

1. Venice and Regensburg



The day was ill-fated from the start. Scarfing down all that Pizza Laguna the night before was more than his aging stomach could handle. He hadn't slept well; now he tossed and turned and stared at the ceiling, tired and beaten. The problems and inquiries of the next twenty hours loomed heavy and his mind cried out to rejoin the padded world of dreams. His wife breathed softly beside him, relaxed and vulnerable as she never was during the day.

With some effort he turned over and glanced at the metallic strip displaying the date and time: Friday September 26, 2031, five-forty A.M. Without really knowing why, he decided to get up. After putting on yesterday's clothes, he crept toward the kitchen to make first coffee.

«Empty!»

He put the tin back on the shelf and grumbled to himself. Ever since Stella converted to mint brew, she had stopped

drinking coffee, and he had to remember to buy it himself.

Doing the shopping, the art of knowing what's missing today and what you'll need tomorrow, was never his forte. Not that he was incapable, it just never felt natural in his mind. The stress from work might explain his lack of organization, but he was hopeless when it came to the actual necessities of life. He was still living day to day, though he did everything possible to mask or ignore the truth.

With an imperceptible shrug, he made for the bar near his house, just opening its doors. There was no jacket on the coatrack as he crossed the anteroom; his son wasn't back yet. With a trace of envy, he thought about young people spending their evenings out with friends, loud and happy, not a care in the world.

He used to be just like them. A shiver ran through his body; the past flashed before his eyes, uninvited as usual. The echo of faces, of rooms and voices of his youth came back, especially during the last few months. Bitter nostalgia for what was and would never be again. He felt the weight of things left undone, decisions unmade, opportunities missed. Old age, the dim companion tracking him silently for so long, finally revealed its cumbersome presence.

The elevator's reflection, ruthless as ever, worsened his sense of discomfort. He workout routine kept him in good shape, but the signs of physical deterioration were there: the top of his forehead bereft of hair, alarmingly silver elsewhere. His eyes, after years of work, stayed half-closed, as if to escape the light. Ever-deepening wrinkle lines made grooves in his face, like folds in a well-worn map. Though his seventy-six kilos at one hundred eighty centimetres still made people

envious, he had resigned himself to a slow, daily decline some time ago.

Just a few months until he hit fifty.

He tried to stay positive: all the wrinkles took attention away from the scar across his right cheek; people had finally stopped asking him about it. He told the story of the defective blender with an actor's grace; that scuffle in Antwerp wasn't so long ago. The scar was a daily reminder. He turned his back on the mirror and waited for the elevator to reach the ground floor.

Walking along Liberty Road, he watched the city as it awoke: one thing after another in the misty morning, the hookers were just leaving their corners to the street vendors, bakers, and news dealers opening up shop. Venice, the city of his childhood, pierced the surface of the Lagoon, blurred by the fog but no less entrancing. He had to smile, considering the irony: born in Campo della Tana, near Darsena, he began to travel and wound up here, half a century later, almost exactly where he started.

«Almost» he thought bitterly. He was living in the Porto Marghera neighborhood, quite far from the Venice he knew in boyhood. Linking the Cannaregio district with terra firma, The Liberty Bridge taunted as it kept him from his childhood world, from mysterious vices, and from the Sea.

He went into the bar; the buzz of the morning's first news broadcast irritated him, as always happened when he heard a TV on low volume. Despite the measly physical distance separating him from those childhood places, he never felt the urge to visit. He feared entangling himself in a schmaltzy

nostalgia might upset the fragile balance he built to guide what remained of his life. As a citizen of the Most Serene Democratic Republic of Venice, requesting a sightseeing pass for the island was easy, but he saw no reason to pursue such a useless caprice.

Moreover, an official request would bring attention. This was inadvisable, thanks to his international trips and participation in the Brussels Resistance. He'd be faced with a new wave of interrogations and blame. So, he stayed put. Day after day he watched as the world he once knew crumbled. In the new country brought from the ashes, he felt like an outsider. Maybe if he played a more active role- if he'd never left, things would have ended differently. He arched his eyebrows and grumbled. He hated the days when the entire universe wanted to lock you into one depressing introspection.

