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WEEK ONE

September 3-9

Sunday morning

Two nights ago, over our upgrade-to-Business Scotches, my wife Maggie and I were assuring each other how right our friend Stefano had been when he e-mailed last spring, "Oh what a good *new*." He'd just heard we were coming back here to Fiesole, this bi-jou of a Tuscan town cresting the high hill north of Florence. (Even Italians who speak excellent English say *new* not *news*; *novità*, the Italian word for news, is singular.) Stefano's an expert on the Hit-tites, more reliable on the far past, on the very far past, than on the present. But a good *new* is precisely what we've come here for. What we both need. Let Stefano the scholar this time also prove himself a prophet.

Here's why we pretty badly need a good *new*.

On my birthday three years ago, Maggie and I met after work for a celebratory drink. Without thinking the answer would matter, I asked something like "How'd your day go?"

"Not so good. I had a bad mammogram."

And then began the toughest year of our lives, infinitely tougher for Maggie, of course, than for me. Surgery. Chemotherapy. Radiation. Since then all signs point to a complete recovery. The oncologists are unanimously optimistic. Tests and the numbers couldn't be better, they insist. But that year pushing back against death just about finished us. Up until that rainy late October afternoon we not only thought we had it made, we thought we had it made for good. One sweet year would fold smoothly into the next until some unimaginably remote, hardly perceptible twilight would bring us to a close we'd barely notice. It didn't take many gruelling sessions of chemo and radiation to teach us both how foolish we had been. How unreliable life not only can be, but, inevitably, will be.

And that is why we've come back to Italy, to Fiesole and the Villa Le Balze, Georgetown University's outpost in Tuscany, to find Stefano's elusive, much needed, *new*. We've lived here before, from January through May in 1987. That winter into spring transformed

our lives. At that point we'd been married for fifteen years. We had two children: Thaddeus, 14, and Cecilia 11. We had a heavy mortgage, and we were struggling to meet two private school tuitions. Money was so tight that we'd begun paying for our groceries in cash—including coins—to make sure we didn't write a bad check. Vacations, if there were vacations, meant a week, in a good year two weeks, in a tiny bungalow at the tip of the Jersey shore. Each of us had been doing the same job for 20 years, Maggie at the Department of Agriculture, me at Georgetown. We loved each other; we adored our children. But our lives somehow, year by year, had just kept getting thinner, duller, dimmer. Boredom, we could both sense it, was building up toward backlash.

And then I got the chance to come for the first time to teach at Le Balze, where Georgetown runs a small study abroad program for juniors. Taking the chance was entirely Maggie's idea. She's always been the bolder of the two of us, the one more open to risk. But when she first suggested I apply, I didn't pay much attention. I thought she'd never get leave from Agriculture. And besides how could we live without her salary? But when her bosses heard she had a chance to live for five months in Italy, they not only said *Of course*, they practically shouted *Grab it*. So we did.

We took Thaddeus and Cecilia out of school, to the dismay of their teachers and the disgust of their friends. We told them they didn't have to do anything in Italy but try to pick up some Italian and sit in on Art History lectures. We emptied our paltry savings to buy the plane tickets. And hoped that my salary would keep us fed and clothed and afloat for five months. We even managed, just before we left DC, to sublet our house (which made up a bit for the loss of one salary). On the day we flew out from Dulles, a blizzard socked the city, crippling it for the better part of a week. In Fiesole we found everyone in shirt sleeves.

It began well, and with each week it got better.

Years later, when it came time to select a topic for his college admissions essay, Thaddeus wrote about Florence. He said that on his first solo trip into the city he had the sensation that comes when you taste something for the first time and know that from now on this is going to be your favorite food. Even after a few weeks each of us would have said the same thing. But Maggie and I also learned

something more, something far more valuable than anything I was teaching my students. Living in Italy taught us to upscale our demands. The Italians around us were doing just that, daily, hourly setting the bar beyond high. (Florentine Stefano, when I told him we were invited to see the palazzo of a Principessa with a famous name and title, lamented: “But, Gian, she is only a *Roman* princess.”) Tuscany quickly taught us not to settle for a merely good life. Life worth having, we learned, wants demands placed on it. It turns out that the more you ask from Life, the more you are likely to receive in return. Our increasingly settled routines had asked for too little, and as a result, inevitably, each year we got even less. Italy that year made us see Life’s fundamental, maybe even its secret, irony. *To him who has more shall be given. To him who has not even that shall be taken away.*

Once we began to learn that, we lapped up our Italian lessons. And life kept getting better well beyond our stay here. For the next dozen or so years after our Italian sojourn, Maggie and I kept asking for lots from life, and life kept on giving us more than we could have ever hoped, more than we could even have imagined. Until that October evening, when we, without warning, topped out.

