

BYRON TIMOTHY

Souls Ablaze Sample Chapter

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Wedding in Europa

Paul and Sandy strolled through Berlin airport wide-eyed and wondrous, taking in the visual smorgasbord capturing their senses at every turn. The history, the culture, the attire and speech patterns; the German language they had yet to learn were all mentally and emotionally transformative at first glance. Every scene and spectacle was more like a dream as they passed through gate after gate of armed security personnel and eventually to a small café with overpriced coffee that was simply delicious. The long wait for the others had begun but first it was up to them to figure out the transportation process to Bavaria so they sought out the tourist office which informed them there were trains leaving every hour. They merely had to step outside the main gates and find the blue-colored “B” platform. Three hours to wait for Paul and Sandy’s parents remained (who found seats on the same flight) and the Halstons who’d be arriving two and half hours later so it was going to be a long haul. They took the opportunity to step out into the vibrant pulse of the city and have a look around. Of the three airports in Berlin, they arrived at the Schönefeld Airport

which was outside the central portion of the city. Nevertheless, there was plenty to see and do because everything was still new and interesting from their fresh perspective. The avant-garde buildings and pulse of life struck them on a gut level and impacted them like space travelers in uncharted lands while Sandy held onto his arm tightly as they “oohed” and “aahed” their way through panoramic streets on the outskirts of town.

“What do you want to do first?” Paul looked at her, “There’s not much around here from a tourist’s standpoint but we can take a taxi somewhere to get a closer look at the city if you want. First, we need to go back to the tourist center and ask for a map though.” They couldn’t decipher much from the map so ended up staying in the airport for the remaining two hours (rather than getting lost in an unfamiliar city), drinking coffee and beer instead. Both being worth the inflated prices as luck would have it. When their parents arrived, Paul’s appeared completely done in from all the security procedures and bumpy flight experience with Dad’s face whiter than ever before and Mom not much better, albeit a bit more composed than Dad. Neither had flown in better than fifteen years and, since that time, everything had changed insofar as flying protocols and security red tape were concerned. Sandy’s parents, by contrast, looked practically unfazed by the whole thing.

“You guys OK? You look like you’ve been through a harrowing experience or something.”

“We’re alright...,” Dad declared, leaning a bit to one side, “...we’re just not accustomed to how complicated flying has become in the modern world. We had our bags unpacked and searched and we were asked a lot of intrusive questions back in the good old US of A of all things! Made us feel like regular terrorists,” frowning intensely.

“Just the normal course of life these days, old timer,” Paul explained sympathetically, “It’s shocking but thankfully we didn’t get pulled aside this time...you can miss your flight in some cases. 9/11 turned the stress of flying into the even greater stress of dealing with endless security and bureaucracy. Anyway, you’re here now so let’s get you to a nice restaurant immediately. We haven’t eaten anything yet.”

“I take it your flight was problem-free?” Mom asked him.

“Other than the usual snoring, loud people and crying babies, it went off without a hitch. German security was actually very polite and helpful which was a nice welcome considering we were afraid they might look us up and down because we’re Americans.”

“You did mention something about eating I recall?” Dad echoed forcefully, “The meal on the plane wasn’t much more than a snack and my stomach’s been growling for the past five hours.”

“Hope the Halstons have a better experience than you guys did, god knows how long it’s been since they’ve flown which is bound to take a greater toll on them,” Sandy remarked.

“But they’re made of that tough older generation stock, they can handle just about anything I’d imagine,” Mom adopted the most positive stance on the situation, “I wouldn’t put anything past that generation. They are the backbone of America and probably every other nation too!”

“Let’s hurry up and grab a bite,” Dad was quick to remind them as he began walking in the direction of the restaurants. “We’ve got a long wait so let’s settle in and enjoy ourselves.”

“He’s right!” Mom agreed with the others close behind.

When the Halstons arrived they were as lively and starry-eyed as anyone could’ve imagined and a lot more than expected

even in light of all the “greatest generation” talk. Mrs. Halston greeted them with such enthusiasm she made everyone relieved to see her and further reinforced her position as the unofficial spiritual guide of the group, gazing at them with the most irrepressible joy and laughter in her eyes that overshadowed a slight grin underneath. She hugged them while nudging her husband to do the same.

“This is too much!” she exulted. “I can’t believe we’re really here. I knew it was coming but nothing prepares you for the actual on the spot experience,” grabbing Paul’s and Sandy’s arms and walking between them on their way out of the airport.

“Next the train to Bavaria, but oh wait, are you two OK to travel another few hours? I forgot to ask how long the train ride was,” Paul felt a little embarrassed. “We can stay in Berlin for the night if you two aren’t up for another long journey right away.”

Mrs. Halston laughed, “Of course we’re ready! I’d love to stay in Berlin for a few days but we’ll come back after the wedding. Don’t want to stand in the way of progress. It’ll be the sheer delight of my life to see you two get hitched!”

“She hasn’t talked about much else the entire time,” informed Mr. Halston, “She told everyone on the plane why we were going to Germany and even made me buy a brand new camera for the event,” shaking his head while holding up a small but expensive Nikon with a rather intricate-looking lens. “I was certain she was going to invite everyone on the plane to the wedding.”

They quickly sat down at a fast food restaurant to order a prodigious amount of food and gorge themselves like 15th century royalty, passing ketchup and mustard back and forth while sharing fries and drinking each other’s drinks. It was

all very confusing but equally as fun as it was chaotic. There were admittedly a few instances of “Hey! That’s mine!” for those who were particularly committed to their choices but, other than that, things went rather smoothly for a stint at the junk food Mecca they happened upon. They hopped the train to Bavaria with a bit more energy and laughter as they found seats in the same general area and managed to haggle their way into a more insulated group setting by nicely asking other passengers if they could sit together. Mrs. Halston only had to mention “the wedding” three or four times to guilt them into compliance. When they arrived at their destination, they checked in at the hotel and quickly separated for a much needed escape to slumberland.

Next morning, they gathered around the breakfast table to make plans for the next few days. Paul and Sandy had decided the marriage would be held in a small church just outside Bavaria which Sandy had contacted and secured before they left. Sandy suggested they all visit the church in the morning to view the setting and even practice their roles beforehand (which were greatly simplified for a small ceremony). They all agreed because they couldn’t refuse the reason they were there in the first place.

The church was middle 13th century with tall stained-glass windows, a thin spire and ominous winged gargoyles perched on top. It was simply stunning and looked even more impressive than the pictures they sent. Paul and Sandy couldn’t help giggling and holding each other’s hands like grade school kids which helped to alleviate any afflictions of “cold feet” either of them felt and even made the marriage seem “ordained by God” due to the beauty of their surroundings (or perhaps Paul just wanted to see it that way since it offered a supreme sense of

comfort. Paul and Sandy walked down the aisle as the others sat “oooh’ing and “aaah’ing” throughout the entire spectacle. The young couple looked very serious and tried not to smile throughout the rehearsal even though the anticipation of the final moment was building inside them. The old priest with flowing white hair and noble presence donned his processional hat and watched from the pulpit with a look of dotting approval on his face. He had seen many weddings before but this group appealed to him on a certain level he found difficult to define. His face was permanently serious but his eyes twinkled with a certain fascination none of them had ever seen in a pastor before.

“Mom and Dad, you can come up and stand beside me and Sandy’s parents can stand beside her.” Mrs. Halston began furiously taking photos and grinning like someone witnessing youthful happiness for the first time, muttering squeals of delight as the rehearsal moved slowly and surely toward the final climax of matrimonial union. When Paul slipped the ring on Sandy’s finger, Mrs. Halston lost all control and her husband had to hold her while sobbing a bit himself. Not being as much of a tough guy as he pretended.

Sandy’s mom also began to cry and exceeded Mrs. Halston in number of pictures taken per minute as well as random outbursts of pure parental delight. She hugged Sandy and Paul when it was over while going into exhaustive detail about how great everything looked and how this moment, of all things, would be the absolute pinnacle of their lives. Sandy fully agreed and Paul remained silent otherwise he might start crying too. The ceremony had affected him a lot more than he expected.

“Let’s go back to the hotel and remind ourselves who will be coming next and when. The church can hold at least one

hundred and fifty people but I doubt we'll need that much space. Be nice if that many came though, wouldn't it?" looking at Sandy with a glow in his eyes.

"Small and intimate is better," she reminded him, "We want only the truest of the true at our wedding, don't you agree, baby?"

"Whatever does it for you, babe. That's all that matters to me. As long as we're man and wife when all's said and done I don't much care how we get there," gripping her hand tightly. "Big ceremonies are wonderful but intimacy more than typifies what love's all about."

When they arrived back and the hotel they realized that at least 50 people had already said they would come as the replies to invitations began rolling in at a prodigious pace. Most of them would arrive in a few days and it became incumbent upon them to make sure the reception hall could accommodate all the replies and any and all that might come after.

"The priest said we could use the church basement..." Sandy reminded him, "...and the capacity is close to a hundred so we should be fine. There's no extra charge for the use of it and he said there's a garden outside for any guests who wish to get a breath of fresh air between eating and dancing. He's a nice man and really fits the image of a European priest, doesn't he? Simply amazing. The icing on the wedding cake if you will," Sandy giggled to herself. "Did you get a look at the reception and garden area? The garden is filled with beautiful bushes, fruit trees, flowers and a fountain with lots of stone benches to sit and contemplate the wonder of nature."

"You mean like getting married?" Paul laughed. "No, I didn't see it but I trust your taste of course. Besides if it's anything like the rest of the church, I know it'll be perfect and better than we

could've imagined. Just like everything else so far."

"My parents can't believe this is all happening so fast," Sandy said to him, "Last night they even asked if I'm making the right decision."

"They are worried about me? Whether I'm the right man? That's typical I guess. How do you feel when they say such things? Does it put a wedge between you and your parents?" watching her very closely.

"I guess even though I'm reluctant to admit it, I love you and I'd never trade you for anyone on earth. I love my parents too but they've always been suspicious of you and wonder if you're really good for me or an awful curse," sadly.

"They don't think I can make you happy?" feeling a bit hurt at the thought.

"I don't know, it worries me," she said confidentially. "My mom seems to like you but my dad hides a lot of reservations about us."

"Well, we'll just have to prove him wrong then, won't we? Proving is better than talking any day," he said confidently. "I do know you and I will be a lot happier together than alone."

The day of the wedding came off without a hitch, more or less. Some of the guests were still suffering major cases of jet lag and got lost on the way to Bavaria. Still others couldn't find the right church because of incomplete directions but, in the end, everyone was where they were supposed to be and Paul and Sandy entered their marital vows with a gloriously unassuming ceremony and a slew of gifts they were now saddled with the task of either sending home or storing somewhere in Germany. In the end, Paul and Sandy's parents brought most of the gifts back home, excluding the ones small enough to take in the newlyweds' luggage. The cash gifts amounted to

several thousands dollars which would make traveling a bit less stressful as far as finances were concerned.

At the reception, the drinking was kept under control by the fact that they didn't order too much because some of their friends might be tempted to turn it into a frat party with all the trimmings. Not Myra of course but Alex for sure (who'd decided to make the trip at the last moment). Myra was particularly touched by the ceremony and vowed to have an equally as simple a wedding (which, she noted, might be in the works since she was in a serious relationship now). The conversation was happy and lively with a lot of focus around the young couple's future plans and whether they'd ever come back home again after seeing the great, big world out there.

"Of course we will," Sandy assured their inquisitors, "Home is home and no other place will ever feel the same but we have to see what else is out there and how the "other half" lives in a manner of speaking." Her parents and most of her friends seemed to be satisfied with the answer and even the priest blessed their undertaking with a subtle warm smile that expressed more approval than even he was aware of. Mr. Halston meanwhile reminded Paul that he had to come back for "that sweet gem of a ride" he was now charged with and, if he didn't, what on earth would he do with such a beast when he lost all of his mobility and sight?

Paul laughed, "Well, you make a good point. I do love that car but I'm also anxious to see what sort of prospects are out there as far as lifestyles in far-flung places go." Not forgetting to mention he was looking forward to seeing the many charms of Europe and felt something like a bird out of the nest doing so.

After two more days everyone went their separate ways

except for Paul and Sandy's parents and the Halstons. The "skeleton crew" planned to stay at a lodge high in the Alps to get the full continental picture postcard experience before the young couple escaped to their honeymoon and utterly disparate agenda. Visiting the Alps and staying in a snow-covered wonderland would be the height of their expectations of winter "Eurovisions".

"There's a mountain resort not far from here, looks to be about ten miles as the crow flies but probably no more than twenty-five on these snow dusty roads. It's *very* German and gorgeous. Look!" Sandy showed them pictures of an alpine structure couched in the middle of towering cliffs where the snow seemed to hang on for dear life in the background. She pictured them all sitting together by the fire after a day of skiing and sharing adventure stories about how they fell down, got up or got lost in unfamiliar surroundings while gorging themselves to heart's content on exotic food. Clinking glasses and laughing heartily.

