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## **THE GONDOLIER WEARS NIKES (AUGUST 2003)**

THE BRIDGES IN VENICE arch from one side of a canal to the other and pin together two distinct possibilities, one network of cobblestone and narrow corridors to another. You may cross or turn back, and you will as a result be either here or there. But the outcome will be the same; you will become at least remotely lost.

The streets in Venice lead nowhere.

The bridges are arched and the gondoliers can pass under by tilting their heads downward while the gondola glides through. It's mid-day. I'm lying prone on hot cobblestone with my camera poised on an even keel with the canal. "Look," I say. "Look at his red shoes." I take pride in this observation and want to be rewarded for it.

I get the feeling that on the other side of one of those bridges I might bump into myself, my elusive twin. She exists perfectly. She is happy and dressed in silk. Her red scarf flutters into the balmy wind. There is a faceless man on her arm, her soul mate. He exists perfectly too. He exists for her. Leigh takes a green bottle of beer out of his backpack, looks around and when the coast is clear takes a swig. "Oh yeah, look at that," he says.

I snap a picture, but the gondola slips past. I won't know until I get home and develop the film that I have captured nothing more than a river of milk and a flower box under the iron grate of a window across the way. A smear of red would have been enough, something that could have been a shoe, a blotch of insect blood, a wing of light refracted back into the lens, because no one will believe me now when I tell them, "I saw a gondolier in Nikes."

I will search for that gondolier as the day progresses. I will search for others in similar shoes, but won't find any. An interval has passed I'll never get back. I feel I have missed something important. I will never be satisfied in life. It's one of those unremarkable snapshots that imprints itself

on your brain—flowers against a white wall—and you know you’ll never forget it. You know life will never be what you may once have thought it could be. You didn’t think it would require so much work.

I believe Leigh will propose marriage to me in St. Marco’s Square near the end of this day. I will not understand until this moment the implications of my answer, nor how much I do and do not want authority over such a preposterous choice, although all my life I have been waiting for it. I will feel something inside me ignite like a flame, and the moment will crystallize around me. There he will be on bended knee.

Yes. No. Cross or turn back.

He is an older man, a good man. He owns a small boat with two sails. There is a void of open water beyond Discovery Island in Cadboro Bay I will never penetrate. I watch from the shore as he and his spinnaker get smaller and smaller and, rounding the peninsula, disappear.

I will always be new to him. I tell myself he will always love me for my relative youth. I want him to teach me how to love him the way a good wife should. I want him to think I’m beautiful in a strange, erotic, daughterly way. There are so many things I want to be to him, I don’t know what, but I want them.

I have been comparatively horrible, taken pleasure in hurting him, insulting him in public. I called him vacuous in front of my mother, and I said it like this, “vac-u-ousss.” In the shoe store I said he was nothing more than a cheap suit and tie. Some of the worst things I’ve ever done I’ve done to him. I want him to point out some meaningless truth that would—by virtue of its randomness—blot out all surrounding banality and make us perfect for each other. Something small enough to fit between us, but large enough to grant me immunity. Something about shoes.

Perhaps it’s the current, how the gondolier plunges his staff into the water and shoves his vessel forward. The ease of its glide that slows your sense of time and makes you think gondolas all over this city move at precisely the same speed. You think you can reach out and catch one, but they move quickly. They have always been moving this way. One day when there are no more gondolas moving, Venice will hoist itself from the imagination of civilization and become a real place in time.

“Why are you hiding that?” I ask. “Beer in Venice is like pop in North America.” The edge of my voices catches me. I am inflected with the bitch I have become.

This is not me. This is utterly me. I wonder how he feels.

He says nothing. He has an older man's tolerance. He holds the bottle to his lips, the green glass rim, looks hard at the gondola as the gondolier bends his neck into his chest and angles his body at a forty-five-degree angle over the stern of the boat and then disappears into shadows.

