

Refugium

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Children play in the ghetto square. Mothers wheel prams and keep an eye on their toddlers. A group of boys pursue a soccer ball. It skids across the paving stones. One of the boys reclaims it. His kick misfires and the ball slams into a bronze plaque on the north side of the campo. It falls to the ledge that runs beneath it. Momentarily balanced, it topples over.

The ledge serves many purposes. School children discard their satchels there, infants reach up to it, in anticipation of hidden treasures; tour guides lean against it as they weave their tall stories.

On the bottom left corner of the plaque can be seen the figure of a helmeted soldier. He clutches a rifle with a bayonet fixed to the muzzle. He is thrusting the bayonet forward. His left leg is bent at the knee, while the right leg is braced, propelling him headlong into action. The bayonet is in relief, the point sharp, detached from the surface. The soldier is herding a mass of figures into cattle wagons.

The figures are melded together. Their heads are bowed, their faces bent downwards, anonymous save one couple – a woman holding an infant. Mother and child are tiny, yet they emanate startling power. In stark contrast to the bayoneting soldier the image evokes fierce love, the desperate protectiveness of a mother.

A toddler trots to the plaque, hoists herself onto the ledge and leans back on the tableau, legs dangling. She beams triumphantly at her mother who smiles back, acknowledging her efforts. The sharp point of the bayonet catches the toddler's sweater. She cannot wrench herself free. She twists and turns, but remains captive. Her jumper is coming loose. Her mother runs to the rescue. She lifts her daughter from the sill and whirls her in the air to still her wailing. It is not the first time a child has been caught by the bayonet.

The mother returns late at night. The square is deserted. She takes a file from her purse and works furiously. A figure crosses nearby. The mother strolls from the plaque and pretends she is en route elsewhere. She waits until the figure vanishes, returns to the bronze soldier and resumes filing. Her back is turned to the square, concealing her actions. She works away at the sharp point of the bayonet until it is blunted. She returns the file to her purse and walks from the square, elated. No one has noticed; and no one notices the next evening, except the mothers. They smile knowingly.

It is winter. A mist is descending. Lights are turning on in apartments overlooking the campo. Lamps, mounted on steel supports, cast warm shadows on the paving stones. Two boys practice karate moves. High up, on a fifth floor, an elderly woman sits by the window. She looks down on the square, and surveys the action. A shutter is flung open two floors below her. A younger woman leans out. She braces her hands on the windowsill: "Paolo. Paolo", she calls. "Come in. Dinner is ready".

Paolo takes no notice. The square embraces him. It embraces the parents and their children; it embraces all who idle there; embraces the group of boys in hot pursuit of a soccer ball. Paolo bursts from the pack with dreams of world cup glory. He lifts his arms in triumph as he intercepts the ball and kicks it between the posts, marked by two sweaters.

"Paolo, Paolo, come in", his mother repeats. "Dinner is ready".

A toddler climbs onto the ledge. She is safe, far removed from canals and bridges, free to run loose in the Campo. Doubly protected now that the soldier has been castrated.

It is night when Nathan leaves the airport. The water taxi hurtles across the Laguna. He shields himself against icy winds. The outlying islands move by on the periphery of vision. The taxi is being driven in a fury. It is borne aloft and thuds back on the surface. It skims over the wakes of boats that have preceded it.

The young man at the wheel is in a hurry. He has been paid a set price and wants to complete the job quickly. Time is of the essence. Time is money. He is in no mood for idle conversation. These are difficult waters to negotiate. He takes advantage of the open lagoon to drive at full throttle. He knows these waters well. He knows the hazards, the lie of the buoys, the location of shallow channels.

As he nears the city the boat slows. Entering a canal, the driver steers carefully. The slim waterway dictates the pace; he must negotiate the water traffic. The façades of canal-side buildings are upon him; their sombre tones are intensified in the semi-darkness. He pulls up to a tiny landing, disembarks and within minutes he is standing before a doorway in a narrow alley. He unlocks the door and steps into the foyer. A flight of worn stone stairs ends abruptly at a door on the first floor landing. Nathan steps inside the apartment. All is clean, all in order. He is exhausted. Tonight he will fall into the deep sleep of the long distance traveler.

