Elizabeth Spencer

Eudora Welty describes her fellow Mississippian Elizabeth Spencer as “a kind of smiling sibyl,” writing fiction of “width, depth, and shapeliness.” Her settings range from her native South to Venice, Florence, Rome, and Montreal. In the Introduction to her best-known novel, The Light in the Piazza, a love story in which the chiaroscuro of Florence is a main character, she remembers her first encounter with the country that also figures as the romantic center of the story set in Rome, “The White Azalea.” “There’s a second country for everybody,” she says, “one way or another. First and last, for me it was Italy.”

FROM THE LIGHT IN THE PIAZZA

INTRODUCTION

The first time I saw Italy was in August of 1949, and I was half-asleep. It was the third, final month of my first summer abroad, my first trip to Europe. I had undertaken the venture on the modest proceeds of my first novel and the invitation from a close friend to visit her in Germany, where she had been working for three years with the American occupation. Except for a happy time I had spent in Paris while waiting for my permit to enter Germany, I had had so far little to rejoice about. To my friend and her fiancé, who tried their best to see that I “had a good time,” I must have seemed hopelessly uninitiated to the moral rigors of postwar Europe. To them I must have been like a chirpy sparrow, flitting by accident through the horrors of a Max Ernst painting. I can see that now. My country training, for instance, had made me view all visits as a little like house parties—a bad mistake. While they worked daily in their government offices, in cloudy Bad Nauheim, I hung around the empty apartment a friend of theirs had lent me, reading, or walked in the village, knowing scarcely a word of German. I shivered at the pool. What, besides the temperature, was the difference between this and a dull summer in some little Southern town? There, at least, friends might call and come. I took to riding horses at a local stable, and so met a young Viennese who began to ask me out. He, too, was at loose ends, waiting for a work permit. My friends rose up with disapproval and suspicion. Who was he? What did he want? Mississippi old maids a dozen years back had cut up this way. I had to give up a pleasant friendship. My friends had worked in Nuremberg during the trials, and in this and many other episodes, they must have been right, as my life so far, they pointed out, had not got me prepared for things there.

All miseries end. This one ended for us all three when my pass ran out. I had a month to spend somewhere. What to do? Drearily (Germany had got to me, too) I agreed that the best choice was Italy. There might at least, I thought, be some sun. I came down on the night train to Milan.

Sun.
In the predawn light, I crept by taxi through the kind of bombed-out area I had become used to seeing in German towns. I wondered, as I looked the door to my hotel room in a bare new structure that still smelled of fresh cement, if I shouldn't go back to Paris after a few days and see people there again before my return. It had been the one happy time, with little French restaurants to discover and the sights to see, picnics in the Bois de Fontainebleau and evenings at the Deux Magots. With this resolve, I slept and woke. Breakfast came up. Coffee such as I had never known before—rich, smooth and hot. Tender croissants. Gobs of butter and jam. I pulled a blind. Sun poured into the room. I opened a window. Singing came up from the streets. All this in a vanquished city whose horrors of so short a time ago must linger still! Still unbelieving, I went out, found my way to the cathedral, bought a guidebook, wandered, fed pigeons at a café in a piazza. I smiled and talked to beautiful, smiling people without knowing a word they said. Well, maybe a little. "Americana?" "St." That was easy.

As was much else. That entire month I never carried my own bag, or lacked for a guide. Waiters guessed what I might like and brought it; workmen stopped building new walls to show the way to galleries and palaces. Sitting in the sun at that happy day's end, I felt that life had begun once more. If my friends in Germany had been stationed in Italy, I wondered, would things have been different? So pondering, I walked around till a certain truth dawned. I could think whatever I liked about anybody or anything, but everywhere around me Italy was making its first great statement. If I have dwelt too much here on that unfortunate time in Germany, it was only as a preface to Italy, only to show that there was never a heart more ready for Italy to impress it. And the measure of what Italy could do was astounding, and simply cannot to this day be taken.

