

BABY PINK

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THINK
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Rosie Huntington-Whiteley
BY KARL LAGERFELD

BAZAAR

ESCAPE

Edited by SASHA SLATER

TUSCAN DREAMS

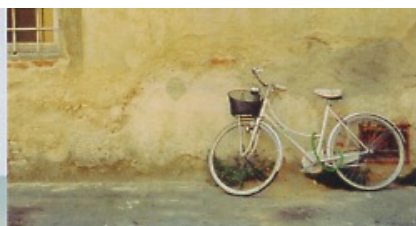
Julie Myerson rekindles her love affair with Florence.
Plus, Minnie Driver in Mexico; and fashion's favourite London hotels

A BRIDGE
WITH A VIEW
*The Ponte Vecchio over the
Arno River in Florence*

ESCAPE



Clockwise from left: Julie Myerson in 1979. The Ponte Vecchio in Florence. The city's ancient walls. A bike in a side street. Bottom: panforte in a bakery window. Opposite: the Duomo



RETURN TO SPLENDOR

Memories of falling in love with Florence as a teenage au pair persuaded JULIE MYERSON to revisit the city 35 years on

In February 1979, I went to work in Florence as an au pair.

I was 18 years old, my experience of going 'abroad' limited to a couple of school trips to France. All I knew were the rowdy, hormonal corridors of my all-girls school in Nottingham. I boarded the plane with no knowledge of Italian and clutching my great-aunt Hilda's ancient phrase book, which supplied a translation for 'I'd like my moustache waxed at both ends, please.' I woke next morning to find myself living in the Renaissance.

It was my gap year, yet 'gap year' does not begin to describe the effect those months in Italy had on me. Florence – its mysterious beauty and its ravishing art, the capellas and palazzos, the dull green snake of the Arno, sudden blue skies glimpsed from the antique gloom of a narrow street – turned my head and heart upside down. I walked among Botticellis and Michelangelos, met *contessas* and *principessas* and learnt to make myself (more-or-less) understood in a language that seemed to lend glamour and veracity to every mortal who spoke it. After the foggy, leaf-strewn streets of Nottingham, how could *Firenze* not have blown me away?

But it was more than that. The place – and perhaps the fact that I was so precariously, euphorically alone in it – changed me in ways that I took for granted then, but which now, more than 35 years later, I realise were profound. In all these years, probably only the births of my three children have surpassed, in intensity and momentousness, those few glorious, soul-changing months.

I've returned briefly once or twice, but it hasn't been enough. Thomas Wolfe famously said that you can't go home again, but I wanted to – I had to. Something about being 53: so much of life behind me, but feeling – oddly, disconcertingly – more and more these days like the raw, uncertain teenager I once was. Florence and

I were not finished. My husband was good enough to realise that this mattered to me, so we rented an apartment there for 18 luxuriously unhurried days.

Back in 1979, it wasn't all rosy. The first family used me as a slave-cum-cleaner, made me sleep in what amounted to a cupboard and, when I complained, confiscated my

passport. Miserable, but already far too smitten with the city to run home, I sought help from the nice lady at the British Consulate and, stealing back my passport, escaped to another, much happier job.

I was to look after the three-year-old grandson of a kindly and cultured half-English couple in Via de' Guicciardini. Their apartment – just over the Ponte Vecchio and next-door to Palazzo Pitti – looked out over the most beautiful garden I'd ever seen. I remember creeping over the wet gravel that first rainy morning – orange-trees dripping, statues, arches, the heady scent of jasmine on the damp morning air.

'One of the oldest gardens in Florence,' the woman at the gatehouse tells us now as we stand peering through the tall locked gates. 'Go on,' says Jonathan. 'Tell her you lived there.'

'I don't know,' I say, hesitating. 'What for?'

