me, but I can make out rows and rows of bags along the walls, some opened, some closed. A thud echoes down the hall, and then an “oof” followed by something hitting the ground. I have to go back now. I imagine another version of myself clawing me back, dragging me by any part of my body, and pulling me back up those stairs. But each moment brings me a step closer. The hallway opens to a larger room, where sconces on the wall burn feeble light, illuminating tables full of bags. On the tables next to the bags are pieces of art. Small, large, framed or not, hundreds of paintings lay beside bags of corresponding size.

“What the hell....” I whisper. I hear footsteps coming down a hallway directly in front of me, though there are hallways leading out of this room on every side. Immediately I fall to the ground, crouching behind

a workbench.

"So you mean to tell me that some tourist grabbed a bag with an original Medici altarpiece in it?" says a deep voice with a thick Italian accent.

"I have it right here, sir," whispers (who I can only assume) the woman from the shop meekly, "she did not take it."

"Do you have any idea how difficult it was to steal this piece from the Galleria dell'Accademia?" said the voice, getting closer. I cover my mouth with my hand to stop my breathing, but little gasps of air keep sneaking through my fingers.

"No sir," says the woman.

"Only put the bags out when the handlers arrive," says the deep voice, the feet standing right in front of me now. "You know what to look for, don't you?"

"The red scar," she says.

"Bravo," says the man, slamming his fist on the table, "because you don't want to know what happens if one of those bags gets sold. The police won't be able to find all ten fingers."

"Yes sir," whispers the woman.

"Every store is getting its new shipment next week," he begins walking away from where I crouch; "you'll be notified if your storefront is going to be used to move any new... items."

He walks away. The woman standing in front of the table begins to snifle. She turns and walks out of the room. I have to get out of here. But somehow, I have to get to the storefront before she does... I scramble to the other side of the room, staying low to the floor, knocking a purse off the table and kicking it down the hallway.

"Hello?" she calls.

Staying low, I run out of the room, trying to be as light on my feet as possible. By the time I see daylight, I can finally breathe again. The only thing between me and safety is the next ten stairs. When I push the door open, a man stands in front of me and the shop's entryway.

"Now what were you doing down there?" he asks, with a heavy Italian accent.