He awakes early morning. Through one of the windows can be seen a clothesline. The line extends over an alley between the third floor windows of opposite buildings. The shutters are closed, the ropes controlled by a simple arrangement of pulleys. The clothes are black, as if in this mundane task, as in the city at large, there is an aesthetic at work. Black t-shirts, black underwear, black trousers, black pantyhose, black socks

and jeans hang listlessly. They barely catch the breeze that is making its way through the calli.

The winter sun lights the stucco and exposed brick patches of the upper storeys. A shutter opens; a woman extends her arms and pegs one more garment on the line, a black skivvy. She pauses briefly, surveys her work, closes the shutters and vanishes. The line of black garments is a work-in-progress.

Nathan dresses and sets out. Tales come his way in the walking, in detours, chance encounters. He is guided by instinct. This is how he prefers it, to be led by the story, and to remain unobtrusive. Stories are his obsession, and walking his passion. He recalls a Yiddish saying: the world is full of little worlds and we are all playing hide and seek. Nathan is both hider and seeker.

Claudia sees it clearly, six decades later, in a bar off the Rialto: the *Campo San Giacomo dall'Orto* on an autumn morning. 1954. She is seven-years-old. She hurries down the stairs from her third floor apartment. She counts each step, leaps the final three stairs and dashes out into the campo. The plane trees are stripped of foliage; the square is exposed to the wan sunlight. The smell of fresh bread from the bakery warms her. She turns into an alley and makes her way to the glassblower's workshop. It is a routine she follows every morning.

Sprawled over the shelves are tortoises, their squat legs protruding from carapaces shaded in swirls of oranges and ochres; owls, transparent eyes dotted with enlarged black pupils; red-and-blue-plumed parrots from the forests of the Amazon; pairs of storks standing face to face, elongated beaks touching; lions perched imperiously atop transparent pedestals; swans and giraffes with slim necks that stretch the glassblowers' art to its limits.

And horses. Horses are the glassblower's specialty: horses cantering. Galloping. Black horses, silver horses, winged horses, sea horses, horses at rest, horses rearing on hind legs readied for battle, hooves and tail touching base, providing three-point balance.

Streaks of morning sun find their way through an open window; the rays animate the animals. They are on the verge of moving. They are congregating in herds, descending from their resting places. A menagerie is about to be let loose upon the city. Claudia sees them swarming through the square, diving into canals, clogging the alleys. They commandeer the piazzas, the boat landings. Venice is being invaded, given over to marauding animals.

The glassblower interrupts her reverie.

"I have something special for you", he says.

He is a tall man. His body is upright, muscular from years of labour. Nearing seventy he remains alert and restless, as if permanently poised for action. He has lived the best part of his life on his feet, moving between

furnace and workbench, running against the clock to shape the molten glass before the cooling. Working late into the night to provide stock for retailers.

If a work is broken, he gives the pieces to neighbourhood children. His eyes peer through a pair of black-rimmed spectacles. He lifts the glass leg of a horse from the counter and hands it to Claudia. The glass is transparent. The foreleg is bent at an oblique angle, implying a ferocious stance, a throwback to imperial triumphs.

On her return from school Claudia places the leg on the sill of the bedroom window. It lies on its side, fully exposed beneath the open shutters. She sinks back on the bed, rests her head on the pillow, and turns her eyes to the window. The sound of daily commerce drifts up from the square below her: the call of street hawkers, the laughter of children at play, the hum of conversation. Church bells toll the passing hours. The translucent glass is a reflector of changing tone and colour – a chameleon. In the horse's leg are concentrated the waning light of the campo, the pastel-shaded façades of surrounding buildings. In its transparent veins Claudia envisages the waterways of the city, and the open seas beyond it.

In the ensuing months she will come to know the language, to read in its varying shades the passage of the sun, the glare of midday light, and the approach of evening. In its changing tones she will envisage the shifts in season. She will recognise the reflection of foliage restored in spring to the plane trees. On days of rain and overcast skies her imaginings take on a darker hue. The city is sinking beneath rising waters. The boundaries between canal and pavement are being obliterated. High tides are invading the campo.