He struck up a conversation with the barista, hoping to drive every thought from his head. Small talk was easy: current events, vacations past, and making *baicoli*, a venetian cookie. Two tourists (with their unmistakable square pink brooches) came in, unexpected at that hour. The barista rolled his eyes as they sat down. He started folding the newspaper absent-mindedly.

«Tourists,» he thought to himself, «are what's always ruined Venice.» He thought of the Sculpture of the Lions from the Arsenal, wrapped in *Domopak* on a winter morning. Credit for that episode goes to the untamed wings of youth in protest (care was taken not to damage the work, of course). Before making a hasty escape, the culprit scribbled a note, "Not for everyone."

At fifteen years old he already felt the need to take a

stance on the urgent problems connected to tourism. Yes, the most visited city in the world needed to do everything to protect its resources. But what about creating an infrastructure adapted to handle the daily influx of hundreds and thousands of visitors? As the last descendant of a well-to-do Venetian family, the idea of transforming the island into an oasis for the elite appealed to him. Protests and warnings did nothing; the city was unliveable: price-gouging, lines for miles, and apprehension in the air. All this while Venice slowly collapsed back into the native marshlands from a thousand years before.

Following the Paduan insurrection, tourists and cruise ships practically vanished, lessening the flooding and erosion. Now, after Treaty of Lugano, the political situation appeared to be stabilizing and some local company, in accordance with the Venetian Holiday Ministry, started running tours. This was not so easy as it was before; now you had to follow the itinerary provided by the Office of Tourism to the letter. Any deviation was grounds for a run-in with the police. Eating sweets was restricted to predetermined locales.

He watched the barista fill out the Breakfast Certificate for the two tourists and felt a wave of sadness. A lament for all the times he enjoyed other cities as a traveller without warnings and regulations, just leaving things to instinct and chance.

He ambled home, his back to the Lagoon. «Italy starts after the Liberty Bridge,» his uncle Marco would say. Sometimes he thought that phrase contained the source of his melancholy. Leaving Venice wasn't easy, coming back was even harder. So it was impossible to resist the memories

flooding in that morning, screaming like the port sirens.



Just two months after graduation he decided to leave Venice. Despite high marks and a healthy appreciation for scientific material, he wanted no part of continued studies. His father Leonardo, partly for punishment, partly to clear his own conscience, wanted him to work in Modena. But he wearied of letting others make his decisions, and he had no intention to do that now. He was young and full of life, craving travel, new encounters, seeing the world he'd heard about through his own eyes. His experiences traveling were beautiful. He savored the feeling of independence that comes with deciding where to go and who to talk to. The prospect of a fixed job, with a steady income, an existence shuttled between the house and office, was the furthest from his mind. He was sure he could find his own way by himself, without his father's help.

Thus began their umpteenth dispute, coming back from Belluno, where they'd spent the last week of June:

«Oh really? – his father started in with a jeering tone – And what shall you do, with no money, if you don't go to work in Modena?».

«I'll go to the Czech Republic!» he retorted instinctually.

The older gentleman, dumbfounded by his futile attempt to place the unknown country on a map («somewhere near Czechoslovakia»), could not pretend he knew what to say. He recomposed quickly and began a long invective against shirking responsibility and the obligations tied to being a

member of the venerable house of Prant.

Daniele stopped listening. Satisfied he'd surprised his parents, who obviously understood so little about his private life, he began mentally composing the letter that would soon be on its way to Klára Pekařová at Kanovnická number Two, České Budějovice.

He met her the year before in Regensburg, Germany. He was there doing a vacation-study abroad; she was visiting distant relatives who were venturing beyond the Iron Curtain for the first time. She was at a party with some friends in one of the communal student kitchens. She was distracted when he came in, but quickly spun around to see the new arrivals. A sweet smile dimpled her cheeks and her long, raven-black hair was done up in an elaborate chignon. He was already lost in her deep blue eyes, made of dewdrops and sunlight. They reminded him of the Sea, the Garda Lake, pure crystals of the Murano jewelers. He uttered a clumsy greeting to the others and took a seat. He couldn't stop staring.

