

Take Pity and Dry the Hell Up

By Thomas M. McDade

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A world torn dope smoking sailor with obscured literary aspirations fresh off the USS Ramply finds himself in Venice—la citta' dell'amore—by the Ponte della Paglia... and so begins a story as rare as a ruby moon that rocks like we've never read before. Any prospector hungry for the gold of 'voice' would lay claim to McDade's expectorating chant that generations ago was somewhere a plainsong—corvid, mercurial, tender and un po di matchstick shaken up, poured out—it's liquid metal of the sun all right, so uniquely branded and immediately his own it comes with photo ID. The dialogue is a funk dynamite charge in pistol explode mode, the prose saw-toothed, recombinant and abruptly structured. What more can we say? Let him:*

Her hair, helter-skelter streaming from a Paddington is tar black, big blue eyes match the hat, lips victim of a purple stick.

And

“No pics, on the lam I am.”

“I bet. You walk like a sailor. I'd say you've been at sea for a month and a half.”

“Just thirty days.”

“Neptune almighty, I'm slipping. See that church out there on the little Island,” she says.

“The tower looks like a ballistic missile,” I respond.

“Or something more disarming,” she says giggling. “That's St. George's, Seaman Philistine. He slew a dragon that refused to act as his weed lighter. My coo-coo friend here I call Mule, flies in a packet from there every morning, heirloom shit.” Her eyelids leap as if something she sniffed just hooked a neuron. “I reward him with suet pizza.

And

I head back to the Bridge, pass the Guggenheim Modern Art Museum. I bet it would be a “relief” from all the religious antiquity. It's closed. I give a shaky, whistling beggar some change, American. He's grins gratefully, as if I'd just granted him citizenship. Clouds are moving in.

Help! We can't stop quoting! The whole reason literature is and what language can do. Cinque stelle. (Five stars)

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I leave the ship to commence my vagabond trek, my notebook, and a Venice See-and-Do Guide in hand. Luckily, I don't have duty. The rainclouds rejoice, take pity, and dry the hell up. The USS Ramply (DD-801) rests by an industrial pier where occasional vans some say are gypsy owned park. Women join men hawking watches with dials galore that belie the low prices one can haggle. I figure true gypsy vans sport glorious, eye-catching colors like horse drawn caravans I've seen in *National Geographic Magazines*. I like that train of thought enough to stop by the Hotel Danieli to scrawl down my words. I hear Liza Minelli who is working on a movie is lodged there, O.J. Simpson too. I remember falling for her after seeing *The Sterile Cuckoo*. I cut out its *Bridgeport Post* ad and tucked it in the novel of the same name that inspired the film. Rumor has it O.J. might visit one of the ships in our squadron. I was never a Bills or Forty-Niners fan. Would [she](#) dare walk a gangplank?

I pause crossing the Ponte della Paglia near the Doge's Palace that my S & D says is the oldest bridge in Venice. I spit furtively into its canal and jot down the act for memory help down the years. Hell, ripple might travel to the Mississippi. I'm a sailor of the expectorating kind, not your traditional drunken variety just yet. I overhear an American couple discussing the Bridge of Sighs that's visible in the distance. Some poet picked that name because prisoners saw their last daylight while walking across it to the Doge's prison. Casanova took that stroll. I bend down, pad on knee to write while inhaling the Yankee woman's perfume.

San Marco Square is alive with tourists, many feeding the pigeons. One lands on a kid's head and does a shave-and-a-haircut-two-bits tap. Four folks wielding Polaroids vie for subjects. One man, wearing sunglasses, watch cap pulled low, looks vaguely like Vin Borders, a tall, bad news boatswain mate who's in the brig. He cut the helm cables in Catania. I witnessed a hovering chopper lift him off the fantail of the ship. A woman aggressively pulls me aside. Her hair, helter-skelter streaming from a Paddington is tar black, big blue eyes match the hat, lips victim of a purple stick. Her pouched sweatshirt reads "Wake Forest." Jeans stuffed in turquoise highlighted cowboy boots.

