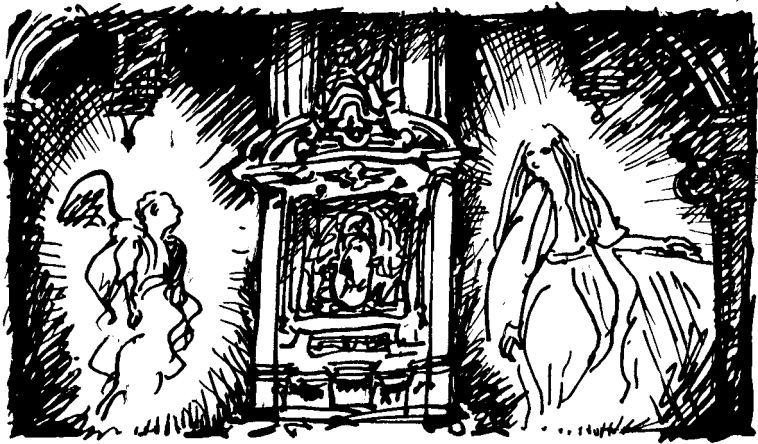


ADVENTURES IN TIME TRAVEL

Historical fiction by the winners of
the Young Walter Scott Prize 2020





WHAT FIORE SAW

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Highly commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize
11-15 category

Author's introduction

My story was inspired by Pontormo's Annunciation in the church of Santa Felicita. Of all the paintings in Florence, none moved me more than this relatively little-known work – hidden in a locked side-chapel in a tiny church and lit only by my coin in the machine. I was haunted by a need to understand how the historical moment of its creation contributed to its emotional power.

It was painted during a time of crisis when the Italian republics, until recently the cultural and financial heart of Europe, and spaces of new modern freedom, were being subdued one by one by foreign powers. In 1527 Rome was brutally sacked by the army of the Holy Roman Emperor.

Florence still clung to its freedom, and took advantage of the chaos after the sack to declare itself a republic for the last time, with Niccolò Capponi as leader.

The republic lasted only two years, during which time the Capponi family commissioned Pontormo's painting. In 1529, Florence fell to Charles V, becoming a client state of the Holy Roman Empire. This was effectively the end of the Italian Renaissance.

The melancholy Jacopo Pontormo was one of the first mannerist painters. Mannerist art looks back at the confidence and balance of the High Renaissance from a perspective of tension and instability.

Vasari recounts how Pontormo lived alone with a ladder to his room that he could pull up after himself. "...His bizarre and fantastic brain never rested content... he was so afraid of death that he would not hear it spoken of...solitary beyond all belief. At times, going out to work, he set himself to think so profoundly on what he was to do, that he went away without having done anything all day but stand thinking."

The patronage of the Medici in Florence had raised the status of artists and thinkers from humble artisans to prophets and guides, and given them space to neglect material concerns and stand around thinking. But for the ordinary people of the city and the surrounding countryside, life and work went on much as it had for centuries, with little regard to the fact that they were at the epicentre of a historical epoch. The Renaissance, which seems to us an era of mythical grandeur, had humanist ideas about the glorification of ordinary humanity at its heart. I wanted to write about a moment in an ordinary girl's everyday life when these two perspectives intersected.

Santa Felicita was the patron saint of women who had lost a child.

La Vacca, "the cow", was a large bell in the Palazzo della Signoria's Arnolfo tower. It summoned the citizens of Florence to take their part in the democracy of the city, and was a symbol of republican pride. When the king of France threatened Florence with military subjection in 1494, Piero Capponi replied, "if you sound your war trumpets, we will ring our bell." The Vacca was eventually melted down by Duke Alessandro to demonstrate his domination over the city.

WHAT FIORE SAW

Florence, 1569

All still. Only motes dancing, playing in a shaft of wan gold. Faintly falling, settling softly.

The children pattered in on either side of their mother.

Fiore followed behind.

The clear smooth floor of an aisle always seemed to make little Lilo want to run, in spite of hard words after.

Pippa put two small hands on his shoulders and hauled him back. 'It's God's house!' she whispered, shaking her curls fiercely. 'Into the chapel! Brunelleschi made it,' she added, proud of knowing. 'Nonna said. You know who he is, Lilo? He built the great dome!'

Lilo was peering into the dimmer chapel. His mouth opened into a perfect tiny circle as he looked up at the fresco, his eyes growing as round.

