

World's Most Beautiful Necktie

A Short Story

by

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An old suit, a battered hat, a perfect tie, and a good collar, that's what makes a well dressed man.

Baron de Meyer

The books I read and the life I lead are sensible, sane and mild,

*I like calm hats, I don't wear spats,
But I want my neckties wild.*

OK.NEWS 1964

You may have the universe if I may have Italy.

Giuseppe Verdi

If you have never been to Rome, then you have not experienced life. For life in Italy has a quality different from all else you have ever known. Rome in particular has a taste that fills the senses and imbues the soul.

Samuel Grier

I came to Rome to live for a time.

My job required me to wear a suit Monday through Thursday. On Fridays I wore a sport coat.

Every day I wore a tie.

When you come to Rome, you must visit the city's largest outdoor market, the Porta Portese across the river from Testaccio and just inside Trestevere by the Tiber River.

At the Porta Portese you can buy everything you never needed. Clothes. Plants. Leather. Jewelry. Antiques. Reproductions. Electronics. Automotive equipment and power tools. Knick knacks and knockoffs of all varieties and in untold numbers.

It is a "must see" for every tourist who comes to the Bella Città.

The downside of visiting the Porta Portese is the constant threat of becoming a victim of petty theft. So take off the jewelry and the watch, leave your camera in the safe at the hotel, put your credit cards and passports in a money wallet that attaches to your belt and folds inside your pants, and take along a wallet with a few euros that you can keep in your front pocket and won't be too upset if a gypsy manages to pilfer it.

Many a vacation in Italy has been spoiled for people who keep their cameras or cell phones in a Velcro pouch on their belts and find it gone when they get off the bus or walk out of a crowd. The same for wallets filled with identification that are kept in pockets, waist belts with the little pouches in front, and purses kept tucked under the arms of their owners. All are subject to theft by professionals who can remove the nose from your face without your knowledge.

But with proper care and vigilance, attending the Porta Portese early on a Sunday morning before the heat and large crowds arrive is pure pleasure for the person who is not in a hurry and likes to meander and sort through the small treasures sold in a thousand booths.

This is a rather long introduction to my love affair with neckties.

For Christmas our first year in Rome, my wife bought me a Marco Laurenti necktie. If you have never seen a Marco Laurenti creation, it is more art than apparel. The one my wife bought was blue with twisting swirls of silver and black and other blue shades that wound their way down from the knot to the point. I, who had never really cared much about the ties I wore, was enamored.

Italy and Rome especially are a jolt for the American male. There are more apparel shops for men than women. Men's high fashion rivals that of women in Italy, and at first glance this appears an oddity to someone like me who usually lets my wife pick my shirts, my ties and other accoutrements to wear to work each day.

But no more.

Finding Marco Laurenti neckties became an obsession.

And that is where the Porta Portese comes in.

One of the vendors at his stand in the Porta Portese sold Marco Laurenti ties for 10 euros, or about \$14. Each time I went to the Porta Portese I visited his stand and purchased another one or two neckties until I had one each of all the varieties that he sold.

The Marco Laurenti ties I wore with my suits.

But on Fridays I always wore "mafia black" with a black shirt, black pants, black belt, black shoes and a jacket with black checks embedded in dark green. What was needed and what Marco Laurenti could not provide was a pitch black tie with a design to match.

After much looking through the market one morning, I found for one euro the perfect black tie with little off-white naked winged cherubs flying all across its front. As a prudish American, I was worried about the little penises on the cherubs, but I decided since they were almost invisible to the naked eye that it did not matter.

The only people who seemed to notice the penises were British women. After greeting one another with a European kiss on each cheek at Friday social functions, it was not unusual for the British female to pull my necktie close to her face to examine the cherubs up close, and with a salacious smile tell me how much she liked it.

"Do I make you uncomfortable?" asked one.

"No," I said, "I just tend to be a little stiff sometimes."