The final destination was Hotel Zugspitze at the base of breathtaking mountain scenery that unquestionably outdid any postcard of Teutonic pastoral splendor. The comfort was legendary but the skiing even more so as the Halstons tried their hand (and feet) at it for the first time. It was fun—and a little humorous—to see the elder couple enjoy "their" honeymoon even more than Sandy and Paul did. Sandy giggled with delight and wondered if they'd be half as sprightly in their golden years? What a great model couple they were! By contrast, Sandy's parents were old hands at the skiing program and ran rings around the rest of the group while going off on the most challenging slopes available. Although not big fans of rented skis, they managed as well as any championship skier and Sandy

couldn't believe the way the experience put the roses back in their cheeks.

Sharon joined them after the wedding a few days in. She'd gone to visit a friend in Munich after the reception with the promise to meet them at the resort for a few days of much-needed R&R after the flight and wedding. She was inspired by how easily the newly-minted couple had taken to married life and perhaps a little jealous she hadn't snapped up Paul for herself in the long gone past. Privately, she wondered if it would've been the same if they'd gotten to the altar first. Perhaps not, because these two were like a couple of little kids off their parents' leash for the first time.

Later that night and shivering beside the fire after falling on her butt countless times, Sharon made her declaration of hope and blessing to Paul and Sandy: "You two will certainly live a long and happy life I believe. I sincerely hope you have many great experiences abroad and begin a solid and loving family together."

Paul's mom clapped upon hearing this and went over to sit next to Sharon as her soul sister. Instinctively, she could see Sharon was a little sad at watching Paul get taken by another woman but was touched by how well she was dealing with it. "You are a lovely human being and I adore you," she said, "Did you enjoy the wedding ceremony? I didn't get the chance to talk to you before you left."

"It was absolutely splendid! I've never been inside a church so small and charming and Sandy was gorgeous in her choice of wedding dress. I have to admit I cried a little bit, not just because of the wedding but because Paul really looked like the type of man I want to marry someday."

"He did look fabulous, didn't he? Like the man any woman

would want to marry because he'll not only make a great husband but because he's very attentive to women's needs."

"Absolutely!"

"So, you haven't been on the slopes yet, have you? You think tomorrow will be the big day? Don't be afraid to make a fool of yourself because most of us have already fallen on our butts so many times we haven't a shred of dignity left."

"It's practically a rite of passage then. I'm sure I won't fare better than anyone else but I did take some skiing lessons when I was in my early teens so maybe it's just like riding a bicycle and it'll all come back to me," she giggled nervously. "Of course, maybe it won't and I'll just be another bungler in everyone's way."

"How much longer are you planning to stay in Europe? I think you mentioned wanting to visit Italy since you'd never been there before," she asked in point of fact.

"Yes, Greece too, but the country seems to be having some political problems at the moment and could be a bit dangerous for a single woman traveling alone. Not that I've ever let that stop me before..." she was quick to point out.

"You'll be alright wherever you go and whatever you do," with her arm around Sharon's shoulders. "You struck out on your own in Asia and I don't know anyone who's done anything remotely close to that...and you spent a lot of time over there too which still amazes me," observing her carefully.

"I hope I find someone like Paul someday," she said with a slight tear at the corner of her eye. "I've been feeling really lonely since I got back home and seeing Paul getting married has kind of made it worse for me."

"I know and you will, what about that former boyfriend of yours, Charlie? Do you still keep in touch with him? I remember

you two getting along quite well and you comparing Paul to him from time-to-time.”

“He moved to California a year ago and I haven’t spoken with him since. I suppose I could look him up...,” she replied with a note of hope in her voice. “He was a good man and I was pretty sorry when he moved away. Paul would be a better choice I think. Anyway, I hate feeling depressed on this happy occasion.”

“It’s only natural and don’t worry. By the way, do you mind if we go out skiing together tomorrow? I’d love to spend some time with you and catch up a bit. I feel like I’ve missed so much in the years you’ve been away,” she explained strongly. “You were, at one time, the person I hoped Paul would start a family with and I’d like to know every last detail about your overseas adventure.”

“Of course, you mean just the two of us skiing alone? We could invite Sandy and have an all-girl outing to cover all the juicy gossip as it happened,” Sharon winked with a knowing grin.

“That would be outstanding! I’ll ask her. We can really rip into the men in our lives while they do their macho competition thing.”

“Wonderful, I look forward to that.”

The next day, the ladies and gents separated into their gender-specific groups and began their departure to alternate slopes. Sandy’s mom also joined them even though she wanted to hit the more difficult slopes on her own. The medium difficulty slopes didn’t inspire her much but it was worth it to be with the girls where they could share their own thoughts and impressions about the wedding as well as trading personal evaluations of everything said and done during the affair. The ladies of the group took full advantage of the opportunity to

discuss each and every detail: how everything looked, felt or influenced them at the time.

“It was one of the most wonderful things in my life,” remarked Sandy’s mom, “Small but powerful and heart-touching in every respect. I mean the emotional quality when Paul held her by the waist made me cry more than I ever thought possible... .leastways near as I can recall. Feel like I could burst into tears just thinking about it now.”

“And when he placed the ring on her finger and the priest gave his permission to kiss the bride—the way his head was arched and the depth of his voice—was like the Lord himself blessing their union. It felt that way to me anyway,” explained Sharon. “I hope I have a wedding with such overwhelming emotion and breathtaking beauty.”

“We should all be that lucky,” replied Mrs. Halston. “Paul makes such a handsome husband and so classy and well-mannered. How could any woman resist that? It was simply lovely.”

“Thank you,” said Paul’s mom. “I feel the same way but I don’t want to brag about my own son in front of other people and risk sounding like an overly doting parent.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Sandy’s mom assured her, “There’s no other way to describe what happened except perfection and grace. I mean, small as it was, it was perfect even with the small mishaps here and there.”

“You mean like when Sandy’s dress got snagged at the end of a pew and the train almost tore off? Fortunately Mr. Halston was quick to act or things could’ve gotten ugly.”

“Yes, that was lucky,” Sandy’s mom strapped on her skis while gazing at the others, expecting to wait a considerable time since she was dealing with rank amateurs. She was suitably patient

even though she wanted nothing more than to hit the slopes as soon as possible.

“Our resident ski expert awaits us,” Mrs. Halston nodded toward Sandy’s mom. “I get the feeling we’re holding her back a bit. You were a ski instructor at one point, weren’t you?”

“Yes, before I met my husband I was literally dubbed, “queen of the slopes” at a resort I worked at because I put on shows for the competitive events. I was even asked to compete in the Olympics at one point but I injured my right knee in training and it never fully recovered. At least not as well as required to compete at the top levels of skiing,” she explained with a certain pride and tragedy combined.

“That’s amazing, I’ll bet you would’ve been something in the Olympics too! I’ve seen your skiing style and you are head-and-shoulders above anyone else on the mountain. There are some fabulous skiers around here too!” Mrs. Halston bubbled with admiration.

“Thank you but you’re embarrassing me a bit now. Kinda feel like I’m being roasted by Dean Martin in some way!” she giggled nervously.

They had a good chuckle at her feigned persecution and decided to hit the slopes one more time after the huddle they’d been in over an hour finally dissolved. Sunlight was beginning to wane and it was their last chance to reach the top for another glide down before night closed in and a different breed of skier—the night skier—ruled the mountain. Sandy remained with Paul’s Mom and Mrs. Halston in an attempt to solidify familial bonds as much as possible before they embarked on their own distant excursions. Staying on the easy slopes as much as possible in order to strike a balance between outdoor recreation and serious and intimate dialogue about anything

and everything come to mind.

Later that evening on the last night for most of them, they ate like pigs and drank like fish in order to facilitate good times and get all their most embarrassing and endearing character foibles out in full view. It was a vaunted tradition among friends and family alike who were parting for unknown durations of time.

The fire raged in the dining room and the discussion became more raucous and outrageous with each passing minute it seemed. “Paul is going to be one of those old married men that refuses to push the baby cart because it’s unmanly, what do you think?” Mr. Halston kidded him.

“Yes, he looks like the type,” Sandy laughed. “I’ll force him to do it though cause I’m not planning on taking care of the children alone,” she winked with a liquored and lax face. “Marriage is a contract and there’s no getting out of it!” laughing at her own silliness.

“Well, then do I get a 100% money back guarantee if not completely satisfied?” Paul perpetuated the laugh riot that went on all night. “Maybe I should’ve gotten my lawyer instead of a priest!” winking back at her with an uncontainable smile. “Now that we’re on the subject, do I need a lawyer once we have kids to ensure they are fully protected under family happiness and fulfillment laws? I need to make sure they are raised in accordance with the values and principles I hold dear, don’t I?”

This caused another round of table and glass shaking laughter. “You tell her Paul!” remarked Mr. Halston. “Let her know who’s gonna wear the pants in the family!”

“I will—she is!” he feigned stammering, “I have no illusions about that!”

The next morning, they all woke up and had breakfast a little after nine with a succession of moans and groans around the

table from the heavy and severely impaired heads. Sandy and Mrs. Halston could barely hold their heads off the table and kept resting their chins in their hands with the hope of holding something on the order of intelligible conversation. In the end, sufficient amounts of food, water and juice were consumed in the hopes of counteracting the effects of the previous night, which was only partly successful at best. Afterward they bid farewell with hugs, kisses and resilient smiles that held secret hopes and long-lasting sorrow. Sandy, Paul, Paul's parents and the Halstons prepared to go their own way but everyone in the dining hall was noticeably reluctant to make the first step toward separation. Sandy grabbed both of her parents on a whim and thanked them for being there and supportive of their "special day" and promised she'd be home soon enough because she'd "miss them dearly enough to hurt". Paul kissed Sandy's mom and hugged his new father-in-law who seemed to have warmed up to him a bit after their thrust into inebriated intimacy and fresh family ties.

"Well, that was nothing less than perfect!" Paul concluded after the throng was gone.

"The best!" Sandy grabbed his hand in hers, "Ready for a little excursion around the tourist attractions of Germany and Austria? We're going to see them all and it's gonna be more fun than the wedding!"

"And we've still got a nice little entourage so we won't have as much culture shock as we might otherwise have on our own. Mom, are you ready to paint Berlin red?" looking directly at her.

"Oh, yes, and your father has a bunch of places already marked up on the map. Look!" showing him the map with at least ten places highlighted that looked suspiciously like an aerial

bombing map.

“I hope I didn’t miss anything,” he said with a wide grin like Cheshire Cat. “We may never have this opportunity again so might as well check all the boxes of things to see, leaving nothing out,” sounding confident and excited at the prospect.

“You’re right!” Paul agreed.

When they arrived in Berlin a few hours later they were a little sore from the uncomfortable seats (they paid for the cheapest ones) but ready, willing and able for whatever came down the pike. Paul’s dad produced the map immediately and asked them to pick the first destination during lunch which was necessary before making any rational choices.

“Can’t think clearly on an empty stomach, besides the food here is so outstanding and a necessary part of this entire experience, isn’t it?”

“It is!” They all agreed inside a cafe a short walk from the station that had frankfurters and bratwurst that really hit the spot. Mr. Halston complained the food might be a bit too rich for him and the misses but couldn’t stop talking about how fabulous it tasted once they got started.

“This is what coming to Europe is all about!” Sandy exulted in the moment, “I mean you can’t find food like this anywhere back home. It’s a culinary paradise and not terribly expensive when you figure in the favorable exchange we’re getting. Who could’ve imagined so many cute and delicious eats on every corner?”

“Yeah, those crazy Europeans, huh? Surprising they aren’t a lot fatter than they are! What’s the secret?” Paul remarked with a frown.

“Brandenburg Gate is first on the list I think...,” Paul’s dad reminded them, “...so don’t peck at it...there’s lots to do, lots to

do today and not much time!”

After lunch, they walked out of the café and grabbed the train to Brandenburg Gate which was chock full of tourists milling around and snapping photos from every angle and pose imaginable. It was the definition of a “tourist trap” but at the same time well worth it. It was impressive in every respect and everyone took the opportunity to shoot the most flattering images for the folks back home and compete with others for the most picture perfect shots and locations. They walked in and out of the towering columns hearing a dozen different languages in the space of a few minutes but the feeding frenzy around the famous monument wasn’t altogether unpleasant and left them with a feeling of having abandoned the war, leaving their brother soldiers behind.

“What’s next?” Mr. Halston looked over his shoulder at the map.

“Reichstag! We have to see the parliament that was so instrumental in World War II! I’ve seen it so many times in pictures and I just hope they allow us inside,” Paul’s dad expressed fervently. “I’m a World War II buff and this is a special day for me!”