'She might let you go in.' But I'm not sure I want to go in. It's enough for now just to stand here. Next to this place – so eerily and

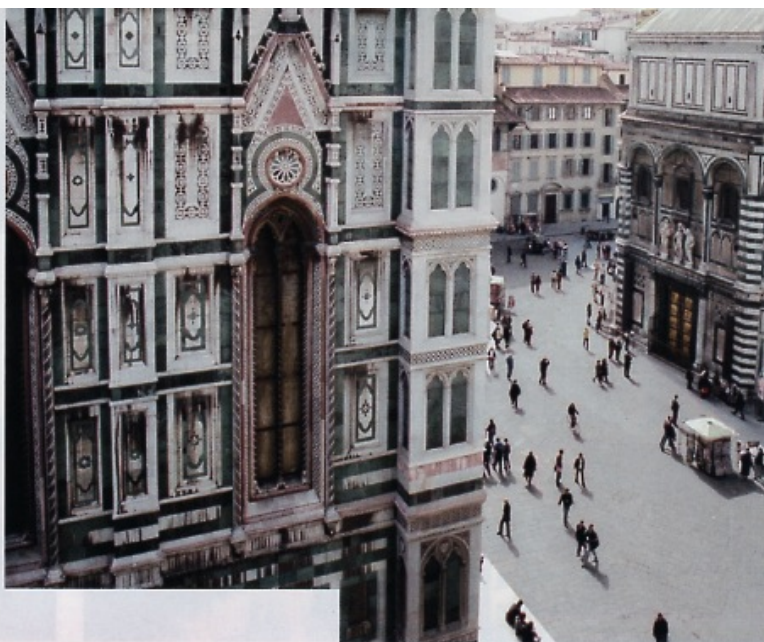
timelessly the same – my own five decades of living suddenly feel scattered and small. I remember being told back then that the Vasari Corridor – the 'secret' passage built so that the Medicis could make their way from Uffizi to Pitti without having to jostle with the plebs – ran along the other side of our



ESCAPE



Left: a doorway on a side street.
Right: Giotto's Campanile on the Piazza del Duomo.
Below: chalk pavement art.
Bottom: gelato



The sight of the humbug-striped church of San Miniato al Monte stirs a memory

sitting-room wall. Could it be true? Countless evenings, I'd find myself lifting my eyes from my book to gaze at that yellow wall, transfixed by the idea of the shadowy, historic space on the other side.

Back to 2013 and there are 98 steps (no lift) up to our little rented flat on Via dell'Ortiolo. The upside is our rooftop terrace – heart-snatching views, Brunelleschi's Duomo and Giotto's Campanile so close you feel you could reach out and stroke them. On the other side, Santa Croce and, beyond it, the humbug-striped church of San Miniato al Monte, nestled in the hills. The sight of that church, a regular haunt of mine in 1979, stirs a memory. 'Somewhere beyond it there was a dusty track that took you up through olive groves, until you came to this great big, rundown farmhouse. It had a library and a ballroom with old, faded frescoes. And cats and dogs and chickens everywhere. And a beautiful white horse...'

'Hold on,' Jonathan says. 'A ballroom? And a white horse? And you say you could walk there from San Miniato?'

'It belonged to this English lady – oh, what was her name? She'd lost her sense of taste and smell in a riding accident. And she wore her hair tied back with string and she let all these kids come and hang out in her kitchen and talk about literature and art and play guitars.'

Jonathan is laughing and I can't blame him. We try Googling but without names, not even for the house or the road, find nothing. But we do discover that it's possible to go into the Vasari Corridor. There are tours. 'We have to do it,' I say, unable to resist the looking-glass experience of finally being on the other side of that wall.

I wait outside our local *alimentari* while Jonathan buys bread, oil, wine. Light fast leaving the sky, shop shutters rattling down, cyclists rushing past, the far-off sob of a saxophone. Just down the street is the block where, in 1979, I took Italian lessons at the school for *stranieri*, repairing afterwards to a *caffè* with other foreign students. There

was a rebarbative elderly man called Signor Brossard. And two German girls – was one of them Helga? I especially remember a lively, bearded American called Jim. Could he have been the one who took me up to the old farmhouse?

'You need to forget about the farmhouse,' Jonathan says. 'Even if you did find it, what are you going to do? Knock on the door?'

'Back then the door was always open.'

'Yeah, yeah,' he says, smiling.

I lie awake that night listening to the forlorn dong-dong of the Campanile bell, remembering how one of the German girls once told Brossard – who bragged about being a published writer – to shut up. And wishing I could remember Jim's other name and wondering what happened to the lady with the white horse and, I suppose, also wondering what became of the girl from Nottingham with the growing-out perm and the red skirt and her whole life still ahead of her. Next morning, we eat breakfast at the cool – in both senses, since the air-conditioning is ferocious – Gucci Museo Caffè in Piazza della Signoria. Then we join a tour into the Vasari Corridor, where an energetic art-historian leads us down some steps from the crowded Uffizi Gallery – 'You ready? Here we go!' – and shuts the door.

