

THE VENICE
EXPERIMENT

THE VENICE EXPERIMENT

A Year of Trial and Error Living Abroad

by Barry Frangipane
with Ben Robbins

The Venice Experiment
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Although the authors have made every effort to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the information contained in this book, we assume no responsibility for errors, inaccuracies, omissions, or any inconsistencies herein. Any slights of people, places, or organizations are unintentional. Some names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

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FOREWORD

Sixteen hundred years ago, in the year 452, two Italian guys walked into a bar—bear with me here—mourning their town’s imminent destruction at the hands of Attila the Hun and his ferocious army.

As they drowned their sorrows, one of them turned to the other and said, “Attila has already ransacked the north from Paris to Strasbourg, and is heading towards Italy. If we don’t do something, he’ll get us too. But I’ve got an idea. Let’s cut down millions of big trees, and then float them two miles out into the lagoon. We’ll pound the trunks down into the muck around a sandbar, and then on top of this foundation, we’ll build a huge new town out of granite and marble from the mainland. The Huns won’t be able to get us out there.”

“But,” the other guy said, “chainsaws won’t be invented for another fifteen hundred years, and all we have are these little wooden boats.”

“Non ti preoccupare,” the first guy said. “Don’t worry. I’ve got an axe, and I just sharpened it this morning.”

“Sounds good to me,” answered his friend. They and all their buddies then proceeded to drink massive quantities of alcohol until they actually believed that this was a perfectly

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logical plan for defending against an onslaught of vicious invaders.

Fast forward to the twenty-first century. Every year, twenty million visitors marvel at the sheer genius of this magnificent city that still stands above the water—most of the time – on these same ancient tree trunks. To be sure, the first Venetians had no idea their island would someday be one of the epic wonders of the world, but history now regards this axe guy in the bar as a true visionary. He tried something different, something seemingly impossible, convinced a group of people to join him, and it all worked out brilliantly.

My friend Barry Frangipane is another such contrarian. After sixteen years of his mother insisting that dessert had to come after dinner, one day he tried it the other way around, and this new order has worked just fine ever since. Not quite brilliant perhaps, but a valuable lesson nonetheless.

I got to know Barry when he was nearly fifty and was immediately struck by his possession of two rare qualities—an absolute disregard for convention and an uncanny gift for connecting with people. For the last several years, I have been the beneficiary of both.

During our work together, he has shared story upon story over lunches and late nights at the office. For a guy only twenty years my senior, it seems like he has a century's worth of life experiences beyond my own.

FOREWORD

Barry's implausible successes inspire countless people to venture off the beaten path and discover a life beyond the comfort zone. In his failures, and there have been plenty, he manages to extract and share valuable lessons that are more often than not hysterical. His brand of fearlessness is a rare breath of fresh air in our modern risk-averse society.

In a world of nearly seven billion strangers, Barry deliberately takes the time to connect with nearly every human being who passes within ten feet or so. A few find this unsettling, but it makes a delightful and lasting impression on so many others. For Barry, each encounter fills in another detail in a lifelong tapestry of relationships.

It's not without a bit of jealousy that I enjoy Barry's tales of traveling the world, mastering new languages, making friends, and starting crazy ventures. He's always off to do remarkable things that people like you and I can't just run off and do—or can we?

This book is the record of Barry's love affair with Venice, including the year that he spent living and working there. It's just one of his endless series of experiments with cultural habits and human interaction. Personally, I find his observations both insightful and encouraging. I hope you enjoy meeting him as much as I have.

~Ben Robbins

1

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My secret plan to move to Venice was ready. It was time to see if my wife would buy into the idea of leaving our home to live for an entire year in a foreign country.

As happens from time to time in the sunshine state, dark thunderclouds had formed over our suburban tropical paradise with little warning. I had been reviewing software code on our patio as I waited for Debbie to return home. The steady rain turned to a thick spray as it came through the screened enclosure, and the water in the swimming pool gradually overflowed, rippling onto the deck.

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Debbie entered the house with water dripping from her clothing, and fought to close her broken umbrella. Her five-inch Manolos, covered with mud, were kicked across the kitchen floor. I closed my eyes for a moment, wondering if this might be a bad day to tell her of my plan. The sound of ice clinking against a glass told me Debbie was certainly pouring her drink of choice, Grey Goose. Comfortable in my armchair, I smiled as my wife told me about her terrible day, and my imagination filled in the details...