"Want your photo taken with the pigeons?" She smiles as if snapshot of me would make both of us famous. When she opens and closes an outstretched hand, a fat brownish specimen launches off the pecking carpet to her shoulder. "He's kin to a passenger pigeon that served valiantly in The Great War, honest Ninja," she says, raising her right hand.

"No pics, on the lam I am."

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“You are kind. How’d George get a light after the kill?”

“The rescued princess baked him mind-expanding donuts, like that nursery un-rhyme?”

“I do,” I answer and softly applaud.

“I do too and that’s not forever death do us part; want some?”

“Ten American is all I can do.”

“Three pre-rolled and a velocity pill.”

“OK.”

She goes through some hand gestures as if a magician and slips my purchase into my jacket pocket with added flare. I part with the ten spot.

“Ever make any pigeons disappear?” I ask. Her slightly dented nose tip twitches as if requesting nourishment.

“Flocks, now you beware of the Carabinieri and I ain’t talking pasta sauce with bacon or your name will be Dungeon Phil,” she advises.

“I hear ya.”

“By the way, if you want some ‘I do,’ a laser honeymoon, check out my friend. Twenty US of A”

She hands me a business card, “Jenna Lollobrigida.”

“Jenna looks like one of the waitresses in Tintoretto’s ‘Last Supper’.” she adds. “You know where that hangs Seaman Phil?”

“Nope.”

“On Georgie’s hooks, take a boat over.”

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Sabra.”

“Do you have a card?”

“No, just oral arrangements, do come around tomorrow.”

“Goose bumps. No, make that pigeon bumps,” I tease.

She places a hand over her heart and licks her gumball lips.

We laugh. Is she an exchange student from Grosse Point who believes in tasting life at every level? I should have told her about a movie I saw at a Norfolk art cinema, *Death in Venice*. It was all for the love of a boy. How would she have replied? I hope Saint someone rescues her. I would if on an aircraft carrier with a wealth of places to stash her, yeah sure. Maybe she’s taking part in a psych study. Will I be in her dissertation?

I find a wall to sit against to record the pigeon princess before venturing into St. Mark’s Basilica to light a few candles for dead family and friends. I say a quick rosary knocking the decades down to one Hail Mary each. The frescoed Pentecost Dome with all its gold is most impressive. Four able-bodied angels are guarding stern looking gents who are poised as if circus acrobats at the ready. Mural ropes like ribs of an inside out lampshade, link them to the peak by their halos. I can’t see those hard asses cutting any soul slack, burn you at the stake for possession of an heirloom seed. Art everywhere – I’m even walking on it. Stories of the Saints and Mary, etc. depicted. The pillars remind me of a movie, spy making scarce behind one. Christ, it’s the Borders twin. I wonder if I’m the only sailor off the Ramply who has a Borders feeling. I return to the candles to light another for the safety of my ass. Did Liza and O.J. visit?

I roam aimlessly as planned, encounter museums that I should visit. Cooped up I don't need—leave that for the feathered Mules of Venice and environs. Churches galore but I call St. Mark's enough for a lifetime. I jot down this and that. A kid nearly runs his bike into me. A mutt eats a bowl of pasta – honest to God. A soccer ball escapes a game. An attractive young woman runs to the rescue. She kicks it back high despite her short skirt. The players applaud. She bows.