The hush is startling. The silence has a dead, flat quality – a potent echo of the centuries when this place was kept closed against the outside world. And at first the corridor seems surprisingly wide. But then we're guided around a corner and the sight of the empty, narrow space, stretching spookily away off towards the Ponte Vecchio, is faintly shocking. Hundreds of pairs of eyes watching us – the walls are hung with self-portraits of several centuries of Old Masters. As we tiptoe along, we can peer down out of the tiny grille-covered windows at the street below and – almost obscenely – into the modest hotel opposite. An unmade bed. A T-shirt draped over a chair. It feels like spying. Is this how it was to be a Medici?

I am longing to find myself on the other side of our old apartment, but it turns out the last bit of the corridor is temporarily closed following a water leak. So near and yet so far. When we



finally emerge into the blazing heat and gaze up at the corridor's secret, empty eyes, it's hard to believe we were ever inside.

Back on our roof terrace, we drink Aperol spritzes and watch the sun sink behind the Duomo. Google has become a gateway to the past. Aimlessly fiddling around on my iPad, I put in 'Brossard - writer' and discover to my amazement that my irascible old classmate was telling the truth: 'Chandler Brossard, beat writer and poet.'

Next day we climb up the hill to San Miniato. The view down over Florence is misty, unreal. We go into the church with its high white walls covered in faded, primitive frescoes and sit for a while. Moments pass. 'I have no memory of being in here,' I whisper at last to Jonathan.

He shrugs. 'You can't expect to remember everything.'

'But I want to.'

Why? I don't know. We sit there for a while longer, but my mind won't play. It keeps on flying up and out of there and back to my children and London and our home, the close-knit, worrisome present of our lives, rather than the clean lines of the past.

And back in chilly London, when I'm thinking about something else entirely, the names of the farmhouse and its eccentric owner come back to me. A quick Google and I'm amazed to find that it all seems still to be there. The road. The farmhouse, still in its state of romantic disrepair. And, since there are photos taken by a granddaughter, possibly the woman herself. I also recall Jim's unusual surname - and can't decide whether I'm surprised that he stayed on in Italy and has been there all this time. I do think about making contact - but, in the end, I don't. Real life - and the present - take over and I let it slide.

The keenest memory of our stay is of the thunderstorm which, on our last night in the city, seemed to set the sky behind Santa Croce on fire. For a while, as the rain sheeted down, everything was obliterated. Hills, domes, pines, the stripes of San Miniato. The road that may have led to the farmhouse. The girl in the red skirt who may have left a part of herself out there. For a while, all of it was invisible, gone - we seemed to be looking out at nothing.



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LITTLE BLACK BOOK



Clockwise from above: the Giardino Dell'Iris botanical garden. A room at JK Place. Gucci handbags. The Florence skyline. A traditional food store



GIARDINO DELL'IRIS

Look out across the Arno Valley from this secret garden above the Piazzale Michelangelo. Inspired by Botticelli's *Primavera*, wander between olive-trees and the 2,500 varieties of iris that flower here in spring. Piazzale Michelangelo (www.irisfirenze.it/giardino.htm).

GELATERIA CARBE

Known to aficionados as the city's best *gelateria*, this small family-run parlour is famous for its fig-, almond- and pistachio-flavoured ice-creams.

60r Via Ricasoli (+39 055 289 476; www.gelatocarabe.com).

JK PLACE

Positioned on the Piazza di Santa Maria Novella, the contemporary 20-room JK Place feels more like a private palazzo than a hotel.

Enjoy unparalleled views of Brunelleschi's Duomo from your bathtub or sip amber negronis on the terrazzo.

7 Piazza di Santa Maria Novella (+39 055 264 5181; jkplace.com).

HOTEL CONTINENTALE

Owned by the Ferragamo family, this Fifties-style boutique hotel is well placed in the centre of town between the Piazza della Signoria and the Duomo. Its teak terrace bar, with views across the Ponte Vecchio, is particularly special.

6r Vicolo dell'Oro (+39 055 2726 5806; www.lungarnocollection.com).

GUCCI MUSEO

Head to the Palazzo della Signoria and discover the legacy inside. From the iconic bamboo-handled bags to the elegant red-carpet dresses and famous Flora prints, the museum's permanent display proves why Gucci is so much a part of the Florentine cultural canon.

10 Piazza della Signoria (+39 055 7592 3300; www.gucci.com). □