When Debbie left her office for the evening, a gust of wind blew the papers composing her night's project from her hands into the swampy ditch alongside the road. Her thin skirt flapped violently around her waist as she bent over on the roadside. Drenched from the horizontal Florida rain and wind, she ignored the long line of slowly moving cars behind her. Her umbrella had escaped and blown across the nearby parking lot. Water began to gather in the ditch, so she lunged farther in, desperately grasping at escaped sheets of paper caught in the weeds.

The droplets of rain weren't particularly heavy, but with every gust, they stung her mascara-streaked face like tiny needles. Clutching a handful of soggy paperwork against her rain-drenched silk blouse, she gritted her teeth

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and ignored the first few horn blasts. Her Manolo Blahnik heels sank into the brown muck as she made her way back and forth across the ditch

As she snatched up the last remaining sheets, more honking and finally a catcall rang out from a pickup truck waiting at the light. The grinning man in the driver's seat recoiled as Debbie's head whipped around to reveal an angry glare framed with rain-matted auburn hair. A sudden blast of wind drowned out whatever she screamed at him while extending the middle finger of a hand that still clutched a soggy mass of papers.

"It sounds like you had a pretty bad day," I said, as Debbie continued her story.

"Every damned report in here is trashed," she declared, sinking back into the overstuffed chair with a sigh. "I can't do anything with these till tomorrow. They're pointless anyhow; nobody really needs them. I hate this hellhole of a job."

"If they're pointless, why stress out over them," I offered. "Look at it this way, now you don't have to work tonight."

Clearly not amused, Debbie stared sullenly into space. I took a deep breath and closed my laptop. It was time. Of all the days to finally tell her what I had been secretly plotting....

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I began, “Debbie, I’ve been thinking about maybe the two of us going somewhere.”

“Good Lord, what have you come up with this time?” She peered at me suspiciously over her glass. “Barry, the last time you said that, we disappeared to Paris for two weeks. How are we supposed to do that now? We have jobs, and I’m way too far behind right now...” Her voice trailed off as though she hadn’t completely convinced herself.

“Well, you didn’t seem too attached to your job a second ago,” I countered. “None of my clients are here in Florida, and they don’t know where I’m connecting from.”

In an annoyed tone, she responded, “Why the hell would you want to go on vacation if you’re just going to work?” Her confusion was understandable. It was time to tip my hand.

“I’m not talking about a vacation.”

Setting down her glass, Debbie leaned forward intently. Confident I had her attention, I continued to tease her by stating the obvious. “So, since I’m not where they are, and they’re not where we are, it doesn’t matter where we live, does it?”

Debbie blinked, waiting for some indication of my intentions. “Damn it, Barry, what are you trying to say?”

“Well, I’ve been looking at apartments in this little town called,” I paused, “Venice.” Unable at this point to suppress my ear-to-ear grin, I continued, “We can get

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a place on the island. I'll bring my laptop and internet phone, and I can work afternoons. My clients will never even know we moved, and we can rent the house out. Since it's Venice, we certainly won't need cars. We'll sell them both, and with the money we save on payments, insurance, gas, and repairs, we can live on just one salary—mine.”

“We could do it for a year. You can just relax and cook—with better ingredients than you have here. You'd rather be doing that anyhow, right?” After months of planning, I was satisfied that I had thought of virtually everything.

Debbie took a deep breath and settled back in her chair. For a split second, I found myself unsure that my scheme was unfolding as planned. Doing her best to muster a poker face, she responded, “Huh. You're actually serious? You want to just pack up and move to a foreign country?”

“Well, yeah. Unless you'd rather just stay here.”

Her face suddenly looked distant, and for a moment, I couldn't tell how she felt about my proposition. It was my turn to blink. “So... what do you think? Are you in or not?”

Staring coolly at me, Debbie hesitated, sensing my anticipation and relishing the moment. The slightest hint of a smile appeared, and no amount of determination could hide the growing excitement in her eyes.

“I'm in!” she suddenly squealed, clapping her hands together like a little girl. “I quit, I quit! I swear, we're gonna

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do this!” Gradually regaining her composure, she settled into a slow bouncing motion in the chair.

“So,” she wondered out loud, “what kind of an apartment do you think we can get?” Debbie wandered off to search Google for apartment rentals in Venice.

