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Venetian Stories

Jane Turner Rylands

VENETIAN STORIES

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VENETIAN STORIES

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JANE TURNER
RYLANDS



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POSTMAN

ARCHITECT

COLLECTOR

CONTESSA

SOCIALITE

MASON

VISITOR

MAYOR

INTERPRETER

GONDOLIER

LORD

MOTHER

When the last quarter of the twentieth century opened throttle for the millennium and the Venice of today, the neighborhood of Salizada San Samuele was still a backwater that figured on no tourist route. Local shops and local people carried on a symbiosis hardly altered since the dawn of commerce, making forays into the wider world of Venice more a matter of style than necessity. The Salizada itself had not yet filled up with shops and dressed its homely character from its service as the crossroads of its small community. Like all such neighborhoods that once flourished among the teeming footways of Venice, it was exclusive and had its own *dramatis personae*. Every weekday morning there were the housewives today with their shoulders hunched and collars raised against the cold, hurrying through its broad expanse to the shops around the corner past the two sentries in the dry cleaner's, Mario and Bella, where they stood ironing in duet and caroling through the glass to this one and that one to come collect her waiting goods, *per favore*. Around half past ten entered Mario the trash collector pushing his cart, followed by Zic the handyman. Together, in front of the dry cleaner's, they reviewed the day's take, smoking and making a show of anything *divertente*—an old hookah, a portrait of a long-forgotten granny brooding behind a dirty glass, a length of carved stone from a cornice that could have fallen on someone's head, a pair of faded curtains as long as the street was wide—before adjourning to Bar Bacareto, the broad-fronted *osteria* that presided over the top end of the street like a rosy monument over its avenue.

In those days, before the workers moved virtually en masse to the mainland and the *borghese* gave up on pets in favor of accessory dogs, the *calli* and *campi* were atrot with Identikit mongrels, each one recalling several different breeds but looking like none of them. In the neighborhood there were always some of these in the role of “good boys” on lead looking for pats, and some “bad boys” on the loose, looking for trouble—but never with the cats who snoozed on sunny doorsteps impervious to their erstwhile predators, just as the pigeons waddled safe in the *campi* of the Serenissima. Coming in from the street of shop deliverymen pushing *carrelli* cried out for room to pass—“*Attenzione alle gambe!*” Look out for your legs!—then dropped their carts and wandered off to join the trash collector, the handyman, and all the other regulars for the morning's *ombra* at the Bacareto. While over at the maids, appearing here and there at balconies and windows, broadcast their industry dust clouds from the heights.

But no one paid the slightest attention when Luigi Esposito approached the Salizada, as a beetle might venture from under a baseboard, pausing to see if the coast was clear, then scuttling along the nearest edge. Had anyone bothered to notice, his inelegant livery might have suggested something in common with the trash collector, but in fact no nexus joined them. For this stranger was not a *spazzino*, nor any other kind of steward of the Most Serene Republic. He was a *postino*, a minion of the State of Italy—and San Samuele was not even his appointed round. Luigi Esposito did not belong to this neighborhood. Furthermore, at eleven o'clock on a working day he belonged on his postal route several neighborhoods away. Luigi was only too aware of the anomaly, in all its applications, and halfway down the Salizada surrendered to its spur, breaking into a clumsy, skipping run to deliver himself into the sanctuary of Calle dell'Anzolo.

Safely out of sight, cosseted in dimness, Luigi Esposito braked his run to the lumbering gauntlet that suited his stocky build, a stature that conspired with his dark eyes, his black curls, and his outfit of government issue, to present to the Venetian eye the perfect image of a Southerner, a *meridionale*. That was one of his problems. Another was that even though he was only thirty-three years old, he was clearly a character settled in his ways. As he walked along the *calle* he slouched forward to ease his progress. He let his hands ride idle in his pockets and let his elbows bounce at his sides so that his shoulders gave a little shrug at every step.

Ahead of him, toward the end of the *calle*, the palaces leaned closer and closer together until the confusion of eaves and chimney shafts let pass hardly enough daylight to mottle the pavement even at midday. The effect was suggestive, and many an intrepid stranger to Venice, venturing off the beaten path, had peered with misgiving into the depths of Calle dell'Anzolo and turned away convinced that he had come upon one of those fabled "assassin alleys" where brooding ghosts lingered for revenge. Even Luigi Esposito, who had lived in Venice for nearly a dozen years, had approached this place one foggy morning not long before and shuddered to make out in the floating gloom a figure in a fluttering cape bearing down upon him. He had been about to fall to his knees and cry out, when he recognized the broad hat of the English *Reverendo* whom he'd seen coming and going from the great black door that loomed in the darkest part of that sunless reach, but who always said *buongiorno* and let him pass unharmed.

Yet only a step or two beyond this darkness a small bend in the *calle* brought into view not merely the reassuring light of day but the spectacular flashing expanse of the Grand Canal. This was a bright winter's day, and it was toward this shimmering vista that Luigi Esposito was plying his footsteps through the deepening shadows.

From his shoulder swung the black leather bag which declared him unequivocally the deliverer of the post. He had, only minutes before, been going his rounds pressing doorbells, crying "*Posta! Posta!*" into a crackling intercom, or upward toward a querulous face peering down from a window ledge. In and out, heaving waterlogged doors over the undulations of ruined floors, feeding envelopes and magazines into mean, defiant slits, or tapping his feet on the cold while an old woman lowered a basket so she wouldn't have to come downstairs, he had resisted until he arrived at Campo Sant' Angelo. And then, even though he had finished, and it wasn't time for lunch, he had given up and headed for San Samuele.

Emerging from the shade, he stood now at the water's edge, blinking in the brightness of the reflected sunlight. Almost opposite he could see the midmorning crowd milling on the *pontile* at San Toma, waiting for the vaporetto. Here and there at the edges of the Canal islands of debris bobbed on the shoulders of the dancing waves. Near the steps where he stood, in a wreath of straw and flowers and grapefruit peels, floated a drowned cat so swollen it looked like a man's head. Beside it a writhing newspaper drifted slowly to the bottom. Farther out, where the current was stronger, a glinting motor oil can caught his eye and made him smile.

