

DOPPIOZERO

Chapter One

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If we really have to call this place an outdoor museum, then fine: you all remind me of Mueck. The works of Ron Mueck, those resin and polyurethane hyperrealist sculptures, just over life size, of ordinary human beings. This morning the air in Florence is thick with bodies made of resin, of matte vinyl. The weight of it pushes me dazed down the same streets I travel in winter. Via delle Casine, that abattoir for Asian tourists, has its own perverse appeal; I want to hate it, but let myself be carried along, sweat pasting my linen skirt to my thighs. I've bypassed the Lungarno della Zecca Vecchia, scuttling across like a fleeing reptile, with sour coffee breath sealed into my mouth by hastily applied lipstick.

You people are just like those sculptures: out of proportion, but perversely lifelike, and besieged, as in the exhibitions, by creatures who are just slightly smaller. In this case, vendors selling wind-up gadgets, twirly toys to launch in the air, phony prints, selfie sticks for phones. It's not a plague, just a bad exhibition, a crappily conceived show, where the curator's intentions are inscrutable.



Francesco Natali

Weeks ago, when the heat was already getting brutal, I climbed up to a cool hallway in Palazzo Vecchio, on one of the upper floors: bureaucratic business. And I looked down through a window left open to catch a breath of air. In Piazza della Signoria, the bodies of the people below looked peeled by the knife of the sun, each in a box of shadow propped on the ground, solid, huge. There and then I thought back to Mueck and that triptych of sculptures, twice the size of the average person. Where a huge old man in bathing trunks reclines in the lap of his slightly younger but still elderly wife, under a beach umbrella of proportionate scale. This Florence was him, their umbrella the Duomo. But what about the attentive wife, why didn't she get her husband out of the heat, if she's so loving?

Then Andrea came along. In that tent by the river. And insofar as possible, that triptych became a little clearer to me, sleeping just above the water. I came back here in 2012, after prodigious educational experiences abroad. In the English-speaking world I was the queen of postgrad courses, of fellowships, calls for papers. When people heard about my decision over summer dinners in the country around Pontassieve, everybody disapproved: I was making a big mistake, I would regret it, I'd see soon enough, my friends said, almost with spite, as they uneucharistically broke bread for the next sausage. These three years have flown by, scoring me a little contract at the museum in Palazzo Vecchio and some art history teaching gigs at a few American colleges: that must be why I still dream in English. That must be why my thoughts swarm around in English. On the outside, I gird myself in caustic Florentine dialect: the kind with an "i" before every other word, consonants that are more hiccups than aspirations, more offense than defense. A filthy-mouthed Florentine smartass with the alienation of a Brit.

I wonder whether this summer those sculptures — meaning all of you, all of them, Tuscans mixed with Asians, Latin Americans, African Americans, and other indolent tourists — can make any sense out of my everyday trek up from below, from the riverbank.

Why is that woman climbing up from the shore like some savior or vagabond?

Why does she hike up to the city hall, turning stiff among us, becoming just like us, in her little linen dresses?

And why is she moving like she already felt an itch between her shoulder blades?

An itch everywhere, which is why in the office I think back to the tent where I've been sleeping for the past few weeks, on the banks of the Arno. Where I retire in the evening and wait for the torrid sunset to offer itself up, half-melted, to the tourist cameras on Ponte Vecchio, behind us. Andrea and I watch it together from the door of the tent, on the other side, where the river bends towards mountains tamed by dusk. We get undressed, kiss each other's backs, eat dinner out of a can.

Andrea must be some crafty aquatic being come to tease me with temporary understanding. As we brush our teeth with bottled water, I never ask if Andrea will be moving on, taking off like from a festival, some big concert where you can't wait for the final set.



Francesco Natali

You know the feeling of being only half-washed, wearing the wrinkled, baked-on clothes of a night out in the open, after a party that's kept you up to dawn messing around with some new acquaintance. That skin-level dissatisfaction, this disheveled camping out, makes me feel alive.

In the morning I go back among the sculptures stifled by the heat. Rarely do they talk to me. Except today, one came to see me with entirely different intentions.

(1 – [*To be continued*](#))

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