"Oh," she replied, "that doesn't sound like a bad thing."

After that conversation I learned to choose my words more carefully.

I digress.

So having bought all the Marco Laurenti ties available at the Porta Portese, I began searching for them throughout the city, but to no avail. They were nowhere to be found.

On the Via del Corso near Piazza Popolo I found a few imitations, but none was a Laurenti. When we went to Positano on the Amalfi coast, I looked at every men's store for them. Nothing. Only copies.

And then it happened. On my way to the U.S. Embassy off the Via Veneto, I passed a window with a vividly red and black tie. It was vintage Laurenti. The red swirled around the tie's middle, which was laced with curls and waves of black and gold. It was as if Michelangelo had gone into fashion for a day and painted a Renaissance version of the perfect necktie. The tie hung from a single hanger and stood alone in the window's center overlooking sweaters and trousers. It required no accompaniment. It was a masterpiece.

Unfortunately, the store was closed. I would have to come back.

I did not get back to that part of Rome for several weeks, and by the time I got there the red tie was no longer in the window. Disappointed, I walked in.

A gentleman my own age was standing with a beautiful young girl. He was drowning her in attention, and she seemed to return the admiration. It was clear that I was interrupting. "What can I do for you today, sir?" he asked in perfect English.

"I walked by your store a number of weeks ago," I said, "and you had a red and black tie in your window. I thought it might be a Marco Laurenti."

"I will be back in a moment," he said to the girl in Italian. He then smiled and said, "Follow me."

Walking to a large oak chest, he opened the bottom drawer. It was filled to overflowing with neckties wrapped in plastic. It was a Marco Laurenti goldmine. At the top of the pile was the red tie I had coveted weeks before.

I spent the next half hour picking out ties for my less than stellar wardrobe. Gold, red, black and silver. Symmetric, asymmetric, straight lines and curves. It was a feast. At 18 euros apiece, with the 100 euros in my pocket I calculated that I could afford five.

I walked back to the proprietor and interrupted his overt affair once again. "Will you sell me six ties for a hundred euros?" I asked.

He gave me that well-known Italian look of regret that indicated I would be sending him to the poorhouse if he did not charge me full price. "OK," he said reluctantly. "For you, a special price."

As I chose the last of my six new neckties, I could hear him talking to the girl out front as if he just won the lottery. It was me, not him, who was being taken to the Laundromat. But it did not matter. In my small world, I was mining diamonds.

After that day in the shop near the Veneto, I no longer was on a mission to look for ties. I was content to wear my Marco Laurentis the first four days of the week and my cherub tie on Fridays. Every day was a compliment for Laurenti or the cherubs.

"What a beautiful tie" became the familiar refrain.

It was on the Via del Corso where I stopped at a small store I had not noticed before that I discovered the world's most beautiful necktie.

Right next to it laid the world's second most beautiful tie.

The world's most beautiful necktie was jet black with bright paisley teardrops splashed across its face. Orange and red and green and yellow drops with dark sprinkles overlaid presented a surreal and unnatural aura. Colors so vivid they took away my breath.

The world's second most beautiful tie was also jet black, but it was covered in exquisite, gently painted rose buds.

The contrast could not have been more stark.

There were two versions of each tie. The version for ordinary people like me was silk. The version for the truly serious fashion aficionado was a pleated, almost vinyl-like fabric I had never seen before. The pleat gave a three dimensional look with the illusion you could sift the colors on the tie in your fingers.

Even the silk version of the ties sold for a price I am embarrassed to reveal. But I could not resist. I succumbed to the seduction of the world's most beautiful necktie without a tinge of regret.

I wore it on only the most special of occasions. In the presence of diplomats. At celebrations. When we hosted out of the ordinary events and VIPs.

The secretaries where I worked, however, did not like the world's most beautiful necktie. "Too bright" was their chorus.