Water has entered the foyer of the apartment block. It ascends the stairwell and laps against the bedroom door like a pawing cat desperate to enter. It seeps beneath the door. It flows towards the bed, rises up the legs and attacks the mattress. It is about to touch the pillow. Claudia awakes with a start, her reverie abruptly broken.

She glances at the window. The glass leg is aglow with the reflected lamps of the square and, in her mind's eye, a concentrated image of the stars and planets, swirling constellations, distant galaxies. The glass is as solid as stone, yet as transparent as crystal. It is both mystery and reassuring presence, active participant and neutral observer.

For the rest of Claudia's life, it will remain her most treasured possession. She will retain it in the jewel box she kept it in as a child, alongside her father's cigarette lighter, mother's lipstick cover, and grandfather's silver snuffbox. She will lift out the leg and run her fingers over its contours. She will hold it up to the light and behold the workshop; and she will recall the glassblower at work by the furnace.

He is a shaman, a man in possession of magical powers. He lifts the rod from the kiln and works the hot liquid before it loses its fire. He applies

shears and tweezers, stretches and pulls, squeezes and pummels, and extracts the animal from its chrysalis. It has taken a matter of minutes.

She will press the leg to her ear and hear the waters of the Laguna; she will look through it and see the square, her childhood companions. And she will fling open the shutters and place it on a bedroom sill in a city far distant; and for a blessed moment, be returned from her exile.

This is his plan: at one time on any given day, Nathan will set foot in the ghetto. His rationale is to see it relation to the city. The ghetto is his touchstone. Unlike those who once dwelled here he is free to come and go as he pleases. There are no curfews, no drawbridges, nor guards patrolling the waterways. There are no padlocked guardian gates to contain him. He walks from morning late into the night, and each day he allows a different route to unfold before him.

In time he begins to see beyond the apparent symmetry, beyond the intentions of those who laid the foundations of empire, their quixotic attempts to create perfection. It may be a matter of millimetres but the city is tilting. The walls are moving, leaning in on each other. The tilt can be seen in the piping that runs beneath the garrets. It is in the archways, the rectangular stone entrances and the wooden beams that frame the ceilings. It can be discerned in the slight slant of the pavements. It is in the stone supports of balconies and the wooden frames of shuttered windows. It is in the rising and falling, in both the sinking and the resistance.

This is the paradox, the city's central tension: Venice is fluid, built upon mud and swampland, shaped by water, baptized by reflected light, yet constructed of stone and mortar. Rising upon *terra ferma*. In the walking Nathan comes to understand the meaning of the term. Its origins can be traced back to this very city, *terra ferma* denoting, say the lexicons, the territories on the Italian mainland, which were once subject to the state of Venice. The city has risen on the interface between island and water, sea and *terra ferma*. Fortified by natural moats; hence a haven. A refugium.

Ibrahim dreams of Senegal each day, each hour, each minute; he dreams of Senegal as he stands late night on the Riva, a stone's throw from the Doges Palace. The chill is rising. It penetrates the marrow. He stamps his feet and digs his hands into his pockets. He jogs on the spot and hunches in his down jacket. On the ground before him are arranged imitation designer-label handbags.

"I cannot give up", he urges himself. "I cannot give up".

There is time enough for one last sale. It has been a bad day. One transaction may redeem it. There are people about. Tourists strolling by, photographers lined up on elevated vantage points, lenses trained west upon the lagoon in pursuit of yet another Venetian sunset.

This is Ibrahim's calculation: he will ask for forty euros and allow the

buyer to bargain him down as far as twenty, leaving a five-euro margin as profit. Better a small profit than no profit. This is how it has been since he arrived in the city, a battle waged between two obsessions vying for attention, the imperative to eke out a living, against the enduring ache of *nos-thal-ghea*. He churns over the figures, balance sheets, receipts versus expenses. Stocks are running low. Tomorrow he will journey by train to Firenze. He will purchase bags on commission in clandestine warehouses and return to Mestre where he lives in a two-roomed flat with eight compatriots, four to a room, the tiny kitchen a communal assembly point.

He is on perpetual alert. He looks about him. If he is caught the police may turn a blind eye or issue a warning; if he strikes it unlucky he will be taken to the station. He may receive a fine, and if he has valued possessions, they may be confiscated in lieu of payment. At worst he may be threatened with deportation. The scenarios are varied, but the danger is always imminent.