His son, Paolo, had found just such a can a few days before with some oil left in it. So he brought it home. After Luigi had poured the oil into a jar, Paolo had chucked the can out the window into the canal. But someone in the neighborhood, probably right there in his own building, had called the police trying to make trouble. When the police knocked on the door

and called out "*Vigili!*," Paolo had been frightened, but Luigi rose to the occasion. At first he pretended not to know what the police were talking about. Then, he stepped out into the corridor and complained in a loud voice that he, who had no boat, no motor, and no cause to have motor oil, let alone an empty motor oil can, had to submit to such questionings when there were others, taxi drivers and deliverymen with boats, who lived in the same building—he would be glad to show the good *vigili* where to find them. The silence that gripped the house in the wake of these declarations attested to the respect the hidden auditors felt for the *vigili*, and went a long way toward restoring the good humor these agents of the peace had lost in climbing the six flights of stairs to Luigi's door. Luigi was proud of himself.

But afterward, when the police had gone away, his wife had told him in front of the boys that it was wrong to lie. And later, when they were alone, she had scolded him again for setting a bad example. Sabrina was getting religious again: these days she ran to the priest about everything. His mother was religious too, but her case was different. What with chasing Babbo out to work at the brickyards every morning, and fetching him home from Basketball Sport every night for thirty years, she had a right to some consolation. In actual fact, when Luigi was about ten, the job of fetching Babbo home for dinner fell to him, which meant tearing himself away from his comic book, from the hypnotic spell of *Paperino*, of Donald Duck. He would run as fast as he could and hope that Nando, the *barrista*, would be looking out the door and see him coming, because if he was, Nando would give him the thumbs-up sign and go straight over to the card tables and send his father home, so Luigi didn't have to come all the way. Nando was a pillar of the community as important as the priest, Don Gennaro, who happened to be his best pal. Nando harbored the menfolk after work and always attended to the wives and children. Sometimes he would call out, "Tell Mamma Rosa she can throw in the pasta," and Luigi would tear back home to snatch a few more minutes with *Paperino* until Babbo arrived. Sometimes if Mamma was ready to serve up the plates and she heard Babbo on the stairs, pulling himself up by the banister singing "*Valderi! Valdera!*" she would shout to Luigi to go help his father. Going to the door which his mother had left open on purpose, he would find Babbo in the passage, rebounding from one wall to the other trying to pot himself into the doorway. Then it would be dinner in the kitchen, the arguments, which sometimes included him, and which, after he learned the technique, he enjoyed, and then bed, and the world of *Paperino* until he fell asleep.

No wonder his mother used to love mending socks and baking cakes for Don Gennaro who patted her hand and said how lucky her husband was. The priest regretted, however, that she had only the one child. Then one day soon after Luigi had gone looking for a good job up north, Babbo got himself crushed under a load of bricks falling from a crane. When his companions dug him out and saw how done in he was, they were loyal enough to make sure he was dead before the ambulance got there, so he never had to live with it. Then they said to it that his mother got the workman's insurance and the pension. The owner of the brickyard was touched by the eleven strong men who came on Rosa's behalf to appeal to his better nature.

Anyhow, little Paolo had been thrilled at the way his father had won out over the police. Luigi smiled with pleasure then frowned at the thought that his wife's friends would say she was right. He would tell Paolo that he had seen his oil can making its getaway to the Lid. That would make him laugh.

He watched three women in fur coats being borne across the Canal on the *traghetto*. He scowled at their swaying backs as the labors of the rowers propelled them away.

He became aware of footsteps behind him. They stopped. A door opened and slammed. There was no further sound. He turned and walked back up the *calle*, scanning the upper stories as he approached a low doorway. As he unlocked the door and pressed his weight against it, he looked about once more.

In an instant he was inside leaning against the closed door and bolting it before feeling for the light switch. When the bare bulb flared over the cellarlike room, a sharp hiss made him start. In the far corner a gray tiger cat arched its back and swayed. Luigi realized with annoyance that it must have crept in when his mother came to leave more boxes. It hissed again, showing needlelike teeth. Its upper lip was quivering and its pupils were dilating and contracting as though trying to measure him. He picked up a pebble and threw it. The cat leaped forward, snatched a dead rat in its teeth, and dragged it under the trestle which held stacks of boxes and crates above flood level. Without taking its eyes off Luigi, the cat began clawing and biting at the rat's flesh. Luigi placed a chair in front of the iron stove and sat down with his back to the cat. Animals, when they showed their lack of feeling, revolted him.

He was sitting, safe at last, in the *magazzino* which he rented from his wife's uncle Gino who had tried for years to get a high rent for it as a "workshop in the best neighborhood." Only one innocent had ever risen to the bait: a young carpenter who had quarreled with his *padrone* and was desperate to set up on his own. But it was too small even for a novice, so he had given it up at a loss and Luigi had been allowed to have it for the boxes and trunks he had no place to keep in the one-bedroom apartment where he lived with his wife and seven-year-old son, and now his poor widowed mother, dragged up from Naples to sleep on a sofa in a city where she would never feel at home. But she'd helped to make space for herself in the apartment by moving boxes of things to the *magazzino* with her shopping cart. In fact, she had become almost a mania with her, and no one knew exactly what she was packing and taking away. Sabrina said she hoped his mother might be planning to go live in the *magazzino*.

To make matters worse, there was probably another baby on the way. His mother had heard Sabrina being sick in the bathroom several months ago. But Sabrina still hadn't mentioned it. He lit a cigarette and blew out a cloud of smoke. He wondered why Sabrina couldn't manage better. The priest would gloat as if he'd made it happen himself. In a sense he had. Priests were always after more babies. The thought made Luigi reach for the wine bottle. He unscrewed the cap, took a deep swig, and gazed into space, waiting for comfort. The truth was that the *magazzino* was useful for more than storage. The real reason he had wanted it was because it was near his postal route and gave him a place to stop for a little rest, *un rifugio*, on a bad day.