I contentedly basked in the success of my plan. At an early age, I had realized that not everyone had a high tolerance for my spontaneous ideas. I felt especially lucky to have a wife who actually seemed to enjoy my spur-of-the-moment inspirations, and who helped me to better pace my impulses. For her part, Debbie was well aware of how unpredictable life with me could be, since our relationship itself had been based on spontaneity from the start.

Our paths had converged ten years earlier in the summer of 1996, when I was still adjusting to life as a single parent to my two daughters, Stephanie and Amber. Selling my stake in the software company I co-founded a decade earlier had given me more time to spend with my girls. I worked on my consulting practice mostly from home, using an internet phone to stay in touch with a small group of clients scattered across the United States.

I had been working in my den on a Thursday morning, sipping coffee, when the phone rang.

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“Hey, darlin’, it’s Debbie!” Even though we had never met in person, her Texas drawl was familiar and friendly. “The system is acting up again.”

Although I worked closely with all of my clients, there was a certain electricity in the air when I heard this particular voice. Debbie was responsible for payroll on a construction site at the Anheuser Busch brewery in Houston. There was always something special about her calls. It might have been the way she called me “Darlin’,” even though she called everyone else that, too. Whatever it was, I looked forward to any chance to speak to her and found myself always willing to spend any amount of time helping her.

I listened patiently as Debbie described the problem with her computer. She concluded with, “I swear, you probably think I make this stuff up just so I can call and bug you.”

Recalling that my girls were staying with their grandparents over the weekend, I sensed an opportunity, and immediately volunteered, “Debbie, I don’t think I can fix this one from here, but I can come out Saturday and get it taken care of.”

Surprised, she answered cautiously, “Um, okay.”

“I’ll need someone to pick me up.”

“I guess that’ll be me. How will I recognize you at the airport?”

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“I’ll be the all-white guy wearing all black,” I responded, impressed with my own cleverness.

Forty-eight hours later, my heart pounded as my early flight touched down in Houston. I was surprisingly nervous about meeting this woman I had known only as a friendly voice on the phone for the last several months, and had no idea what to expect.

As I deplaned, the only person waiting was a stunning redhead in black jeans and a tight-fitting blouse. She examined each person through her dark sunglasses as they emerged from the jetway. As I nervously walked toward her with my bag in tow, she watched me curiously, finally asking, “Barry? Is that you?”

I was still in awe, and blurted out the only thing I could think of, “Uh, yeah. That’s me, the all-white man in all black.”

“Oh, my God,” she squealed, giving me a quick hug. “I’m so glad to finally meet you!”

Stepping back, she put her hands on her hips and looked me up and down, her gaze finally settling on my nondescript black suitcase affixed with a large label that read *THIS IS NOT YOUR BAG*. Chuckling and shaking her head, she turned toward the exit. “Alright, let’s get goin’.”

I followed as she led the way at an impressive pace for someone in four-inch heels. Hurrying to keep up, my eyes were locked on her shape, while I attempted to conceal my

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admiration. As we threaded our way through the crowd toward the parking garage, she glanced over her shoulder a few times to ensure I was keeping up. Each time she looked, I would quickly try to suppress the enormous grin that had planted itself on my face.

Debbie unlocked her little Toyota Corolla, and we jumped in. Screeching around the parking garage's circular ramp, it was immediately clear why the car was missing two hubcaps. Still grinning with nervous excitement, I gripped the door handle as we sped away from the airport. It was the most fun I could remember having in years.

We made our way along the highway into the city. Eager to make conversation, I asked, "So, other than the system going down, how was your week?"

"Oh, you mean other than the whole system crashin', me dumpin' my boyfriend, and feelin' like hell after gettin' totally trashed with the girls last night?" She pulled her sunglasses down to glare at me with bloodshot eyes.

Wishing that I hadn't asked, I simply replied, "Well, I guess you're looking forward to a productive weekend then." I then stared directly ahead, contemplating what might be a safer topic.

We arrived at the brewery and walked through the plant to her office, which was located in a small trailer adjacent to the brewery. As she unlocked the door, her face practically turned green from the smell of fresh hops. After

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showing me where her computer was located, she quickly excused herself, clearly still feeling the effects of the night before. When she returned fifteen minutes later, I proudly showed off her fully repaired system.