His mind is drifting. He is in Dakar. He envisages his mother and father, and his two sisters. They are in mourning for the third sister. She has been dead three months. She was pregnant, in her final trimester. She was fatigued. Feverish. She vomited. She was admitted to hospital and died a day later while her brother was in Venice. The unborn child had lain dead within her for three days but she did not know it. When Ibrahim received the news, he sank beneath the weight of his grief like a stone cast in water.

The city's beauty eludes him. He ponders the paradox; when those who pass by him are on tour in Senegal they are welcomed. They love the Senegalese in their native habitat. They find them handsome, photogenic. They take snapshots of smiling children. They are enervated by Senegalese drums and buy them to display in their living rooms on returning to their countries.

When they see the Senegalese in Venice with their goods laid out on the pavements, it's a different story. Some pass by with indifference, others with contempt. Some stop to bargain. They whittle down the margins. They possess wealth beyond his wildest imaginings. He has become immune to the contempt; yet there are times when he rages against his daily humiliation. He vows to purchase the ticket home on the morrow, but again he hesitates. He does not want to lose face, to court a sense of failure. Just one more day and his luck will surely change - he will be on the road to success and return home laden with riches. Just one more week and he will find employment. One more month, maximum, he promises. That's all. I swear it. He has been in Venice seven years now.

It is approaching midnight. This is his chance to occupy the piazza of San Marco. By day he would be exposed, the presence of his goods too obvious. The coast is clear. He lines up the handbags in front of the Basilica, but the fog is closing in, the people are leaving. He gathers up his goods and moves to the square's centre. He is the sole person remaining.

The air is thickening. One by one the famed landmarks are receding: the ducal palace, the prison, the soaring bell-tower of St Mark, the Basilica. The fog is fast descending. It envelops the isle of St George, and the lion atop the towering column. Ibrahim envisages the text inscribed in the open book the lion is holding. He knows it well: "Peace be with you Mark, my evangelist. Here shall your body rest".

He must not rest. He cannot afford to rest. Yet it is all closing down, vanishing: the orchestra rostrums, the steel roller doors over the shops, the Florian café where the price of a coffee is akin to a bad day's takings. The fairy lights of the arcades have dimmed; then they too are gone, along with the Christmas decorations. The fog is at his feet. The last to vanish are a flock of pigeons.

He is shrouded. He is warm, cloaked in the heat of his own body. The journey that has led here has been wiped out. He has no past, no future. He is on a cloud. He is the cloud. He is heartbeat. Pure being. Insubstantial. He cannot be seen; he cannot be apprehended. He is disarmed of responsibility. Rendered anonymous. He stands in solitude, a non-presence. And dreams of Senegal.

"It is the *ruakh* that draws me here", says Nakhman. He searches for ways to define it. "It's in the lagoon and the canals that surround us. It's in the dying vibration of a tolling bell as it gives way to silence. It is a white noise. Not loud, not soft. Not high. Not too low. It's not a definite sound, but it is always there. It is in the wind, in each breath. It's here, where we stand, in the ghetto square. It is everywhere and in everything, but it can only be heard in silence".

Nakhman leads Nathan to an apartment building. They climb a flight of stairs to the upper stories. The ceilings are lower, the floors more compressed. They come to a halt on the sixth story landing. Two steps forward and they are by the door of the top floor apartment. In the ghetto, the upper floors are several storeys higher, built beyond prescribed limits centuries earlier to accommodate the ghetto's burgeoning population. The confined residents had added storeys in their quest for living space; the skies had been a way out, a vertical way forward.

Nakhman's apartment rises above the neighbouring rooftops. Darkness falls early in winter, but on the top floor it lingers. He unfastens the shutters. The setting sun streams through the open window. On one side the shutters open onto the ghetto square. The shadows have lengthened. The footstones are paved in twilight.

On the opposite side, the windows face the sprawling city. It stretches before them like a billowing carpet patterned in ochres and reds, mauves and crimsons. Interposed by domes and bell-towers. In the distance a glimpse of San Marco Square and, on the furthest horizon, the upper decks of an ocean liner framed by a slim band of water; and directly below, the terra cotta tiles of lower rooftops, garrets and chimneys.