So now we’ve returned, same job, same place, but from the start demanding even more than we ever have asked before. After our brush with catastrophe, when the chance to live and teach here again unexpectedly opened up, Maggie insisted we grab it. I was even more surprised this time by her eagerness. After all she was enjoying the biggest job in her increasingly distinguished career. Leaving it now would probably bring that career to a complete and premature end. But she didn’t care. Whatever her post-chemo tests and numbers say, she knows even better than I that she’s not her old self, not even anything like that self. Italian has a haunting word *ombra*—it means both shade and shadow. When I look at Maggie now, really look at her, I see that she has become *un’ombra*, a shadow of what she was, physically, emotionally, spiritually. But she’s also what the Ancients called a shade, someone caught between life and death, subdued, paled, an echo. And often when we talk I hear underneath our conversation, unsaid, the aching unforgettable lament from Gluck’s opera *Orfeo ed Euridice*, when Orfeo realizes that his beloved wife Euridice will not ever come back to life. *Che farò senza Euridice?* What will I do without Eurydice?

Maggie is exhausted; I'm terrified.

But on the plane, over those Scotches, we told ourselves that Stefano's got to be right. The first time at the Villa we started off knowing nothing about Italy, knowing no one. This time it already feels like a homecoming. We have friends, dear friends, eager to welcome us back into their lives. We know the places, some famous, many not, that were special for us. We understand how the Villa works, and how to make it work when it frustrates. We've even managed to sublet the house again, another house. So this time how can things not be even better than they were? We've got a running start, and we've promised ourselves we won't allow a missed turn, a foolish choice, a wasted minute.

We can't.

Mid-day

After lunch I walk from our apartment, in what is called the villino, to the villa itself. For the first time I am going to meet my students, always referred to by Le Balze as *gli studenti*. If you ask Maggie and me why I'm here, the answer is: to help Maggie recover, to help both of us recover, to grab that good new. If you ask Georgetown, my employer, why I'm here: it's to teach. Sooner rather than later I know I've got to figure out how to make those two quite different, and I already sense, potentially opposing goals, rhyme. Because if it were up to me, I'd never leave Maggie alone.

This meeting isn't a first class. That's scheduled for tomorrow, Monday. But our astute and diplomatic program director, Marcello, has suggested a little get-acquainted orientation after lunch, *pranzo*, in Italy the major meal of the day. *Gli studenti* have already been in Italy for a week, on home stays with Italian families in Urbino, 70 miles due east of Florence, across the Apennines. Marcello tells me this has been a big success. They have already bonded with each other and with Marcello, and so I start off as something of an interloper. Not only do Maggie and I not live in the villa with them, we don't take our meals together except on special occasions. I am literally an outsider. Marcello hopes this informal meeting will serve as a kind of transition, to enable me, as it were, to slip smoothly into their world.

Gli studenti, perhaps twenty-five in all, have stayed on after the

meal in the small stuffy dining room, a room designed to seat no more than twelve. Crowded between tables, collapsed on benches and chairs, they sprawl, a blur of apparently interchangeable t-shirts and shorts. The food at Le Balze has always been memorable with a treasury of favorite recipes developed by the first cook, the one we knew fourteen years ago, Clara Frasoni. She's retired now, the kitchen is managed by two new cooks, but the recipes remain pretty much hers. Today it's been a Tuscan bean soup, followed by ravioli with sausage and walnuts, completed by Clara's truly remarkable tiramisu. And of course wine. As much as you want for as long as you care to linger at table. This may be Georgetown but it is Georgetown in Italy. With that menu and as many helpings of each course as they chose, and the wine, on this airless afternoon, no wonder they all seem on the verge of stupor. At this point I could probably announce that I am here to teach nuclear physics and hear no objection.