Bending forward, he opened the door of the stove. He grabbed some wood shavings from the floor, held them to his cigarette lighter, and threw them inside. A small flame shot up and he reached into his bag for something to keep it going. He found a postcard. With his lighter he lit around the edges and added it to the fire. He watched it burn and curl, as though shrinking with pain. Someone he met once had worked in a crematorium in England and told him that corpses would sit up in the fire and scream. He stared at the words sinking into the blackness, and only just in time remembered to scoop up some more sawdust and shavings.

keep the fire burning.

Luigi lifted the bottle from the crate and took another gulp. As he did so, he noticed a loose strip of wood on the crate's side, which he grabbed with his free hand. He gave a sharp yank and pulled it off. Through the gap it opened, a child's wooden block rolled onto the floor. He snapped the strip over his knee and put the pieces on the fire. He picked up the block, which had a letter on each face; he turned it around and around, looking for his initials, then threw it too into the flames.

The stove began to give off some heat. Luigi pulled his bag onto his lap and fumbled among the bills in the bottom for the remaining letters. Letting the bag drop to the floor, he arranged the letters on his knees with their addresses downward. Facts spoiled the ritual. On top there was an air letter from Australia. He dug in his pocket for his penknife. With the sharp blade he cut a splinter from the crate beside him, but it was too thick and blunt, so he threw it into the fire. He cut another, thinner one. He put his knife back in his pocket and with the splinter ripped open the sides of the air letter. He unfolded the flimsy blue paper and scanned it hastily lest the fire should go out.

Someone was starting a farm ... needed rain ... last letter took over a month ... had met a lot of Italians ... helped with everything ... missing Italy ... all well ... hoped to have money to visit next year ... hearts ... children's scribbles. Nothing important. He was glad it was good news, and he added it to the fire with a benevolent smile that showed no teeth, like the one the Pope was wearing blessing the little children in the picture that Sabrina had taped up in the bedroom the other day.

He stuck his finger under the lid of a coarse envelope and brought out a letter scrawled in such clumsy writing that he could hardly make it out. As he unfolded the paper, a soft ten-thousand-lire note floated into his lap. "Our dearest ones," the letter began. Luigi stared at the scrawled words for a while and then looked up in disgust. It was written in some dialect.

He could imagine what it said. It would be two old farm people who lived in a shanty, who grew everything they ate and never had any money unless they sold a rabbit, or some eggs. They had a daughter who was too beautiful for her own good. She had run away from home and they hadn't seen her for years. One day she came back. She had with her two little children, but no husband. He was dead, she told them. She stayed with the old folks for a few weeks, but then she couldn't stand it away from the city any longer. So she took the two children and left. She wrote to the old folks now and then telling them her latest address. They wrote to her saying how much they loved her and sent her money so she could come and bring the children to see them again. But she never came. His throat ached with feeling as he told himself the story.

He looked at the banknote and wished it had not been his fate to open that letter. And yet being touched by such good and simple people was a blessing in itself. He laid the letter in the flames and, placing the money in the envelope, laid that too in the fire as an offering near the edge. He watched as the envelope turned brown and then caught fire. Quick as a flash he plucked it from the fire, dropped it, and stamped out the flames. Ruefully, he removed the ten-thousand-lire note and pushed it into his pocket. Without looking up he tossed the envelope back into the stove. He would, he resolved, as he noticed the cracks in his shoes, put five thousand into the poor box at church to show his gratitude to God that there were still such good people on earth. He felt a grace descend over him. Perhaps, he

pondered, it would be wrong to give any of it away. He could use it, God knew. And who but God had put it in his way?

Luigi's finger hurt where he'd burned it on the envelope. He looked at his hands and saw the dirt under the nails. The hands of a workingman, he thought with a sigh, and poured some wine over his finger before sticking it in his mouth to soothe it.

The cat had finished with the rat, and stalked to the door not to be locked in a second time. It sat licking its paws and waiting.

The cat was right. It was time to go. He arranged the remaining letters like a hand playing cards and chose one, which he put on the crate beside him. The rest he opened and spread on the fire without bothering to read them. He uncapped the wine and took two more gulps.

He ripped the end from the last envelope and brought out a sheet of paper covered with flowing lines of elegant script. It was in French. Carefully he studied the sentences for words of love. Once when he was working in a hotel he had fallen in love with a French girl. All one afternoon he had memorized words from a dictionary, and that evening, after a *passeggiata* in the Piazza to the music of Florian's and Quadri's, he had drawn her into a doorway and whispered in her ear, "*Baisez moi*," whereupon she had slapped his cheek as hard as she could.

He pulled a face at the memory and, finding no mention of *amour*, decided the letter had to do with thanks for a favor. "*Merci, merci beaucoup*," they were saying at the end. Someone on his postal route had gone to some trouble for someone in France and they were deeply grateful. He understood the situation perfectly. His countrymen were always performing acts of kindness toward strangers who didn't know what to make of their openhearted and friendly ways. They were sympathetic and understanding in their very natures. We are, he murmured to himself, probably the kindest people on God's earth. He put the letter into the stove, but the thought stayed with him.

In a reverie he watched the last letter disappear into the merest crumpled ash. And at the evidence of human vanity his heart welled with sentiment that flooded his whole being. His tears sprang to his eyes. Unashamed, he turned and let the staring cat see them roll down his cheeks.

Before Vittorio Falon was even sixteen, he had been in the best houses of Venice. The experience opened his eyes and worked to his advantage. Even in the short term it gave him a certain confidence that riding down the Grand Canal with his schoolmates he could look up from the vaporetto and know who lived in this palace, or that one, and envisage the rooms that looking up from the Canal one can barely see. But Vittorio was discreet beyond his years and never let on to his peers. Now, nearly twenty years later, he found himself welcomed once again into these great houses, but the people who invited him seemed not to recall his former visits. So he never reminded them.