As darkness falls Nakhman lights candles; he prefers them to electricity. His thoughts turn to his son and daughter. He is divorced. He sees them only on weekends. "I light candles to illuminate the outside", he says. He switches to the collective pronoun of the proselytizer: "We light candles to illuminate our inner selves". The candles draw him out of his isolation.

He awakes abruptly each night at the same hour. It is built into him as precisely as the time tolled from a multitude of clock towers. He lives for the awakening at this hour, the purity of the stillness. And he hears it, he is convinced of this, hears it in the dead of night, that white noise in the darkness, the sougning of the city, interspersed by the muted tread of distant footsteps. Just one tone above the silence: the *ruakh*.

The wide-lens beauty of Venice is overwhelming. Yet it can turn cold in an instant. A deeper beauty lies elsewhere. It is in the private gestures on discrete display in public. It can be seen through the close-up lens against a sweep of islands. It is in the intimacies that lie beyond the walled palaces, the brick edifices, and the open spaces of piazzas. This is the unexpected privilege the city offers, and it can appear at any time. It is more likely to be seen when the eyes are at ground level, resisting the allure of gilded palazzos.

Nathan is on board a vaporetto heading back from the outer islands. The boat pulls up to a landing on the island of Giudecca. Two women wheel an elderly lady onto the boat over the rampart. Judging by the likeness in appearance the three women are a mother and two daughters. They are confined to the open deck; the wheelchair cannot access the cabin. Cold winds sweep the Laguna. The mother is swathed in scarves and shawls, inflated by quilts and blankets. All that can be seen is her face. The crumpling folds of her cheeks are as white as silence. Her deeply set eyes are keen and active.

The daughters huddle against her. They lean in from either side and touch their lips to her forehead. They massage her back and shoulders. The tableaux is rearranged mid lagoon; one sister steps away a pace, while the other moves in behind the wheelchair. She bends forward and wraps her arms around her mother, adding yet another layer of warmth.

The three women are curtained off on the tiny deck of the vaporetto. They have claimed their piece of space. It is all they need. Nobody else exists. The sisters are for their mother and she is for her daughters. They engage in intimate conversation; the landing stages come and go, but the tableaux remains constant.

The women alight at the Hospital station. The wheelchair cannot negotiate the landing ramp. Five men step forward and lift it over. The private has, for a moment, become one with the public. An instant later the public and private part company, and the women move on towards the hospital. Nathan remains on board. He sees them retreat as the boat pulls away from the station. He keeps watching until they vanish.

The stories are taking flight; the threads are spooling in unexpected directions. Ibrahim stands in the square of Santo Stefano. It is Sunday. Late morning. The winter sun has broken free of its moorings. Ibrahim dreams of Senegal, but in the hard light of day his dreams evaporate. Dakar is a chimera.

He has laid out ten handbags on the raw pavement. The bells of many churches are in full throttle. On Sundays there is an air of festivity. A sense of lightness descends on the city. Venetians appear more open, benevolent. For many it is a day of rest, a time for outings and family visits. For the street traders it is the best day to do business.

Ibrahim is lulled into a sense of security. It is too late by the time he sees them; three policemen are bearing towards him. He snatches up the handbags and threads them over his arms, five on either side, evenly balanced. They nestle in the crook of his bent elbows like a congregation of loose bracelets. He takes off towards Academia Bridge holding his arms up before him. The police are closing in. He ascends the steps two at a time to the apex.

He is exhausted. He has been up since five. He had taken the bus from Mestre on the daily commute over the Bridge of Liberty. On arriving at the terminus he had searched the waste-bins for discarded newspapers. He had spread the handbags on a bench and stuffed them. The stuffing shows off their ample figures. Inflated, the bags are more likely to attract buyers. He had made his way into the heart of the city, and stopped to lay the goods out in a succession of locations; and had abruptly grabbed them on hearing the warning passed via the street traders' grapevine: the police are nearby, the danger imminent.