The room felt calm. The party hadn't started. People were sipping French wine and chitchatting. There was a young German keeping her entertained, whom he could only despise. He needed to hatch a plan to get the attention on himself. He could play the guitar, a handy trick, but there was no instrument to strum.

He turned to a pair of French and one Danish student talking excitedly about the future of Europe. Motivated by a glass of fine Cabernet Sauvignon someone put in his hand, he decided to interject, in his poor English: «individual States must remain the most independent that is possible. As an Italian I believe it is right to defend our traditions and

customs, which are different from others».

A deep, deliberate voice came from the other side of the table: «That's some limited reasoning! Sure there are differences, but it is stupid to emphasize diversity. Eventually people mix and evolve like the ancient languages did. Our traditions will blend together as well. It's a positive aspect of globalization».

He'd managed to attract her attention in a less favorable way. She glared a look of defiance, pleased to have shut down his argument and caught him by surprise. Speaking passionately, she was even more beautiful: it was so cute the way her eyes lit up and her head swayed under the weight of her determination. He was not about to let himself lose so he fired back: «It took two world wars for us to understand that no culture in Europe can have the upper hand over another.»

She didn't let it end there, her voice now slightly more piercing: «That's a ridiculous comeback. Obviously, I'm not talking about a nation forcefully imposing itself on others. I mean a slow process where the people come to know each other and support the best parts of every culture, leaving the worst out.»

Others joined in the argument. Then someone flipped on the music and turned out the lights. The party commenced.

Klára stood up with a jerk and moved away from the table. Daniele felt a little put off, so he downed another cup of wine and followed her. He felt the rage smoldering. How could such a beautiful girl treat him like that? So with a quick swipe he did the only reasonable thing he'd done all night and loosened a barrette from her hair, peeling out of

the kitchen.

Bewildered, the girl ran after him through the doorway, down the hall, down three flights of stairs and out the dorm. It didn't seem like he was stopping but she wasn't going to him win. On they ran, one chasing the other, along the city's medieval highways; echoes of their footsteps bounced off the same walls that resounded with the processions of knights and noble merchants in past centuries. They raced to Pietra Bridge on the Danube before slowing down, wheezing and gasping for air.

She caught up to him and yelled with a final burst of energy: «What were you thinking?!»

Mere centimeters apart, their eyes were bouncing in the darkness. He feigned ignorance. His penitent hand offered the barrette, and he gazed at his feet. She snatched it back and fixed her hair. Moving away slightly, she leaned against one of the walls to catch her breath. Her face brightened into a smile.

«What's so funny?» he asked and moved a little closer.

The retort came quickly: «You're a real Italian. We Czechs like to say you're all hot-blooded.»

«Sure, when some girl brings it to a boil,» he replied, with his own smile.

He stood in front of her and looked right into her eyes. Still unsure, he felt instinctively like it was the thing to do. She was not going to be intimidated: «Don't act all macho with me! There's no excuse for what you did.»

«Oh really?» he replied, feeling courageous for some reason.

«I pulled you away from a noisy party and brought you into the moonlight on a beautiful, old bridge, just because I wanted to finish our conversation. If we did it your way, the music would have drowned us out half an hour ago. Dancing is nice but there's no room for dialogue.»

She smiled, and then her face got serious: «I don't think there was much else to say. The ideas you posed are ripe for nationalist exploitation. Wanting to impede the slightest attempt at integration and assimilation is counterproductive. Differences always create animosity. . . .»

They were close enough to be touching, «or Love» he added, pressing his lips to hers.

She gave into his kiss for a moment then she pulled back and pushed him away. «You're crazy! I don't even know your name!» she exclaimed, feigning resentment.

«Daniele Prant, pleasure» he replied with a sneer and made another pass at her lips. She ducked away and he planted a very passionate kiss on her right cheek. Undeterred, he started to kiss around her neck. She moved away sweetly.

«It wouldn't make sense, honey. I'm going back to the Czech Republic in two days.»

Daniele didn't understand: to a starry-eyed seventeen year old, two days was an eternity. She felt differently. So they walked along the Danube, one regretful, the other disappointed.

Her name was Klára and she was twenty. Even though she was from Prague, she studied chemistry at the South Bohemian University at České Budějovice. Daniele had never heard of the place, though he promised to flip through an