“That didn’t take long,” she remarked suspiciously. “There’s not much to see in Houston on a Saturday. How about a late lunch?” She suggested that I might enjoy a local Mexican restaurant, although she seemed less than excited by the thought of food. Despite her gastrointestinal handicap, several beers and margaritas later, we were the best of friends. For nearly four hours, we talked about food, friends, and life in general. I learned that she was a classically trained pianist who loved to cook, and that she had always wanted to travel. I told her about my first marriage falling apart, and she bashfully shared her childhood dream of marrying an Italian who would whisk her away to the Mediterranean coast.

Finally, realizing that it was early evening, she said, “It’s gettin’ late. What hotel are you staying at?”

Mustering my best straight face, I countered, “Well, this is Houston; there’s bound to be some place to sleep, right?”

The following morning, as we left her apartment to drive back to the airport, we agreed to see each other again the following weekend. Two months later, Debbie moved

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to Florida, and we began planning our first trip to Europe together.

On our first date in Houston, Debbie had revealed her dreams of romance and Prince Charming. I, however, had my own ideas about what a perfect life companion required—someone with the stamina to survive both the good days and the bad. It was therefore no accident that I made her first trip to Europe a whirlwind of activity.

Whether or not she realized it, my new love interest underwent a rigorous test of endurance. Having spent much of my life traveling, it was important to me to find out whether she could keep up the grueling pace of constantly being on the move and adjusting for the unexpected. Our itinerary consisted of four countries in ten days. We would tour France, Austria, and Switzerland, sleeping along the way on trains and in hostels. We would end in Italy, where we would stay with my mother's relatives.

From the start, it was clear that Debbie was not only a great companion, but also a natural traveler. We picnicked at the Jardin du Luxembourg in Paris and walked along Champs Elysées exploring the boutiques, galleries, and cafés. She reveled in the glamour and fashions of Paris, but seemed just as content curled up in my arms on the train as we left. The more time we spent together, the more I marveled at the calming effect Debbie had on me. In Salzburg, Austria, we ran down hundreds of steps in a

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thunderstorm from the castle to the hostel, sampling the apple strudel at every café along the way.

In Switzerland, as we watched our missed train pull away from Lugano station, I banged my fists on the wall. Debbie just put her arm around my waist and whispered, “Darlin’, what’s the worst thing that’s gonna happen? If we have to spend four more hours here feeding the swans and walking around the lake, I’m okay with that.”

I was more relaxed than ever as we embarked on the last leg of our trip. While on the next train to Italy, I phoned ahead to my relatives to arrange for them to pick us up at the station. Conversations in Italian, especially by phone, were difficult for me. After listening to many Italian language tapes over the years, I had learned enough of the language to ask questions, but often didn’t understand the answers. My uncle understood, I had hoped, that we would be arriving on the next train from Lugano. We exited the train in Conegliano, Italy, to find my aunt and uncle waiting on the platform. Zio Alfieri was a proud man, short, with a long, curly mustache that barely hid his smile. Over the years since I met him, his physique had certainly changed from that of a soccer player to a soccer coach. Even in middle age, though, the twinkle in his eyes, together with his strong handshakes and hugs, still revealed both a strong physical work ethic and a warm character.

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In terrible Italian, I did my best to introduce Debbie. While I was explaining to Debbie that *zio* meant *uncle* and *zia* meant *aunt*, Zio Alfieri carefully examined her physical attributes before turning to nod approvingly and say, “Bravo! Bravo, Barry!”

He then excitedly relayed something in Italian to my aunt, who looked at me and smiled. Without understanding a word, we both knew that Debbie had passed the initial audition. Zia Loredana laughed. “Alfieri appreciates the beautiful women,” she said as she gave Debbie a big hug. My uncle and I worked on loading the luggage into his tiny Fiat, while attempting to save some space for the passengers.

After piling into the car, we set off toward their home in the village of Sarmede. With the stunning Dolomite Mountains as a backdrop, we drove through the rolling hills until a group of homes and businesses clustered around a church came into view. My aunt explained to Debbie that this small town of three thousand people was where she and my mother were born and raised.

After arriving at their home, Debbie was introduced to my uncle’s elderly mother, Zia Agosta. They then escorted us back outside to a small attached apartment with two rooms—a combination kitchen/dining room downstairs with a spiral staircase leading to a room containing a queen-size bed and small bath.