Just one instant off guard and he is now cornered. There are no alleys to duck down, no squares to take flight in. All escape routes are closed to him. He edges towards the wood railings and extends his arms over the water. The police are within metres. He unbends his elbows and releases the handbags. The gesture appears like an offering. His pursuers have been thwarted. In order to be detained a trader must have the goods in his possession. The police turn away, deflated. Ibrahim leans over the bridge and stares at the discarded goods bobbing in the water. He calculates his loss in capital; then shrugs his shoulders, and resumes his habitual air of stoicism.

The handbags are moving downstream. The paper stuffing keeps them buoyant. The silver clasps glint in the sunlight. The bags are buffeted in the wakes of vaporetos and barges. They weave in and out of Grand Canal traffic. They separate, regain touch and form new constellations. Water is a leveller; the handbags are no longer imitations but water-borne Guccis. They are the harbingers of a new Venice. A tradition is being born, a marriage between sea and designer label. One day, surely, there will be a festival of floating handbags.

One by one they sink, as if they had talked it through beforehand, drawn straws and decided in which sequence they should give way, which ones, in descending order, had the most likely chance of survival. One solitary bag makes it to the lagoon. Like a salmon battling its way upstream it finds its way to the Adriatic. It collides with ocean liners and freighters. It brushes against a dead cat floating body up, legs extended beneath it, as if it had walked off land and kept on walking. The sea is littered with hazards, but it is open. It emanates the heady scent of freedom.

The Gucci's freedom is short-lived; it is trapped in a fishing-net. The net is hauled aboard a trawler and unraveled on deck, where the fish are sorted. A fisherman curses as he retrieves the handbag. With each passing year the amount of rubbish trapped in the nets increases. He is about to fling it back into the sea when he glances at the label. The Adriatic has yielded a treasure. Upon reaching port the following morning he allows it to dry in the sun and wraps it in gift paper. He takes it home to his wife. That night, for the first time in many months they make love, all thanks to a man who dreams of Senegal trapped on a bridge in Venice.

Ghetto: Nathan is aware of the history, while acutely attuned to ghetto's present. From the Venetian *getto* (foundry) since the first ghetto was established in 1516 on the site of a foundry. Some argue it is from the Italian *borghetto*, diminutive of *borgo* (borough).

The journey of the word is ongoing. It has assumed many guises: a part of a city, especially slum area, occupied by a minority group; an isolated clique or enclave. As a verb: to put in, or restrict to a segregated district. Historically: the Jewish quarter of a city. A neglected, or otherwise disadvantaged residential area; troubled by a disproportionate amount of crime. Adjective: urban, of or relating to inner city living.

Nathan makes his way to and from the first ghetto. He knows each exit. Knows where once stood the gates, the drawbridges. He changes direction on impulse. He digresses on tangents. He is lost. He finds his way. He is lost again. It is getting late. He is in the narrowest of alleys. If he extends his arms on either side, he can touch the buildings. He hears footsteps behind him. A shadow falls by his side. He quickens his steps. Now *he* is the shadow, the footsteps are his and the figure in front is hurrying. Shadow pursued by shadow; shadow pursuing shadow. He is lost. He regains his way. He is in a labyrinth.

He turns right and a canal is upon him, a cul-de-sac of water. It has crept up the steps. It laps at his feet. There is no way forward. He turns back. A single figure walks twenty metres ahead of him – a black silhouette, rugged up, hooded. Perhaps she is a potential lover, a thief, a young man buried in his thoughts, perhaps an old woman vanquished by her solitude.

The doors of passing buildings are hard up against the alley. The figure inserts a key in a latch, opens a sturdy door and disappears behind it.

A man emerges from a door three buildings on, and steps out metres in front of him. Nathan wonders what lies beyond the door: perhaps a hidden courtyard, a walled garden, perhaps the meeting place of a secret society. The city is closed off to him.

In Venice there is a House of Refuge. The location shall remain nameless. Night has fallen. Nathan heads for a bar off Campo Do Pozzi. A gathering of men and women stand by the counter. They are celebrating the birth of a boy born two hours earlier. They raise toasts to the baby, to the elated father, and to all who join them.

Meryam is waiting. She lives in the House of Refuge. The bar is a meeting place, a haven. She sits with her circle of friends. She is twenty-one. She radiates innate warmth but her smile is tempered by a deep melancholy. How can it be otherwise given the tale she is about to tell them?

