

Excerpt, *The Traveler's Companion* by David Foley

*This is from Chapter 6. It's 1985, and Mark, the narrator, has recently arrived in Venice with some friends he's touring Europe with. One of these is Philip, a theological student whom Mark met in Paris.*

The tour of churches is actually quite interesting. Philip possesses a knowledge of Catholic tradition and history daunting in its monolithic mass. As we make our way through the tangle of Venice, sweating a little under the amplifying heat of the morning, he reels off a detailed exegesis of dates of construction, hagiographic lore, excommunications, dispensations, dogmatic orthodoxy or heterodoxy of frescoes, the fine theological points they demonstrate or fail to. If Philip has any information to convey about the secular history of Venice, it is only to gloss the papist tale he is telling.

We are not—"not by any stretch," says Philip—seeing all the churches of Venice, but there is, it turns out, a definite tendency to our wanderings. We are heading away from the crowded touristic heart of the city towards one of the island's less frequented corners.

We come at last to a church for which Philip professes to feel "a certain fondness." We stand on a bridge over a little canal and gaze at it. On the other side of a broad *campo*, the church rises, large and domed and unremarkable. Unremarkable, that is, until we get nearer and I can see the large metal cross on the door, studded with 100-watt bulbs. Inside, it is cool and dim after the glare of the morning. The walls, a conventual white, absorb rather than reflect the dusty swaths of light that descend from the square windows lining the dome. The first impression is of cool light and ample vaulted space, but as our eyes adjust the true oddity of the church comes through. All around us, cluttering the nave and the apse and the side chapels, are statues too brightly painted, clumsy frescoes, reliquaries adorned with chains of plastic flowers, and, above the altar, a crucifix almost campy in the Grand Opera suffering of the upturned gaze and the punctured side. It's as if we've wandered into the attic of all of the churches in Venice.

"Isn't it wonderful?" breathes Philip.

"You don't think it's a little..."

His eyebrows lift, as if he's preparing to take offense. "Yes?"

"Well, a little cluttered."

He smiles, though not without condescension. "Of course. You like the *tourist* churches. You like art. This is not art. This is the true religion of the people. There is more faith in that ugly little Virgin than in all of Bernini. Ah," he breaks off, and if his saturnine face could be said to brighten, it does. "Antonio."

I follow his gaze. Near the altar two people are talking. One is a priest; the other is a young man holding a bottle of brass polish in one hand and a rag in the other. From time to time he gestures emphatically with the rag.

“How nice,” says Philip. “You’ll meet a friend of mine.”

And in fact the conversation in the chancel seems to be coming to an end. The young man has put down his rag and bottle and taken the priest’s hand. The priest squeezes his shoulder warmly, kisses him on either cheek, and disappears. The next moment the young man is heading up the aisle towards us.

“Antonio!” Philip calls.

The young man looks up, examines Philip briefly, and then without really changing expression says, “Ah, the American. I remember. At Carnival, yes? *Come stai?* Your name, I forget it.”

Philip tells him. “And this is a friend of mine, Mark Dearborn.”

Antonio is a slight young man, maybe in his early twenties, with black hair falling to his neck in loose curls, and very dark brown eyes, thickly lashed. His chin, nose, and forehead are strongly formed, but his cheeks are a little rounded, giving him a boyish look. He is wearing a short-sleeved teal blue shirt and loose grey trousers.

He acknowledges the introduction with an odd look, as if warily considering me. Then he sticks out his hand. “Another American? How ya doin’?” His burlesque of an American accent stops just short of malicious, as if he’s challenging me.

“Fine thank you,” I say. “How are you?”

Again the exaggerated accent: “Fine,” he says. “Just fine.”

Then he seems to shrug off his rudeness. “How do you like our church? *Ti piace?* It is a very ugly church. *Brutissima*. But it is mine. I was baptized here.” He gestures to the altar. “Today I polish. I have a *macchia*—a what?—on my shirt. Will it clean, do you think?” He looks up at Philip and smiles for the first time. “You invite me to lunch. *Grazie*. It is the best time for lunch. It is too hot for anything but eat or sleep. Where do we go?”

“Wherever you like,” says Philip.

“Good. I know a place.” And he leads us off.

“What was the priest saying to you, Antonio?” Philip asks.

Antonio shrugs. “He wants me to be a priest. My mother wants me to be a priest, so she asks the father to talk to me.”

“And will you be a priest?”

“No.”

“Why not?” says Philip. “You’d make a good priest.”

“You are wrong,” says Antonio indifferently. “I would make a very bad priest.”

Here is the place.”

We have come to a little *trattoria* with tables and umbrellas on the sidewalk. As we sit, Antonio says something to the waiter.

“I order wine,” he says. “Then we order lunch.” Taking out a pack of cigarettes, he offers me one.

“No thank you.”

“You do not smoke?”

“Bad for your health,” I smile.

He shrugs. “When the Americans drop their bombs, I think it will not matter.” He offers Philip a cigarette, is refused, then lights one up himself. “*Allora*, what do we eat?” And he begins to explain the menu to us.

When we’ve ordered, Philip goes off to the restroom, leaving Antonio and me in an uncomfortable silence. Antonio gazes off to his left, smoking pensively. He seems to be trying to forget I’m there. Just as I’ve made up my mind to say something, he says, “You are from New York?”

“Boston.”

“Ah, yes. ‘Please come to Boston.’” And he lapses into silence again.

“You speak very good English,” I offer.

He smiles briefly. “Well, you see I am always with Americans.”

“How do you know Philip?”

“He was here at Carnival. He talked to me at church.” The subject seems not to interest him. “And you?” he asks suddenly.

“I beg your pardon.”

“How do you know Philip?”

“We met in Paris. He’s friends with a girl I’m traveling with.”

“A girl you’re traveling with...” he murmurs. “*Bene*.”

And now he is silent again, so I ask, “Why does your mother want you to be a priest?”

Again the brief sarcastic smile. “Because I speak too good English. Ah, here is your friend.”

During lunch, Philip and Antonio talk about the Church. Antonio seems to have a great many opinions, but he gives them off-handedly, as if they don’t interest him much

or as if he'd rather be talking about something else. When lunch is over and Antonio has lit another cigarette, he turns to me. "How long you have been in Venice?"

"We arrived last night."

"And you have seen...?"

"Next to nothing."

Antonio considers. "Tomorrow I do not work. If you like, I give you and your friends a tour of Venice." He calls for the bill and pays it, saying over our objections, "But I must welcome you to Venice. It is my wish for a beautiful summer."