His reticence had partly to do with the fact that he knew himself to be one of a dying breed: a Venetian with a future in Venice. But there was more to it than that. For as long as he could remember, he had been teased by the notion that the stream of fate which had conveyed his father, at the early age of twenty-one, to the surprise inheritance of a draper's shop in the Merceria, was transporting him too toward some unforeseen destiny. His only fear was that when his moment came, he might not be as apt as his father, or worse, that when it came he might not even recognize it.

When Secondo Falon inherited Morello & Figli, from a great-uncle without *figli*, the beauty of the business was that it was stable, so that being continued on established lines, it would continue to yield a comfortable living to a hardworking proprietor. The awkwardness was that Secondo's good fortune revealed to him that he had no heart for drudgery. What he saw sparkling in his overflowing cup was not so much the money as an unexpected sense of romance. And that was the sense in which he welcomed his new destiny: the mantle of a Venetian merchant had fallen to him; he would embrace the legacy to the full. So with the ardor of youth he jettisoned his uncle's stock that had served the prosaic needs of so many families so long, and spangled his shelves instead with the princely sheens and midnight rainbow hues of the handsomest furnishing fabrics money could buy. The radiance set off against the antique shelves and paneling was overpowering. Under Secondo's rule, Morello & Figli was less a shop than a conjuror's den crepitating with notions of potentates and power. His advisers reproved him with the proverb of sinking one's fortune in a single ship, but Secondo had his own maxim: the love of luxurious goods was as ingrained in his fellow Venetians as in himself, and they would suffer to go without dish towels and aprons if their sumptuous furnishings hung in the balance. It became the stuff of legend. Morello & Figli flourished as never before.

But while the tide of prosperity was at the flood for Morello & Figli, in the highest quarters of Venice the tide was low, and getting lower, as reservoirs of ancient wealth ebbed slowly away. In due course, when the old families could no longer afford to run their *palazzi* and were constrained, one after the other, to divide them into apartments, Secondo's business multiplied like images in a shattered mirror, for he was called upon to furnish each fragment with the richness implied by the whole.

In any case, his business had never been solely with the great, for all who aspired to share in the gorgeous atmosphere of Venice bought from him: the rich bought fabrics by the bolt but the less rich bought many bolts of fabric by the meter. And he had the good sense

accord these customers their full weight as the anchor of his business whose steady custom kept him stable. He favored them also because it made him feel munificent, as though he conferred a blessing by helping them to their rightful share in the splendor which their city flaunted all around them. He would spend hours with them advising on the best fabric to cover a single side chair, or even a footstool.

Secondo's wife, Donata Manina, took a different attitude, and was a perfect complement to him. She enjoyed above all the custom of the noble families and the rich foreigners who came to live in Venice. She loved to serve their every whim as they gilded and regilded their grand *palazzi*, or even their rented *piani nobili*. Indeed, after the birth of her only child, Vittorio, the moment when she might have been expected to retire, she redoubled her interest in this part of the business. Eventually all the great commissions came directly to her. And she personally attended to each one. She herself went with an assistant to show books of swatches to her customers, to take measurements, to consult and give advice, to avoid the simultaneous appearance of similar fabrics in the houses of neighbors, or even worse, of friends. She became The Indispensable Guide.

When Vittorio was fourteen, she taught him how to take measurements with an efficiency and a dignity which inspired confidence and respect. He was a quiet, serious boy and, as a only child often does, he kept mainly the company of his parents. After school, and in the summer vacations, he was his mother's assistant. Sometimes she would coach him to make suggestions that she knew would be received with enthusiasm. The two of them were a great success together, and Vittorio gained such pleasure and poise from the consideration accorded him, in spite of his youth, that he was eager to begin taking over from his father as soon as he could put his schooling behind him.

But his mother had other plans. She wanted him to become an architect. She inured in him the benefits of that training, coupled with his present knowledge. He knew he would be wise to continue to follow her advice. He set out to specialize in interior design, but while he was still a student in Rome, his father died. Vittorio was ready to come back and take his father's place, but his mother would not hear of his abandoning his studies. Instead, she brought a manager from Milan to run the business. She chose well: Dott. Verdi was not merely capable of the day-to-day operation of the shop, he proved to have an excellent touch for the grand business as well. At this, the mother retired, ceded to Dott. Verdi the apartment over the shop, and found an apartment for herself and her son on the Grand Canal. The location was something she had insisted upon, but she had been obliged to compromise on certain amenities in order to afford it.

Nowadays when visiting in his mother's house it infuriated Vittorio that he was every night and several times a night, startled awake by thuds and squeaks followed by prolonged shudders, capped by the arrogant *clang!* of the vaporetto's gate being shot violently into place. Footsteps and voices echoed around his bedroom. *Why*, he could not understand, she persisted in the martyrdom of living in this apartment. Everything was wrong with it. The layout was impossible: an entrance into a long, dark corridor onto which opened first two bathrooms side by side, followed by a kitchen with a dining room opposite, then two bedrooms to which the faraway bathrooms theoretically related, and then at the end, the *salone*, or drawing room, with two windows—this was the *pièce de resistance*—overlookin

the Grand Canal.

A view of the Grand Canal, yes, but at what price! Immediately below these windows was a vaporetto stop: all day there was a murmur of activity there, which peaked every ten minutes as the boats arrived. Very late at night the boats became less frequent. So the arrival came as a sudden shock. He had begged her to move to a different location, but she was stubborn on the issue. When he came home to stay with her, especially on weekends, she would often sleep until ten o'clock, and then excuse her tardiness by saying that she had been kept awake by the noise. But she would always add that she didn't usually notice it, though maybe she noticed it more when he was there because she knew it bothered him.

Tonight it particularly irritated him. He was beginning to feel superior and protective toward his poor old mother. She didn't seem to have any interest in her life apart from him. He listened for sounds from her bedroom, but there were none and he concluded that she had probably been lying awake for hours anticipating this racket. He wondered how often she was kept awake like that. She had been living here for nearly fifteen years, since when he was at university. She used to say she'd got used to it, but would move someday. Now he perceived it was beginning to wear her down. Soon, he surmised, her health could begin to fail. He was glad that he had started to pay more attention to her again.

