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# Falling in love with — and in — Firenze



CFlisi

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My most indelible memory of Florence isn't a visual image of a particular piazza or building or statue, nor the fabled Uffizi Galleries, Arno River, Ponte Vecchio. Instead, I remember Florence as I looked down on it from the hill town of Fiesole, about five kilometers northeast (and 250 meters above) the center of town. My then-boyfriend (later to become my husband) had brought me there for a romantic dinner; from the terrace of the restaurant, we looked down on the softly flickering lights of Florence and — inescapably — the dome of the Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore. That dome, 80 meters high, dominates the landscape even at night, and remains the largest brick dome ever constructed, composed of four million bricks.

From above, we couldn't see the people, neither the elegant locals going about their business nor the hordes of tourists (notably less elegant) engorging the city's major arteries. The latter already posed a problem the first time I visited Florence, and the situation has worsened over the years to the point where you have to time your visit carefully to navigate the major attractions of the city.

For example, Piazza della Signoria is the historical crossroads of Florence. It flanks Palazzo Vecchio, a magnificent building dating back to the 13th century. It became City Hall under the leadership of the de Medici two centuries later, and boasts artwork by Michelangelo, Donatello, Bronzino, and others. A famous statue of Davide by Michelangelo stands out front . . . but it's a replica, not the original. I was taken aback when first told of this, but at least I didn't have to fight my way through the crowds for the privilege of seeing the copy, as happens today. To see the original, you need to visit

the Galleria dell'Accademia, one kilometer north of the replica.

Another famous city treasure I *did* see in the original was the Porta del Paradiso, the main gate of the Battistero di San Giovanni (Baptistry of Saint John). The original bronze door was created by Lorenzo Ghiberti between 1425–1452, and is a masterpiece of Renaissance sculpture — 10 square panels depicting scenes from the Old Testament. For centuries people could touch this artwork and marvel at its three-dimensional veracity, but, as the crowds grew to unmanageable size, the city decided to follow the example of Davide. In 1990, the Porta was replaced by a copy. The original rests in the city's Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, protected from the elements by a plate-glass box.

Ghiberti was a contemporary of many of the artistic giants of the Renaissance, including da Vinci, Michelangelo, Giotto, Giorgio Vasari, Sandro Botticelli, Leon Battista Alberti, and Filippo Brunelleschi. The vision and artistry of Brunelleschi in particular helped define the city as it became the center of Italian and European culture. He was an engineer as well as a sculptor, designer, and urban planner and had vied for the commission to design the Porta del Paradiso. His proposal was so attractive that the city suggested the two artists combine their work. Brunelleschi refused to share credit with Ghiberti but no problem about lost opportunities; between 1420 and 1436 the engineer drafted an equally memorable project — the towering brick dome of the Duomo.

That's not the only example of artistic interweaving in the cultural capital of Italy. The Porta del Paradiso was originally called the North Gate. When Michelangelo first saw it, he gave it the moniker that has stuck for 600 years.

Michelangelo's impact can also be felt in Fiesole, although I didn't realize it on my first visit. This tiny town's most luxurious hotel, Villa San Michele, has a façade possibly designed by the master (more likely by one of his disciples). Whoever was responsible, the Renaissance shines through in its classical symmetry and harmonious proportion . . . the same qualities you breathe everywhere in Florence.