I remember standing in a reception line where we greeted 400 people. I complimented our guests generously and welcomed them graciously. Not one single person commented on the world's most beautiful necktie with the exception of the very last person through the line. "Hey, I like that tie" was its only compliment.

When the time for me to leave my job in Rome drew near, I decided that I should buy the world's second most beautiful tie. Maybe then my tie would be admired and receive the compliments I was sure that the world's most beautiful tie had deserved.

I took my normal walking route, heading down the Aventino and around the Circus Maximus. I stopped for a moment and watched the Japanese tourists put their

hands into the mouth of the Boca de la Verità and get their pictures snapped by a hundred others.

If a Roman dared to speak a lie when questioned with his hand inserted in the Mouth of Truth, legend said it would be severed from his wrist.

I passed the Hotel 47 and swung around to the Piazza Venezia in front of the massive Vittorio Emanuele monument. From there I walked up the Via del Corso and took a detour onto the Via Condotti for distraction.

I decided to head for the Spanish Steps, where looming in the distance and framing the steps was the famous Bernini fountain, a large boat where tourists can catch streams of cool water from the mouth of a sun that sits on the boat's stern.

I wound my way back to the Condotti through the side streets to walk the avenue's other side.

In abundance were the Beautiful People. Some were shopping the designer stores reserved for the very wealthy. Others were out to soak up the admiring looks.

A couple walked by. The man was dressed in a cream colored suit and looked like a movie star. The woman leaning on his shoulder, her eyes covered with a spectacular pair of sunglasses, wore a black mini skirt and could have been a supermodel. Even for me with my jaded view of Hollywood, watching them was sheer pleasure.

Funny how the Beautiful People always seem to find each other, I thought.

Present also on the Condotti were the old gentlemen, cuffed and suave and still charming, with young girls prancing on high heels at their sides.

Bella figura. La dolce vita.

Looking good. The sweet life.

This lifestyle, this existence of excesses that fills the senses and incites the passions was to be savored. For me, experiencing it vicariously was enough.

More than that was uncomfortable.

I finally returned to the Via del Corso and turned in the direction of the store that held the world's second most beautiful necktie. Anticipation built at the thought of gazing at it once again.

Suddenly on my left an old Italian man hiding in the crevices of the marble walls that line the Corso stepped out when he saw me. Americans, especially those of us who are of Scottish, German and English heritage, are easily spotted.

Ravaged by alcohol, his face covered with red sores, the old man stumbled as he reached in my direction and held out a torn paper cup filled with a few coins.

There are thousands of beggars in Rome.

Some are pitiful. Some are professionals who make a living off the guilty conscience of visiting tourists. Others are thieves waiting to see from which pocket you pull your wallet if you are foolish enough to do so in front of them.

I walked past the old man and wondered at the depravity of the human condition.

Moments later I was in the store from which I purchased the world's most beautiful necktie and was staring at the world's second most beautiful tie.

I had coveted it. I intended to buy it.

And suddenly I no longer wanted it.

I admired the tie that lay before me. The pleated material beckoned. But this time the seduction did not work.

Instead of the tie, I saw the face of the old man holding out his hand, hoping that I would add a few coins to his cup so that he could feed his addiction once more.

It was a warm October day, and I left the store.

I made my way to the winding street that would take me to the Trevi fountain where Michelangelo himself claimed the best water in Rome could be sampled.

I decided that I wanted to throw my three coins into the Trevi to guarantee my future return to Rome as tradition promised.

I had already circled the well in the middle of the square in San Gimignano a few weeks prior with the same intention.

But a little extra effort to make sure that I would once again walk the streets of the Eternal City never hurt a yearning soul.

As I stood at the Trevi and leaned over to drink the water from Rome's most famous aqueduct, I marveled at what was once the heart of the civilized world.

Its beauty. Its contradictions. Its rich. Its poor.

All are part of the ancient mosaic, and each contributes its own unique vibrancy to the character of Italy's beloved Rome.