In the flat silence that greets my appearance Marcello delicately suggests that I tell *gli studenti* something of the course I propose. He professes himself delighted by everything he has already heard about it, and is eager to hear more. Eager is not what the students seem.

The course, I explain, is called "Shakespeare in Italy." I explain that I am not a Shakespeare scholar; my writing and teaching focus on issues of adaptation, from stage to page, and from page to stage and screen. That means I work a lot with Shakespeare's texts, but primarily as they influence or as they are reshaped by writers like Charles Dickens or Anthony Trollope or Oscar Wilde. Scripts fascinate me, how they suggest performance, how they are released and revised and even repressed through performance. I once published an article entitled "The Problem of the Playwright's Authority," in which I demonstrated, convincingly in my clearly prejudiced judgment, that playwrights have no authority at all over their texts. Certainly not the authority of novelists or poets.

In this course, I continue, we will read Shakespeare's seven and a half "Italian" plays, plays that are either set in Italy or, like *The Tempest*, are about Italians. The half is *All's Well That Ends Well* which ends well because, though it starts in France, it ends right down below the villa in Florence. The others are: *The Two Gentle-*

men of Verona, The Taming of the Shrew, Romeo and Juliet, Much Ado About Nothing, The Merchant of Venice, Othello, and The Tempest. After a somewhat wobbly start, Italy turns out to produce a wow of a play list. The last three certainly in anyone's judgment among the greatest of the master's master works.

Gli studenti, however, do not seem wowed.

I press on. We are going to group these plays together by asking whether their shared setting in Italy should actually make a difference to how we read them, separately and as a group. It doesn't seem to matter that *Measure for Measure* takes place in Vienna. Or that *Love's Labours Lost* is set in Navarre. Navarre? So does it matter that these plays are set here? Do we gain anything by hypothesizing some idea we can call Italy working within and behind the individual plots? After all, I point out, there was really no state called Italy until the 1860s. Before that, the peninsula was a hodgepodge of diverse and independent territories: kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, independent republics, and of course the Papal States. (And it remains true that there are at least two different Italies, the north, the *Settentrione*, and the south, the *Mezzogiorno*, with almost nothing in common except corrupt government pretty much everywhere.) What's even more telling: we know that it's highly unlikely that Shakespeare ever set foot in Italy. And for significant parts of his time in London most Italian merchants had withdrawn from the island. So does it count that one play takes place in Verona and another in Padua? Does it matter that none of these plays is set in Rome? Are all the place names merely nominal? Or, if they do matter, is it only to suggest something generically foreign, exotic, other, a sort of Renaissance version of a galaxy far, far away?

The continued silence in the room suggests general consensus that these questions do not matter at all, for any reason, to anyone.

I try to up the ante. And does it matter that we will be reading the plays not in classrooms in Georgetown but in our own villa, in Fiesole, in Italy? Can reading them here, should reading them here, show us things about them and about Italy we wouldn't see if we were doing this course on the banks of the Potomac rather than the Arno? Come December, when we've had three months of shared experience, shared texts, shared travel, will Shakespeare have told us something about Italy, something that will be particularly relevant to us?

Will our Italy shed light on Shakespeare's "Italy"? Will Shakespeare's "Italy" shed light on ours? Does *where* we read something alter *how* we read it?

No one says a word, but I seem to hear them thinking: this is Sunday; classes begin tomorrow. This is our final day of freedom. It's not fair today even to talk about work.

Sensing that indifference having turned into boredom is now verging on resentment, Marcello suggests I tell them about the performance.

In lieu of a final exam, I explain, we will try to stage at least an abridged version of *All's Well*. Marcello adds that he is already looking into theater rentals down in the city.

Despite Marcello's enthusiasm, even this does not thrill.

I murmur my goodbyes, chalking up their benumbed silence to the wine and the tiramisu, and head back to the villino. After all, they are right: classes don't begin until tomorrow, either for them or for me. But has Marcello's little overture boomeranged, I can't help but wonder? Have I, inadvertently, edged apathy to the verge of hostility?

Le Balze

Heading back to our place, I take a few moments to reconnoiter.

Maggie and I live in a self-contained, three-storied apartment just outside Le Balze's front gate in what's called the villino, attached to the wall but outside the Villa proper. It's reserved for the faculty member who comes each term from the main campus in DC. The rest of the staff, academic and curatorial, are all Florentines with their own places in and around the city. We alone live up here—and of course also not here.

