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Italy, Constructing

## Florence: A Novel

So I'm in Greece. It's me, five of the closest friends I've ever had (even though I've only known them all for about two months), and this *feeling*. I'm opening the door to my hotel: a small, sunset peach (sort of pink) beach house that holds eight rooms total, of which we are occupying three, we've slept in four, and have access to the whole lot – we're the only ones here. So I'm unlocking the door to my hotel, actually *unlocking* this front door, because we haven't seen the owner since the night we checked in.

I look at these people that I've known for as long as a box of Honey Bunches of Oats (with almonds, of course) or a pair of contact lenses, and I see myself as a twenty-something in a group of twenty-somethings. I'm moving through this vacation alone, unfettered by parents or permission. I'm half-way across the world from anything I've ever known on an island off mainland Greece in a town I've never heard of and on a vacation that I helped plan. I try to see my life through the eyes of that 11-year-old I once was and I realize that for a moment, I can. I realize for a moment that these are the pages of my life actually unfolding before me and blowing in the wind behind me as I scribble down the words and then move onto the next line and paragraph and page and chapter. I see how life happens in this series of events that lead up to these moments of understanding. I see that I am *in* that world I imagined as a kid, and I try to stand back and just read the simple, empowering, slap-stick series of coincidences that is my life.

I am living the stories I used to tell myself. When I was a kid – and I use the term quite loosely, since my interests and conversation topics are quite childish and not a little

asinine – I used to think about when I would be 20. But it was so much more than that, not “20” but **Twenty**, an age and a time in my life when anything and everything would be possible. These thoughts were like stories, like bedtime stories or nursery rhymes I would tell myself about a time when I could go anywhere, try anything, and decide for myself how to live every day. I can remember the titles of some of these stories: Strolling Through the Streets Alone at Night and Permission: A Thing of the Past and Who Cares if I Just Drank a Gallon of Milk in 5 Minutes? These stories represented what I thought life at **Twenty** would be like, they were written by my imagination and embody that time when my life would become *my* life. These stories have been warped, though, distorted by the fact that I’m now that actor within them. I’m prancing along in these long, drawn out, half-wittedly written books that can be so touching at times but are mostly just way too self-involved, with too many long monologues, and starring this ridiculous main character. Now, with the actual me in these stories instead of the imaginary me, I’m finding some inconsistencies.

This day, this trip to Greece I was telling you about, it’s the story I read when I was about 11. This one is about people in their **Twenties**. It’s about their freedom and their vitality and their impeccable bodies and their choices. This book is about their ability to do anything or nothing and everything meaning something because this is when I’m (supposed to be) smart and getting smarter. This is when I’m tough and untouchable and loose and filling pages not of a book or a novel, but of something quick and sloppy and transient, something fitting of a **Twenty**-year-old: a pamphlet or a poster taped to a streetlamp or maybe a cute purple bumper sticker.

Every once in a while I’m able to pull my head from the pages of my life and see that this is me living in the real world, not just reading the words of my formative imagination. I

see that sometimes this is and sometimes this isn't what I thought "life" would be like. The only problem is I don't remember ever reading this book called Florence when I was a kid. I mean, it's not like I ever read Greece either, but I see myself, that character from my stories, standing on a bridge I don't know the name of, looking out over the pudding of the River Arno and trying with all my **Twenty**-something might to see Florence for Florence. In Greece I could just be **Twenty** with no worries or expectations, but in Florence, that's quite a bit more difficult. I wonder if this is how it's supposed to be, and it becomes obvious to me that Italy doesn't feel like my bedtime story, it's more like an assigned reading entitled Florence.

The truth is, Italy is not a simple, quirky little patch that's pinned to the pocket of my life's backpack. Italy doesn't fit so easily into the readings of my childhood; Italy isn't loose and unchained. I trudge through it, admiring things here and there, but only to be overshadowed by the fact of the whole; it's a constant battle between what I want to experience and what is expected of me to "read." When I was 8, 10, 13-years-old, those stories I read felt more like Greece, so free and unexpected, but in Florence, these weekend getaways are just that, short-lived and quickly replaced with the assigned reading for the week.

I find myself reading this novel of Florence and guiltily checking to see how many pages I have left before I can set this book down. Perhaps I haven't read enough Florence this week, maybe I haven't been into the city itself, or I haven't learned enough new vocab and verbs, or I just don't completely understand the cultural significance of *arrangiarsi*. I have to tighten the reins, chastise myself, dig back into this reading and *get it*. I have do all of these things that everyone and their mother and their mother's cousin twice removed has told me

I'm supposed to do while I'm here – “you *have* to go to [fill in the blank],” “you're going to *love* [fill in the blank],” “you *can't* forget to [fill in the blank]”.

I look at Italy from the constraints of an assignment, wanting to jump into the pages and experience them for myself, but being unable to in the face of so many expectations. Just like when reading an assignment for a class, it's very difficult to get away from the mere fact that someone else has deemed this particularly pertinent for me to learn. This is what Italy feels like to me, like I have to do this for “Them,” not necessarily for myself. As it turns out, “They” are not someone else. “They” is the feeling I get in the pit of my stomach when I think of going home and having to explain a four month break from reality to everyone who wasn't here. “They” are the guilt of wishing I could stay but almost peeing my pants in anticipation of leaving. “They” are the reading I'm doing right now – on the side and not assigned of course – of my life when I'm 30, 40, older; when I will look back on this trip and regret not doing something or going somewhere or not, who knows, buying something. I read this book on my 40-year-old self and try to see where I may fall short on this trip, and all it amounts to is assignment after assignment after assignment from “Them.”