The Reichstag was open to tourists as they walked through the Neo-Baroque halls that reminded Paul of something from a classical music album cover. It was more beautiful than any building he’d ever seen in his life to be frank. Even better than Faneuil Hall in Boston which was one of his favorite places on the east coast.

“This place is crazy cool! Everywhere in this city is just amazing! We’ve reached heaven on earth!” Paul effused.

“Looks slightly better in person? Is that what you’re saying?” his Mom smirked.

“Ho ho ho! That’s exactly what I’m saying in fact. Pictures don’t do this place any justice!”

“You’re right,” she agreed. “Reichstag! Baroque or Neo-Baroque? Excuse me I don’t know...”

After another hour of searching around the German parliament and making a general nuisance of themselves by “oohing” and “aahing” in the chambers while some manner of government business was going on, they went to dinner and decided to take a night tour around the city. Berlin at night was spectacular to behold and tuck away in one’s memory for posterity; at least to the wide-eyed and bushy-tailed Americans now occupying this fabulous city. The buildings were ornate and intricate in every detail and crevice, making them stare in wide wonder at the majesty of German artisanship. Everything was gorgeous and orderly in appearance, execution and process of life and living. Nothing like what they were used to back home. The train carried them all over the city and although quite crowded it was bright, clean and comfortable.

That evening, they sat around comparing notes and experiences, trying to top each other for vivid and lively descriptions of the sights. Pointing out their own personal preferences in addition to how much they were impressed by the permanence of construction and what the people were like at the time.

“The Berlin Museum Island is my absolute favorite!” Mrs. Halston informed them, “Such gorgeous architecture and the artwork was simply divine. It beats anything I can recall and what a treat to live amongst such stunning beauty everyday!”

“It must have a strong effect on people’s mood and their overall attitude toward society and fellow citizens. It has too when you see such impressive things on a daily basis,” Paul’s mom agreed with her.

“Oh, man, what a country!” Mr. Halston gushed, “I wish I could stay here forever I do! Swear I’m gonna go AWOL when you guys aren’t looking!”

“Good! My ultimate dream has finally been realized!” Mrs. Halston exulted, “I’m finally free!” chuckling at each other’s roasting of each other.

Paul gazed in appreciation of the fact that they could kid each other and still remain fabulous friends. Maybe they didn’t even need to be friends all the time but they realized they were partners in the struggle for life and they’d never abandon that field of battle. Permanent allies in the game and if it meant taking it out on each other from time-to-time that was just par for the course.

The next morning, they decided to see the countryside outside Berlin and get out of the hustle and bustle for a day. The rolling hills and farms were just what they needed after the whirlwind Berlin tour the previous day. There were pastoral churches and quaint farms in many of the small towns along the way and the bus was pleasantly accommodating and offered excellent views through tall windows. It was certainly good to escape all the walking and map reading of Berlin. About halfway into the countryside tour, they noticed a traditional German wedding going on amongst the orchards where the priest joined the two under a group of apple trees before they snatched a couple and bit...then kissed each other as new man and wife.

“Oh, my god, that’s so beautiful!” Sandy squealed with delight, “A new union signified by eating fruit like two children playing in the fields. What an idea!”

“Yes!” Paul agreed, “Truly exceptional! Want to get married one more time so we can do that? I’m game,” grinning slyly at

her.

“You’re silly, but yes I’m tempted to do something more creative to add that special unique touch to our most special day.”

“It is special and what a place to hold a wedding. Look at all the family and friends dressed in their smartest Sunday dress, smiling and happy!”

“Apparently, that’s what big German weddings look like and what a sight it is too! Who says the Germans don’t know how to have a good time?”

“Everybody seems to know how to have more fun than Americans it seems. Sometimes I feel like we’re the driest and most boring people on earth. Too many people like to keep to themselves and avoid all human contact in the general course of things. Strange for people who constantly say they live in “the greatest country in the world” in my view.”

“Let’s not talk about the old home since we’re in a new one now and we’re gonna talk full advantage of everything it has to offer,” coaxing him along different lines. “Let’s forget about the past and face whatever’s ahead with open hearts and wide eyes.”

“Paul’s getting pretty poetic as he approaches his thirties, isn’t he?” Paul’s Dad laughed. “If he spends too much time in Europe he’ll probably grow a beard, long hair and take refuge in a monastery to write. Keep an eye on him, Sandy.”

She laughed, “He’d better not because I’ll become the first woman priest in whatever monastery he goes to and be a constant obstacle to his life as a monk,” winking and striking her best sexy pose.

“I’m convinced!” Dad replied, “But now I can’t go to any monastery after seeing that!” She hugged him and looked at

Paul who seemed a bit annoyed at the direction the conversation was taking. She winked at him, “Well, if he does abandon me, you’ll be next in line,” she promised him.

“Deal...and I won’t forget it!”

They passed a couple of monasteries along the way which seemed to add moral force and meaning to their roasting of Paul. They even passed a castle or two with spires that touched the clouds and tiny windows that looked over everything below while allowing little view from the outside. “Spectacular” and “heavenly” were the only ways to describe the farms surrounding and spilling out over the hills below the castles.

“I’m breathless,” said Mrs. Halston, “Even though we’ve been close to the region before it never ceases to take my breath away. I want to stay here forever like this old guy,” nudging “The Mr.” who was falling asleep beside her from the intensive activity of the past several days.

That evening, they again sat around comparing notes and looking at each other’s photos of their favorite highlights of the day. Paul shouted, “Austria next, what do you think everyone? Salzburg and Innsbruck are the two places I want to visit but I’m open to suggestions.”

“Austria?” Dad replied, “You want to leave Germany already? There’s still so much more to see and do here. Plenty of small towns and countryside locales...we’ve barely scratched the surface here in good ole Deutschland.”

“True, but one of the major places Sandy and I wanted to see was Salzburg and Innsbruck. We made some preliminary plans to go there since it’d be a great place to see how the “other” Germanic peoples live. The cities are basically magical.”

“Perfect place for a couple on honeymoon?” Paul’s Dad sensed the underlying motivation. “A romantic place for two newly

coined spouses seeking the most romantic spots to galvanize their affections?”

“Galvanize? I like that word, Dad. That’s exactly right too, it’s the perfect location to bond more solidly as man and wife,” glancing at Sandy for support.

“Yes, he’s right, romantic is exactly what we’re after and the photos of Salzburg look like the place to make those dreams happen. I actually want to go more than Paul because it looks like a genuine “city of love” in my opinion,” kissing him and nuzzling her head into the side of his neck.

“One more day here and then we can stay together or go our separate ways,” Mr. Halston suggested, “It’s so much fun being together but maybe some of us would rather be away from the crowd now, taking recent changes to marital status into account.”

“No, I love being together with all of you...,” explained Sandy, “...it’s better than us feeling alone so far from home.”

“You’ll have to rely on each other soon enough, better get used to it as quickly as you can,” Paul’s Mom reminded them, “And it probably won’t come as any shock that you’re now comrades and allies in the struggle for life.”

Sandy’s mom chimed in, “She’s right and the hardest part will be realizing that you’re no longer alone and you have to work together toward common goals everyday. That every decision you make affects the other person equally.”

“Astute observation,” Sandy noted, “So, does this mean we’re all going to Salzburg and Innsbruck or what? Now that we’ve all taken on the role of marriage philosophers I hope we can! We’ll be on our own soon enough but since we’re all enjoying each other’s company so much, why spoil it?”

“I’m up for it if everyone else is,” Mrs. Halston announced

first as an encouraging sign to all of them. They'd all feel guilty if one of the oldest members of the group was willing to do it and the rest of them bailed out all of a sudden.

"Well, if she's going, so am I!" Sandy's mom announced, "We've got almost a week before we have to be back home and we're certainly not tired of any of this yet. I could go on forever," Sandy's father gazed back with a grin that questioned her sanity then changed to a more youthful countenance after hitching onto her mood.

"OK!" Sandy's father finally said. "You're right! This is an experience we may never have again and something we can keep as a cherished memory forever. Why not?"

"Why not?" Paul echoed a sentiment they were all feeling after a short debate. "We could all leave tomorrow but it'd be a shame to go. It's truly a slice of heaven!"

"Onward and upward," Sandy bolstered his resolve, "Life is about keeping moving and heading to the next potential paradise....or not."

He laughed, "You are a quirky one but I guess that's one of the things I love about you most," grabbing her hand and squeezing it.

They headed for Austria the next morning after a rather slapdash packing routine that left some of the stragglers gasping for air as they boarded the mid-morning train to Salzburg. It was a fairly long trip by European standards as they settled into their own private car and began looking at some travel sites online for the best places to visit, wine and dine. Salzburg had some of the most acclaimed sites in Europe in that regard which was certainly a bolster of confidence for the voracious tourists freshly unbound from Uncle Sam's umbilical cord.

"I like Mirabell Palace as an option..look!" Paul's dad showed

the pictures to Sandy and Paul on his phone...just like what any American tourist would dream of as an ideal place in Europe: picture-taking heaven and a relaxing place to hang out and soak in the vibe..."

"Outstanding!" Paul agreed while smiling at the manicured and exceedingly intricate garden before them.

"Yes," said Mrs. Halston, "Let's go there first by all means. I'll do anything as long as I can keep seeing the best Europe has to offer with such good company," directing her attention at Sandy's Mom and Dad. "Are you having as good of a time as the rest of us? You're certainly not as vocal as we are," she giggled.

"How could we not be having the time of our lives! Painting this continent red with such great company IS the life for us! We're generally not this quiet but this place has such a soothing effect on so many levels."

"It does, doesn't it?" she agreed.

"Then there's the Hohensalzburg Fortress and Salzburg Cathedral which look simply out of this world! Love it! Love it! Love it all!" he added with unbridled enthusiasm.

"Getreidegasse will be great for shopping too. Looks to be the shopping district and I'll just bet they've got some gems waiting for us there!" said Mrs. Halston.

When they arrived in Salzburg it was early evening and only some of the group members had managed to sleep during the train ride. The others were way too much into this entire adventure and became children before Christmas gift opening ceremonies. Everything in their unfamiliar surroundings reeked of freshness, novelty and delight that was too great to measure or resist in either underpinnings or influence on their collective psyche. Most of them just went along for the ride like a cloud drifting through a voyage of discovery. The

train station let in a lot of light with its open air construction, sweeping spaces and post-modernist design. It was also highly organized and neat as anyone could expect from a country as strict on order and discipline as Austria. Everything was certainly charming enough in its appreciation for simplicity and “covering all the bases” of human need and activity (insofar as train travel was concerned)

They booked a hotel close to the station that was small, comfortable and quaint with a cozy little restaurant that spilled out onto the street in a busy part of the city. Settling in for some dinner after unloading their stuff and voraciously attacking a meal of bratwurst, sauerkraut and vegetables. All of it was so delicious that Paul’s father acquired a stomachache later that night and couldn’t be moved until late the next morning. He had consumed almost three baskets of fresh baked bread with lots of butter that became an unhealthy addiction somewhere along the line.

When they left the hotel the next morning, the sky was slightly cloudy with the sun peeking out from time-to-time. There was also a cool breeze that tousled their hair and tickled their faces as they undertook a massive walking tour of one of Europe’s most charming cities. Lots of other tourists were around but nothing compared to Berlin and Salzburg was equally as beautiful in every respect.

“Hohensalzburg Fortress seems to be the city’s premier attraction,” Paul’s Dad explained to them. As they walked up to the hill it sat upon, they soon discovered why: a giant fortress with an imposing and forbidding appearance and, at the same time, permanent, ancient and alluring. The smooth lines of the building complimented the hill it rested on and made them feel strangely safe and protected even though it wasn’t currently in

use. Next stop was the ever popular Salzburg Cathedral with its medieval facade and sweeping interiors that drew light from the outside and warmed the interior like a hearth fire. The austere white glow of the structure made the travelers hold their breath and crave to know what manner of wonder and faith inspired the builders of such a place. A setting that could make even an atheist question his denial of the sacred soul and spirit of man.

“Ho! Ho! Ho! What do you say about this little diamond?” Paul’s Dad pumped them, assuming the role of unofficial tour guide of the group. “That ceiling could make anyone into the most devout Christian on earth. A genuine house of God!”

“Yes, it is and for those of us who are already committed Christians, it really reaffirms our faith by occupying such a gorgeous institution,” Mrs. Halston said with a sense of pride.

“Paul, what about your faith?” kidding him on the subject. Sandy knew his idea of faith was believing in a long shot sports bet and that he’d squirm at the mention of it.

“I believe I’ll have another beer,” he said matter-of-factly, “In hops we trust.”

She laughed, “That’s awful but our children will be brought up as good Christians because I think it’s the only way to make them strong beings that can weather the storms of life.”

