

**Skies, Streets, & Stories:
A Venetian Reflection**

By Kathryn Evans



Sometimes I watch the sky with longing when I see an airliner flying through the clouds. I wonder where the plane is going, or where it has come from. I wonder about the people on that plane and what it was that brought them away from their homes, or about how they might be returning to their home after being away for a long time.

I worked at a store that was beneath the flight path for the Charlotte International Airport. I would go out to the parking lot and sometimes just watch the planes fly overhead. I watched them with envy, wishing that I could be on one of them and off to some new, faraway place. It wasn't that I wanted to leave my home or wanted to get away from anything; I simply wanted to see new things and experience new places. I had never seen the world except on a television or movie screen, it all just seemed one big Hollywood set. I never really knew that the world existed until I saw it for myself.



The first time that I was faced with the prospect of flying over an ocean, I did not exactly get off to the best of starts. My life up to that point had not been very exciting. At nineteen years old, I had never really traveled before and had never gone anywhere without at least one of my family members. I had been preparing for months, but never really expected my excitement to wreak such havoc on my nervous system. My body went into a rebellion and started to protest the stress of it all. The morning of our flight, I woke up with a headache that progressed to a migraine as the day went on. The migraine set off the nerves in my head and caused my right eye to tear up; I felt nauseated and miserable, and had to make sure that I knew where the nearest bathroom was in case I actually had to vomit. I was traveling with a group of people who were all

old enough to be my parents, and only one of whom had I known at all before that day. What a wonderful first impression I was making: tears running down my cheeks, hugging my own stomach as I was gripped by nausea. I could barely even function let alone talk and converse like a normal human being. All of this bother, and we didn't even step foot on the plane yet.

The problem with traveling during busy tourist seasons, such as Spring Break, is that airlines will sometimes get overbooked. Of the thirty-seven people that were in our group, fifteen of us got bumped off our flight. Of the thirty-seven people, I only knew Grace, who was a friend of our family. When she got the opportunity to take this trip to Italy over Spring Break, she offered to take me as her travel-buddy. It was an entire group full of teachers, and I was the only person under thirty years old, though the majority were actually in their fifties or sixties. Luckily, in my miserable state that day, I didn't lack parental figures to nurture me through my illness and to deal with the nightmare logistics of figuring out how the rest of us were going to get to Italy. I spent most of that day curled on airport benches, hugging my head against the florescent lights and the sound of busy travelers hurrying between their terminals. In the end, I was rather grateful for the delay in our departure. Rather than spending nine hours on a cramped plane with my migraine beating in my head, we were put up overnight in a posh hotel where I was able to sink down into the clean, soft bed and lie there in the dark and quiet until I drifted to sleep.

By the time that we finally reached the other side of the ocean, I wasn't entirely certain that I was cut out for traveling. I was too sleep-deprived to notice very much what was around me and was barely conscious as we flew over the Alps, though I tried my best to rouse myself long enough to take a picture of the snowy peaks. When we finally landed in Italy, I felt as if it had been the longest day of my life. My body moved as if on autopilot; I didn't really have any control but I had to keep moving. I saw Padua and Verona as if I were dreaming them. All I wanted was to sleep and recoup my energy a little. My enthusiasm for the trip had almost died at the very beginning of it.

Then we reached Venice.

The modern world surrounds the lagoon of Venice with docks and machinery and large industrial buildings. As we approached the city, I was already preparing myself for disappointment. It was three days into our week-long trip, and I had seen very little to impress or excite me yet. We had to take a motorized *vaporetto*, water-taxi, in order to reach the city proper.

As soon as we entered the Grand Canal, something began to stir me. I could feel the wind blowing against my face with the smell of sea and water, awakening some part of me that lies dormant when I am on land. As the *vaporetto* came to the heart of the city, I could see the old buildings with their doors and landings right against the canal. The water lapped against the stone walls as it has done for hundreds of years. I could almost picture the revelers dressed for Carnival, with their elegant masks and beautiful costumes, dancing along the streets and coasting through the canals in their gondolas.