At a tabac, I buy an orange drink to wash down my Sabra pill, no smooth slide, no direct hit. Crossing the Grand Canal at the Academia Bridge, I walk to the farthest point this side of the Canal by The Basilica of Saint Mary. Another fascinating dome and I see by my See & Do that people worship here with their health in mind, hoping Mary will provide. St. Mary's dome represents her crown, church interior her womb. How cool is that? No speed but just the opposite occurs, I'm slow motion and wobbly. I bump into people. A nun shoves me. When I can't move another yard, I see a street sign, Fondamenta delle Zattere. I freeze mid-step. I'm a statue but fearless. I've never felt so serene and clear. Eyes fixed on a faded apartment plaque; I can make out "John Ruskin." Philistine hell, I know John from an English Lit correspondence course: "The Pathetic Fallacy," poets and writers giving inanimate objects human feelings. My thoughts are jumbling, fading. John's name is pulsing, breathing, how about that? I'm waked and buried. Suddenly the final minute of a decade passes, all reverses, *I'm* missing "human feelings." Whirling into place, I'm a sonnet, a novella. As the spell folds, I collapse. Radioman 3rd Class Coles appears from nowhere to help me up. He has a tough time of it.

He's bombed. I'm able to steady myself. He asks nothing about my condition. "How does a sailor find a whore in this town?" he asks.

"Well, if you were in New York or Chicago, you'd ask a cab driver," I say, "Here a gondolier. He hugs me and laughs like my words were the most hilarious ever spoken.

"Don't bust my stones," he says.

"That guy wrote *Stones of Venice*," I say, pointing to the Ruskin plaque. I give up Lollobrigida's card and Coles says if higher, he'd swim across the Canal. He's off like a shopper who got the true dose of speed. How does he know that address is on the other side? What a downer if the destination is just yards away from where I stand.

Now, gondolas are inanimate but the waters give them a life. There's something to gargle. I can see the Gritti Palace Hotel from where I stand. Hemingway used to stay there. I'll find a place to sit nearby and maybe smoke. Are the joints that Sabra sold me full of heirloom pigeon shit? Who cares? The pill wasn't as bitter as it could have been I guess, a trip, a trip. I stop at a restaurant for a bowl of tortellini in broth and a slice of artichoke pizza. The waiter's apron is down to the floor. A woman two tables away has a dachshund in her lap. I write a few journey notes about the Basilica of St. Mary, Ruskin, my bronze experience, and Coles. I head back to the Bridge, pass the Guggenheim Modern Art Museum. I bet it would be a "relief" from all the religious antiquity. It's closed. I give a shaky, whistling beggar some change, American. He's grins gratefully, as if I'd just granted him citizenship. Clouds are moving in.

I'm lightheaded and dazed, must be an aftereffect of the pill, but I'm keeping a straight course, no drifting into the populace. Folks smile at me responding to my goofy

expressions I expect. I land at the La Fenice Opera House. A toothpick chewing teen sells me a large postcard with a photo of the façade and facts. La Fenice means “Phoenix.” The two statues are the muses of music and dance. I rest on the stairs with a handful of others. A smiley couple stops. The burly fellow, a Brit, announces the wonderful Celeste will now sing a song from *Romeo and Juliet*, “A Time for Us.” This brunette wears a long red skirt, tan leather jacket, and white turtleneck. She hits some very high notes. Will a Fenice bigshot discover her? Her neck is long and I wonder if that extends her range. A woman who sounds German says she’s inspired to visit the Rialto Bridge. An old crone sitting next to me whispers, *Merchant of Venice*. I must strike her as Seaman Philistine. The toddler on her lap has a stuffed animal and by God, it’s a dragon, fabric flame dangling from its mouth. I doze, forehead on arms crossed on my knees. A cop wakes me asks if I’m okay.

At the Gritti Palace, I find a niche by the empty outside dining area. Sitting, I dangle my feet over the water. I place my bet, light one of Sabra’s twirls. Did Hemingway ever sit here to smoke dope? I think he was a scotch drinker. Brandy is the booze in “A Clean Well-Lighted Place.” A movie I’d seen based on his work comes to me, my boot camp time. They finally allowed us to go to the base theater. *Hemingway’s Adventures of a Young Man*, the guy who’d starred in *West Side Story* portrayed yours truly. Bit of a coincidence in my woolgathering, Nick Adams joined the Italian army. Yes sir, grinding out boot camp with Hem; Great Lakes, 1963. No bad smoke reaction yet. I wave at tourists in passing gondolas, neither Liza nor O.J. aboard. If only she’d tap on my shoulder.