“She’s waxing poetic again...,” Paul mocked her, “...but in some strange way I agree even though I’ve never been much of a religious person myself. I do know it has a positive impact on people’s lives and outlook because I’ve seen it.”

“So, you don’t object?”

“How could I if you believe so strongly?”

“You’re mysterious and wonderful at the same time. How anyone could mix that combination of elements in one body I’ll

never know but I'm strangely and irresistibly attracted to it!"

"Could be the fatal flaw in your character, my young bride. Maybe we're both just a couple of coconuts...and maybe that's OK too," smiling ironically at her.

"If you two lovebirds can tear yourselves away from each other for the next few hours, we can head to the most romantic place in all Salzburg: Mirabell Palace! You guys will love it!" Paul's Dad suggested.

"Lead the way, great guide!" Sandy said in her most enthusiastic voice. "Romance and beauty awaits us and we should make our way there posthaste."

Mirabell Palace was a sprawling white building with elaborate and colorful gardens surrounding the entire property. There were a series of fountains of different sizes and statues dotted the walkway intersections where tourists sat around in droves enjoying the serene and invigorating surroundings, snapping pictures of themselves in cute or coquettish poses. Paul's group casually walked through the picturesque gardens with Hohensalzburg Fortress in the background holding each other closely and taking in all that could be taken from this astounding locale.

"Love is in the air....," Paul announced to the group, "...and what a classically gorgeous building in the middle of it all. So staunch and eternal are the buildings of Europe—such superb architecture! Our country needs a few lessons on how to make buildings and living spaces more inspiring and beautiful."

"Yes, we seemed to have rebelled against solid buildings and pleasant outdoor public spaces when we broke away from Europe," Dad agreed with him. "Everything in the world has become so cheap and temporary, especially in the western U.S."

"True," Sandy's mom agreed with him, "The east coast has

some beautiful buildings in Boston, New York, Philadelphia and D.C. but the rest of the country doesn't seem to give a damn about building anything lasting or permanent."

"And all those buildings are really old," Paul added. "To be fair, I guess Europe doesn't really build buildings like they used to either. All the new stuff is pretty modern and somewhat cheap too."

"Permanence is a lost art in the world," Sandy's mom lamented.

As the sun sank low on the horizon, the traveling horde walked down compact city streets in Salzburg center with throngs of other tourists and dialects. People were well-dressed and meticulous in appearance and a certain refined manner filled the air that was both refreshing and noble. Clothing hues remained subdued to say the least: brown, black, faded blue and similar muted tones that indicated people weren't overly interested in drawing attention to themselves. They were simply going about their lives while, at the same time, avoiding ostentatiousness and creating envy in others and that alone was alluring to the aliens in their midst. A group of ten women passed by in traditional Austrian costume, singing and dancing down the street with flowery, charming vivaciousness and joyful cultural pride.

"Austria, huh? Wonder what Innsbruck holds in store for us," Paul's Dad remarked jubilantly, "I know the population is about twice Salzburg but I'd venture to guess the attractions aren't as stunning. Although the Triumphal Arch looks pretty spectacular and the Europa Bridge is something of an engineering marvel from the looks of it," showing Paul the images on his phone. "Not as much history there perhaps but still top-shelf stuff to see. Don't worry, Paul, you made a good call asking us

to tag along with you..”

“Thanks, dad, I’m glad you approve of my rapidly conceived itinerary. I would hate to think I convinced everyone to come here and it turned into an anticlimax or something.”

He laughed, “Hey, are you guys having as good a time as the rest of us?” to the others.

“Are you serious? This is about the best experience of my life! Don’t want it to ever end at this stage,” replied Mrs. Halston.

“Paul, I’m so glad I came along instead of getting on with the business of life right away,” Sharon assured him, “I’m going to be a little sad when we do finally split up though but first—*Innsbruck here we come! Austria forever!*”

“This is nothing short of heavenly...,” Sandy’s mom chimed in, “...and you make a helluva tour guide, Paul!”

Paul laughed, “Thanks all of you...”

When it finally came time for them to part company after one last extended tour in Innsbruck, the tears flowed without stopping. It was too hard for them to break up because everything was so perfect (well, mostly except for the usual stresses of travel). The embraces lasted much longer than expected as well as long stares into each other’s eyes and intentions. Attempts were even made to take a snapshot of each other’s souls and keep them in the “priceless” category in the back of their minds.

“This is too much,” Sandy seemed the saddest of all as she embraced Sharon who had become one of her closest friends in a very short time. “Please stay in touch with us on social media, dear. I hope we can all do this again sometime.”

“We will...,” Sharon assured her, “...and of course we’ll stay in touch while you keep us posted on your adventures worldwide. I’ll be glued to my seat knowing where you are and what you’re

up to along the way. The most valuable thing about traveling is that everyone's individual experience is so different."

"So, we'll have a lot to talk about when we go back, is that what you're saying? We'll be more interesting people with lots of memories to draw upon?" Paul half kidded her.

"Exactly! Not that you'll be a more interesting person but you'll be a person of character and perspective as so many people aren't because they've only seen one side of life and living."

"Sandy, she's setting us off in the right direction. What do you think?" Paul turned to his new spouse.

"She's a real gem and I love her. If we ever break up, I'll have to turn lez and marry her instead!" grinning absurdly.

"Oh no! Then I'll have to live with the fact that I turned a woman lesbian. A major blow to my ego!"

"Oh stop!" Paul's Mom couldn't stand it any longer, "This is no way to end our time together."

Paul pulled Sandy closer and kissed her in order to prevent her from feeling ashamed in front of his Mom. He also looked directly into her eyes and stroked her hair to drown her fears about not seeing their loved ones for a long time. At the same time he saw so much pain in his Mom's eyes that it resonated inside him and he wanted to cry out loud because he knew he was the cause of that pain. But there was no other choice and it was nobody's fault that all the little birdies had to leave the nest eventually even though that didn't make it any easier.

"I love you Mom and I'll miss you incredibly but please don't worry, we'll be alright. You'll know every move we make as you keep us posted on all things back home."

As he and Sandy accompanied them to the train station a sinking feeling took shape in his stomach that Sandy seemed to

share. Sandy and Paul kissed Sharon goodbye as both prodigal returned and newfound sister/ family member.

“Love you all!” Paul shouted loud enough for the entire train station to look in his direction. “Well, that’s it,” he said to Sandy with a look of veiled apprehension.

“Yes, we’re really on our own now but it actually feels good. We can do whatever we want and we don’t have to worry about complaints or conflicting needs. Just the two of us facing the world alone,” feeling unusually bold after the send off.

“Well, I think we should go to Italy first...,” Paul suggested, “...we should spend a week or two longer in Europe before making our way to Asia to look for work.”

“Work? Now there’s a four letter word everyone hates,” she chuckled.

“Our money will eventually run out because no one pays you to have fun in this world.”

“Yeah, what’s wrong with the world anyway?” continuing the joke.

“What do you think about Italy? We did say we absolutely had to go there and I think Venice would be a good romantic getaway given the fact we haven’t really had a honeymoon yet.”

“A man after my own heart,” blowing him a kiss and smiling in her own endearing sex symbol way. “You really know the right thing to say at the right time, Paul. Well most of the time at least. Venice, huh?”

“What other place in Europe would serve as the perfect cap to everything we’ve been through so far, Paris perhaps? Can’t do better than Venice in my book. Premier city of love.”

“I agree totally.”

Next morning, the Italian “city of love” became the next destination on the young couple’s itinerary. The train ride

was comfortable but seats were filled to capacity when they boarded and they were lucky to find two together. Everyone seemed to have the same idea as them: Venice was too good to pass up as a tourist orgasm and testament of eternal love in this world. They weren't sure why but there seemed to be such an exodus to northern Italy, perhaps due to the place's overall mystique and how it'd been portrayed in movie, book and song but when they arrived at the station culinary smells of all stripes assailed their senses which appealed to their growling stomachs after such a "long journey" by European standards.

"Well, we held out as long as we could. Time to eat! What do you think, San?" his question echoed through an auditorium-like setting that amplified his voice two or three times. The high ceilings and classic Renaissance-style architecture made it feel like the exact place to be at this point in time.

"Food heaven is what some guidebooks say about this place and just looking at it from the train station, I believe they're right," he announced to her.

"We're going to eat and ogle til we drop! Are you up for doing some tourist-fueled marathon walking? This city is a walker's paradise from the looks and descriptions of it online. Let's live a little!" adding her own brand of enthusiasm to the mix.

"Whatever you say, wife o'mine. Time of our lives and we're going to savor every minute and then some," he assured her. "Venice will be the place where we find our feet and rediscover our souls and selves if we're lucky. Wouldn't be the first time such things happened to two wayward travelers like ourselves."

"First we need to hit the gondolas because that's how you really take in the true grandeur of this place. Especially at night..."

As they rode a gondola through the seemingly endless water-

ways of Venice, they witnessed the color and “splendor” of a place more ancient and alive than any place they’d personally seen. The bright oranges, rich blues and deep reds of the buildings were only to be had otherwise on a psychedelic trip at Woodstock in their estimation. The archways and waterways blended together in a kaleidoscope of candy and cake. They passed other tourists and lovers who seemed to be having similar experiences and nodded and waved at them as they glided in opposite directions. The dazzling orange lights of the early evenings took their breath away and made them forget how hungry they were or how much they wanted to snap pictures of everything in sight, while the sounds of people talking in low tones along the waterways and enjoying the marvelous food added to an already complete setting of beauty and harmony never experienced at home.

“I don’t know how much more of this I can take,” Sandy explained to him. “It’s all so intoxicating but I don’t think I could ever get tired of it. We’re in seventh heaven, Paul!”

“Yes, yes and yes!” expressing his own thoughts on the matter, “It makes me want to start a new life as a painter just to capture all this like so many have throughout the centuries. I’d truly thank my lucky stars each morning if I lived in a place like this.”

“Are you saying you’re ready to set up our new life here and forget about Asia altogether?” with pointed intrigue.

“Oh, no! I still think we need to see all we can see but this certainly wouldn’t be a bad place to come back to or make our temporary home while we hatch schemes of bigger and better things.”

The courtyard of Palazzo Ducale was long and formidable as they walked past multiple arched doorways situated in a long line of succession that appeared to continue without end

throughout the city. At the end of the courtyard, massive domes capped the background and darted behind the walking area leading up to them. The building's design was both byzantine and filled with statues in small cutouts bearing eyes that followed them around as they entered and exited through countless doorways.

For dinner, they stopped in at Bistrot de Venise which was a popular meeting place for both Venetians and artists alike according to some of the reviews online. It had a nice line of outdoor tables along the Calle Dei Fabbri San Marco with tons of well-dressed and fashionable passersby chatting vibrantly as they strolled on their merry way. The inside walls were covered with maroon and gold wallpaper with floral and leafy prints alongside ancient drawings and harlequins hanging from the walls and ceiling in odd places. In addition, there was a violin, songsheet and other musically-themed displays tucked behind glass, supplementing the overall sophistication of this well-known haunt.

"It's expensive but well worth it as a way to treat ourselves to some wicked indulgence once in a while. We deserve it!" Paul decided. "I know you're worried about our finances but this'll be a feast for the ages."

"Better than our beloved Filippo?" she smirked.

"I don't know, we'll find out I guess. Filippo was pretty impressive and gave us our first taste of old Europe and all it has to offer. I'm still sentimental as far as that goes."

"What about all the anti-Americanism we were supposed to encounter here? Do you really think it's a problem?" with keen interest in the answer.

"I don't know, we haven't talked to many people who actually knew we were Americans. I've gotten the impression that

people are pretty accepting so far.”

“I don’t think it’ll be a problem except in rare cases perhaps. We’re both pretty likable people so if people hate us because of where we come from, we probably shouldn’t hang out with them anyway,” was her sagacious reply.

“Spot on, cookie!”

After devouring the meal, they sat stuffed to the gills listening to classical music selections being piped into the room alongside the muted conversations of other diners who were mostly tourists like themselves (from what they were able to overhear). The meal was unexpectedly satisfying and rich, to say the least, as they naturally compared it to Filippo and tried to avoid being too critical about it.

“That was at least as good as back home, maybe better!” Sandy concluded, “I am very impressed by the food.”

“No complaints here,” Paul observed; smacking his lips together and smiling from ear-to-ear to show he meant it.

“Want to take a long walk around the city at night after a bottle of wine or two?” she encouraged him, “We’ve already spent a small fortune so might as well go all in on the fun!”

“Why not? Red or white?”

“Let’s do white.”

“White is it my queen,” Paul gestured for the waiter to come to their table, “How do you say that in Italian?”

“They speak English here, remember?” she giggled.

“Yeah, but I want to say a few words in Italian just to practice. Hope they don’t laugh at me.”