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“Barry’s mother was born right here in this apartment,” Zia Loredana explained to Debbie in Italian, with me translating as much as I could understand. “For the next few days, the two of you will stay here.”

Behind us, a concerned voice asked, “But where will Barry sleep?” We turned to see Zia Agosta behind us. In her generation, the very suggestion of an unmarried couple sleeping together was preposterous.

Zia Loredana winked at me and explained to her mother-in-law, “Barry will sleep on the kitchen table downstairs, and Debbie will sleep in the bed upstairs.”

Zia Agosta seemed satisfied with that answer. A few hours later, she knocked on the door of the apartment carrying extra blankets and a pillow to ensure that I would be comfortable on the table.

The next morning, we joined the family for a breakfast of local cheeses and breads, and Zia Agosta inquired as to how I was feeling. While starting to tell her how refreshed I was, I felt an elbow in my ribs and heard Zia Loredana’s “Ahem.”

Alerted to my near undoing, I quickly groaned, held my side, and demonstrated the proper amount of aches and pains for someone who had spent the night on the kitchen table. Zio Alfieri chuckled under his breath, then made an announcement about the morning’s plans that

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had something to do with the local market and walked outside.

“What did he say?” Debbie asked.

“I’m not sure. He either said we are all going to the market, or we all went to the market. I still have trouble distinguishing between the past and future tenses.” Loredana and Zia Agosta joined Alfieri outside.

“Since we haven’t been to the market, he must have said that we’re going now. Look out the window; I think they’re waiting for us,” Debbie said.

We walked toward the car. Scrutinizing Debbie’s short, white sundress, a concerned Zia Agosta asked, “Isn’t Debbie going to change before we go to the market?”

Zio Alfieri let out an audible groan. Debbie, stunned, hurried back into the apartment to change into something more conservative that would satisfy the censors.

It was clearly market day in Vittorio Veneto, as tiny cars lined every inch of available roadside. Alfieri found a perfect parking spot on the sidewalk. In this hillside town, the community parking area had been taken over with vendors with local cheeses from Piancavallo, barrels of green olives, antiques, and new CDs with music from all the latest Italian singers.

After walking downhill through a mile of street vendors, we walked back uphill, returning to the car with no one having purchased anything.

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After we finished shopping, we dropped off Zia Agosta at the house. The rest of us drove to the hill town of San Daniele and found a table where we could relax in the sun and enjoy some prosciutto and Prosecco, a sparkling white wine similar to champagne. San Daniele, a quiet little spot in the foothills of the picturesque Dolomites, was home to arguably the best prosciutto in Italy. Tiny restaurants specializing in the local delicacy were found on every corner. Many of them offered beautiful views from outside terraces, where thin slices of prosciutto were served on silver platters paired with homemade *grissini* breadsticks and white wine.

We sat and talked, taking in the view as we recalled the morning's events. As young women strolled by, one after the other with short skirts and bare shoulders, Zio Alfieri nodded approvingly, while Debbie just watched, perplexed, thinking about her required change of clothing earlier in the day.

It was very tiring listening to every word in a foreign conversation, just hoping to glean a clue as to the topic. So the more the meal dragged on, the more I ignored the conversation entirely. At one point, however, Alfieri must have told a joke, as he and Loredana both started laughing, then looked over at me expectantly. Naturally, I laughed too, not wanting them to think that I wasn't listening. Debbie asked, "What did they say?" The table was silent.

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While my aunt and uncle certainly didn't know enough English to understand Debbie's question, based on her timing and perplexed look, they knew what she was asking. I had to think fast.

"Debbie, here's what happened. Alfieri said something, then Loredana responded, then Alfieri said something else, and they both laughed. At this point you need to burst into laughter, or they'll know I have no clue what they said." Debbie burst into laughter, as did Alfieri, Loredana, and I, although for different reasons.

The next morning, we said our goodbyes to the family and set out to spend the last days of our trip in Venice. Debbie pressed her nose against the window as the train skimmed across the lagoon toward the island. Slowly, Venice came into view. All the bell towers seemed to grow as we neared the city, with the famous *campanile* towering over Saint Mark's Square.

