

The Board Meeting

- He looks like that man, you know ...

She points at the guide weaving between people and holding up a yellow umbrella which dances over the crowd. Then he sees him – a swarthy profile, a hook nose.

- Oh yeah, Danieli!

- It's not him?

- Cant' be! He topped himself – well, couldn't take the heat, the man laughs. But he was from Venice.

Down the street palazzo backs, apartment buildings, and churches stretch away. Most are run down with peeling paint or flaking plaster. Her high heels make it hard to walk. She trips.

- I wish he'd slow down.

- You didn't need to get tarded up. Anyway – you've hooked your rich sucker.

- Well I didn't marry you for your charm.

- No! Nor me! Marry you - for your charm, that is.

He grabs her arm to pull her along. She trips again and swears.

They push through a crush. Nearby there are some stalls selling scarves, ties, plastic gondolas with shiny gondoliers and plastic gilding like shrivelled gold. And masks. Grotesque with distorted wizened faces frozen in leather. Half bird half human. She grimaces.

- These are ghastly. There's something sinister about this place, John.

He nods.

- Isn't there just.

He gestures at the tour party.

- Look at these idiots. They think it's all about art and beauty and all that guff. This place is built on treachery ... and greed.

- So you feel at home here.

He stops a moment - surprised.

- Yeah! I suppose I do.

They see the guide smile at them over his shoulder.

- What a joke if he's a Danieli. Wipe the grin off his face if he knew who I was.

He makes a false smile at the guide who winks back and, strangely, laughs into the air.

- What happened with Danieli?

- We got him off the board. There was us four but he had the majority shareholding. Then he misses the AGM. We don't vote him back on.

- He didn't turn up?

- Seeing his son in hospital. Boy had a car crash that morning ...

- You went ahead?

He shrugs.

- You're a bastard!

- We could get the assets after that. Don't look so superior! They paid for your clothes ... and a few other things besides.

The guide stops in front of a door. She looks at him, puzzled.

- Was he wearing that cloak before?

The guide produces a large rusty key and opens the door with a flourish. The man steps inside.

- This looks interesting.

But she sees they have lost the rest of the party. Turning she meets the leering face of the guide, his nose like the beak of a bird of prey.

- John, don't! Please come back.

He takes no notice and carries on.

- Come on! We want to get our money's worth!

A dark corridor. A smell of damp decay and a grating sound as the door is shut.

- He's locked it!

The guide sweeps past them and the man follows. The floor is difficult in her heels but she catches up and tugs at his sleeve. He takes no notice but points to the lights.

- Look at that – real candles.

- John, let's go back.

The guide opens a door and they step out behind some columns, much colder now. Looking through the arches they see they are in St Mark's Square.

- These people. It must be some fancy dress do.

- But it's not carnival time.

She sees men in frock coats and tricorne hats, women with long skirts, beauty spots on their white faces, and high wigs. Now the crowds separate for the guide as he heads across the square. They come to a large gathering. Her husband is in front but suddenly he turns, his face ashen his mouth swallowing the air.

- My god ...

The guide stands aside to reveal spectators standing round an area paved with small and uneven stones. There's a hole in the ground with a pile of earth nearby. Alongside, in a row, three heads, men's heads lying on the ground. A sudden welling of nausea. But it's worse. One moves, its tongue lolls out and its eyes open. Men buried in the ground! She screams and the spectators now look at the two of them. She guide steps forward and shouts something she does not understand. Two men with pikes, and dirty, break away from the crowd and come over to them. The guide, reaching out with just thumb and forefinger, takes hold of her husband's sleeve and leads him towards the hole. He seems unable to resist and the two soldiers hold their pikes to stop her following.

Robert Ayres, 13th October 2009