“Vino bianco, per favore,” she said to him.

The waiter heard the request and nodded in acknowledgment while Paul’s mouth hung open because he’d lost his chance. The waiter quickly scurried away leaving Paul staring at his back,

frowning.

“Well, that sucks,” he moaned.

“Don’t worry, there’ll be others. We’ll be here for at least a week after all. This is our central honeymoon destination and we can’t leave a place so well-versed in the ways of love as Venice right away.”

He giggled like a little boy, “Absolutely not,” taking hold of her hand, “This is *our* place now and it doesn’t belong to anyone else as far as I’m concerned.”

“I like the way you think,” taking hold of his arm and holding it under hers.

After vanquishing the vino bianco, they walked along the crowded canals squealing in ecstasy at each passing gondola with its lamp on high like fireflies in the night. The lovers, revelers, sightseers and jetsetters all coalescing in an idyllic Venetian painting from the Renaissance. The only differences being the more muted clothing styles of modern times and less overall concern with form and formality. The city itself remained as enduring and endearing as ever despite subtle changes in dress and the customs of people inhabiting it and there was a comforting sense of eternity in old cities that transcended the ravages of time. The place certainly hadn’t changed as much as the people, leastways in terms of appearance and limitless charm.

“I miss having our little entourage around for support and reflection especially when I see all these large groups. Europeans really like to travel in crowds, don’t they? I almost feel like we’re completely alone by comparison,” Sandy confessed.

“I actually love the fact that we’re finally alone and on our own. I was over the moon at being in a large group of friends and family of course but it’s healthy for us to adjust to living as

husband and wife too. We need to see what it's like," squeezing her hand for effect.

"Guess I feel that way a bit too but I miss them all the same."

Glazed tile walkways and warm glows emanating from restaurants and bars along the canal further comforted them and instilled a sense of belonging as they sought a place to be alone and act like true Italian lovers. Scores of backpackers and couples stared at them as they walked by but they barely noticed anyone else, finally coming upon a tall stone wall above a canal that was ideal for sitting and contemplating their life going forward together. Sandy sat on Paul's lap while they kissed like two high school kids discovering the opposite sex for the first time. Her arms locked around his neck with foghorns moaning and screeching in the distance. It was so perfect they forgot the beauty of the place for the time being as they became lost in each other's grasp. The lapping water against the wall was both soothing to the soul and inviting to the spirit as gondolas glided by with wide-brimmed and red besashed oarsmen singing old songs with a wide range of skills thereabouts.

"Well, you want to grab another drink somewhere or opt for dessert instead? All this love and affection makes a body hungry and thirsty," Paul smirked.

"Oh, yes, it's such a burden loving and being loved, isn't it? No wonder so many people avoid it," she chuckled.

"They do? I've always thought it was because they were incapable of loving or forming solid human bonds," looking to her for agreement or opposition.

"You're too logical when I'm trying to be poetic and philosophical."

"And that's what makes us the perfect pair I think: we complement each other so well. When you're up, I'm down

and vice versa. We really balance out each other's edges and flaws."

"Flaws...?" she frowned, "...*moi*?"

They dropped into a small café with mandolin music playing on a small stage and warm orange glows here and there so they weren't bothered by stark light as they set into relaxation mode. Ordering tiramisu and shaved chocolate bits cake alongside coffee and both were simply sinful. Their server was an attractive and lively female student with an enveloping smile and an obvious love for her job.

"What's the name of this song?" Sandy asked, trying to match her level of enthusiasm.

"It's called "Tarantella". Why? You like it?"

"I love folk music and that sounds very special to me!"

"Where are you from by the way?" she asked.

"The U.S...Salem, Massachusetts to be exact."

"The witch trials city?" with heightened enthusiasm.

They laughed in surprise, "Yes!"

"Very interesting..." she said to them, "...I'd very much like to go there. Witches are really fascinating to me."

"We're so used to it we don't even think about it anymore. It's just something we've grown up with."

"Yes, I can understand it isn't new or exciting for you," she conceded "But for others, maybe more so."

"True," replied Sandy, "It's a beautiful town actually but not as big as Boston and not much happening except for the witch tourism thing."

"I don't go looking for excitement when I travel abroad but historical places of significance that give me a connection to the ongoing story of humanity."

"You're an erudite traveler," Paul explained to her, "You should

go to America when you have the chance. Salem's not too far from New York by the way."

"I'd love to go there!" she said with a marked rise in tone and excitement. "I've heard from friends it's a great place to visit and people are interesting and diverse."

"You can't fault New York on its diversity, there's certainly a lot of that! What are you doing in Venice anyway? Are you from here?" gazing at her wide and fiery brown eyes.

"Yes, I'm a student here...studying to be a lawyer."

"Wow! Impressive!" replied Sandy, "So, you want to defend bad guys and engage in harrowing courtroom dramas, that sort of thing?"

"Well, not exactly, but I do like a bit of drama at my job from time to time to keep things fresh. At least as a waitress I meet lots of happy people and I contribute to making them happy. In law, I don't expect to meet any."

"Suppose not..." Sandy smiled, "...but it will be a challenging job no matter what and you'll make a comfortable living for yourself."

"Yes! I hope to be very "comfortable" someday as you say..." she chuckled graciously, "...it'll certainly be disappointing if I'm not," displaying a bit of that old pragmatic guinea worldview.

"You seem very smart and sure of yourself. I'm certain you'll have a successful career on that basis alone."

"Thank you," shaking her hand before disappearing into the kitchen without saying goodbye.

"Guess she doesn't like compliments," Paul shook his head with a sigh, "Maybe you complimented her too much. Italians are pretty reserved about giving praise from what I understand. They're more stoic and withdrawn about it."

"They're such affectionate and boisterous people it's hard to

believe they draw the line at giving praise and compliments,” in her own defense.

“They think it’s not genuine and they’re always suspicious of people who are too nice or complimentary. That’s why I think they do it. It’s sort of like some Hispanic cultures where they’re very careful about giving praise because people tend to believe you have ulterior motives for doing so.”

“I see,” looking at him thoughtfully, “I guess there are some similarities between Italian and Spanish cultures to be honest so it’s a fair comparison. This music is great by the way, isn’t it? I’ve always liked folk music but this is so much more lively and colorful.”

“Italians are pretty lively and colorful in general, don’t you think? Drink your wine so we can get a bit tipsy and have uninhibited sex later on,” he smirked at her. She slapped him on the shoulder and frowned.

“What did you say?”

“Huh? I was half-kidding but I do love sex when we’re a bit drunk, loose and crazy. It adds to the experience in a way nothing else can and makes you less inhibited.”

“I know but there’s a way to say things without sounding like a hormonal teenager.”

“So it was the delivery and not the message this time?”

She didn’t answer but the depth of her frown increased and she let out a snort like a baby bull. “Don’t worry, I don’t know why I got so upset about what you said. I realize you were only joking but I’m sensitive to anything that spoils the mood and ambiance at the moment.”

“I love you for your sensitivity,” Paul assured her, “It’s part of your charm in my opinion. Vulnerabilities are what truly endear us to one another and bring us closer to the ones we

love. If you didn't have your little foibles and I didn't have mine, we'd hardly love each other as much as we do."

"That's sweet—and however much it might be a backhanded compliment I appreciate the goodness of your intentions," she explained with a feeble smile.

"Alright, so let's drink another bottle so we can have "meaningful" and "uninhibited" sex later," he laughed. "What do you think of that?"

"That'll work," grinning with a subtle reproach.

Paul waltzed over to their server and ordered a bottle of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo which was native to Italy and something Paul loved drinking back home. He figured he'd surprise Sandy with something she'd probably never had before: a decent table wine to set them at ease and put them in the right mood for later.

"What did you get?" she asked when he sat down.

"Ummmmmmm, you'll see....I think you'll like it."

"You ordered a red, didn't you? Something Italian right?"

"I don't know..." averting his eyes from hers, "...you'll just have to wait and see."

"Better be good with that build-up."

The wine came to the table in a basket laying on its side for easy pouring which Sandy inspected closely in an attempt to determine what form of red it was.

"Chardonnay? Merlot? I can't see the label."

"Montepulciano d'Abruzzo. I used to drink it on occasion back home but I don't think we've ever shared a bottle together, making this a bona fide first!"

"Ooooooh...it smells divine," she remarked after the bottle was opened by the waitress, "Really full and fruity," doing her best wine expert impression.

“It is, isn’t it? It’s not an expensive wine but it tastes expensive to me. Not that I’m an expert or anything, certainly not as devoted to beer as I am.”

“Wow, this stuff goes straight to your head, doesn’t it?” wobbling in her chair a bit. “So, that’s your plan: to get me drunk and frisky. Bring out the red that goes straight to my head!” she frowned amusingly.

“The red that goes straight to your head to get you in bed!” Paul remarked casually as if there was nothing unusual about it. She smacked him on the arm one more time while taking another big gulp of the wine that warmed her quickly.

“Don’t worry, I won’t let you drink more than I do as it might make me perform badly in bed tonight. Reds tend to make me sleepy.”

After dispatching the second bottle of wine they took a slow walk along the promenade along with scores of other lovers holding each other close and deep kissing in complete oblivion to their surroundings. A pattern of lights ran up and down the tiny hills of the city as gondolas slipped past with other lovers and groups of travelers chatting and shouting joyously in a pleasing backdrop to a long-awaited honeymoon.

“This is truly the “City of Love” no matter how trite that may sound and we’re going to relish every second as it transforms us from ordinary married people into super love machines,” she stated casually.

“Wow, the wine’s really affecting you more than I expected. Love machines like a James Brown song?” smiling and kissing her on the lips with a worried look.

“Are you ready to go back to the hotel?”

“Soon...,” she replied dreamily, “...let’s walk a little more. I can’t get enough of the vibe of this place.”

When they finally made it back to the hotel they laid on the bed just basking in the glow of enduring emotional highs and themselves as two liberated folks committed to a long future together. They watched a bit of Italian TV which they didn't understand but it added to the overall "vibe" and allure of being in Venice. The lapping of the water could be heard distinctly outside the window as well as random shouts of partying and revelry one could only expect in a place like this. Groups of people passed below their window at times laughing and singing odd songs as they nuzzled in each other's arms and prepared for that much-needed slumber.

The next morning, Sandy awoke first to take a shower and make herself look as stunning as possible without all the comforts and benefits of home. She looked at Paul sleeping like a block of wood and felt the good fortune of belonging to someone like him in a foreign land. She couldn't do without him now. She fixed her hair and prepared her face for another hot day while looking at the sun outside just popping up over the canal to the east. Certain to be another perfect day and there was nothing that could stop it...not with everything going for them at present.

"Hey, you're up early," Paul remarked through squinting eyes. "Ready to tackle the day like a genuine trooper as usual? You look fabulous by the way! Wow!" getting up and kissing her on the cheek. "All for me!" making his way to the bathroom for his own primping.

They had breakfast at a small café down the road from the hotel in front of a gondola station with six boats bobbing up and down at the sway of the canal. They heard a couple of gondoliers practicing their best singing voices while toying with their characteristic wide-brimmed hats with red sashes.

Paul had eggs, muesli and toast while Sandy opted for just coffee and a croissant.

“The sun’s just coming up over that really tall building behind you on the left. Check *that* out cookie! What a sight!” She started snapping pictures and sipping coffee with equal enthusiasm. “Stand up and put your back to the rising sun, Paul. It’ll make a stellar memento.”

They spent the morning walking through a web of canals that made Venice the invariably unique and picture-perfect postcard city it was. Canals were omnipresent and each one reigned unique as far as the sights along the way were concerned. The Basilica di San Marco, in the southern part of the city, was of particular interest and they sat down to enjoy the setting itself as well as the throngs of people flowing inside and out. The gorgeous brightly colored images on the front were more awe-inspiring than words could express and left them staring in wide wonder at an overpriced café in the middle of the courtyard. It was truly a masterpiece of intricacy and delicate charm and Paul must’ve taken fifty pictures just outside but still felt cheated out of having captured it entirely. It was too expansive for the camera lens and had to be seen in person to do it justice.

Afterward they worked their way to the Teatro La Fenice which was fairly austere-looking on the outside but exceeded all expectations within: a theater of dreams in fact. The statues and lighting were truly something from an era of romance and chivalry long past while the chandeliers and frescos on the roof were the object of open-mouthed wonder and delight. Unfortunately, there were no shows planned for another week so they wouldn’t be able to see the place in full glory but—wow!—what a phenomenon! They worked their way back to the Grand Canal and Rialto Bridge which was arguably the

most vibrant part of the city. It'd been the subject of postcards for eons past and there was good reason for that renown on closer inspection. They took lunch on the Grand Canal just off the bridge facing a long line of docked gondolas that bobbed and wove with each passing ripple.