'Who is it?'

'You naughty thing!' said Pippa. 'It's the Blessed Virgin – and the Angel Gabriele there! Say a prayer now.'

The children knelt, eyes fixed on the semblance of sunlight on the wall and the tremulous turning face of the Madonna.

By candlelight, the fresco was different from Fiore's memory.

It was not her custom to remember often. But now she saw one October evening in her mind's eye, and did not blink it away.

The light dripping very quiet and slow like honey; the olive groves sweet-smelling, with the harvesters homeward bound. A few still remaining, singing at their work – one calling to her that it was a fine season.

She had brought a knife for the bristling ox-tongue growing strong about San Miniato. Here was navelwort clinging to the moss, quenching leaves as small and round as soldi. She put one into her mouth, letting it lie on her tongue for a moment like Christ's body at the Mass, before she bit.

Always about the feast of San Michele the green things grew young

again, even as the sun fled. It was like another spring, one that promised nothing but lengthening shadows, the earth drifting asleep instead of waking.

Borage, dandelion, and ears-of-the-hare, fresh and bright and bitter. Fiore squashed them into the basket with both hands, but still she wanted more, and gathered the rest into her gown.

Her back ached with stooping, and she enjoyed the moment of straightening as she began to knot her skirt, sun gentle on her face.

She turned to the valley, dim and warm as a womb, with Florence lying safe, caressed by the muscle of the hills.

The Arno slipped silverly, doubling its bridges; palazzi along the water bathed in a glow, the crowned tower rising proud. The dome, like a ripe perfect apricot, above all.

Fiore paused in the breath of light, holding the tails of her unfinished knot. She looked forward to the first mouthful of salad, crisp beneath a silky slick of new oil, singing with all the most savoury memories of a summer well past. It would bring pleasure to Mama's tired face. Bello would call it bitter, screwing up his little nose, cheeks dimpled like a ripe hazelnut, but enjoy it still. She was not tired at all for the walk home, but happy to be still.

As she watched, the cupola of the Duomo gave a quick dancing spark, as you see sometimes in eyes.

'Madonna!'

A man's voice! Half the dandelions went spilling down the moss. It was too vexing...she bent to gather up the toothed leaves.

'Madonna!' A voice urgent as the pealing of the Vacca. A hand on her arm – she started round.

It was a young man with hungry eyes, whose face had the pale, hollow life of the statues that looked down from the campanile.

'You saw it!'

His eyes burnt deep into her face. She ought to drop her own, and she wanted to – but her gaze was fixed by his.

'I was only looking at...our city,' she said.

‘I have seen this in dreams,’ he cried, hands eagerly twisting the air in front of her into wild shapes, ‘but always, in waking, the memory fades before I comprehend. I never thought to see it on a living face! You must come with me.’

‘Are you mad, messer?’

‘I beg you! You cannot go away from me as if it had never been! Come, I will take you only to a holy place.’

‘I am sorry.’

There was quick terror in his face. He reached out a hand towards her. ‘You must come – you must understand. Not to the workshop – to a holy place!’

Fiore felt bound to go, in mere Christian pity, for it was as though he meant to fall at her feet and die; and she knew she would not be missed at home a while yet. But it was madness.

‘You will tell no one?’ she said.

‘How could I ever tell of such in words?’

Her heart was throbbing in her mouth as she followed at a seemingly distance. Down to the city, between the shadows of the cypresses beckoning on the night.

Arnolfo’s tower rose above the roofs like a clock’s hand, the light blinking on the little golden lion.

Through the Porta San Miniato. The sun was almost gone from the streets, the yellow stone of the old wall soaking up the last of it, like four-days old bread finding oil from the latest press at the bottom of a bowl.

Down the Via de’ Bardi. She thanked the Virgin it was so quiet. From faraway came the sad sound of drunken singing: “roses and violets, all in the Spring... let he who will be gay, for the day will never stay.”

By Santa Felicita he stopped.

‘Is not the chapel being adorned for Messer Capponi?’ said Fiore, by way of saying something, so that he did not stare at her silently.

“When the sun shall set in the East, and rise again in the West, thou with thy love may rest...” sang the drunkard.

‘I have been set the work,’ he said. ‘I thought I never could undertake the annunciation – I thought all vain – until I saw you.’

The chapel was cool and clean enough to keep cheeses in, with a small, sweet-curving dome.