From Milan I went to Verona, to another hotel, breakfast and guidebook—but this time as I went about the streets of that softly lyrical town, I became at every step more aware of what beauty was being cast up at me, regular and almost as rhythmic as the waves of the sea, on every side, at every turning. And all in the open, outside! A small-town Southerner is not apt to be ignorant of architecture, but I had never before thought of statues and fountains as accepted ornaments of life—its daily dress—to be enjoyed by everyone from moment to moment, mingling with the talk and bargaining and breath of life, with sunshine. If you try hard enough, even after many years, the chances are that you can reconstruct a good deal of everything that has happened. (I still remember, for instance, the look of my room in Milan that first night, and the smell of recent cement work.) But I cannot reconstruct anything from my first day in Verona but my own dazed feelings. I can recall my wanderings of that day as a kind of drunkenness, all this on perhaps one glass of wine at a lunch I cannot remember eating. I do know that under orders from my old Baedeker, I trodged to the outskirts of the town to see that (starred and not to be missed) Church of S. Zeno. I remember walking across the hard stones of the old square before the church, with its bare curving sweep of romanesque façade tawny in the fall of the strong afternoon sun, and how I realized that anyone would have to feel its nobility. I saw then that what had been kept from me by a too strict Protestant upbringing was true—that art can express religious emotion more truly than any sermon. Much later I saw this very church in a beautiful English movie of Romeo and Juliet. If that story happened at all, it must have happened there. Then Venice... Florence... Siena... Rome... How to get it all down! It was all crammed, and not just with churches and palaces, galleries, piazzas, mosaics and frescoes, but also with people, a montage of remembered faces. Florence especially had (in addition to Michelangelo, Botticelli and all the rest) a free and lively feeling about it that year, an airiness that was all ease and rightness. In recent times I have been there, tourists seem about to carry it off, like troopings multitudes of ants methodically lifting whole the carcase of a wonderful beast. But not so in that early postwar year. Italians were glad to be alive in a life that was possible to live, and their gladness filled the air and reached out to all corners. All the dancing and romancing, the easy friendships and dates, meetings and partings, may seem frivolous to talk about—though there's not much wrong with frivolity. God knows—but it was more than that that one felt in France and Italy in those days. It had come up out of the inferno just endured; it was a resurrection. Maybe it never reached Germany at all. But it had taken up headquarters in Italy.
In Rome, a young Canadian who often ate at the same restaurant as I, asked me to the opera in the Baths of Caracalla. It was Berliner’s The Damnation of Faust. Every bit as ignorant as my friends in Germany believed, I loved the spectacle with little knowledge of what was going on. It was drama beneath the stars with attendant ruins and cypresses against a velvet Roman sky. We walked back along the Via Appia at midnight, holding hands.

Time to go! Oh, NO!!!

Back to a few days in Paris, retellings of everything, running into friends from the boat, evenings at the Deux Magots. Germany was almost forgotten except for the countryside, fairytale with some dark magic about it that seemed not to have heard of the war. The friendship on which I had based so much hope faded. But instead I had Italy, and the resolve to go back there when and how I could.

Four years later, with another novel published and the warm recognition of a Guggenheim Fellowship, I had my chance. I would spend a year there, I told myself, and finish a novel I had begun. But I met my husband in Rome and the year stretched out to two, then with marriage, to five in all. Even after we moved to Canada, I continued to visialize Italy, to see, as it were, by Italian light. . . . Not everything, of course, that came after that magic summer of 1949 was good or even pleasant. Italy is a poor country where life is hard. Not all Italians are helpful and charming. Not everything is a delight. Illusion is, for one thing, that which comes before disillusion.

But Italy, not being an illusion, remains. It is itself the true measure of whatever is said or done or written about it. One can hope to rise up against that measure, but, failing that, at least to be seen by that light.