The journey began in central Africa; the country too shall remain nameless. They left the town they had lived in all their lives, eighty men, women and children. They ranged in age from mid-teens to forty. Meryam was sixteen. They boarded a truck and headed north. They travelled by day and slept at night under open skies in forest clearings. They passed through several countries and stole across borders. Many weeks after their departure they arrived at their destination, Libya. And waited.

Meryam boarded a boat twelve months later and set out on a journey with strangers. They headed out upon the Mediterranean, a mythical sea: a sea of longing. The name evoked the allure freedom. And danger. Meryam was confined below decks. She could not step outside. She remained in the same place for the entire voyage. A girl sat between her knees. Beside her lay a young mother nursing a newborn baby.

Three days went by and still the boat sailed on. They were lost. They sailed in circles. The crew was unfamiliar with these waters. At some point the boat passed a threshold from the real to the ghostly. With each passing day the panic mounted. The passengers wept. They prayed. They could not sleep. They vomited. The stench rose. The air was fetid with the smell of urine and excrement. On the fourth day the ghost ship ran out of food and water.

On the fifth day a man fell overboard. The passengers mistook the fish for a shark. They were certain he was done for. The fish leapt from the water. They caught the silver glint of its hide. The dolphin circled and dived. The man rose above the waves and, bearing him up, was the dolphin. It nuzzled him back to the boat and stayed by him until he was winched to safety. The dolphin turned, headed back out to sea and vanished.

On the eighth day the passengers heard the drone of a plane. It circled, and dropped food and water. Within hours they were transferred to a police boat. They were exhausted. And light. They wished they could rest in this

moment, wished that it would stretch into days and nights and for all eternity. They prayed their trials were over; and as she tells the tale in a bar on a winter's night in Venice, Meryam looks away. She is weary. She gazes at an unseen point. Pauses. Composes herself, and resumes her story.

The boat docked in Lampedusa. The stay was brief. The passengers were transferred to a naval ship. It rounded Sicily and headed north on the Adriatic, bound for the port of Cavallino-Treporti, located off the Laguna by way of the Lido opening. As the boat approached the port the passengers saw before them a series of towers rising from the flatlands; outriders of Venice, built as a network of surveillance, partnered by coastal batteries, gunpowder factories, forts and barracks. Shelters.

That is how it appeared as the ship drew up to the Marina: the port was a shelter. The passengers lived there for two months; then were dispersed to Padua, Treviso. Mestre. From Mestre Meryam was bussed to Venice. She entered the fabled city over the Bridge of Liberty. She was ferried upon its waterways and ushered to a three-story building. She had finally arrived at the House of Refuge.

Waiting. Meryam knows every nuance of waiting. She has lived in the House for three years now. She knows the false alarm of raised hopes, the interminable boredom. She knows indifference and the kindness of strangers. She knows *nos-thal-ghea*, the pain of longing for the return, the ancient curse of Odysseus. Her father died in her absence. She yearns to see her mother, her brothers and sisters.

She has pared down her expectations, reduced them to a single aspiration: to make a living. She wants only to move from A to B. She plaits people's hair in intricate hairdos. She prepares African banquets. She phones her mother every day. "I am fine", she tells her. "I have friends. I am well looked after. Don't worry".

Nathan sits at a table in a neighbourhood bar; he is in Venice. He is on the seven seas. He is on the tray of a crowded truck. He is floundering on mythical waters. He is lifted high on the back of a dolphin. He is borne above the water and descends down, down, down into a hold; the air is stifling, he is choking. Yet despite the tale she is telling, Meryam speaks gently. Her voice is melodious, the tone understated, hence the story all the more compelling. She is radiant. Lifted by the company. Saving graces. Time is suspended. In this moment there is hope; transient friends gathered by a fire.

Then it is over. It is past midnight. The celebrations for the birth have long finished. It is five years since Meryam left her hometown. She leaves the bar escorted by friends. They accompany her to the House of Refuge. They hug her at the door. One by one they disperse. Nathan walks on through deserted streets and silent *campi*. The shutters are closed. All is dark, save a lamp here, and a bar there lighting the way in the labyrinth.