"The food isn't so great here and it's ridiculously expensive but you can't fault the view," Sandy remarked.

"It's absolutely the best thing I've ever seen in my life. I can't even imagine what it must be like to live here on a daily basis. How could anyone handle so much art and beauty everyday?"

"We're not used to it in America, are we? We have mostly bland-looking buildings and uninspiring sites and settings."

"Boston's an exception though, it's got some great-looking places, don't you think?"

"It stands up to New York, Philly and D.C. pretty well I guess. They've all got some awesome buildings and sights for sure. But, in general, I think Europe has a lot more of them and they're part of daily life and living."

"I believe you're right, I mean look at this gorgeous place!" peering out over the canal with the sun low over the horizon gracing them with a fabulous burst of romantic light. "No one would ever mistake this place for the good ole US of A! That's for sure!"

"Home is home and I'll always have a special affection for it but this is something well above and beyond any conceivable expectation. So, what do you want to do today?"

"Depends, we did a lot of walking yesterday. Are you in the mood for a nice, relaxing day today or another marathon walking excursion to make sure we get our share of fitness?"

"We could hire a gondola for half a day or even the whole day," she suggested while gazing at the line of gondolas before

them and their owners preparing to take on another group of site-hungry tourists.

“They’re expensive. I’d guess it’s over a hundred euros for an entire day, maybe more. Is it worth it?”

“We’re already over budget now. Might as well follow the present course straight into perdition.”

“Perdition?” he chuckled, “Quite a characterization that is! Maybe we could bargain with them a little. I don’t believe it’s high tourist season yet so there may be a bit of flexibility in terms of price. We’ll just look for one desperate for business.”

“You’re just chock full of ideas today, aren’t you? I knew there was a reason I married you,” she spied one man in particular with a kind face about 30 yards from their table and nodded toward him for Paul to negotiate.

“Good, I’ll try it,” Paul sauntered over, waved to the man and asked him how much.

“20 euro an hour,” he replied firmly.

“Too much,” Paul replied equally as firm, “We want to spend the entire day on a gondola seeing the sights. Can you give us a flat rate for the whole day? Let’s say sixty euros or something like that?”

The man appeared to think about it a while, looking around at the other gondolas sitting idle on the docks and wondering if he would be without a customer all day like many of the ones around him. He looked pretty depressed at the thought but was intent on negotiating what he thought was his due for the day.

“Seventy euro for the entire day and not a penny less,” with a resolve that couldn’t be broken. Paul gazed at him skeptically and ponderously for a moment. Seventy dollars still seemed like a lot and he didn’t like being taken advantage of, besides it was unmanly to give in too easily.

“Sixty-five and not a penny more!” with a confidence and boldness that surprised even himself on so many levels. It was amazing what things he was capable of when he stopped worrying about consequences and just lived life without plaguing self-doubts. The old, white-bearded man gazed upon him like an American force of nature. Yielding to the society that allowed its citizens to be so careless while believing in their purpose at the same time. It deepened the gondola master’s hatred and distrust of “those people over there” in the fanciful and presumptuous American empire.

“OK, but I won’t sing!” asserting his rights.

“Thank god for that,” Paul mumbled under his breath.

He ran back to Sandy with the widest possible grin, “We’re in! We got it for the entire day. Gondolas in heaven baby!”

“What?”

“Never mind. Just an off-the-cuff remark. I meant it’s going to be heaven today but maybe that wasn’t the best way to express it.”

“You’re a top-notch negotiator!” kissing him with the deepest sense of spousal pride, “It’s a nice gondola too, we’ll see the entire city in each other’s arms and no walking. Perfect!”

They sailed The Grand Canal with Sandy’s arms encircling Paul’s neck like two lazy, overconfident Americans injected into the obscurity of more authoritarian and status-prone cultures. Actually appearing like two Greek patriarchs enjoying the benefits of doing nothing all day while the slaves sweated and grunted under the burden of their daily toils. The ripples lapped up against the side of the gondola as they looked around at all the ancient Italian buildings, churches and monuments that tickled their hearts and inflamed their culturally sterile psyches; urging the gondolier to go slowly so they could bask in every

cool breeze on their faces and savor every delicious moment of their honeymoon. Other couples seemed to have the same general idea since several nodded as they passed in some form of silent tribute to the many splendors of burgeoning love in Venice. The midday sun blasted their faces with unending light and the promise of beauty and ease as they allowed themselves to be taken into the embrace of long dead lovers of Venice past.

"I love you so much," Sandy said to Paul as she nuzzled closer to his breast and buried her face into the nape of his neck, "Never imagined I'd be doing this with anyone..."

"It's really like something from a Harlequin romance, isn't it? Better than any movie too!"

"And so much like every girl's dream that I can't even explain it to myself. The truest freedom of all is being loved and possessed by someone you truly adore," she explained.

"What a beautiful way of putting it," kissing the top of her head ever so gently.

"It's going to be *really* hard to leave this place though," warning herself as much as him.

"We'll bring Venice wherever we go now that it's become a part of our lives forever."

"HMMMMM....what a beautiful thought..."

"Want to practice our Italian with the gondolier? It could be fun to have him describe things in Italian as we pretend we understand what he's saying."

"You mean just nod a lot, look thoughtful and smile until he catches on to the fact we haven't a clue what he's talking about?"

"Yeah! Something like that."

"OK, I'll start, "Questo posto è bellissimo!" she said loud enough for him to hear over the noise and commotion going on all around them in the busy canals.

He turned around with a surprised look, “Sono d’accordo, signorina. Venezia è la città più bella del mondo! Amo la mia città!”

They giggled slightly amongst themselves as their plan seemed to be working. “Puoi spiegarci i siti in italiano? Dobbiamo esercitarci a parlare in italiano.”

“Qualunque cosa tu voglia, signorina!” and he began furiously pointing out everything in sight while talking ultra fast which was typical for Venetians and perhaps Italians in general. He described the walls and colors in vivid and intimate detail which Sandy and Paul understood some of but not all. It added a special charm to the atmosphere and on some level struck them that they understood his meaning without necessarily catching every word. He described one of the older and lesser known churches as, “A place of worship that no longer had God inside,” which didn’t make sense to them but did make them wonder what he meant.

“It’s a beautiful language, isn’t it?” Paul whispered to her, “So sing songy and musical.”

“That’s what a lot of people say. That’s why it’s one of my favorite languages in the world,” she fluttered, “Sounds so soothing and poetic to the ear.”

“And it’s not sappy or pretentious like some other European languages that sound either too formal like French or crass like German. Those are my own personal thoughts on the subject.”

They passed an older couple guided by a gondolier who was singing Italian love songs and performing flourishing gestures with his hands that looked like en plein air opera or something. It was comical and touching at the same time and inspired Paul to begin singing “O sole mio” to his one and only in his best falsetto that didn’t sound half bad to Sandy. She joined the

chorus and less than five minutes later so did the gondolier who was slightly better than the two of them put together as he picked up the cue that singing was in order and began enacting gestures like the gondolier in the boat that slowly faded in the distance.

“We should ask him to take us to the Basilica di San Marco. We haven’t seen it from the water yet and I think it’ll give us a different perspective on that illustrious landmark,” Paul suggested, loud enough to overcome the gondolier’s singing.

“Good idea. Do you know how far it is from here? Where are we by the way? Any idea?”

“Ca’ Pesaro Galleria Internazionale d’Arte is what we’re passing now. Look over there, it’s on the right and what an incredible sight!” he couldn’t help but praise.

“I’ll try it in English first. Sir, can you take us past the Basilica di San Marco? We really want to see it from the water.”

“Hey! It’s-a no problem for me! I can go anywhere you want-a. I love it when two young lovers like yourselves find inspiration in-a my beautiful city. There’s no city like Venice anywhere in-a da world!”

“That’s for sure!” Sandy fully agreed, “Maybe we should forget traveling and just become gondoliers in Venice. Not a bad place to set up shop if at all feasible.”

“Might be a bit pricey for our present means as a place to remain long-term. Especially at the rate we’re burning through our funds without a care. That being said, I agree that it’d be a wonderful place to spend a few months....or years for that matter.”

“I second that emotion!” nuzzling closer to the nape of his neck.

“Smokey Robinson! That’s one of the best love songs in the

world and one I can certainly relate to now that we're married. We used to dance to it every weekend at the disco all our friends frequented blind, stinking drunk. Remember that?"

"How could I forget? I was the designated driver on way too many occasions for that sloppy bunch of coconuts," groaning in sync with the memory.

Passing San Marco they began furiously snapping pictures with tons of other tourists holding onto their loved ones in all-important memory-shaping delight. It actually did look much more striking from the water with throngs of small and insignificant-looking tourists in stark relief to the formidable landmark. They took turns striking movie star poses in front of the massive structure while the gondolier captured every moment of Venetian-themed Hollywood glamour for them. Then the two frisky spouses laid back on the cushions to enjoy the peace and beauty of their surroundings while French kissing deeply in the proper *action al moda*.

"When do we leave all this? I know we'd like to stay here forever but we have to start making plans for our next destination and where we plan to settle for work," gazing into his eyes with a hint of sadness.

"We could start in Korea or Japan working as English teachers. The requirements are pretty strict these days from what I gather but the pay isn't bad and we've never lived in Asia before."

"God I'd love to see Japan. My friend Charlise went there once and said it was the most amazing place she'd ever been: the food, the culture, the people...all simply perfect according to her. Apparently they also pay really well for qualified English teachers."

"Japan it is then! Can't wait to see how the East lives and how we can fit into a completely foreign society. It's something I've

often dreamt about but never believed would actually happen.”

“Well, now’s the time to make that dream into a reality and a new life for both of us. We’ll meet it head on and maybe stash away a bit of cash for the future at the same time. We have to focus on the future now because if we don’t find a way to put some money together, we’ll never be able to buy anything or start our own business if we want. Sharon seems to be in pretty good shape because of her trip overseas and, if we pool our resources, we could put together double of whatever she saved.”

“That’s wise thinking ole’ fab wife o’ mine. We’re going to Japan then! Pinch me! All the pictures make it look so sleek and modern too...ripe for adventure and self-discovery!”

“The best part is we won’t have to sacrifice anything because it’s such a developed country in the first place, probably even more so than our own.”

“Out of curiosity, what kind of business would you like to start if we did manage to save up enough money? A pizzeria, bar or restaurant? Something like that?”

“I don’t know, a dry cleaner, laundromat or car wash I was thinking, but we can cross that bridge when we come to it,” she supposed, “First let’s work on getting the right amount of money together and then we can worry about where to put it.”

“Right! There’ll be plenty of time for details after a few years of living in Japan.”

“For now let’s concentrate on dinner, shall we? What say we go looking for a place completely off the tourist track tonight? We do need to find something typical of what Venetians like to eat and not just what they dole out to the tourist hordes.”

“You’re singing my tune now buddy! Up for a late night search-and-see operation then? Is that vibe I’m getting here?” fishing for compliance.

“Okay, we still have a few hours of daylight left so let’s ask the gondolier if he can take us to some out-of-the-way spots now. Let’s get off the tourist track in the gondola first. We can even ask him for suggestions about a certain place to eat tonight, ask him where he eats for example.”

“He probably eats street food. We can do that too but it won’t be as romantic as we’ve become accustomed to on this trip so far, though I’m not against having an *al fresco* dinner if you’re game. You’re calling the shots!”

“Street food it is then! Guess we should start saving a bit of money for our trip to Japan to be honest. She turned to the gondolier: “*Quale ristorante ha il miglior cibo da strada in città?*”

The gondolier replied back in broken English: “The place I usually go is-a about-a ten minutes from where we are now. It’s-a not only the best street food in-a da city, it’s-a best *food* in-a da city! I’ll point it out as-a we pass-a. What you think about-a da sightseeing so far? It’s-a good time for you?”

“It’s simply paradise...,” Sandy replied back to him, “...and worth every euro too. We might even work in a tip if you show us the place you always eat. That’ll make this trip extra special!”

“Extra special is-a what I’m all about-a, Miss! It makes-a me extra happy to hear you say that too.”

When they passed the street stall it was set back from the road near a small and ancient church that didn’t look especially well-maintained. There were nothing but locals at the place and not a single tourist from what they could see from afar. Definitely a good sign! There were also lots of families in attendance apparently preferring to eat there instead of cooking for themselves—another good sign since Italians took considerable pride in their culinary skills and creating bona

fide masterpieces in the kitchen.

Later that evening, they spotted the gondolier at one of the tables as they approached the restaurant which was already filled to capacity. Everyone looked up at them as if they were aliens from another world because they never saw tourists at such a modest and low-budget establishment. They asked to join him and he beamed widely, stood up and pulled out a couple chairs for them to sit down.

“We’ll pay for your meal since you were kind enough to show us this place,” Paul announced immediately.