When he had first set up his practice as an architect, he had been eager to establish himself outside her influence. Also, somehow, he did not quite like the idea of reasserting in the public mind the direct association with Morello & Figli; at least not at first, even though his Roman girlfriend, Flavia, was impressed by it and thought it extravagant to leave it for others to manage. But he categorically refused to turn his attention in that direction until he had made his own name. Flavia's ambition to manage Morello & Figli did not convince him, and it was his opposition to it which prompted him to avoid introducing her to his mother for fear they might hit it off. Little by little Flavia lost interest in coming to Venice and eventually she gave up on him. So for a while he had no women in his life at all.

But somehow, as he began to acquire bigger projects and important clients, he felt himself drawn into his mother's company again. He marveled at how much she still knew about life in Venice and especially how much she was able to tell him about the patrician families who used to be her customers. When he told her about the commission he was about to receive to create a mezzanine apartment for the Decardi son, who was getting married and coming back to Venice to live, she had advised him not to turn away other work on the expectation of being occupied with that project as there was trouble about the marriage and the wedding had been postponed; it might even be called off. They would probably do the apartment anyway, she maintained, but they would not be in a hurry. She ventured that it might be tactful for him to suggest that they take some time to think over the plans. He did that, and the Decardis were so delighted with him for being so easy to deal with they invited him to a cocktail party that same evening. He met there the Patrictis, and out of that meeting he had acquired a large, prestigious project in their enormous *palazzo*.

His mother had somehow divined the right course so many times recently that their old harmony returned. He began to confide in her and seek her opinions. But he would not come to live with her. Nor, to be fair, did she want him to. She wanted him to get married. But she begged him not to marry just any ordinary girl; she wanted him to have someone elegant and bright who would be a help to him. That was her sole reservation. When he told her the

Flavia had drifted out of the picture, she actually clapped her hands with spontaneous delight.

His mother's cleverness as a manager of situations he had always accepted as one of her natural advantages, but coming back to it after a time, he was more impressed by it than ever and wondered how his mother, retired these many years, managed to be so well informed about the private lives of the *alta società*. He knew that she had no companions and rarely visited other people's houses. But when he asked her how she kept abreast of a world she didn't even inhabit, she reminded him with an injured air that she had known these people for many of them, since before he was born. And although they weren't really social friends, she saw them out for coffee and about the town; they trusted her not to be too interested in their private lives and so were less guarded with her than they would be with most of their friends.

As Vittorio lay in bed now, awake and thoughtful, he felt a wave of childlike admiration for her, which was followed by a wave of affectionate concern. He wondered if she wanted someone to talk to, lying awake in her room. Almost an hour had passed since they said good night. He could hear people walking down the *calle* to the vaporetto. The opera must be over, he thought. And though they were laughing and talking in an undertone befitting the time of night, they might as well have been walking through his bedroom, so clearly could he hear their echoing voices. It was, he knew, an effect of being near the water that amplified every *ciao-ciao*, clip-clop, cough, slam, or mutter, and he wondered if Venetian politicians in their cloak-and-dagger days had been wise to the perils of giving utterance near a waterway, or was that the unknown factor by which so many of them came to grief. It was precisely because one heard so much from the *calle* that he always took this room when he was home, although he knew that when he was away his mother often slept here herself. This practice he regarded as evidence of her loneliness for him.

He arose quietly and tiptoed to the hall to look into his mother's room. But a rustle made him look into the drawing room. The light from the vaporetto stop glowed through the window that gave directly onto it; his mother never closed the shutters there because, she claimed, she had paid so dearly for the Grand Canal view. In the lower half of the window where she had trailed ivy over the iron grillework, the light flickered through the leaves. Suddenly he made out her form silhouetted against it. She was sitting by the window with her back to him. She seemed to be doing something with her hands. He heard another rustle and saw that she was writing with the quick, short jottings he knew from the days when she used to have detail consultations with clients. But what was she writing? He heard some voices from outside the window. Two women were below talking in an undertone. He guessed that they had decided to hang back from the *pontile* until the boat arrived so they could talk privately. He concentrated on the voices; they became more distinct.

"But are you sure?"

"Oh I *know*. Listen to this: Matteo was coming back from staying with a friend in Bergamo. As Edmondo was in the country, I thought it would be a good idea, since Matteo's only twelve, if he met his train in Verona and came back with him. But by a twist of fate Matteo's friends put him on an earlier train, so he had to get off at Verona and wait. He was wandering about the station when he happened to look in the window of the bar and saw Edmondo kissing a woman. And guess who it was: his ex-secretary; the one who left Venice last year and then came back, Marda Segusio. Somehow Matteo managed to keep his wi-

about him and succeeded in boarding the train he was supposed to be on without their seeing him. Then he watched them get on separately. Five minutes later they pretended in front of Matteo to be amazed to meet. So now Matteo has seen for himself what a *buffone* his father can be.”

“How awful for him.”

“He can hardly stand to be in the same room with him, he’s so embarrassed for him. Just like I felt the first time I caught him.”

“But the poor boy. Twelve is the worst age for that sort of thing. What about little Esmeralda?”

“She’s only four so she doesn’t know anything about it. For her it will all come later. But I’ve promised Matteo that this time I will get a divorce.”

“Couldn’t you wait? Maybe it’s just a passing fancy.”

“Oh you know as well as I do that this thing’s been going on for years. And before this one there was Moceniga Carrara. I almost divorced him then, but it’s better this time. He couldn’t possibly bring himself to marry his secretary; he’s such a snob. But she’s *very* ambitious, and *very* determined. It will be fun watching him squirm. I’ll bet you *anything* he comes right out with it and asks me to stay married to him until he can get rid of her. He’s so *spoiled*. Anyway, keep it quiet for now. I don’t want my mother to find out or she’ll start an *intervention* to save her daughter’s famous marriage. Since she made it, she thinks she has artistic rights over it. *Eccolo*, there’s our boat. We’d better join the others. Won’t they be thrilled when they find out? Something to talk about.”

“You can trust me. It’s too sad to talk about.”