I'm thirsty. There will be only select moments in this day that I don't long for a drink of water, every twenty minutes another litre taken in and perspired out. Soon, thousands will die of heat exhaustion in France. I will feel shabby in cheap Mariposa dresses as we stroll around Paris during the final phase of our trip. I will come back hating a city I'm supposed to love. One night I will tell Leigh I hate him for looking at a young French girl in a white designer dress of such subtle yet superior quality I will want to cut my own skin. Instead, I will take off my cheap shoes and throw them at him from across Rue Lourmel. Another night the most beautiful woman I've ever seen close up will saunter past us, sort of dancing along the curb and sidewalk, a twinkle in her eyes. I will have a strong impulse to cut part of myself away, my hair maybe, a finger, a toe, spurned by the knowledge that a more moderate alteration would be redundant, even laughable. But I will walk away from Leigh instead. I'll walk for three hours toward the lights of the Eiffel Tower, like traveling down a dark prairie highway toward the beacon of a distant town. There's no telling how long until you get there, but you thought you'd be there by now. The tower will seem close, then disappear, then close again as I round a corner. My heart will beat fast as I stroll the concentric circles of Paris, increasingly lost—as if there are degrees of lostness—café after café, thirty-four degrees at midnight, the scent of hot concrete and roast duck in the air. It will feel like walking deeper inside, as though it is possible you'll turn a corner and feel your body disappear. I will realise the folly of life with one man, but each time the tower disappears I'll believe in love again.

"Where have you been?" he'll say when I return, and I'll think, 'He loves me. Thank god he still loves me.'

That lost.

One night in our apartment shortly before the trip, Leigh and I got drunk on red wine. A week earlier I'd pinched my thumb between rubber and metal as I'd switched gears on my ten-speed bike, and a blood blister had popped instantly outward from the smooth tip of my right thumb. Underneath a transparent bulb of skin, the blood pulsed. I hated but couldn't get rid of it myself. Leigh had experience with blood blisters from his days working in carpentry. If I didn't cut it off it would become a hard solid mass,

“forever,” he said. But it’s hard cutting away a part of yourself, even if it’s ugly and imperfect. Leigh lacerated it for me before the end of the night and enjoyed the process the way some people enjoy popping those little insula-tion bubbles. He said it like this: “Let me lac-er-ate that for you ... you won’t feel a thing,” and I closed my eyes and extended my hand.

We have hardwood floors and red walls in our apartment. I walk on tiptoes because of the people who live below. I think this makes me a compassionate person and take pleasure in my goodness, but really it’s a learned behaviour from girlhood. I feel light and airy as I do it. Sometimes I catch myself, and as my socks sweep across the floor I realize I’m getting older and farther from someone’s version of the truth. It’s good to be quiet. It’s possible everything can break.

There is no large red rug in the middle of the living room, something to soften the edges, I’ve said repeatedly. There is a large ugly painting of three fish about to intersect on the wall above the dining-room table. I hate this painting because I know the fish will never meet. They are in the process of emerging from murky green water, contained inside the limits of an ornate gold frame. This makes me nervous during meals. I will never know the distance they’ve traveled to get here and, what’s worse, neither do they. The table is a relic from his old life. I have seen photographs of his slender ex-wife kneading dough on its surface. His children painted pictures there. His youngest child, a daughter, is named after the Linden tree. His second son, a Logan berry. His first son, Grant, embodies his father’s legacy.

I have named no one over the course of my life, except my beloved cat, a pet ant and a snail.

Spoofers. Anty. Snail.

On the backsplash above the kitchen sink Leigh has nailed a fish-shaped cutting board; it has a chrome head and tail, but the middle is made of wood. Above that is a magnetized knife rack and a dozen sharp knives of varying sizes pointed downward. This makes me nervous while I wash dishes. I think that fish is in peril. Leigh likes chrome objects because they make a place look clean, he says, and small wooden boxes of any kind. I can understand a fascination with boxes. He likes to put objects inside them. He can always find things that way. I don’t know why he likes fish because I haven’t yet thought to ask.

Our neighbour is a tall, handsome young man who smokes pot every day, all day long. Our hallway always smells of it. He almost never goes out,

except to walk a gentle Doberman Pinscher, who may or may not live with him. Sometimes there he is in the schoolyard across the street, walking the dog. He wears a black trench coat and sometimes a hat. We can't understand how a man and even such a quiet dog could live together in such a small space; we believe the dog may be an infrequent visitor. It is difficult to see the truth of things that transpire behind closed doors, even when they're close. It is difficult to see inside this man's heart.