“May I clip that for you?”

“No need, new one to share.” I flip the roach into the Canal, an irresponsible playboy. On that reverie, I flame another. I review my notes by match light. Many sloppy pages I don’t recall writing will be tough to decipher; I’ll make something of them even if I have to lie. Darkness reminds me I should head back to the ship. Did you catch that John Ruskin?

Coles appears under a streetlight near the Hotel Danieli. He’s panting; gasping, left side of his face is puffy, black eye on the way for sure. Nose bleeding, shirt ripped. “Borders attacked me. He’s Jenna’s pimp, jumped off the carrier returning him to the states. He thinks you ratted about the helm sabotage.”

“Bullshit!”

Bastard nearly caught me with my pants down. He showed me a photo of you buying dope from a weird looking chick in the Square and me helping you up when you dropped. He wants to kill you, tried to maim me for knowing you. He hit me with a sucker shot. If Jenna hadn’t tripped him, I’d have never escaped. She was fabulous, an ace, a pro. Yeah, I’m crazy but she was worth the fright.” Just as I give the whacko a heroic kudos slap on the back, Borders rushes our way carrying a sword that looks out of the Crusades. Ten feet away, he freezes just as I had at Ruskin’s house. “Thank be to Sabra,” I whisper. Weapon raised, he’s a knight in a museum exhibit. When he crumbles, two teens run to him. “Anybody know CPR,” one shouts.

“I do,” returns Coles who in a flash is roughly spinning Borders over and pumping his chest. About five minutes later cops arrive and take over.

“Wow, you know CPR. I’m impressed but what a waste of it.”

“I don’t, saw it on TV once. Piece of shit was dead. I thought the snapshots might be on him. Bingo, in his shirt pocket with three joints.”

After the ambulance speeds Borders away, Liza Minelli shows up, sings fifteen or twenty feet away, no “Come Saturday Morning” from *The Sterile Cuckoo*. Dressed in black, shawl, and long skirt, nearly lost in the darkness and a building corner, she delivers a throaty “Cabaret.” We drift closer. Liza isn’t Liza, except from a distance, just a decent impersonator. “I’m getting us autographs,” says Coles. He flies to bear hug her or him. Returning he brags that he gifted her bosom with a joint, “One happy stick.” A sailor ace of the sleight of hand for sure but his adjective is “pathetic,” ha! Just a “Z” on each photo; the horizontal lines fly off the edges. Coles noticed gaudy county singer boots as the skirt hiked in the rush to scam, one color same as Jenna’s nails. This Liza splits as swiftly as O.J. used to into end zones. I tell Coles riding dragons barefoot is dangerous. “Any footwear risky with Jenna,” he says. “We need urgent psychiatric help,” he adds and lights us up in the broad Danieli nightlight. A couple stops for the contact high. Coles sells them a number, a mystery no arrest.

I sat in the after crews’ lounge writing feverishly except for a break when a Hull Tech friend on roving patrol took the remaining joint off my hands to hide in some ductwork that’s proven dope dog proof. I continued until just an hour remained for domed and frescoed sleep.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I use details from journals and notebooks I’ve kept through the years to inspire my fiction. Liza Minnelli and O.J. Simpson were in Venice when the ship*

I served on visited. I did find John Ruskin's place and the hotel where Hemingway stayed. I used those four people as building blocks. "Sailors being sailors" actual and imagined the mortar. As far as literary influences go Kerouac is always in mind. If I'd have found evidence that he'd been there he might have made the story. I'll let Jack finish this off: "No fear or shame in the dignity of yr experience, language & knowledge."

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