He heard them walking down the ramp and could just see their heads as they walked across the *pontile*. The one was Baronessa Bonome, the other was Sofi Patrissi. Vittorio was dumbfounded. He had been invited to drinks by Edmondo Patrissi at Palazzo Patrissi only two days ago to start work on the restoration. She had been with them. People said it was her money that paid the bills.

The vaporetto thundered up to the *pontile* and Vittorio took the opportunity to creep back to bed. He had lost the desire to interrupt his mother’s sleeplessness. He felt changed, and though invested with a forbidden power. All at once he was gripped by the desire to laugh. Of course—his mother’s information: *that* was how she got it. People came to the vaporetto stop from the Teatro La Fenice, from the Gritti Palace, from the Monaco. And late at night when there were few people, they talked. And the meetings for coffee? She had said she saw them at coffee, not that she had coffee with them, and they trusted her—yes, he could see that all now—they trusted her, an old woman sitting quietly at the next table occupied with her newspaper—or more likely her notebook—they trusted her by not even noticing her. After all, she was nothing more than a familiar face, like the hundreds of familiar faces in Venice that one nods to in the narrow *calli* day in and day out all through the seasons, year in, year out, without quite being able to place them. And so she knew all, carefully overheard conversations at Café Florian, Paolin, the Gritti Terrace, the bar at the Monaco. And then the nightly vigils. He smiled in the dark. He wondered whether he would tease her about it in the morning or whether he would let her keep her secret. He decided to hold his peace. But he would bring her breakfast in bed at ten o’clock. *Mamma mia!* No wonder she gets so tired.

He must have dozed off, for he was startled by the sound of footsteps, slow, heavy, wear-

footsteps coming along the *calle*. Automatically he slipped out of bed and crept soundlessly toward the hall. It amused him that he had caught the habit after a single exposure. Like mother like son, he concluded as he reached the door of the drawing room; but he was surprised, in spite of himself, to find her still watching. So she hadn't even taken a nap. He admired her stamina, her determination, but he wondered if it could possibly be worth it this hour. He checked himself: for he could see on the *pontile* the head of Edmondo Patrisci. She is following a pattern she knows, he realized. He watched Edmondo move as though to straighten his tie and stretch his back. The man was tired, it was obvious from the way his shoulders sagged. He saw him put a handkerchief to his lips and wipe them and then look at the handkerchief. He made a quick gesture. He must have thrown it away, Vittorio decided. The distant hum of the *vaporetto* increased to a roar as it approached. Vittorio shrugged his shoulders at the noise and under its cover returned once again to bed. Shortly afterward he heard his mother's bed squeak and he fell into a sound sleep.

When he awoke he was troubled. Something had happened to him since last night, something important. He got up slowly and opened the shutters. He looked up the *calle* and then toward the *vaporetto* stop. He remembered those strange, incredible things that had happened in the night. This morning he was the same man, Vittorio Falon, architect and interior designer, and yet he had acquired a new dimension; he had glimpsed the world from Olympus. What foot these mortals be, he grinned to himself, and then remembered his mother. He would go and make breakfast to pass the time until she woke up. He longed to see her and speak to her despite his resolve to say nothing of last night's adventures.

He dressed but decided not to shave right away. She wouldn't scold him if she didn't have to sit opposite him. He would shave while she was having her breakfast in bed. But he took his shaving bag with him to the kitchen anyhow, since it was halfway to the bathroom. He was pondering for the thousandth time the conundrum of how one might rationalize the badly designed apartment when he turned in to the kitchen and found his mother already there.

"Good morning," she smiled at him. "Did you get enough sleep?"

Vittorio wondered for an instant whether she knew that he had been with her last night.

"I couldn't sleep very well because of the horrible racket," he ventured. "I don't know why you ever sleep in that room. One hears everything."

"Yes, I think you're right. Last night I slept like an angel. Perhaps I should always sleep in the other room."

Vittorio dismissed his suspicions. The brioche were already on the table, so he sat down. She brought the coffee and sat down opposite him.

"Sorry I haven't shaved. I was going to bring you breakfast in bed," he said.

"Dear boy!" she exclaimed. "I am so glad to be up early. I don't like to make you late. I know you like to catch up on your work on Sundays. Tell me all about what you're doing. What are your new jobs?"

"Well," he began cautiously, "I told you about the two public jobs, and I told you about the Palazzo Patrisci. There's nothing more, really."

"Ah," she replied. "Palazzo Patrisci. Isn't that a big job?"

"Yes. Yes it is. A big job. It's complicated. They haven't done any work for years and

needs a general structural repair and a lot of remodeling and restoration.”

“That sounds expensive,” she observed, taking a hungry bite out of a brioche and gazing thoughtfully at the jam oozing from the stump. “Where does the money come from? Do you believe the rumors that the money is hers?”

“Oh, I don’t know. But when I spoke to them she took an interest in the money side, I can say that much.”

“I see. So you know them both—Barone Edmondo *and* Baronessa Sofi.”

“Yes ...”

“She is lovely, don’t you agree? Beautiful, charming, and, it appears, very rich. I think she is an excellent young woman. It’s a pity her husband doesn’t think so.”

“*Mamma!* How can you say such a thing!”

“*Vittorio!* How can you talk to me like that? I know a great deal about your clients Patrisci and I speak only to you. If you’ll listen to your mother like a good boy, I’ll tell you a thing or two. Then *you’ll* have to be discreet.”

“Of course, *Mamma.*” He dreaded hearing her retail the conversations he had heard from himself.

“Haven’t I helped you before?”

“Indeed.”

“Well then. You should pay attention to me; I’m only trying to help you. Now listen. Barone Edmondo is in love with another woman. The Baronessa has discovered this and she intends to send him away. Very soon.” She stopped, surprised by her own strident tones, and composed herself.

After a pause, she added quietly, “I hope that when you are there working with Baronessa Patrisci, you will include young Matteo in your discussions. He will be interested in your designs, and you will want his approval.”

As the words settled over him, Vittorio blinked like a man emerging from a bank of clouds, thunderstruck at where he found himself. He recognized his future beckoning to him over the ground plan—and though it was only roughly sketched at the moment, he saw perfectly how it could be developed, and realized.