Sometimes I want to enter his apartment as a means of entering into his strange life, to touch his face and slide my arms inside his trench coat, to feel how he feels to be so high on life he is only remotely there. I wonder if he loves that dog, but don't care if he owns it or not. No one should own a dog. I don't know if the dog is gentle or not. I worry that the dog is unhappy. It's hard to see inside a dog's heart too.

Leigh painted the walls and didn't bother to tape off the edge where the wall curves into the white ceiling. He takes pride in his craftsmanship. It took him a week and three coats of paint. I also made love to him during this time, in love with the precision of his eye and the control of his wrist, the red speckles of paint in his hair and the scent of turpentine on his hands. I made love to him like he was a tired husband spent with labour and pride, as if it has always been me he came home to at night. That made me proud and spent too. I have never felt more like a good wife.

This is what we've cultivated together. These are the objects of our work—tolerance, fidelity and faith. Four red walls and space enough to move. These things are true.

“Let me lac-er-ate that for you,” he said, and though I felt nothing, when I opened my eyes it was done.

In a window behind us an elegant display of Murano glass gleams in the late afternoon sun. I will touch no glass objects this day, though I want them badly, even just one. But they are too expensive and too delicate to be transported back home.

I will later learn of the men of the night, *L'omo de note*, the Glass Masters, who still, after centuries, spend their hours in solitude with only by their thoughts and the cultivation of their art. I will read of the work required in the process: the specific characteristics of glass is in the way it solidifies, the workable thermal interval in which the Glass Master gives shape to his vision. The finished product will retain the rigidity of a solid body while maintaining the transparency of liquid. There is a chemical composition for

coloured glass. It takes time and work. Refined nitrate. White earth. Red lead. When it is baked, cover it a little at a time with twenty-two pounds of copper, then add another three hundred pounds of nitrate four times. It becomes a beautiful celeste.

A hummingbird. A flower. A ship.

There are so many versions of the truth.

The light has deepened, softened the edges of the city's ochre walls and its milky canals into a state I can only call singular. I have, after hours of walking and sweating, acquired a sense of purpose.

"Let's go for a gondola ride," I say.

As Leigh's brow crinkles with hesitation, and I see myself standing there in a posture of longing, the light sharpens, and I understand for a moment why Venice doesn't really exist. I know what his answer will be.

Gondolas come in many colours. Some people say the black ones are a sign of mourning, to symbolize Venice's lost freedom (at the Rialto Harbour) when the maritime tribunes relinquished command to the city's first Doge, Paolo Luciano Anafesto. The gondola is flat-bottomed, eleven feet long, inclined to the right and can do without the keel. The oar is designed with a curve to turn right and left, and another curve to go forwards or backwards. Only now do I regard this as an object of perfection. Its only flaw is its inability to safely navigate open waters; it's restricted to narrow places.

In winter the gondolas were once covered with a cabin, a *caponera*. In summer they were covered with silk curtains that sheltered ladies from the sun. It was once a serious problem for young women to find a husband. Every spring the island's boys and girls met under olive trees on the island of Olivolo where marriages were arranged. During feast day one year, pirates attempted to rape the girls and steal their dowries, but were unsuccessful. In subsequent years dummies called *marione* were used as decoys instead of girls.

"Let's save our money for Paris," he says. "There's still two weeks to go."

We decide to find a water taxi instead, a more affordable method of exploration. At some point later this day we pass a woman in a red peasant dress standing in her doorway. She tosses crumbs to pigeons in a vacant courtyard. I take her picture, but it feels like a sin, a kind of conspiracy, because I realize I don't want to know anything about her. I get the feeling only one of us is real. In another courtyard we'll find a man dressed like a Pulnicella, who, like Harlequin, is a silly servant who sometimes takes on

contradictory personalities—stupid and astute, bold and cowardly. Dressed in a white coat constrained by a belt, a long hat and a black mask, he will tilt his head and extend his hand as I hurriedly take his picture too.

The water taxi takes the long route in the wrong direction into the industrial ramparts of Venice and then veers back to the tourist centre, back to St. Marco's square, back to my proposal, perhaps in the same manner as the Doge as he set his sights on Rialto. Columns and cranes hack the sky, and a single stream of smoke dissipates into the winds above of the Adriatic. The noise and activity of the tourist centre recedes as we round a peninsula. Soon there is only open water and a dark steely light on the horizon, and I think, this is not Venice, this is utterly Venice.