Montréal, Québec
October 1957

THE WHITE AZALEA

Two letters had arrived for Miss Theresa Stubblefield: she put them in her bag. She would not stop to read them in American Express, as many were doing, sitting on benches or leaning against the walls, but pushed her way out into the street. This was her first day in Rome and it was June.

An enormous sky of the most delicate blue arched overhead. In her mind’s eye—her imagination responding fully, almost exhaustingly, to these shores’ peculiar powers of stimulation—she saw the city as from above, telescoped on its great bare plains that the ruins marked, aqueducts and tombs, here a cypress, there a pine, and all round the low blue hills. Pictures in old Latin books returned to her: the Appian Way Today, the Colosseum, the Arch of Constantine. She would see them, looking just as they had in the books, and this would make up a part of her delight. Moreover, nursing various stubblefields—her aunt, then her mother, then her father—through their lengthy illnesses (everybody could tell you the Stubblefields were always sick), Theresa had had a chance to read quite a lot. England, France, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy had all been rendered for her time and again, and between the prescribed hours of pills and tonics, she had conceived a dreamy passion by lamplight, to see all these places with her own eyes. The very night after her father’s funeral she had thought, though never admitted to a soul. Now I can go. There’s nothing to stop me now. So here it was, here was Italy, anyway, and terribly noisy.

In the street the traffic was really frightening. Cars, taxies, buses, and motor scooters all went plunging at once down the narrow length of it or swerving perilously around a fountain. Shouts of tourists went by her in national groups—English schoolgirls in blue uniforms, German boys with cameras attached, smartly dressed Americans looking in shop windows. Glad to be alone, Theresa climbed the splendid outdoor staircase that opened to her left. The Spanish Steps.

Something special was going on here just now—the annual display of azalea planes. She had heard about it the night before at her hotel. It was not yet complete: workmen were unloading the potted plants from a truck and placing them in banked rows on the steps above. The azaleas were as large as shrubs, and their myriad blooms, many still tight in the bud, ranged in color from purple through fuchsia and rose to the palest pink, along with many white ones too. Marvellous, thought Theresa, climbing in her pretty, well-bred way, for she was someone who had learned that if you
only move slowly enough you have time to notice everything. In Rome, all over Europe, she intended to move very slowly indeed.

Halfway up the staircase she stopped and sat down. Other people were doing it, too, sitting all along the wide banisters and leaning over the parapets above, watching the azaleas mass, or just enjoying the sun. Theresa sat with her letters in her lap, breathing Mediterranean air. The sun warmed her, as it seemed to be warming everything, perhaps even the underside of stones or the chill insides of churches. She loosened her tweed jacket and smoked a cigarette. Content . . . excited; how could you be both at once? Strange, but she was. Presently, she picked up the first of the letters.

A few moments later her hands were trembling and her brow had contracted with anxiety and dismay. Of course, one of them would have to go and do this! Poor Cousin Elec, she thought, tears rising to sting in the sun, but why couldn’t he have arranged to live through the summer? And how on earth did I ever get this letter anyway?

She had reason indeed to wonder how the letter had managed to find her. Her Cousin Emma Carraway had written it, in her loose high old lady’s script—t’s carefully crossed, but I’s inclined to wobble like an old car on the downward slope. Cousin Emma had simply put Miss Theresa Stubblefield, Rome, Italy, on the envelope, had walked up to the post office in Tuxapoka, Alabama, and mailed it with as much confidence as if it had been a birthday card to her next-door neighbor. No return address whatsoever. Somebody had scrawled American Express, Piazza di Spagna? across the envelope, and now Theresa had it, all as easily as if she had been the President of the Republic or the Pope. Inside were all the things they thought she ought to know concerning the last illness, death, and burial of Cousin Alexander Carraway.