His mother dusted the crumbs from her fingertips and pushed her chair away from the table. “I had a good night last night, Vittorio,” she yawned, “but I think that once you’re married, I’ll give up the view and move to a quieter place.”

As Ermintrude Gotham looked back over her many years in Venice, among the most vivid extrusions she saw marking the landscape were antagonisms, some of which persisted for many years and changed, for an interval at least, the social orientation of her life. Sometimes they entangled others, sometimes even—such was the nature of Venetian life—they had little to do with her personally but entangled her anyhow. Some divided the whole of Venetian society and determined the shape of great social events, of charity balls, and royal visits. Turning the pages of her photograph album was illuminating; one could note the missing and then flick ahead to see some of them come back again, older, and perhaps wiser. There were those that one never would have expected to see again, and others that one never would have expected to disappear, even for an interval. Of the two, the former cases were by far the more interesting ones. There was, of course, a third case, of those who disappeared never to return, which was least interesting of all. Baronessa Notabene's *uscita di scena* was one of these.

Ermintrude Gotham, better known as Trudi Gotham, came to Venice by an unusual route. She was the daughter of the great New York book collector German Gotham, whose vast collection had been generously apportioned to five universities after his death. To his daughter he left his important name, a sizable fortune, and a winning character. She started collecting autobiographical materials, more specifically diaries, virtually by accident.

When she finished her university degree at Grenoble, she went to Praglia, near Venice, to learn from the *Frate* about book restoration, then accepted an offer in London to join the staff of the famous antiquarian bookseller Bertrand Quatriem, where she encountered the great amateur bibliophile and serial marrier, Viscount Cato. After a brief friendship bred among the incunabula, he acquired her. As Lady Cato of Lievedon Hall, she became a famous hostess and she might have continued as such had it not transpired that one of their more illustrious guests left his diary behind and unwittingly won her away to a new career.

The maids, thinking the handsome book to be one of the many thousands belonging to the Hall, put it in the library to be shelved by either Lord Cato's secretary or Lady Cato, who shared this work between them. The diary proved a problem for the secretary, who left it for Lady Cato with a note asking her to give it her attention. It turned out to be an enchanted portal through which Trudi Cato eventually found her way to Venice.

As it happened the maids couldn't remember in which bedroom they'd found the anonymous volume, but Lady Cato was sure she recognized its author by both his tone and his handwriting. Nevertheless it was an awkward situation, as the entries describing the author's stay at Lievedon were largely devoted to musing about the mismatched marriage of Lord Cato to the forthright, but curiously shy, young American. In that character, Lady Cato wrote to the author asking whether he had left a very handsome book at Lievedon and avoided calling it a diary, specifying instead *8. vo, full calf, gilt borders with tooled gilt eglantine motif on spine, 200 pp, watermarked paper, ca. 100 ms, F.* He, being none other than her former employer Bertrand Quatriem, wasn't fooled. His reply took the form of a bread-and-butter note praising his hostess and saying that he had not left the book. Having said that, he went on to observe that the folly of keeping a diary was its pernicious tendency to encourage id

speculation. She took the point. And they remained friends.

But his folly was the world's fortune. When he denied ownership of the book he removed any scruple Lady Cato might have felt about reading it, thus opening the way for her interest in the way people live their lives. Like Lady Cato herself, the interest was principled and serious, with no quarter for wickedness. When in due course she divorced Lord Cato, she set off straightaway in her father's footsteps to become in record time a noted collector. Her fame came partly from the fact that her collection was unusual. No collector before her had focused so closely on diaries and letters, particularly on modern and contemporary ones. She was convinced that hers was an era in which life stories were of special interest, a conviction she based on the observation that the world was changing so fast that a personal account offered the opportunity to ponder change and diminish the sense of loss. Her fame came also from the fact that she encouraged the writing of journals and diaries by awarding financial grants to promising young writers, artists, actors, scientists, in fact to anyone of sufficient interest who came to her attention, to keep a diary for one year, which would at the end of the year become a part of her collection, and, if it had exceptional merit, would make possible the extension of the grant for a further period. Many young geniuses wrote diaries for Trudi Gotham for five or ten years to finance their early careers. Some, who later became famous, felt that their diaries were worth more than they had been paid for them, and begrudged Trudi her share in their success. They realized that in a sense, they were still working for her. Their ingratitude deterred Trudi no more than the condescending speculations in the diary which brought her collection into being. But there was a more interesting phenomenon at work. The effect of frequent success among her diarists mimicked Calvin's doctrine of predestination, becoming almost a doctrine itself: a person with a Gotham grant was among the elect and therefore would succeed.

She had lived for a time in London but, finding herself too much in the shadow of her former marriage, moved to Rome, where she was known as Trudi Cato. While in Rome she commissioned some diaries on her usual basis, but had problems with people who had taken the money and written the diaries, then decided that they would rather keep them or publish them for more money. As she already had considerable experience in the matter and took great care over her contracts, she always won the day. It became a joke in Rome, an exclamation by someone who felt he'd been seduced with money to make a deal he later didn't want to keep: *Sono stato trudicato!*

In truth, there was one instance of a contract which she didn't enforce with such ease and which festered in the legal system for a number of years. She discovered in Rome an interesting but strangely rootless young man who seemed to know everyone and be invited everywhere. He was called Manfredo Nofretti and she ran into him frequently. He seemed to know several of the clever young people who had grants from her. So when he asked her point-blank, if he could have a grant and write a diary, she was cornered. She wasn't accustomed to being accosted by social acquaintances asking for grants, and while she had no doubt that Mani was intelligent, he didn't seem to do anything except appear at cocktail parties and receptions, and the last thing she wanted to sponsor was a volume of idle gossip. Finally, she explained her terms and her position on social chatter, and drew up with him her usual contract. Within a month she had evidence that she had done the right thing; two people, both of them grantees, rang her to say that they had seen Mani's first chapter and

looked promising. Later she began to hear at regular intervals from different people that they had read extracts from his forthcoming journal, which were simply brilliant. Trudi was delighted; for one thing, she was eager to increase the Italian section of her library; for another, this diary promised to be a new departure, which always pleased her. But when the diary fell due, he refused to hand it over. He said it wasn't quite ready. When she offered to extend his grant on the basis of her evaluation of what he had so far written, he hinted that he thought he could earn more by taking it to a publisher. At that point, she turned it over to her faithful lawyer, Davide Bari, who never failed her. Nevertheless, Manfredo Nofret proved a difficult nut to crack, and he was still holding out against Bari's unflagging efforts and diverse tactics long after Trudi moved to Venice.

