

Coffee, molto adagio

by
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I hope you're not expecting Belgian mists and twilights today, because I've skipped town. I've headed south, towards the light: to Italy. I'm wandering a dusty Renaissance square, in a provincial town whose name really doesn't matter, because Renaissance beauty in Italy is everywhere, and hypnotically similar. To lose one's bearings here, one's sense of time – now *that* is true seduction.

Anyway, it's coffee I'm after at the moment. The night train from Belgium was penitential: six perspiring travelers wedged into a tiny couchette, sleeping layered, lasagna-style. It was only just after 8:00 a.m. when I straggled from the train station to the town's main square, but the sun had already angled in, setting crenellations and cupolas ablaze. In Belgium, the sun is a fickle visitor – and ill-mannered - ungrateful for all our fawning attempts to welcome her. But here, in this luminous land, she is clearly at home. Italy is her living room, and all the windows are open.

Two giant bronze horsemen stand poised in mid-trot near the royal palace. In the shadow of their magnificent prance there is, thank God, a cafe. I dump my bag on the cobblestones, take a seat, and wait.

And wait...

Everything seems poised, somehow, like these horsemen. Fifteen minutes go by, then twenty, and not even a nod from the waiter. I glance across the square and sit up with a start. For there, smiling wryly at me from under the colonnade, I glimpse that elusive scoundrel himself: Time. We northerners rarely see him as we scurry about, eyes locked on the next task. Time is just a crusty old bother at our heels. But now something is trying to say: Sit back! Stop worrying! These horsemen are taking over four hundred years just to cross the square. Surely you can take half an hour for coffee.

Hang on: I think a waiter has actually acknowledged my existence!

Ah, no such luck. He was, in fact, dragging sullenly my way until he spotted some friends and stopped to chat. Oh, dear: he's lighting a cigarette. It could be some minutes yet.

Caffeine-starved, I gape at the frothy cappuccino on the neighboring table, its pure white foam dashed with powdered chocolate, a truffle sitting elegantly on the saucer. Then I notice that the coffee is untouched. Its owner, a crisp gentleman in a tailored shirt, is reading a newspaper. Slowly, he turns a page; delicately, he turns another. The coffee sits ignored. At last he drapes the paper languorously over one hand, and with the other, lifts the cup. For a long, quizzical second, he pauses as he catches my eye. Then he brings the cup to his lips and takes a sip. One sip, that's all. Then he lowers the cup, unfolds the paper and resumes his reading. Several more elongated seconds pass before he pulls a starched handkerchief from his pocket and dabs at the foam on his upper lip.

I glance across the square again. The entire, cobbled expanse has stirred awake now, but in slow motion. Bicycles glide along; shoppers drift. Cigarettes hang indolently from lips and fingers. Even the pigeons, sedated by the sun, sidle by in a trance. But a strange thing has happened: I have also slowed to this rhythm.

There's no doubt that Italians have figured out how to catch hold of time and bend it into something beautiful. It is captured, alive, in frescoes and friezes; in crepuscular churches, and marble fountains splashing the same tune for centuries. Moments are gathered with care, and distilled until the mixture is rich enough to sip. You must be patient, however: the key is in the sipping.

The waiter grinds his cigarette butt into the cobblestones with his foot. World-weary, he finally shuffles my way. But I really don't care any more. Take another week, I want to tell him. Take a decade! I'll gladly bide my time with the horsemen. I can wait.