Cousin Emma and Cousin Elec, brother and sister—unmarried, devoted, aging—had lived next door to the Stubblefields in Tuxapoka from time immemorial until the Stubblefields had moved to Montgomery fifteen years ago. Two days before he was taken sick, Cousin Elec was out worrying about what too much rain might do to his sweetpeas, and Cousin Elec had always preserved in the top drawer of his secretary a mother-of-pearl paper knife which Theresa had coveted as a child and which he had promised she could have when he died. I’m supposed to care as much now as then, as much here as there, she realized, with a sigh. This letter would have got to me if she hadn’t even put Rome, Italy, on it.

She refolded the letter, replaced it in its envelope, and turned with relief to one from her brother George.

But alack, George, when he had written, had only just returned from going to Tuxapoka to Cousin Elec’s funeral. He was full of heavy family reminiscence. All the fine old stock was dying out, look at the world today. His own children had suffered from the weakening of those values which he and Theresa had always taken for granted, and as for his grandchildren (he had one son so far, still in diapers), he shuddered to think that the true meaning of character might never dawn on them at all. A life of gentility and principle such as Cousin Elec had lived had to be known at first hand.

Poor George! The only boy, the family darling. Together with her mother, both of them tense with worry lest things should somehow go wrong, Theresa had seen him through the right college, into the right fraternity, and though pursued by various girls and various mamas of girls, safely married to the right sort, however much in the early years of that match his wife, Anne, had not seemed to understand poor George. Could it just be, Theresa wondered, that Anne had understood only too well, and that George all along was extraordinary only in the degree to which he was dull?

As for Cousin Alexander Carraway, the only thing Theresa could remember at the moment about him (except his paper knife) was that he had had exceptionally long hands and feet and one night about one o’clock in the morning the whole Stubblefield family had been aroused to go next door at Cousin Emma’s call—first Papa, then Mother, then Theresa and George. There they all did their uttermost to help Cousin Elec get a cramp out of his foot. He had hobbled downstairs into the parlor, in his agony, and was sitting, wrapped in his bathrobe, on a footstool. He held his long clenched foot in both hands, and this and his contorted face—he was trying heroically not to cry out—made him look like a large skinny old monkey. They all surrounded him, the family circle, Theresa and George as solemn as if they were watching the cat have kittens, and Cousin Emma running back and forth with a
kettle of hot water which she poured steaming into a white enameled pan. "Can you think of anything to do?" she kept repeating. "I hate to call the doctor but if this keeps up I'll just have to! Can you think of anything to do?" "You might treat it like hiccups," said Papa. "Drop a cold key down his back." "I just hope this happens to you someday," said Cousin Elec, who was not at his best. "Poor Cousin Elec," George said. He was younger than Theresa: she remembered looking down and seeing his great round eyes, while at the same time she was dimly aware that her mother and father were not unmoved. "Poor Cousin Elec."

Now, here they both were, still the same, George full of round-eyed woe, and Cousin Emma in despair. Theresa shifted to a new page.

"Of course [George's letter continued], there are practical problems to be considered. Cousin Emma is alone in that big old house and won't hear to parting from it. Robbie and Beryl tried their best to persuade her to come and stay with them, and Anne and I have told her she's more than welcome here, but I think she feels that she might be an imposition, especially as long as our Rosie is still in high school. The other possibility is to make arrangements for her to let out one or two of the rooms to some teacher of good family or one of those solitary old ladies that Tuxapoka is populated with—Miss Edna Whittaker, for example. But there is more in this than meets the eye. A new bathroom would certainly have to be put in. The wallpaper in the back bedroom is literally crumbling off..." (Theresa skipped a page of details about the house.) "I hope if you have any ideas along these lines you will write me about them. I may settle on some makeshift arrangements for the summer and wait until you return in the fall so we can work out together the best..."