Her discontent with the metropolitan sprawl of Rome asserted itself within months of her arrival, inviting fond thoughts of Venice, with its human dimensions, where she had spent her summers before her marriage and which she knew well. After a few years in Rome, she heard through friends of a vacant palace on the Grand Canal not far from San Vidal. It had belonged to Glorio Colana, a much-loved playboy in pre-war Venice, who had died in the war. His wife had gone back to her family in France "for the duration" and never reappeared. After long litigation, Palazzo Colana had finally come up for sale. Trudi Cato bought it and brought her library to Venice. She took back her maiden name and went on commissioning diaries.

Palazzo Colana was perfect for her purposes: the ground floor had space for a porter's apartment and various offices, the first *piano nobile* had the traditional huge *salone* running from front to back, ideal for a reading room, with rooms on both sides for stacks and other deposits as well as offices and workrooms, while the upper *piano nobile* was equally grand but somewhat cozier, and on the top there was a guest apartment with beautiful views. There was only one problem. Although her architect had succeeded in acquiring the building permit to make the physical adjustments required for her library, her Venetian lawyer could not seem to get the permit for her to run the library as an institution and open it to the public.

When she moved to Venice, she had followed the established practice of taking recommendations from local friends before commissioning an architect and choosing a lawyer to steer her various applications for permits through the authorities. In both cases, she had chosen the professional recognized by the upper crust as having the best rapport with the requisite authorities. The young architect, Vittorio Falon, had lived up to his name and without a false step had galloped over and around the difficulties like a *pallio* winner at Siena, whereas the lawyer, Corrado La Strada, of a much nobler pedigree and the universal pick for a winner, was instead getting mired down at every turn. His excuses were becoming so complicated and long-winded that Trudi stopped listening to them, even at cocktail parties. She could imagine the hours he was charging to her account on the basis of these elaborations. When at last the works were finished and the house was ready for occupation both as residence and library, Trudi had a tense conversation with Avvocato La Strada. The next day he came up with a temporary solution which, though bad, was better than nothing. He recommended a temporary oral agreement which amounted in fact to a postponement for perhaps a year of an enforcement of the ban on running such institutions without a permit. There were two drawbacks he felt obliged to point out: the deal would be expensive to arrange, and could, conceivably, militate against her being granted the permanent status she was seeking. However, if she wanted to avoid further delay, there was no other option. Trudi

entertained a stream of unholy thoughts concerning Byzantium and accepted the terms.

Trudi Gotham had met Patrick Mayer in London after her divorce. He had come out to visit her several times in Rome, where he had once lived and knew even more people than she did. When he visited her for the first time in Palazzo Colana, she was on the verge of acquiring her temporary permit, or rather stay of prosecution, for opening the Gotham Library of Autobiographical Materials to the public. From the first he had been interested in her collection, and even recommended candidates for grants. During his visit, they passed the time shelving books, installing the card catalog, and working through correspondence from people who wanted to consult materials in the library. There was a backlog of work, much of it too esoteric for her new secretary, evaluating proposed research projects and assessing fees, which Patrick was able to expedite as well as Trudi could herself. He knew many of the writers who applied to consult the library, and many of the people whose materials were being consulted, so he was an invaluable aide. But perhaps most important of all, he was amusing to be with and amused to be there. She hired him as chief librarian and gave him a suite of rooms on the top floor with a view over the rooftops toward San Marco and the Campanile. She paid him generously, but obliged him to join her famous dinner parties on a regular basis. He was the one detailed to answer questions about the GLAM and after dinner, over the coffee cups and brandy snifters, to let escape an indiscretion or two about the authors or the collection, so that guests were dispatched home with stomachs and ears full of delectable morsels. It worked a treat: esteem for the collection soared, Pat Mayer became nearly as famous as Trudi Gotham herself, and hardly anyone noticed that it was spontaneous, that behind it all was the deft instinct of wily old German Gotham's heiress.

Hardly anyone except for a few aged society dames, that is, who saw only too well that it was not merely calculated, this persistent accretion of fame and worth, but that it was undeserved. They would have loved to be essential to the phenomenon, but they had made a mistake, which they always referred to among themselves as *Her First Big Mistake*. When Minnie Gotham came to live in Venice, as she met new people, she routinely invited them to her parties, and she made no exception *vis-à-vis* the elder ladies of the nobility. Although Ermintrude Gotham was grand in her own way, she was unpretentious, and forthright to a fault. For her, an acquaintance was an acquaintance and an invitation was an invitation. And likewise, a "no" was a "no." Among themselves the ladies agreed to apply the standard strategy of not being in a hurry to accept her, certain that she would come to appreciate them better as a result. In fact, they had nothing against her except that she was coming on a bit too fast. Through a rite not entirely different from the courtship routine of pigeons—in which the suitor struts and preens while the lady feigns aloofness over repeated supplications until the suitor's ardor wanes, then at last the lady all at once relents and they come together to perpetuate the society of pigeon life—the ladies initiated the ritual by turning down Minnie Gotham's first invitations with hauteur. But Trudi Gotham, having been brought up where a spade is a spade, took their behavior at face value and let them go. Although she didn't register the fact at the time, it was nevertheless true: her star was rising, theirs was sinking. She hardly missed them, but these few never forgave her for being so unsophisticated as to fly away at the first rejection. Their leader loomed one more time on Ermintrude Gotham's horizon.

Baronessa Notabene was the Anointed Queen of Venetian Society. Everyone knew how she

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