As we left the station, the city of water opened itself up to us. The Grand Canal, directly ahead, was bustling with activity. Two *vaporetto*, or waterbus, stops perched on the edge of the canal with people waiting at each one. We watched people going about mundane daily routines in this exotic place that seemed to emerge directly out of the sea. Traveling down the canal were merchant boats carrying wine, toilet paper, and Coke, while a UPS boat delivered packages to businesses on the canal. Palaces rose

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up from the water with beautiful blown-glass chandeliers glistening in the windows. The aroma of fresh pastries filled the air.

Debbie stopped at the edge of the Grand Canal and began to cry. “I never dreamed,” she sobbed. “Seeing it in pictures and in movies, you just have no clue. I feel like I’m finally at home.”

We got to the end of the line to board Vaporetto #1, the waterbus that ran the entire length of the Grand Canal. As we waited, little old men with newspapers and old ladies with grocery bags bypassed our line, creating a mass of people in disarray at the dock. When the *vaporetto* arrived, the crowd boarded the boat leaving us, and others, behind. As the boat left the dock and motored down the canal, we decided to tour Venice on foot instead.

Determined to make the most of our one day, we wandered the streets and squares, visiting all six *sestieri*, sections, of the city. In this town of almost four hundred pedestrian bridges and no cars, we crossed bridge after bridge, really going nowhere in particular. On the banks of a small canal, furniture was being loaded onto one boat, while on the other side of the canal, fresh fish was being unloaded from another. Small stores lined the *calli*, or walkways. One butcher shop sold only poultry, the next sold only beef and pork. Small delicatessens with beautiful Italian cold cuts like *Prosciutto*, *Mortadella*,

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and *Sopressata* called to us. It was amazing how many products they could stock in a store the size of an average American living room.

Gondolas crisscrossed the Grand Canal dodging larger boats delivering wine, produce, and dry cleaning. The centuries-old palaces lining the canal seemed to be leaning on each other for support, some more successfully than others.

One of the biggest surprises was a huge park called the Giardini Pubblici with its expansive walks under hundreds of tall trees and benches lining the way. We would have never dreamt that in a city built mostly on tree trunks pounded into the ground, there would be a park almost half the size of the famous Luxembourg Gardens in Paris.

On a tip from my friend Giorgio, we searched for a particular *gelateria* in the Santa Croce neighborhood that he promised served Venice's best *gelato*, a frozen dessert similar to ice cream but made with milk rather than cream. The address led us to a small, unassuming storefront near Ponte degli Scalzi, one of only three bridges crossing the Grand Canal, with no outside sign to indicate that it was in fact Gelateria Alaska, the name we were given, or that it was a *gelateria* at all.

Pressing our noses to the glass, we peered through the dust to see a large map of Jamaica on one wall and a photo of Bob Marley on the other. The ice cream display

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was empty, the door was locked, and there was a large handwritten sign on the door that read, “*Chiuso a causa di malattia,*” which I translated as “Closed due to illness.”

We were becoming accustomed to these dead ends—a surprising number of stores were closed in the middle of the day—but this one was different. There were over forty comments handwritten by customers and friends on the weather-beaten sign.

Guarisci presto, Carlo—Get well soon, Carlo—and *Torna subito mio grande amico*—Return soon, my good friend—read the first few comments that I translated roughly for Debbie.

The thought of poor Carlo suffering made us suddenly realize that this magical place was full of people making their way through life like they do any other place on earth. The outpouring of concern scrawled on the window made us imagine the kind of friendship that Carlo must have had with his clients, and how closely knit the neighborhood must be.

As if she could read my mind, Debbie asked, “Why don’t you write something?”

I wrote it in English, hoping he would understand this note from a complete stranger. “Get well soon, Carlo. I can’t wait to try your gelato!”

By this time, the sun was hanging low in the sky, and all of the other shops around us had also closed. Soaking in

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every detail along the way, Debbie and I slowly made our way back toward our hotel. I thought to myself how glad I was that this was the last stop on our trip. Had we begun in Venice, I wasn't sure we ever would have left.

The next afternoon, as our return flight took off, we banked hard over Venice. I leaned over to join Debbie in peering down as the city on the water disappeared into the distance. Somehow, even though we were headed home, it felt as though we were leaving something precious behind.

Not too differently from our own romance, Debbie and I had fallen in love at first sight with Venice and never quite recovered. We would make several return trips over the next decade, some lasting as long as a month. As much as we loved our home, friends, and family in Florida, leaving Venice was always difficult. This time, though, we would stay an entire year, enjoying the city at a relaxed pace without a looming departure date. It would be perfect.