I really shouldn't have smoked a cigarette so early in the day, thought Theresa, it always makes me sick. I'll start sneezing in a minute, sitting on these cold steps. She got up, standing uncertainly for a moment, then moving aside to let go past her, talking, a group of young men. They wore shoes with pointed toes, odd to American eyes, and narrow trousers, and their hair looked unnaturally black and slick. Yet here they were obviously thought to be handsome, and felt themselves to be so. Just then a man approached her with a tray of cheap camoes, Parker fountain pens, rosaries, papal portraits. "No," said Theresa. "No, not" she said. The man did not wish to leave. He knew how to spread himself against the borders of the space that had to separate them. Cartrozza rides in the park, the Colosseum by moonlight, he specialized... Theresa turned away to escape, and climbed to a higher landing where the steps divided in twob. There she walked to the far left and leaned on a vacant section of banister, while the vendor picked himself another well-dressed American lady, carrying a camera and a handsome alligator bag, ascending the steps alone. Was he ever successful, Theresa wondered. The lady with the alligator bag registered interest, doubt, then indignation; at last, alarm. She cast about as though looking for a policeman: this really shouldn't be allowed! Finally, she scurried away up the steps.

Theresa Stubblefield, still holding the family letters in one hand, realized that her whole trip to Europe was viewed in family circles as an interlude between Cousin Elec's death and "doing something" about Cousin Emma. They were even, Anne and George, probably thinking themselves very considerate in not hinting that she really should cut out "one or two countries" and come home in August to get Cousin Emma's house ready before the teachers came to Tuxapoka in September. Of course, it wasn't Anne and George's fault that one family crisis seemed to follow another, and weren't they always emphasizing that they really didn't know what they would do without Theresa? The trouble is, Theresa thought, that while everything that happens there is supposed to matter supremely, nothing here is supposed even to exist. They would not care if all of Europe were to sink into the ocean tomorrow. It never registered with them that I had time to read all of Balzac, Dickens, and Stendhal while Papa was dying, not to mention everything in the city library after Mother's operation. It would have been exactly the same to them if I had read through all twenty-six volumes of Elsie Dinsmore.

She arranged the letters carefully, one on top of the other. Then, with a motion so suddenly violent that she amazed herself, she tore them in two.

"Signora?"

She became aware that two Italian workmen, carrying a large
azalea pot, were standing before her and wanted her to move so that they could begin arranging a new row of the display.

"Mi déjaice, signora, ma... iziscommod..."

"Oh... pot it there!" She indicated a spot a little distance away. They did not understand. "Ponere... là."

A little Latin, a little French. How one got along! The workmen exchanged a glance, a shrug. Then they obeyed her. "Va bene, signora." They laughed as they returned down the steps in the sun.

Theresa was still holding the torn letters, half in either hand, and the flush was fading slowly from her brow. What a strong feeling had shaken her! She observed the irregular edges of paper, so crudely wrenched apart, and began to feel guilty. The Stubblefields, it was true, were proud and prominent, but how thin, how vulnerable was that pride it was so easy to prove, and how local was that prominence there was really no need to tell even them. But none could ever deny that the Stubblefields meant well; no one had ever challenged that the Stubblefields were good. Now out of their very letters, their sorrowful eyes, full of gentleness and principle, appeared to be regarding Theresa, one of their own who had turned against them, and soft voices, so ready to forgive all, seemed to be saying, "Oh, Theresa, how could you?"

Wan't that exactly what they had said when, as a girl, she had fallen in love with Charlie Wharton, whose father had unfortunately been in the pen? Ever so softly, ever so distantly: "Oh, Theresa, how could you?" Never mind. That was long ago, over and done with, and right now something clearly had to be done about these letters.

Theresa moved forward, and leaning down she dropped the torn sheets into the azalea pot which the workmen had just left. But the matter was not so easily settled. What if the letters should blow away? One could not bear the thought of that which was personal to the Stubblefields chaining out on the steps where everyone passed, or maybe even into the piazza below to be run over by a motor scooter, walked over by the common herd, spit upon, picked up and read, or—worst of all—returned to American Express by some conscienceous tourist, where tomorrow, filthy, crumpled, bedraggled, but still legible, faithfully relating Cousin Elec's death and Cousin Emma's grief, they might be produced to confute her.