“It’s-a not necessary at t’all-a!” he replied affably.

“Not necessary but I want to, you’ve been a great guide and a wonderful insight into this amazing city. We’re on our honeymoon by the way.”

“Oh, it’s-a very special time for-a you then! I remember when my wife and I got married—we went to Spain—and had a wonderful time-a there. Was-a pure magic and Spain is-a at least as beautiful as Italia. Very similar in many ways too,” the gondolier explained to them.

“Where is your wife now?” Sandy asked him, “Do you still live together?”

“She’s-a home right now taking care of my youngest-a boy who is only five years old. He’s very active and keeps her on-a da move all-a the time! I love him of course but he can-a be difficult to handle at times!”

“How many children do you have?” Sandy couldn’t resist probing, “Sorry to ask you so many questions...”

He laughed off her concern, “It’s-a no problem at all! I love to talk about-a the family! They are my greatest joy and-a pleasure in life. I wouldn’t have anything without them! I have-a four children: three boys and-a one girl.”

“You are such a proud father,” Sandy praised to the heavens, “We’re thinking of having kids someday too but Paul believes it’ll hold us back from living and having fun together.”

“They don’t hold-a nothing back! Children are-a gift from God-a himself and there is no other way to be happy except by-a raising good children and being proud of what-a you helped them become in life,” he determined unequivocally.

“That’s great to hear! I’ve heard other parents say similar things and children do certainly change people, usually for the better I’ve noticed. They also seem to give people a purpose and reason to live, something completely lost on my generation. They’re so focused on themselves, shiny objects and their own pleasure.”

“It’s-a no way to live! You live-a through other people in addition to-a seeking your own happiness!”

“He’s a very smart man!” Paul garbled excitedly with half a mouthful of food falling out, “People are truly what make us what we are because lone wolves are miserable people in my experience. I’ve tried that lifestyle and didn’t like it very much.”

“So, you’re saying it’s time to start a family?” Sandy winked at him. “You’re ready, willing and able?”

“Well, hold on there a minute cowgirl!” he frowned, “I wasn’t saying right away but someday soon. We can enjoy a little bit of our lives first and be shamelessly self-indulgent a teeny while longer, can’t we? There’s no rush to parenthood since we’re still fairly young.”

“You need energy to keep up with the little ones. That’s why being young when you have children is the best way to do it. As you get older, you may not have the energy to keep up any longer,” she explained dutifully.

“Wow, put the pressure on, why don’t you? What do you

think, sir? When did you have your first child?” looking to the gondolier for comfort and support. “What is your name by the way?”

“Giorgio Bellini,” shaking Paul’s hand which had been extended preemptively. “I’m-a very pleased to meet such an attractive-a couple like you! I never get-a tired of taking young lovers around this-a beautiful city!”

“It’s a special, *special* place to be sure and not a disappointment by any stretch of the imagination. Venice lives up to its name and is ten times better in person than on TV or in pictures. Something I find refreshing to say the least,” Paul chuckled to himself.

“Lotsa people say that-a to me! They’re often disappointed by-a Roma but never by-a Venice! Tourists always praise-a her to-a da skies and I’m very proud to live here! To answer your question about-a my first child, I was-a seventeen...”

“Seventeen!” Paul replied with mouth open, “That seems awfully young to me. Were you scared at the time?”

“Not as I recall-a. I remember being worried about how I was-a gonna support-a my new wife and baby. Actually, it wasn’t unusual for people in my generation to have-a children so young.”

“That’s true, my mom gave birth to me when she was just nineteen,” Sandy confessed with a thoughtful expression. “That generation believed it was just the natural course of life to do so,” staring at Paul with a thoughtful gaze.

“It is natural...,” he replied, “...our generation has just been brainwashed to pursue material things and selfish acts instead of raising children or starting families. It’s not cool to have families because it means you’ll no longer have any fun according to the way our generation thinks.”

“You kids are-a missing one of life’s greatest gifts by not-a having children. My little ones have made-a me what I am-a today. My best experiences in-a life are-a the ones I’ve lived through other people. Other people make us what we are,” Giorgio explained as a simple matter of fact.

“You’re a very wise man,” Sandy praised him, “We’re only as good as our value to the people closest to us. We exist through others in the deepest possible sense.”

“How’s-a da food? You like it?” Giorgio changed the subject as he was feeling a little uncomfortable discussing such a heavy topic at dinner.

“It’s some of the best Italian food I’ve ever had,” Paul replied unequivocally, “Absolutely beyond description.”

“Not Italian food, Venetian-a food! Best in all Italy!” grinning as widely as any human being could. “We don’t-a like-a any other food here, most of us.”

“I can see why,” Sandy concurred.

“Not expensive this-a place either! So good but you don’t-a get a nice table with-a beautiful interiors.”

“The exterior of Venice works as a backdrop for me,” Paul assured him.

“Most beautiful place on-a earth-a!” he gushed, “I’ve been a lot of-a udder places too...all over Europe and some of-a Asia but here I love-a da *most!*”

“We understand how you feel because this is one of the greatest places we’ve ever been and we truly wish we could stick around.”

“You are-a people very sensible!”

After dinner, on the way back to the hotel, they envisioned how it would feel leaving this place. Tomorrow evening was the big push back to Berlin for a direct flight to Tokyo but

they were apprehensive about making so many life changes so quickly after leaving gorgeous places behind. Going from one unforgettable place to another at breakneck speed to an uncertain future was as taxing on their emotions as it was thrilling and adventurous yet they were ready for more after the considerable value it offered them so far.

“I’ve already set up three appointments for teaching positions in Tokyo but when we get there and someone decides to hire us we’ll have to leave the country to get the right visa that converts to a working visa. Sound like something you’re up for? Not too much of a hassle?” Paul asked pointedly.

“We’ll do whatever it takes to make money and adjust fully to life in Japan. I don’t care what we have to do as long as we do it.”

“You’re a lot stronger and more willing to do the necessary stuff than I am and you don’t complain about all the little things either. I’m so glad to have you around to balance out my rough edges and increase my patience in dealing with tough situations. I love you famously for giving me that strength,” grabbing her around the waist and kissing her deeply. “This experience will definitely bring us closer than ever.”

“Before we leave we should try to scare up Giorgio and thank him for everything he’s done for us. It would be the perfect ending to what has been a truly golden experience.”

“You’re absolutely right and what a fabulous idea! Maybe we’ll get to meet his family too. The first day we saw him they were lurking around helping him.”

Next morning they walked along the Grand Canal to the spot where they met Giorgio but he wasn’t anywhere to be seen. They asked a couple gondoliers hanging around but couldn’t get any definite information. Then someone who claimed to

know him said he didn't show up for work because he had some family business—one of his sons was sick and had to be taken to the hospital.

“Oh no! That's not possible!” Sandy gasped, “Just last night we were talking about all the blessings of family and children. We should stay one more day and see if we can catch him later at the restaurant. We can't leave without knowing what happened to his son.”

“You're right and I'm in total agreement. Besides, it won't be a bad idea to indulge in that fantastic food again. God, I hope it's nothing serious. We should've gotten his contact information just in case,” Paul worriedly explained.

“Probably would've been a good idea. Anyway, want to take a stroll down the canal and see what interesting shops and sites we stumble upon? We do need to check back into the hotel and ask them to put our bags upstairs too. Hopefully, they haven't booked our room yet.”

That evening they walked slowly to the restaurant Giorgio had shown them the previous night, hoping and praying he'd be there and not leave them hanging regarding the condition of his son. But there was a catch: they were pretty certain he wouldn't be there if his son was terribly sick which made them even more apprehensive. When they spotted the restaurant from around the corner, he wasn't there so they sat down quietly and hoped and prayed he might show up during dinner.

“He's not gonna come if it's serious you realize...,” Paul tried to comfort her, “...he's got to take care of his responsibilities at home.”

As they were finishing dinner and began pondering the manifold benefits of dessert, Paul walked to the front of the restaurant to order another beer and the owner of the

restaurant recognized him, “Hey! You are-a Giorgio’s new-a friends-a!”

“Yes, we were hoping to catch him here tonight.”

“Of-a course you can-a see him! I can-a give you his address if-a you like. He lives only a couple-a streets from-a here and I know he’d be delighted to-a see you. He talked about you for a long-a time after you left from-a dinner last night.”

The man went behind the register and began writing down some letters and numbers on paper and came back with a wide grin on his face. He handed the sheet to Paul and stood over him as if expecting him to say something appropriate then looked down at their empty plates and smiled even more at the thought of how much they enjoyed his carefully crafty street side masterpieces. He looked upon them as true friends and world travelers and not just the run-of-the-mill tourists that were ever present in Venice.

“You should-a go there right away. He always puts his-a kids to bed early and I know the children would be-a happy to meet some American tourists such as-a yourself.”

“Sandy?” grinning at her relaxation and enjoyment.

“OK, let’s get up and go before it gets too late.”

When they arrived at the man’s humble little home down a side street off one of the minor canals, they were impressed to see how diligently everything was decorated and in perfect order. Sure the house wasn’t fancy or expensive but everything was where it should be and styled in such a way as to be satisfyingly homey. Even the door frame itself was painted a bright royal blue that drew them in like wayward flies.

Paul knocked at the door but didn’t hear anything for several minutes and looked at his watch: 10:30. He began worrying that their mission was doomed to fail after spending another day in

the city for no good reason. Paul knocked louder the second time and thought he heard something (maybe an overactive imagination?). A window opened above them.

“Well, well, well!” forcing their gaze up, “I can’t believe you are-a here! How did-a you know where to find me?”

“The man at the restaurant told us where you live. How is your son? We couldn’t leave without knowing everything was alright since you’ve been so kind to us.”

Giorgio rushed downstairs and opened the door with his wife and daughter at his side. The little girl giggled at the sight of the two concerned Americans who seemed straight out of a Hollywood movie to her. Giorgio extended his hand to Paul and hugged Sandy before whisking them into his home and planting them on the sofa. The surroundings were decidedly modest while still maintaining the understated elegance and style that was all working class Venetian. The paintings on the wall were genuine oils too: several copies of classical paintings and a few abstract ones that weren’t overly bombastic.

“My son he is-a OK now! He had a very bad sickness in-a his-a lung, infection I think-a dey say in English, but he is-a recovering well in-a da hospital now. Thanks-a so much for coming to see me, it means-a so much that-a you come!”

He couldn’t stop staring at them and smiling while his daughter gazed and grinned with a certain lovely charm that made them smile back with even greater enthusiasm.

“We couldn’t leave until we found out what had happened to you. We even stayed an extra day when we heard something was wrong but we’re truly relieved to know everything’s alright now,” Paul gazed with serious intent.

“Would you like-a some wine? My son will be home in a week and then-a my life will return-a to normal. Me and my

wife have been-a worried for so long but now we can-a relax-a because the doctor say it's gonna be OK!"

"That's wonderful, Giorgio," she gazed with clear admiration for his fatherly love for his children which endeared her more than anything to a man.

"If-a you wanna stay another day we can-a go see him together but I don't wanna ask you to change-a your plans if-a you really have to go!" he looked a little embarrassed about asking the question because he knew they would feel pressured to stay and ashamed to say no. He walked into the kitchen and prepared some drinks while they chatted amongst themselves about the relevant merits of his suggestion.

"You like-a red wine or-a white wine?" Giorgio asked without looking at them. He laid three bottles on the kitchen counter and looked them over carefully to see how much remained in each one.

"We'll have whatever you're having, Giorgio," Paul said before whispering something about screwing up their plans and having less time to spend in Berlin before flying to Japan.

"We can't back out now..." Sandy whispered as the voice of conscience and humanitarianism, "...he asked us to go and refusing now would be *really* bad form."

"Bad form? We'll be in bad form if we don't do all the stuff we planned to do in Germany before we leave. We'll miss so much. I do want to see his boy but we're really pressed for time," he pleaded with her.

"It's OK, we can still do most of those things and if we have any extra time we can do more things. I thought we were against setting everything in stone and tying ourselves down to a specific schedule. This is our chance to make a real connection with someone and maybe build a lifelong friendship," she

countered cleverly.

“Ok, you win. Checkmate King Two!”

“Giorgio, what time can we visit the boy tomorrow?”

“Whenever you like-a! I have da day off-a tomorrow.

“Great! Sometime after breakfast then? About 9 or 10?”

“You got her! Here’s-a your glasses. Toast!”

After the decision was made they sat and chatted about the home decor awhile which came off ever so cozy and made a veritable sanctuary around them. Their gazes drawn inevitably to pictures of different parts of Europe and Asia in framed displays on an old brick fireplace mantle. They were well-traveled people to say the least. Chinese vases were mixed with Spanish swords and Greek stone carvings mingled together with the utmost attention to detail, balance and harmony from wall-to-wall. His wife clearly had making their home as much of a showpiece of social ice-breaking as possible uppermost in her mind.

