



Reflections Linda Sullivan

Sometimes if we want to find ourselves, we have to lose everything else, but what are we with nothing?

Mark let the bubbling noises travel into the small room from the street below. Italian streets seemed to be busier than in other countries. The people appeared louder, the aromas more pronounced. In Venice the noise was different again, compared to Rome or Milan, the noise here seemed to exist against a backdrop of silence. He wasn't sure how long he had been lying on this bed. If he never got up, no-one would ever know.

Something about that thought thrilled him, sent little pulses of excitement through his veins. He had created something; his own environment, a choice, a destiny. Power boosted his thoughts, egging him on, pushing for self absorption.

He moved across the room and down the stairs quickly, his limbs snapping into action abruptly, as the thought filtered from his brain. Once outside he pushed through traders and stalls, striding forward as if someone with a mission instead of being no one with nowhere to go. After walking until the market sounds left his ears Mark slowed and strolled along the endless maze of mysterious backstreets. There was something about this city that comforted him, a deconstructed mass of islands and canals, tarnished and sinking, yet not just existing but beautiful. A submerged city reflected back at itself daily in the fluid mirror that filled its hollows. The tourists were mainly found on the long Grand Canal. Mark liked the small alleys where the Venetians moved through

shortcuts with ease. The only way to get around was on foot or on water. There were no cars or trucks and the lack of traffic noise left a hovering peace. The pedestrians all moved together and Mark walked with them, entering into the stream of Venetians.

The satisfaction Mark got from believing he was doing something worthwhile trampled memories of guilty notions. It reinforced the belief in a need for freedom, exploration and discovery. He knew he was doing them a favour. One way or another he had to get out of that life and the chaotic city of London. He had semi existed those days in a web of noise and anxiety, cowering behind a facade and crouching lower and lower. He had two options. One option ensured they would never see him again. The other meant a chance remained. He opted for the latter. He had chosen the braver, slower option. He could have chosen a quick end to everything but he didn't. He had left them with hope, left them with that, and then moved on. He was too far gone to realise that the first option brought closure. He could now only see his path. Occasionally Mark hesitated when passing net cafe, a thought striking his mind, but then other thoughts tumbled along, what can he say now? He has no words.

Mark peered into the water, seeing his murky, dirty reflection. Something was floating in the canal, bobbing along carelessly, unaware that a gondola could crush it instantly. The waitress placed his coffee on the outdoor table, smiled and picked up the tip. Mark looked at her, drinking in her features. A flicker of loneliness made him want to touch her. When she laughed he felt something inside and when she asked him if he wanted anything else, her expressive Italian face focussed on him and his needs.

He glanced at her after each bite, scrutinising her manoeuvres through the tables, delivering food. He ate slowly, watching her, drawing out each chew, savouring the Venetian flavours. She placed a pot of sauce on the table. Mark noticed how she didn't smile at the others customers when she placed the sauce there. She took orders from another table but walked back to the kitchen past his table. Mark acknowledged the signs storing them carefully.

He knew she was finished work at six. Mark moved to a small park beside the cafe. It overlooked a canal and he could watch the ebb and flow of the water. He could also see her, watch the way she worked. The bench he sat on today was typically Venetian; peeling and old. Taking out his sketch book, he began to draw. His pencil created carefully but purposefully, immersing Mark in her hair and hands and shoulders

and lips. The sun met Mark's skin and began its own task of slowly adding colour to the gaunt pale flesh.

When a paler sun shone over Venice and the evening mist arrived. Mark watched as she walked past the park and slipped into a side street. He rose and followed, his moment here. He knew the route. Knew where she crossed, knew where she turned, he knew her. Her hair was different today, he liked it like this, maybe she knew in some way. He walked with her but behind her, she was his focus, and her path became his path. They reached her street but she kept walking, she didn't turn off. Excitement was born in Mark's belly, squirming around his body as he followed her. Where were they going? She had always gone straight home. Stopping at a bar, she pushed open the door. Mark followed, trusting her. He stared as she joined a group of friends, kisses exchanging, smiles overflowing. Mark felt irritated. Suddenly the interest which had consumed him vanished and he no longer cared.

As the waterbus rested on the canal, floating over its reflection below and Mark began to be moved away from Venice, he had no idea that he was never really there at all.

There are things out of our control. If we chase them we will lose either them, or what we have left behind. Both cannot be ours.