Fiore stared at the great fresco on the wall; Christ just taken from the cross, pale and painfully dead, and a multitude of figures with the saddest faces and bodies twisted in glowing torment. They were so close, as though they wanted her to come and writhe among them, and yet there was no place for a basket of greens in their world without weight.

Her companion had turned to the wall still blank.

‘There the annunciation will be.’ He waved a hand to one side of the narrow window. ‘Now I have seen the moment with these very eyes – I understand how the Virgin Mother must be – turning – with the light on your face!’

‘Mine, messer?’

‘I saw you receive it! I must take your likeness direct onto the wall. Turn a little to the side – as you did on the hill. You saw it – God’s miracle – our miracle – Florence!’

The echo returned his words – flat, drained of eagerness.

The air shivered. It was as though the Vacca should peal with all the breath in full brazen lungs, and not one citizen rush out in answer – piazzas empty, the ranked palazzi looking at nothing, their windows barred and shuttered.

‘Where is the light?’ he cried.

He was white, lip caught between his teeth, brows bent together. Fiore flinched from his gaze, and looked at the black and white tiles, wearily repeating their pattern at her feet.

‘How can you be so changed? What you saw is not gone! Parting perhaps – not gone – not yet! Pray, look as you did.’

‘Messer, I cannot tell how!’

A nightmare in his face, as if he watched the recognition fade from the eyes of someone beloved and dying. She must change that look.

She tried to remember the moment by San Miniato. She had been thinking of her skirt full of green things. She had stood up to relieve the ache in her back, and looked into the valley of the Arno.

The sun low enough to take in through the corner of her eye, and the roofs still warm in the last light. The palazzo tower calling bravely to the sky. The Duomo like another sun that could not set.

Two suns, as sometimes on the surface of water.

The gleam of the cupola.

She frowned. The image was dimming, and instead she saw the face of the painter. A single tear gleamed in his eye.

‘Then – it was as if I saw it again.’ His sadness seemed drawn from the deepest well. ‘I saw it...fade. What shall I do?’

‘You must paint me as best you can,’ said Fiore. Now she felt sure she understood better than he. ‘There is no help for it. Was not the blessed mother a woman born, with a woman’s feelings, fleeting with the waning hours?’

‘The light is gone!’

‘There is never much of sunlight in a chapel; see how small the window. You can paint light, cannot you? We must light candles and ask a blessing, and you will paint light from a setting sun.’ She was speaking to him the way she did to little Bello. ‘The sun was going down! That is why it looked so clear and gentle.’

Day after day, she stole down to the chapel, and stood where he asked. She looked in fascination at the flickering lines he traced out. Some seemed to be her shadow, but others were strangely unlike – though she never told him so. Perhaps she was wrong; she had no Venetian glass, and had seen her own face only in pools after rain.

She told him at last she could not keep coming, or she would be found out. She felt sorry at the thought she would never see him again; but then there was life to go on with. He kissed her hand and said he would never cease from seeing her face, and they parted.

It all felt very like a dream after, and when she heard that Messer Capponi thought a great deal of the fresco, and that it was talked of in the piazza, she almost stopped believing it was she who had been painted.

Still she liked to think about it; as though instead of remembering, she were imagining a dream of the future that could never come true.

She had not been to Santa Felicita since the dome was lopped off, leaving this blank, flat roof painted to look like a curve. It had stood in the way of the private passage which the Grand Duke had ordered so that he might pass from one palazzo to another without meeting the gaze of the likes of her, or soiling his shoes with the mud washed down from the hills. They said too that he feared a cold knife slipped in through the gold threads of his farsetto as he passed through the crowd on the Ponte Vecchio.

Fiore saw that little Pippa and Lilo had their faces still up-turned to the fresco, and their mother had knelt down behind them with a hand on each small head.

Pippa twisted suddenly round to look up into Fiore’s face.

‘Nonna Fiore, why is Mama crying?’

Fiore reached forward to wipe away her daughter’s tear – but it glittered in the candlelight like the cupola of the Duomo – and she let it fall.

‘The Madonna Addolorata knows our loss,’ she said, ‘I don’t say you will forget. It was here I came after I lost your sister, not six months mine. Forty years, and it seems last night I last kissed her sweet face. But the grief will grow gentle, like evening light.’

And there was the face of the Virgin Mother – a girl with eyes a little widened, turning to a remembered annunciation, the divine light fading from her face.