

## An Afternoon in Florence

© 2002 Robert Stotzky  
*All rights reserved.*

The pigeons in the piazza are startled by something and make a terrible noise as they all take off at the same time, as if one creature. I follow their wild flight for a few seconds before the waiter interrupts me by bringing me my espresso in a tiny silver cup. I am wearing a beige three-piece suit and I reach into the inner pocket of my jacket for a few bills. I pay for the coffee and add fifteen percent as tip; I would have paid a bit more, but the waiter has left a fingerprint on the cup. As he walks away, I take the handkerchief from my breast pocket and wipe the cup before drinking the coffee in one swallow. It is strong and creamy and leaves an aftertaste that is hardly bitter at all. This is why I come to this small café. I put the cup down and pick up the small glass of Amaretto, which I carefully sip while observing the activities in the piazza.

Small groups of tourists walk slowly across the open space; you can always tell who are tourists and who are not from the way they point and look in awe at the statues and the cathedral. We who have lived here have gotten accustomed to the beautiful scenery. A pity, really, that we are no longer amazed by these the finest works of art that humanity has managed to create.

I have another sip and look at the cathedral. Though not religious, I always feel a great sense of peace whenever I enter it. Even if the icons are not sacred to me, the building itself has a grace and a serene beauty that is almost divine. Few things can move me to tears, but this cathedral can.

I put the empty glass down and stand up, pushing the chair toward the table. I put on my hat and my sunglasses, Giorgio Armani, with frames of brushed stainless steel and glass that is almost black. Shielded from the piercing sun, I walk out of the café, past couples in love, businessmen enjoying a cup of coffee on their way home from the office, and of course the three older men who always sit at the same table having a heated discussion. Mostly about football, but today they are talking politics, it seems. I tip my hat to them, as I do every day, and they wave at me to join them. As always, I walk over, exchange a few words, but explain that I must be off. This beautiful spring day has made me so happy I take a few bills out of my pocket and put them on the table. "Buy yourselves a bottle of wine," I say to them in Italian, which I speak fluently. Most people never know that I am not Italian. The men protest, but I assure them that tomorrow I will gladly join them, and if they buy me a cup of coffee then, we will be even. I tip my hat again and walk away. I can hear one of the men calling out to me. "God bless you, signore," he says. I raise my hand above my shoulder and wave at him without turning around.

I walk up to the fountain in the middle of the piazza. The more daring pigeons have returned, and one is drinking from the small puddles of water on the edge of the fountain. I put my left hand down in the cool water, feeling it trickle over and in between my fingers. The water feels cold and crisp. Holy water, I think. Holy water in a holy piazza; how very fitting. I pull my hand back and wipe it on my handkerchief.

---

---

---

A small girl, not more than seven years old, with hair like black gold, is crying and holding the remnants of a ruptured yellow balloon in her hands. I walk up to her, put my hand on her shoulder, and walk her over to the man selling the balloons. I buy her a new one, yellow just like the last one, and hand it to her. I tell her to be careful with it and ruffle her hair before she runs off across the piazza, the yellow balloon always two steps behind, bobbing up and down, back and forth. She didn't even say grazie, I think to myself. I wonder what she will be like when she grows up. She will no doubt talk back to her parents, skip school, and stay out late with the boys, their filthy hands all over her body, grabbing her breasts without any grace or respect for the sanctity of her flesh.

I cannot allow that to happen. I put my hand into the right-hand pocket of my jacket. The razor with the mother-of-pearl handle is there. I carefully cleaned it after last time, and dried it first with a clean cloth, then with my hair dryer, to make sure the silver blade isn't stained by corrosion. You see, there is salt in blood, and salt may corrode even stainless steel. I start walking down the street, following the young girl and her parents. How happy they look, walking in the warm May sun. What terrible grief I will spare them, I think to myself. She will die a virgin, caressed only by my cold blade. And they will never be able to thank me

---

---

The stories, poems and artwork published by The Harrow are protected by the various trademarks and copyrights of the writers and artists who created them. It is illegal to copy, redistribute, and/or republish any of these works, including mirroring The Harrow's site and modifying or reusing any text or graphics on the site, without the express prior written consent of the owners and holders of the copyrights. Readers may, however, print copies of the information for their own personal use; store the files on their own computers for their personal use only; and reference hypertext documents on this site from their own documents.

Questions and comments about this site or the contents thereof should be emailed to Dru Pagliassotti (editor@theharrow.com), unless they pertain to the reproduction of any fiction, poetry or artwork within the contents or gallery of The Harrow, in which case queries should be sent to the respective authors, poets or authors who own copyright to those works.