The villino is older by several centuries than the villa, which was built in 1911-12. It's also a great deal more rustic than the big place. Five, narrow, rough-plastered rooms, and fairly primitive plumbing. The original owners of Le Balze housed extra staff here, the chauffeur, folks of that sort. And of course, in a real though never mentioned way, despite grand titles like *dottore* and *professore*, I am staff too. Which is certainly the impression left on me by my just concluded encounter in the dining room.

Le Balze was built by an American named Charles Augustus

Strong and donated to Georgetown by his only child, Margaret, by her first marriage the Marquesa de Cuevas, and by her second, the Marquesa de Larrain. In 1889 Strong, the star of his Harvard class, later a Columbia professor of philosophy, married Bessie Rockefeller, the oldest of John D. Sr's daughters. She was 23, a recent Vassar graduate. He was 27, a prize-winner, a soon-and-sure-to-be major figure in America philosophy. Their families were close friends. In fact, Charles' father, a Baptist minister, more or less functioned as the senior Rockefeller's spiritual advisor. Nevertheless, it was, by every account, a love match. So it should have worked out well for all concerned. But it didn't.

First, and with an odd abruptness, Charles lost his faith. That made him literally anathema to his father, and certainly unwelcome to his strictly observant father-in-law. And then Bessie had a mysterious but close to total breakdown, both physical and emotional. Charles surrendered his Columbia professorship. The couple went to live in Europe, ostensibly to seek better medical care for her, but also because Strong increasingly felt he needed to live in a world with no claims but those of thought. By 1906 Bessie was dead, leaving Strong at 38 with their only child, Margaret, born in 1897.

Despite pressure from the Rockefellers, Strong never returned to the States. Instead, in 1911, he was persuaded by two close friends, the literary philosopher George Santayana and the art connoisseur Bernard Berenson, to build for himself a villa in Fiesole, the hill town nearest to the north side of Florence, and not far from Berenson's soon-to-be very famous establishment, I Tatti. Strong's choice settled on an awkward lozenge of land catty-corner to the original Villa Medici, then occupied by his friend Lady Sybil Cutting and her daughter Iris, later the writer Iris Origo. He called it Le Balze, which means in Italian something like The Precipices or The Edges, or even The Ruffles, because it is literally dug out of the steep hillside slope in a series of man-made buttressing terraces.

To design the house Strong employed a neophyte British architect, Cecil Pinsent. Pinsent, just 25 years old at the time, had recently transformed the old farmhouse at I Tatti for Berenson, and he had also overseen some successful repairs to the genuinely Renaissance Villa Medici for Lady Sybil. For Le Balze's extensive gardens Pinsent joined forces with an equally young British ex-pat, Geof-

frey Scott, light on architecture but long on taste (and apparently on looks; five years later he became Lady Sybil's second husband). This clever pair of Edwardian dandies made Le Balze look, at least from a distance, as though it might have been around since the Medici.

The house itself, the villa proper, is long and narrow, large but by no means grand, plain almost to the point of ascetic, coated with biscuit-colored stucco, and topped by a red tile roof. Inside, off a long, vaulted corridor open the three principal rooms, a dining room, a *salone*, or music room, and a library. Five good-sized bedrooms above, with ensuite baths. Behind the dining room there's also a sizeable, two-storied service wing, with the kitchen in the basement, of course. Though generous in scale, the house doesn't have a public room that would pass muster in a millionaire mushroom suburb like Potomac, Maryland, let alone in a place like the Rockefellers' Tarrytown. Its gardens, however, through which I am now making my way, make Le Balze something genuinely extraordinary.

Gardens, not garden. To both east and west the house opens into a series of seven garden "rooms," most enclosed by either masonry or shrubbery or both, far lovelier and more distinguished than any of the rooms indoors. Each is designed in a different formal pattern, with different sorts of plantings. And though they are walled, arches open from one to the next, aligning double, often triple perspectives, of house, gardens, and Florence miles below. In addition, there's also a symmetrically planted ilex grove to the west, and beyond and below the grove two further acres of olive trees, *de rigueur* in any Tuscan country house. Finally, to top it all, literally, a giant exterior double staircase expands to the north.