“You’ve traveled to many countries from all the items I see around me...,” Sandy remarked with infinite admiration, “...and you’ve built up quite a collection along the way.”

“We’ve been-a all over da world!” he observed proudly, “My wife and-a kids love-a to go new places. We’ve even been-a to Cambodia’s Angkor Wat and-a the gorgeous temples of-a Indonesia!”

“Indonesia? We want to go there and see those same cool-looking temples!”

“It’s-a such an unforgettable place. Really and truly! Da jungles are-a so rich and-a vibrant green that it’s like a completely different-a world.”

He waltzed over to the wall and took down several pictures, handing them to the two Yanks in attendance to peruse up close.

Pointing out some key elements in the photos and proclaiming, “Look at-a these-a stepped-up old Indonesian pagodas. Of course Angkor Wat is-a fantastic too and-a probably the most exceptional old architecture in-a all-a southeast Asia...”

“Wow!” Sandy sighed, “What a gorgeous place and one we’ll have to spend at least a week to do any justice.”

“Angkor Wat, never heard of it,” Paul took the picture from her hand, “Holy cow! Wowzers!”

“Cambodia, huh?” Sandy placed another picture on the table, “Is that next to Vietnam?”

“Vietnam, Thailand and-a Laos,” Giorgio confirmed, “It’s a poor country but the people are-a very, very nice and-a the temples are-a simply stunning! If you go there, I’m sure you will-a love it like-a we did!”

“I have no doubt from the pictures you’ve shown us. We have to go there now that we know something so impressive exists on earth,” Paul assured him. “What’s life without a little adventure anyway?”

“You have to-a see it because you won’t soon-a forget! My wife and-a kids enjoyed the big-a stone temples that stretched on forever more than I-a did. They looked like-a old skyscrapers to me.”

“And look at the stone carvings!” Sandy laid into the conversation, “Such amazing details and gigantic too!”

“Let me see,” Paul grabbed the pictures and studied them carefully. “He’s right, we have to go there...,” mind instantly made up.

“But we didn’t plan a trip to Cambodia although it’s not far from Indonesia if we start off there first after Japan,” slightly concerned their plans were falling apart.

“I can see us heading there after Japan. We’ll find a job, work

for a year or two and then make a long holiday in Southeast Asia. Don't worry, San', I'm not trying to scrap all our plans in favor of new ones," trying to appear as responsible as possible in front of his wife.

"After Europe I really must see Japan before anything else..." pleading with him now, "...I've always wanted to see a country that's more technologically-advanced than our own. Think of the things we'll see there!"

"Oh man! And I've heard so many good things from people it simply has to be our first stop," reassuring her.

Giorgio's wife came in carrying some items from her room and looking at her husband with a confused expression. She stopped for a moment and gazed at Paul and Sandy, looking them over carefully before advancing any farther into the room. Smiling when she spotted Giorgio then returning her gaze to them.

"We have-a some company tonight, my beauty queen!" he crooned rather loudly, "They are-a my customers from-a da day before! They are-a very nice-a people, dese two. Say-a hello to dem..."

She walked over and shook their hands graciously while giving a little bow that was exceedingly charming on its own. She then took one of the pictures out of Sandy's hands and began describing the details in broken English while making vibrant gestures to underscore her feelings about the events in question:

"Giorgio took-a da family to Turkey in-a dis one. We went-a to Istanbul to see-a da giant mosques-a there. We also visited a lotta Christian-a churches too. Istan-a-bul is one of my favorite cities in-a da world because it's-a like-a whole country in-a one city and the people are so friendly to us! I very much want to

go back-a there someday,” with barely contained enthusiasm.

“It’s so amazing,” Paul remarked with a silly grin as Sandy worried he might want to venture off to Turkey the next minute, “I’d love to visit Istanbul.”

“No, we can’t, Paul. We have to keep somewhat focused on our plans, remember?”

“Someday....,” smiling at her worried face, “.....sorry I know I’m all over the place with my desire to see everything in the world but I just can’t help myself.”

“Someday,” she replied with a note of constant concern.

“Don’t worry! You can go-a there anytime-a you like!” smirking at their young spousal awkwardness, “It’s been there-a thousands-a years and will wait-a for you whenever you are-a ready,” chuckling at her own cleverness.

“Exactly,” Paul grinned at her, “No rush, no rush...”

“Well, we should get back to the hotel and into bed soon,” Sandy reminded Paul who looked like he could stay there all night just chewing the fat with them. “We said we’d go to see the boy in the morning which means we’ll have to get up early.”

“You’re right,” he nodded, extending his hand to Giorgio who ignored it and gave him a big bear hug instead. His wife did the same and Sandy rather enjoyed getting a firm hug from a woman.

“Thank you-a so much for coming,” Giorgio beamed at them, “You can meet us here in-a da morning whenever you like-a and we can see-a my strong little boy! He will be very happy to-a see you!”

“Hopefully we can raise his spirits a bit,” Sandy replied in earnest as they walked down the cobblestone path to the main canal road back to their hotel. The roads were a bit too quiet at night which was slightly spooky to them since it was always

spooky being the only people on the streets at night. The dead quiet of the roads was broken up only by windows opening and closing and people's distant conversations heard through open windows. It wasn't scary in any way because the city itself seemed very safe but the loneliness of night coupled with the loneliness of having to get somewhere quickly in order to dispel the uncomfortable feeling had an odd multiplier effect on them. They arrived at the hotel feeling overwhelmed by tender feelings and weary from the rigorous walk late at night.

"Good night, Sandy," Paul kissed her on the forehead before cuddling her to sleep.

Next morning they woke up and grabbed a quick cup of coffee from the small en suite pantry next to the television set. Both agreeing they weren't very hungry and were eager to get going as soon as possible so as not to strain anyone's patience or hospitality. They would be heading out late that afternoon back to Berlin and wanted to make the most of the day till then. They also wanted to spend a fair amount of time with Giorgio and his family who they'd already adopted as their own in a sense. Giorgio's home had a somewhat shabbier appearance from the outside in the early morning light and was obviously a lower working class domicile in the heart of a rather expensive city but, given that, the light made the shabbiness oddly rustic and romantic. Giorgio's economic status did nothing to dampen their enthusiasm.

Giorgio and his wife were in the middle of packing some things to bring to their son when they arrived, greeting the two Americans at the door with hugs and mugs of Giorgio's best espresso. He gave them a double shot that was truly an eye-opener to begin the day on the right foot and any fatigue they might have felt beforehand was completely erased by Italian

espresso, a bona fide wonder of the world for sleepwalkers among the living. Giorgio's gondola was tied up about a block away from the house so they all climbed in and headed to the hospital which was two streets off one of the canals according to Bella, Giorgio's wife. Blue-orange morning sky hues added to their sense of wonder and enchantment at interacting so intimately with the locals and they felt genuinely part of the place rather than just two people passing through.

When they arrived at the hospital, Giorgio's son was being checked out by a nurse as he rapidly consumed a bowl of fruit and yogurt on a tray. When he saw his dad he yelled out to him with a mouthful of food that dribbled down his chest still wearing a look of joy and anticipation on his face.

"Monti, my-a beautiful boy! How are-a you? I've brought along-a two friends who wanted to see-a you," with the proudest of grins. Giorgio stepped aside and let him take in the two unfamiliar faces whom he hoped would fortify his strength and resolve in some way. "They are from-a America, Monti. They asked-a to come and see-a you when dey heard you're in hospital."

"America, Papa?" looking to his mom for guidance on how to view the strangers but finding nothing in her stoic expression.

"How you-a feeling, Monti?" Bella asked him, "You like-a da food here? Not as good as momma's but it's-a OK for you?"

"OK momma! The yogurt and bread's-a so good here!"

"I'm-a happy to hear so much-a," beaming back at him.

"Monti, this is-a Paul and-a Sandy, dey are from-a Boston in-a da USA!"

"Boston?" he shouted with boundless excitement, "I've seen-a so many photos dere. It's-a my favorite place in-a America!"

They suddenly became rock stars to the little Italian boy who

was in the process of being energized by a quick recovery and a lot of international support for his well-being. “I can come-a to see you in-a America when I go? I wanna go Boston!”

Paul grinned at Sandy and replied, “Of course you can! We’d love to have you there but for now just focus on getting well and then think about traveling abroad when you’re older.”

Both Paul and Sandy smiled back like he was their own and the boy’s dazzled eyes at their presence was enough to keep them in stark personal glow for the rest of the day. Even the train ride back to Berlin later that afternoon was colored by the boy’s shining opinion and optimism due to their presence at his bedside.

“Coffee for you?” Giorgio proposed as he left the hospital bed and Bella behind to further console and support the boy. “My wife wants-a to spend some private time with-a da boy. She needs to-a talk to him alone so let’s go get-a some coffee. The place around the corner has some-a da best in all Venice. My guarantee...”

“Thank you,” Sandy replied graciously, “Your boy is so charming and loving I was truly touched by his enthusiasm and positive outlook on life. He did look pale and tired a bit but managed to put all of it aside to make us feel good about coming to see him.”

“He’s-a pride and joy! Makes-a me smile everyday too! Children make-a life worth living and give you reason to live as-a human beings. Don’t-a know what I’d do-a without him.”

“Giorgio, thank you for the coffee and everything else you’ve done my friend. Let’s exchange contact information before we hop on that A-train back to Berlin although we’d love to stay forever because we’ve had the time of our lives—you’re like family now!” Paul said in all seriousness.

"I know, I feel-a da same way too," hugging Paul and Sandy in a group bear hug and shuttling them to the train station in his gondola which had been cleaned and polished as early as yesterday. They felt like they were being carried in Cleopatra's royal barge.

"This gondola is the best-looking in all of Venice!" Paul reminded him; forcing a proud grin and a howl out, "I'm-a so glad you see what-a I see!"

They slept during most of the train ride back to Berlin, spent not only from the emotionality of the morning's events but the whirlwind walking and sightseeing tour of Venice. They couldn't remember having done more walking than they did on this particular trip and were looking forward to an additional marathon tour of the more out-of-the-way spots in Berlin (of which there were many according to "unofficial" online guides). They were overwhelmed with adventure for the first time in their lives after living so long in the same place which served as a major factor in their exhaustion and satiation with life in general.

"Only a day and a half in Berlin before it's off to Japan so we'll have to pack a lot into a relatively short span. We may not be back for a long time or ever...if we want the experiences and photos to impress ourselves and anyone else who shares our taste for the unconventional we'll need to act fast."

"Paul, don't worry so much about "seeing it all". That's the mistake too many travelers make who end up driving themselves crazy with stress instead of just settling in and taking in the surroundings."

"I'm doing that a bit, aren't I?" he protested shyly.

"A bit?" she scoffed at him, "Just become part of the atmosphere in pace with it instead of trying to force the ultimate

traveler's experience from a glossy brochure," she wisely stated. "Staying behind and seeing Giorgio's boy is certain to be something we remember more than any old church or picturesque canal."

"Yeah, but those canals will stick in our heads too I think," he countered with a smirk.

"Granted but I hope you get what I'm saying, Paul. Try not to worry so much and simply enjoy the time available to us. Since we don't have a whole lot of time to spare, just accept that we'll only be able to do justice to a few choice sites and leave the rest behind for if and when we ever come back."

With that said they did an uber quick tour of some of the "darker" areas of Berlin of which there were many to their surprise. It had a vibrant underground music and art scene and there were many lively attractions like plays about fictional dragons that consumed environmental waste and made people pay for the carbon they breathed in gold dust and karma (that was a strange plot and Paul had to hand to the Germans for their originality in the strangest possible way). They also discovered an old section of blocks on the East German side used to paint wall art to Lenin in drag and again commended the Germans for their "no barriers to the bizarre and irreverent" outlook.

"Lenin in drag. What do you think?" unable to keep a straight face through it all.

"I don't know but I'm not a fan and could probably have done without coming here at all."

He laughed, "What say we hit that 13th century bratwurst restaurant on the way back? It's only a half mile walk from the subway station and it says they have the freshest sauerkraut in the world."

"We certainly can't pass that up, can we?" gazing at him with

a skeptical smile.

At the restaurant they were treated to a stone-walled dungeon lavishly draped in red royal swathes and banners surrounding carved wood and leather upholstered chairs that looked like something from the Middle Ages. The piped in music also seemed ancient as well as classical which Sandy described as “troubadour-style”, giving her impressions of people in “fairy shoes” as she described it.

After leaving the restaurant they returned to the train station and gathered their belongings from the plush luggage storage facilities that assured them of “the highest level of security and privacy for your priceless items” (which made them laugh because they didn’t have any).

“Don’t think those lofty standards apply to us but maybe someday. For now, we’re just two broke young folks...”