Water cascaded down Jim's body, washing away a grimy flight and a crowded waterbus. His mind purred with activities and arrangements. Drying his body and dressing in clean clothes revitalised him, and like a suit of armour made him feel ready for battle. Locating his backpack he checked his leaflet supply and his map. He was always great at orienteering and knew exactly where he was. It had taken him a while to ascertain locations in Venice's intricate backstreets. Consulting his schedule he saw he would not have enough time to cover the whole area for information, so instead decided to stick to the Grand Canal and try to get Mark's poster in as many shops, hotels and bars as possible. He read the email again, skimming the words,

"On holiday.....certain it was your son.... beside us on waterbus.....saw poster in London..... that distinctive tattoomentioned it to my husband at the time.....it was him....I am sure.....good luck...."

The breakthrough. Jim folded it and put it in his pocket, close to his skin. Standing and securing his backpack on his back, Jim checked the unfamiliar room for any forgotten belongings, hardly recognising it, even though he just spent the night there.

Entering the lobby Jim paused at reception to enquire about internet access. Sitting at a computer he emailed his wife and daughter promising to call before four. His fingers moved; tapping keys cautiously but quickly, wanting to press send on the screen and in his mind.

Stepping outside Jim felt like the temperature was higher than it actually was. Holding the leaflets in one hand and sticky tape and a travel scissors in the other, he moved through cafes, bars, and hotels leaving behind his son's face wherever he went. The email was folded in one pocket, the map in the other. He had worn his combat shorts so a phone was in another pocket; a wallet in another, each pocket had a function, carrying another piece of Jim's ammunition. His eyes moved like a machine, scanning faces. Once the face was not recognised, the memory was discarded. Jim scanned hundreds of faces daily. At night in bed he tried to recall the faces but he can't. They are gone from his mind. There is only room for one face in his mind, one focus, everything else has faded.

Sweat glistened on Jim's bald patch. Pushing open the door of the last bar he could visit, he moved inside, the cool interior swallowing his uncomfortable frame. The sun had weakened but Jim's face was hot. His shorts kept falling down because he had lost weight, and the uncomfortable sensation nagged at him persistently. He must stop and buy a belt. He chose a table bordering the canal, looking down at the water. He watched as a gondola glided by, a gondolier steering his vessel, steadily moving it through the water, navigating it and its occupants, guiding them through the greyness below. After ordering a meal Jim spotted a pay phone in the corner, his wife and daughter and earlier promises called him. He dialled the number with a heavy hand.

"No nothing yet, but I have done the whole main street, tomorrow I will move to the smaller islands. Chances are he is moving around....How are you?....Look don't worry....I met a lot of helpful people...if he is or was here someone will get in touch...." Annoyance began to creep into Jim's tone.

"I can't come yet. There is more I can do, I won't let Mark down, and no I'm not saying you are but he needs me now and I will find him...."

Jim hated explaining it to his wife. He had to. His son was down and he would not leave the field without him, dead or alive. He detested hearing his daughter pretend to be in control. He wished he was there to lead them through this but those wounds would heal with time when he found the closure they all yearned for.

Leaving the bar, another supply topped up, Jim began to walk to the waterbus stop. Forty five minutes later, upon realising he had taken a wrong turn, he cursed and scoured the map. Angry now, he began again. In the humid evening perspiration poured out of each one of Jim's orifices. His feet stuck to the leather of his sandals and with each step he took he slid around in sweat. Still he walked on.

And then there are those who are left behind.....

Rose looked at the clock. Ten past six. Ten past four in Italy and Jim had promised he would phone before four.

"Mum relax ten minutes is not anything to dwell on"

"Who said I was not relaxed?"

Rose replied with a raised eyebrow, aiming to look in control and as if she was dealing with the situation. She hated when her twenty year old daughter detected how every fibre of her being was a nervous wreck. She saw the fear in her own eyes every time she looked in a mirror; she knew Sarah could see that. Her insides felt twisted, coiled up in pain, confusion and terror ever since that realisation. Her son was missing. Two months on, no clues, no answers and now no husband. The cup of tea Sarah placed in front of her stole Rose from her reverie. Uncomfortably she murmured thanks, and let the warm tea console her insides. She stood and started to search the freezer for something to eat, absentmindedly taking out a lump of meat and lobbing it on to the counter.

Sarah picked up her pen once more, and tried to concentrate. Equations. Complex little creatures which demanded absolute attention. Again she thought of her brother and sadness and fear raged against confusion and anger. She heaved a sigh and tried to breathe out all the tension that clung to her body. She moved and walked down the hall. The house felt empty, her footsteps made too much of a noise, echoing against the wall

of cold silence that permeated the rooms. Here half the family semi existed, lying awake at night, constantly thinking, and churning over conversations and movements.

The ring of the phone shook the house. Eileen reached first. The words that reached her deflated her heart. Would there ever be a release. Jim's far away grainy voice explained and reasoned.

"Maybe you should come home?", Rose's voice disintegrated on the word home. Sarah took the phone, he voice firmer than her mother's. She felt clammy and scared and just wished it would all end.