I wonder what's out there.

Leigh has no sense of smell; in the early days after his separation he developed allergies and asthma. The doctors told him it could be the result of stress. Leigh believes it developed during the months he lived in the damp mossy quarters of his father's vacant house after his wife kicked him out. I believe his body compensated for a life crisis his mind could not reconcile. One night he fell to his knees outside the Parliament Building lawns, clutching his chest as the cold winter wind choked his passageways, and I thought he might die. I know now I will never be able to save him. I know now everyone dies alone.

But I may never know what it feels like to lose everything. I may never know what it feels like to have your lifeline cut away, to become an infrequent visitor of your own estranged life—your children, your wife, your house in Oak Bay. I worry that I will never build anything worth saving or leaving, that I will die never having known the difference.

I occupy space with him in the knowledge that he will never pick up my scent. I cannot decide, of the two of us, who is more two-dimensional because of this absence. This is both a comfort and a source of anxiety. He will never know the worst of me, my most primal scents, my feminine odours and secretions. He will never know the scent of my blood, yet at times it will envelop him beyond his knowledge. Likewise, he will never know the best of me, the scent of my skin after a hot bath, my clothes after rain. I draw circles around him in an effort to lure him in. I leave my scent in a ring. He looks through my perimeter, blinking, shocked and battered, wondering, why are you doing this to me?

Not long ago I held Linden's head in my hands as I washed her hair in the bathroom sink. "Lean under," I said, a little annoyed, gathering her hair into a manageable space.

"Okay," she said.

Under water her head seemed suddenly small, alarmingly small, white rivulets where her scalp showed through, and she became less a girl and more of a creature, a tiny drowned mouse in my hands. She stood on tiptoes in a posture of accommodation, leaning so far over I thought she might float away.

Afterwards we all sat at the dining-room table. I asked her if she liked the painting.

"Yes," she said.

"Which do you like better, Linden, the fish or the frame?" and she shrunk into herself, smiling with embarrassment, so we gave them names instead.

Pumpkin. Smudge. Scaly.

She is her father's daughter. One day she'll be a wife.

This is how we live together, scent-less, a little blind. We live beneath the surface of a three-dimensional world, only remotely aware of those things that make us who we are, sniffing for primordial evidence that will tell us decidedly we are not alone. We circle looking for names.

In Venice we wander the alleyways together, in love, more or less, until the last night train from St. Lucia departs for Geneva. There is no more water until we get there. We tell each other how stupid we have been. We should have conserved something for later, an Evian, an orange, a bottle of beer.

Throughout the night the train halts at intervals; the language changes from Italian to French, the French-speaking side of Switzerland. Warm wind and cigarette smoke fills the compartment of the dirty Italian train. A heavy Swiss girl patrols the narrow corridor. She has brown hair, rosy cheeks and perfect skin. I believe her life is what I see now, that all she does is travel back and forth in the night between two countries, a border in between. She has seen the sun rise from vineyards many times. Perhaps she has never been inside Lake Geneva. I feel sorry for her and smile as I squeeze past. I want her to know I'm on her side. Don't take shit from anyone. Don't stay on this train forever. I love you, Swiss girl.



The chaos of Italy splinters off in the night, buckles over fields of sunflowers empurpled by darkness, and is replaced by a familiar French dialect. It feels like my old high school French class in an alternate universe, like my old high school French class, only bigger.

At one point in the night Leigh's arm dangles from the upper cot and sways near the open window below. A young American male sleeps on the cot under his, his back shining in moonlight. Leigh's hand teases the invisible border that separates inside from outside, teases the wind as everything we don't know whizzes off his fingertips. All this time I thought he was the cities I love or hate, but he is not. I lie face down across from him, opposite but on a parallel plane, nothing but space in between, and feel so intimately connected I am for a moment an extension of him, but it's not enough. I want to somehow get over there, climb on top, have him inside me as we cross the border. I want us to move together while something else moves us both at sixty kilometers per hour into neutral territory. But there's his hand. I worry about the speed of oncoming trains, amputations, what I might now do to prevent a potentially fatal accident should another train whistle past.

I want to go back, to where my twin drifts at a precise and infinite speed toward something perfect. Lost and not lost.

I don't know what I want. The gondolier? A shoe?

In the end, he didn't propose.