The deeper we moved into the city, the more I could feel the excitement rising in my chest. I found myself in a world that had previously only existed in my imagination, in movie screens and photographs, and all of a sudden I could touch it and smell it and feel that wind on my face and taste the salt in the air.

My travel-companion, Grace, and I spent the entire day meandering through the streets. It didn't even matter that we never made it very far from San Marco's Square. We didn't particularly care what it was that we saw, we simply wanted to be there on those streets. We shopped for lace. I hunted for souvenirs and trinkets. So that we could keep from having to stop, we got pizza rolls that could be eaten as we walked. I ordered one that was filled with mozzarella and pepperoni, and it warmed me delightfully as we wandered through the twisting streets that seemed like a maze through the city. The smell of that morning's rain on the cobblestones mingled with smell of the sea that ran like veins through the city. Water pulsed through the canals, rising and falling with the tide, vital to the life of the city.

The sounds of Venice are like no other city, for there are no cars and no busy streets and intersections. Most of the city must be traveled by foot, with more distant places traveled to by gondola or *vaporetto*. The stones of the city are so old that motors and machines are too hazardous to the foundations. Only the sounds of people, water, and birds disturb the air.

As we waited to meet the rest of our group, we strolled around the square of San Marco, outside of the great basilica. The sun had disappeared but the sky was still a light periwinkle blue and there was a lavender light cast over the whole square. The air was turning chilly, and there were only a few tourists feeding the populace of pigeons. The pigeons cooed and flapped around the square, settling onto the shoulders, heads, and arms of laughing tourists who snapped pictures. I could still smell the sea and the sound of water was never far away. One of the restaurants had an outdoor seating area and a group of musicians began to play for them. I felt like I was in a movie: the music, the dusky light, the basilica rising up in front of me. I had never imagined myself in a place like that, yet I felt as if I had always belonged there.

Later that night, as we took another *vaporetto* back to the mainland, I sat on the deck, though the night was now cold and made even worse by the wind. As everyone else huddled inside the enclosure of glass, I sat with the wind blowing against my face and it didn't even bother me. My mind was spinning and I felt alive in a way I had never known before. I tried to absorb and memorize everything around me. The sights, sounds, smells, thoughts, feelings, emotions, regrets, excitements; I wanted to capture everything and hold it perfectly in my mind forever. I watched the city drift past me, lit up with lights against the dark night, and I listened to the water that continually lapped against those foundations of stone and tried to soak it all into my soul. The lights mesmerized me and the water lulled me like the sweetest of melodies.

Less than a week later, I returned to the airport where my trip had begun in embarrassment. As I walked down the ramp from the Arrivals area, I saw my mother

beaming and waving me towards her. I let her hold me tightly, and it had never felt so good to see her and feel her arms around me. I immediately began to talk, and describe, and explain, and lament, and exaggerate, and embellish, and to tell her all of the things I had not been able to tell her for a week. I was not the same person as when I had left, and my manner and my attitude had come alive. Now I had my own stories to tell. Now I had experiences that were different and new. Now I had a passion that I had never quite expected, and it added a vitality that I never knew I lacked.

Something changed in me that day wandering the streets of Venice. The sea, the buildings, the history of that city, the newness of my experience, it all awoke something inside of me. Something that pushes and prods me to new places. Something that will not let me sleep whenever there is an opportunity for something new and different.



I still stand outside when a plane flies overhead and watch it with longing. In the summer, when a warm wind is blowing, I feel like it is whispering to me of new places. I dream of the places that I still wish to go. In the decade since that first trip, I've also found my way over the sea to Ireland, to London, and to the Holy Land in Israel. Each experience has shown me incredible things, about the world and about myself, but it was the Venetian streets and waters where I truly came alive for the first time.

About the Author

Kathryn Evans has been writing since she was fourteen years old and has been telling stories in her head for as long as she can remember. She was raised on J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Lewis Carroll, and Dr. Seuss. As she has grown older, she has also developed an affinity for classics such as Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton. She dreams of one day having drinks with Joss Whedon, Neil Gaiman, Felicia Day, and Patrick Rothfuss. She is a movie junkie, a book nerd, and a coffee addict. Above all, she is a lover of stories and of storytellers, in whatever form they come.

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