This is how it began for those in flight: with the scent of the sea, sun playing on water, light refracted by the Laguna. The Hun invaders who pursued them took fright. The islets and marshes, the swathes of wetlands repelled them. They feared the wildness. They feared they would be ambushed. They cursed the loss of their spoils and retreated to their Northern lairs deep within the mainland.

When the sharp crack of voices and the howl of dogs evaporated, those in flight ventured out of their primitive shelters and set to work. They found a way forward through trial and error. They invented ways to build edifices upon shifting foundations. From the swamplands there arose a city of islets, and from the city an empire. And from the empire, the inevitable fall, but the city remained, kept afloat by its beauty and the faint echo of ancestral memory. Recorded in the annals. Fifteen centuries have gone by, yet this is how it had begun: as refugium.

It is approaching noon on a Saturday morning. Nakhman and Nathan walk the familiar route from the ghetto square over the footbridge, past the kosher bakery and galleries of Judaica, closed for the Sabbath; past the imposing black door of the Spanish synagogue, locked for the winter; and along the alley that passes by the Chabad restaurant. Through the plate-glass windows can be seen tables covered in white cloths, places set in readiness for the midday Kiddush.

“Every person has a ghetto inside them”, says Nakhman.

“The boundaries are of the mind. The *ruakh* is everywhere”.

He calls it the paradox of the open perimeter. “The concept does not conform to the laws of geometry”, he says. “It did not exist for Euclid. For the geometrician there are perimeters and open spaces, and the two are mutually exclusive. They do not take account of the mind, the ghettos of our thinking”.

They walk beneath the beams of the ghetto doorway. They have breached the perimeter. They make an odd couple, Nathan and Nakhman, the atheist and the fervent believer. They turn left onto the Fondamenta di Cannaregio. They walk by the canal and pause by the fish stalls. The catch has long been sold, and the pavement hosed down, but the smell lingers.

They turn right, over Cannaregio Bridge, and veer hard right onto the pavement by the canal on the side opposite. One hundred metres on there is a park. The gate is set back from the footpath. Directly over the canal stands the ghetto entrance. The paths are coated in leaves; the trees are moulting. Their bare outlines are framed by the upper stories of the buildings behind them. A man stands at an outdoor tap and draws water.

“This is where I pray”, says Nakhman.

He knows the species of trees and recites them as they appear: lindens and maples, chestnuts, oaks and plane trees.

He points to a park bench.

“Here is where I study. Where I read Torah”.
 They sit side by side.
 And he recounts the story:

He was known as Paulo then. One night he was walking the darkened streets of Giudecca. Through the alleys could be glimpsed the lagoon and on the opposite shore, the lights of Dorsoduro. His marriage was unraveling. He had a girl of two and a boy of one; he had moved back into his parents’ apartment and had taken to walking the city. He would board the vaporetto and make his way to Giudecca. He took solace in its darkened streets. He sat for hours in neighbourhood bars. He sought out the island’s working class enclaves.

He was walking by a three-story apartment block when he saw it: a *menorah*. It stood on a sill framed by a ground floor window. It was of cheap metal; its eight branches were lit with electric globes enclosed in flame-shaped plastic. The apartment lights were partly veiled by the curtains. He imagined a family seated at the Sabbath table. “I knew instantly”, he says. “This is what I wanted for the rest of my life”.

Hence it began, the process of conversion. He took the Orthodox option, years of study and prayer. He frequented houses of worship within the ghetto: the ornate Italian synagogue in the winter months, the larger Spanish synagogue in spring and summer when visitors from abroad boosted the numbers. He sought out teachers and Talmudic scholars. He began to take on their gestures, the rocking movement of the Hasid. He grew a beard and took to stroking it. He had left his parents’ apartment and moved to the ghetto. He had found his way home, he says. And he had found his equilibrium. “It’s simple”, he says.

It is a word he uses often: “Simple”. Yet Nathan can sense it: Nakhman’s complexity, the residual anger. It is not so simple. It cannot be. In the weeks to come he will discern a more nuanced story, but for now he is at peace. Seated on a park bench beside Nakhman. Grateful for the moment of stillness, and for the paradox: the open perimeter.

This is a work-in-progress. Though the tales have encounters in Venice as their starting point, circa 2014, they have been reworked, re-imagined and transformed into fiction. The responsibility for the stories, and flights of fancy, rests with the author.

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