It's with the stairs, one feels, that, having satisfied the philosophical Strong with the rigorously disciplined house and garden, the impish designers set out to please themselves. Every Baroque inch is covered in seashells and sponges, formed from *spugna*, a kind of petrified limestone. It climbs three flights of low, very broad steps, curving along the way around a deep, (again) sponge-clotted grotto where water plunges into a murky, fishy tank. Everywhere you look on and around the stairs, there are statues. Big ones: Venus, Bacchus, an anonymous philosopher, Triton mounted on an

oddly Japanese dolphin. Smaller ones: busts of ancient philosophers, several reclining river gods in bas-relief. The staircase ends, way up on the third story of the villino, at the Loggia, open to the broad Arno plain below.

Father and daughter moved into the house in 1913. I sometimes wonder if Strong named it Le Balze, not because of all those terraces but for the kind of peripheral, edgy life he and Margaret led here. By all accounts it was never even close to a happy place. In any case, Margaret soon left for an English boarding school. She never lived in the house again. Strong stayed for almost 30 years, alone except for a small staff, until his death in 1940. For much of that time he was confined to a wheelchair, completely without the use of his legs. Toward the end of her life Margaret kept an apartment in Florence but never spent a night in Le Balze, though she would come up regularly to have tea served in the gardens.

With no happy memories of the place she gladly gave it to Georgetown in 1979, shortly before her death. And when Maggie and I first lived here, the whole place, inside and out, was scrupulously maintained as a kind of living shrine to a past way of life. Ancient Dino, who had been her gardener, was still in charge. The Marchesa could have been in the next garden: *ci vuole una begonia, per piacere, Dino*. Even earlier, perhaps Henry James taking tea in the library with Berenson, Santayana and Strong. Strong's philosophy books were still on his library's shelves. The Marchesa's lamps, with their delicate, hand-painted shades, still on the consoles. And though most of the staff working then had not worked for the Strong's, they had been trained by the Strong's staff. We were even given the use of the Marchesa's box down in Florence's Teatro della Pergola.

But as I prowl among them now, I see that though the gardens are still maintained, much of the rest of the fabric is starting to crumble. Signs warning *Vietato*—Forbidden—crop up with increasing frequency the further you move from the main building. Indoors, I saw that Strong's library has given way to dog-eared volumes the students consult and haphazardly discard. The console tables are stained with cup rings. The Marchesa's lamps are nowhere to be found. And all the furniture has been prudently slip-covered in garish, stain-resistant plaids. We could easily be in any better col-

lege dorm. Dino is dead. And when I inquired, Marcell says no one remembers anything about the box at the Pergola.

San Gimignano

Back in the Villino Maggie and Cecilia have decided we should drive to much-towered San Gimignano, though it's already mid-afternoon. Cecilia's only here for the week. Then she heads to Boston to start her career as a lawyer. Naturally, we want to crowd as many good things into her week as we can. Our first time here she was 11 years old. The older members of the Villa staff, who remember the little girl with braces and pigtails, maintain this poised and elegant young woman cannot possibly be she. Most of the time I agree.

Despite the crowded Sunday roads, we head off with high hopes.

But first we have to brave the horrors of the plunge down the Via Vecchia Fiesolana, the road onto which the property opens. It's only one lane wide, and a narrow lane at that. And it is virtually vertical from start to finish. What's more, it twists. Which means that as you start down you begin to blow your horn and you don't stop blowing your horn until you get to the bottom so that any until-the-last-moment invisible car coming the other way will in time try to find a driveway or similar layby into which to duck as you hurtle past—calling out with defiance "*Tocca a me.*" My Turn! If this does not work—Pfffft. It's never less than terrifying and on a Sunday, with all the tourists out, it is almost suicidal.

Then, once out of Florence, it takes us about an hour to make our way there, but pretty much from the start San Gimignano is not the success for which we had hoped.

First of all, it's too damn hot. We arrived in winter last time, and winter that year was mild and beautiful. But summer in Tuscany this year, like summer in Tuscany every year, is infernal. Of course summer is supposed to end here in August. By rights we should by now be surrounded by hints of early autumn. But this year September continues to feel like August, scorched, mosquito plagued, and record-bashingly dry. Last night, walking the high Fiesole ramparts, we did feel a rare breeze surprise the stillness. Near me a young woman sighed, "*Ah, che bel vento.*" "Oh, what a beautiful