Theresa moved a little closer to the azalea pot and sat down beside it. She covered the letters deftly, smoothing the earth above them and making sure that no trace of paper showed above the ground. The corner of Cousin Emma's envelope caught on a root and had to be shoved under, a painful moment, as if a letter could feel anything—how absurd! Then Theresa realized, straightening up and rubbing dirt off her hand with a piece of Kleenex from her bag, that it was not the letters but the Stubblefields that she had torn apart and consigned to the earth. This was certainly the only explanation of why the whole curious sequence, now that it was complete, had made her feel so marvelously much better.

Well, I declare! Theresa thought, astonished at herself, and in that moment it was as though she stood before the statue of some heroic classical woman whose dagger dripped with sticky blood. My goodness! she thought, drowning in those blank exalted eyelids. Me!

So thrilled she could not, for a time, move on, she stood noting that this particular azalea was one of exceptional beauty. It was white, in outline as symmetrically developed as an oak tree, and blooming in every part with a ruffled, lacy purity. The azalea was, moreover, Theresa recalled, a Southern flower, one especially cultivated in Alabama. Why, the finest in the world were said to grow in Bellingrath Gardens near Mobile, though probably they had not heard about that in Rome.

Now Miss Theresa Stubblefield descended quickly, down, down, toward the swarming square, down toward the fountain and all the racket, into the Roman crowd. There she was lost at once in the swirl, nameless, anonymous, one more nice rich American tourist lady.

But she cast one last glance back to where the white azaleas stood, blooming among all the others. By now the stone of the great staircase was all but covered over. A group of young priests in scarlet cassocks went past, mounting with rapid, forward energy, weaving their way vividly aloft among the massed flowers. At the top of the steps the twin towers of a church rose, standing clearly outlined on the blue air. Some large white clouds, charged with pearly light, were passing overhead at a slow imperial pace.

Well, it certainly is beyond a doubt the most beautiful family funeral of them all! thought Theresa. And if they should ever object
to what I did to them, she thought, recalling the stone giantess with her dagger and the gouts of blood hanging thick and gravid upon it, they’re only to read a little and learn that there have been those in my position who haven’t acted so half so considerate a way.

For the Literary Traveler

Rome stirs the memory, and memory may be the same thing as desire itself. The women in Edith Wharton’s “Roman Fever” remember the eros past; George Eliot’s Dorothea desires what or whom she cannot name; Elizabeth Spencer’s Theresa Stubblefield regrets and resolves. Where she is standing helps her to read the significance of her family against the background of her loveless past viewed from the beautiful height of the SCALINATA or SPANISH STEPS, a life without passion looks in retrospect like the death she reads about in the letter from home. Theresa has walked a half block north from the American Express office and stops to read her letter on the Steps that contrast the PIAZZA DI SPAGNA with the twin towers of the church of SANTA MARIA DEI MONI at the top. With the water flowing in Pietro (the elder) Bernini’s baroque-shaped fountain (FONTANA DELLA BARACCA), the people swarming in every direction, and the sun lighting the golden and pink salmon façades of the handsome palazzos behind a screen of palm trees, the piazza moves with an ecstasy of its own. Pots of azalea, that in the story promise resurrection, cover the Steps in spring. Eavan Boland describes Piazza di Spagna and the Baracca in Rome and a Vita: “A sunken boat, ... co-image with the flowers on the steps a few feet away; water falls from various tongues and spigots in the boat,...” Matterially in motion in the key of celebration defines Piazza di Spagna. It’s up to the reader whether Spencer means to suggest the life of the imagination as integral to a passionate life by setting the story at the center of the artistic and literary world of Rome. The HOUSE OF JOHN KEATS (NO. 26 on the Piazza) is open to visitors; for centuries writers and artists lived and worked in this neighborhood—artists still do in the nearby VIA MARCUTIA and VIA DEL SABBION at the northwestern end of the Piazza.