I chose this trip, and I knew the assignments before I came, but that doesn't mean I let these assignments dictate all of my experiences while I'm here. I make bits and pieces of this book mine, underlining certain phrases and dog-eared particular pages. I have class and coursework and preparation and worry and responsibility within my Florence reading, but I still love what I'm doing here in this city: smelling the springtime of the house I grew up in while I jog through the streets of Sesto, knowing that I can and will hold off on the hamburger-urge that plagues my taste buds until my parents' backyard grill is yet again fired-up in my presence, or contemplating the allure of the Italian moon boot. I can go to

other places as well, open these bedtime stories – Ireland, Switzerland, Greece – and find so many personal passages and important discoveries within these unassigned readings: I’m not expected to go home and know how to speak Irish (although I can tell you that “D’ja git on queue?” roughly translates to “Were you waiting in line, young sir?”), no one will ask me where to get the best gelato in Interlaken, and who cares if I have no idea why french fries seem to be such a staple of Greek cuisine.

My Italian professor asked me during one of the first weeks here why I wasn’t taking art history, she told me this was “very odd.” I responded that I was finding and creating my own art history, and she laughed and shrugged, perhaps viewing this as just another “Josh Comment,” nothing to take too seriously for fear of his deftly placed wit or covert sarcasm. This is a piece of that assigned reading that I was able to side-step, and now people tilt their heads and wonder: Why would he come to Italy if not to learn something about the art? The key is, I *am* learning the art, it’s just that instead of dragging myself to mandatory class twice a week; instead of dragging myself through museums and churches and chapels and monasteries and villas and cold, cobble-stone streets at 8 in the morning; instead of dragging my exhausted eyes over yet another assigned reading, I allow myself to freely read the writings of artists I enjoy. I explore the “books” of those painters and sculptors and architects that I’ve never heard of, like Van Eyck’s perspective and detail or the sweeping function of Alberti’s structures. As I learn alone, at my own pace, through my own stories, I retain that which is important to me, and although not as extensive as those reading the Art History chapter of Florence, its significance to me is undeniable and true.

I know that Florence will be important to me. I know it will make a lasting impression, and I know it will be shelved in my library of memories under many great titles:

What Cinque Terre Actually Is, As Long As I Don't Look Confused, I Don't Look Like a Tourist, and One Tube of Toothpaste Will Almost Last Me Four Months. When I can break away from the assignments of my stay here, that's when I love it. For me, it's all about those moments that are completely insignificant to "Them" but that are completely significant to me, here, now. It's those fleeting moments when I'm able to step back from reality and to see that I'm now **Twenty**, in Italy, living a life that I never could have planned and have only barely read about. It's during these times when I'm able to stand on my own shoulders, take a deep breath of Tuscany and see that no matter what the assignment, I'll take from it what I want and leave the rest for "Them" to sort out. Not every second in Italy is important, not every second is life changing, and not every second will fit into the stories of my childhood.

So this book, Florence, it's not all it's cracked-up to be – it's so much less and so much more. No matter who assigned what, I've enjoyed whatever it is that's caught my attention long enough to draw me out of the monotony of reading for someone else. I have a hard time accepting those moments when I want it to end (and that is coming quickly), if only because I know it's not possible to pick this book up again and try to read it once more. I know that these pages disappear as soon as I turn them, and the words jumble off into the forgotten or the memorable or the meant-to-be-forgotten or the I-can-only-hope-to-be-memorable section of my mind. The parts that I underline and the pieces that I love should stay pretty well lodged into my memory, but I can't help wondering if this does or doesn't fit into those books of my youth. I looked up at my older self when I was 8 and reading these books about **Twenty**, and now I do the same, only realizing that I am that **Twenty**-something, and that as I add new chapters and sections to those old books, I'm reading the stories of my future.

So this life, these moments, they're mine, and no matter how they do or do not fit into the big life plan of me as a kid is irrelevant. It's all about these instants when I can see me for me, that's all. I don't know everything, and there's plenty I'm still figuring out, and I don't expect you to go away from this with everything spread out and written-up and packaged in a sweet little box with a pastel bow. So what? So I was 8 once and I thought the world would be perfect, and as it turns out (big surprise) it's not, but that's not such a bad thing at all. So I was 10 and I thought that I could do anything I wanted to, and now I see that I can't do it all, but I can still do a lot of cool stuff. So I was 13 and I thought a trip to some far away country with a small group of close friends was all I'd ever need, and now I still think it's at least pretty close. So I was a kid, and wondered about the world, and now I'm **Twenty**, and still wondering, only poking my head up every once in a while to see if it's here yet.

I can be **Twenty** during those moments when my life becomes those bedtime stories and nursery rhymes, and that's what matters. All this assignment business, right, all this about what others want, who cares? If I can make it through this abroad experience with only a few of those shining moments of youthful clarity to dust off and hang on my wall when I get home, then screw "Them," because I have to get started on my readings for **Thirty** and **Forty** and beyond. This is my trip, and assignments aside, I'm finding my own hippity-hoppity happy experiences while I'm here. No matter what little or old me says, no matter what "They" think, I'll have plenty of my own stuff to talk about when this reading is done.