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**Written by CFlisi**

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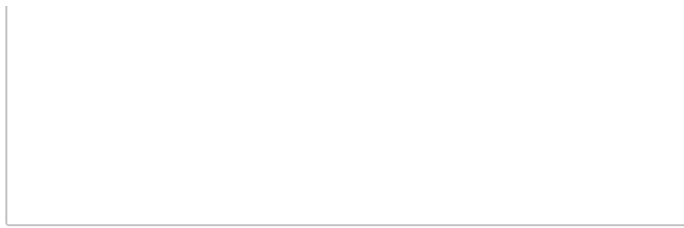
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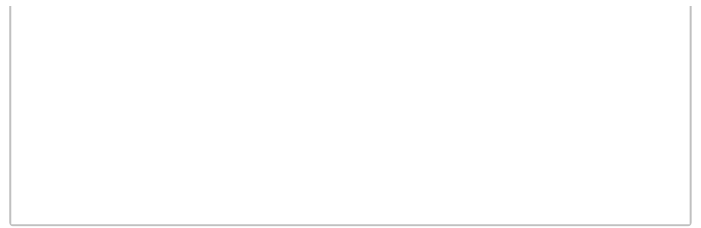
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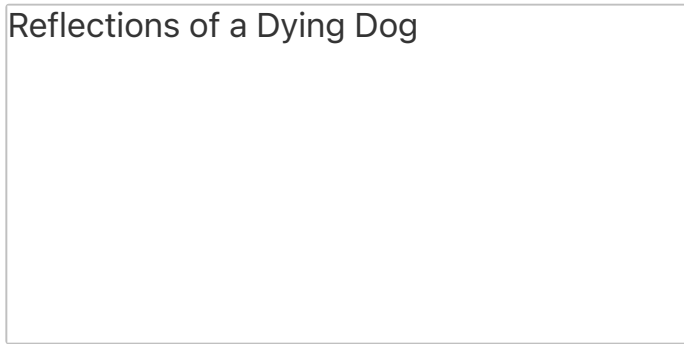
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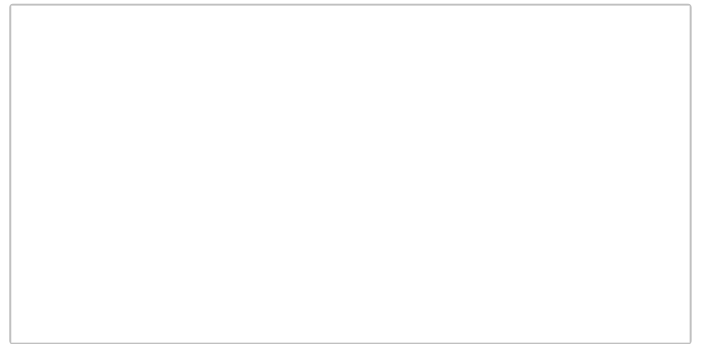
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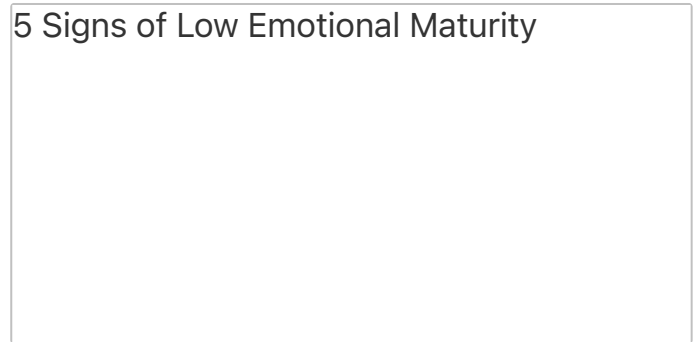
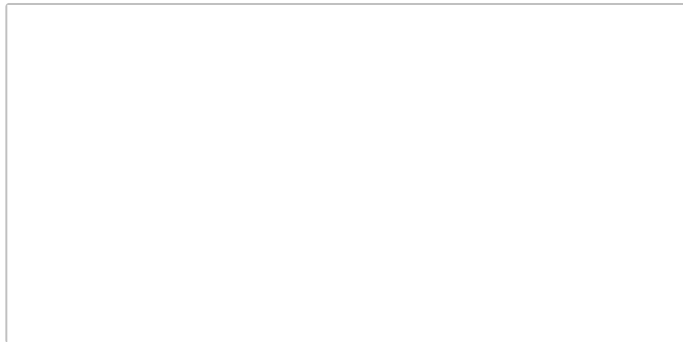
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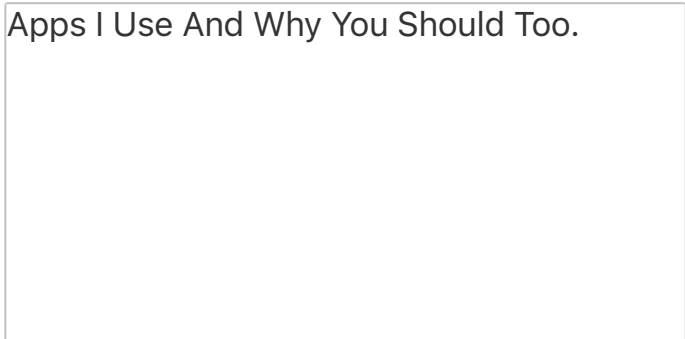
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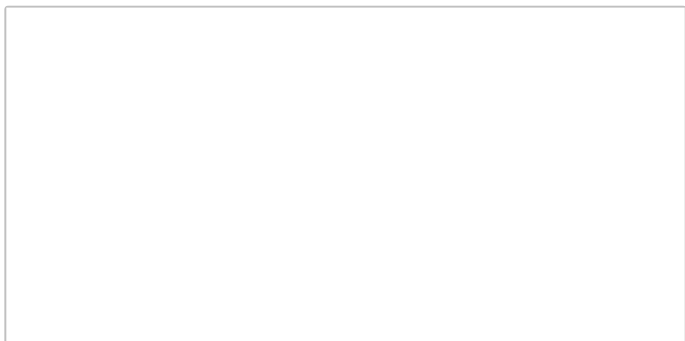
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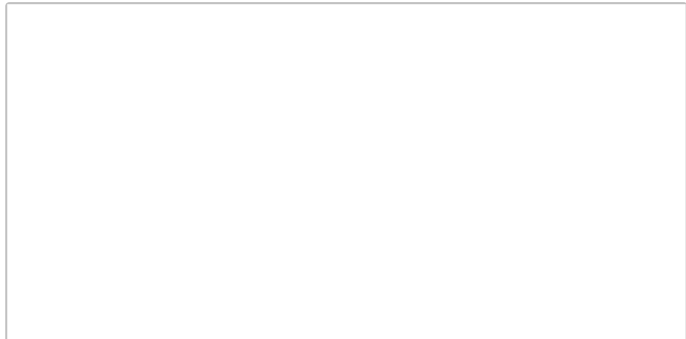
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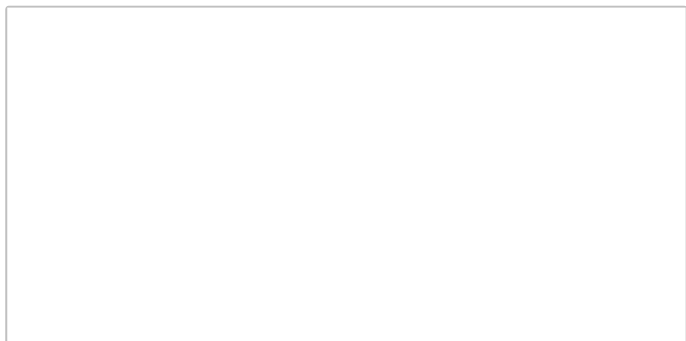
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