TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Carlo Fruttero and Franco Lucentini were a well-known literary duo in Italy for several decades, until Lucentini's death (by suicide) in 2002. For about forty years they co-wrote newspaper and magazine articles, literary essays, translations (from English and French), and edited numerous anthologies – in particular, of science fiction (for over twenty years they ran the highly influential *Urania* series for Mondadori). And they published five novels – six, if we include their curious work, *The D-Case*, in which a group of fictional detectives gather in Rome to discuss and complete Dickens's unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

The Lover of No Fixed Abode, first published in 1986, is the fourth of their novels and stands out from the others in that it is not primarily a crime story. The other four all have at the heart of their plots a murder case, which needs to be solved. They are all original in their approach to the detective story, and in some cases have solutions that do not abide by the strict rules of the Golden Age crime story, but nonetheless the basic structure is that of the *giallo* (as crime stories are known in Italy). *The Lover*, while containing elements of crime fiction (particularly as regards the shady side of the art world), is essentially – as the title suggests – a love story.

The novel, of course, does have a mystery at its heart – and it concerns the identity of the principal character. And here the two authors play strictly fair, scattering plenty of clues

throughout the story for attentive readers to pick up. The solution to the mystery leads inexorably to the melancholy conclusion of the love story – which was already implicit in the title of the novel itself.

Many readers find that the novel's particular charm lies in the brilliant descriptions of Venice. For Fruttero and Lucentini the setting of each of their novels was always crucial. Their first two novels, published in the 1970s, were set in Turin, the city where both writers lived; the books were successfully transferred to the screen (a film in one case and a television series in the other), with Marcello Mastroianni brilliantly playing a Roman detective rather ill at ease in the northern city. Their third novel took place in the medieval city of Siena, against the colourful background of its annual horse race, and their last novel was set in a pine forest on the coast of Tuscany. But in none of these novels does the setting play so crucial role as it does in *The Lover*.

It has been a truism since at least the eighteenth century, when mass tourism can be said to have begun in Venice, that it is impossible to write anything new about the city. However, Fruttero and Lucentini – who reveal themselves as steeped in the literature of Venice – certainly find new ways of saying the old things. The novel contains some wonderfully evocative descriptions of the city – by night, during a storm, with and without tourists, the grand open spaces of St Mark's Square, the intimate *campielli* and *calli* of Cannaregio and Castello, the interiors of grand palazzi and luxury hotels, back-street bars and little shops.

As translator I have the advantage of having lived in the city for over forty years; this meant that I had no trouble in following the movements of the characters around the city (and place names are very important in this novel, as

the detailed index suggests). It also meant that I was able to spot a few minor slips on the authors' part: for example, cruise ships do not moor alongside the Giardini, as described in Chapter II, and Casanova was not imprisoned in the Palace of the Prisons but in the "Leads" at the top of the Doge's Palace. But these are trivial points. In general, their descriptions testify to a full awareness of and feeling for the city's complex history – and this all-pervading sense of the past turns out to be intrinsic to the plot and to its central mystery. See the marvellous paragraph in Chapter XII where the unnamed female narrator muses on the way the male protagonist, whose mysterious identity has at last been revealed, must have seen the city grow…

The principal challenge for the translator of any Fruttero and Lucentini novel is to capture the tone of their prose, often imbued with a subtle irony, which occasionally veers into cutting satire. In this case the main target is the art world and the various absurd characters who inhabit it, whose faults range from pretentious pomposity to sly deviousness or outright criminality. It is, of course, very much a portrait of its time, and some of the language used, even by the more sympathetic characters, may occasionally grate on a contemporary ear.

I hope that this translation has brought across some of the brilliance of the original novel, which, not only in Italy but also in France, Germany and elsewhere, has already been acknowledged as a major contribution to the still vital tradition of non-Venetian literature about Venice – along with works by Shakespeare, Byron, Ruskin, Proust, James, Mann, Hemingway, Pound and others too numerous to list. As already mentioned, it is impossible to write anything new about Venice – but then the same thing could be said about falling in love…

praise for

THE LOVER OF NO FIXED ABODE

"Doyens of the Italian detective story, Fruttero and Lucentini, offer a perfect blend of the comedy of manners and the macabre; in short, very Mediterranean mysteries."

TIM PARKS,
author of *Hotel Milano* and *Italian Life*

"Elusive, allusive, illusionary, Fruttero and Lucentini are a unique double act, challenging rivals or imitators. In *The Lover of No Fixed Abode*, the pair fashion a labyrinth full of shapeshifting and ambiguity, sometimes sinister, often hilarious, for which Venice in all its varying moods offers the perfect setting. Gregory Dowling's lethally stylish translation captures both the Italian original's super-cool urbanity and its uncannily authentic spirit of place."

JONATHAN KEATES,
author of *La Serenissima: The Story of Venice*

"An undiscovered gem, finally available in English… witty, moving and enthrallingly atmospheric."

PHILIP GWYNNE JONES,
author of *The Venetian Legacy*

"Finally in a vivid English translation, the classic imaginative Italian love story and mystery that brings 1980s Venice to brilliant life."

DAVID HEWSON,
author of *The Medici Murders*

Carlo Fruttero and Franco Lucentini were a well-known literary duo in Italy for several decades until Lucentini's death (by suicide) in 2002. For about forty years they co-wrote newspaper and magazine articles, literary essays, edited numerous anthologies and published six ground-breaking and best-selling mystery novels. Their first novel, *The Sunday Woman*, was made into a film in 1975 starring Marcello Mastroianni, Jacqueline Bisset and Jean-Louis Trintignant. *The Lover of No Fixed Abode*, first published in 1986, is the fourth of their novels.

THE LOVER OF NO FIXED ABODE

Carlo Fruttero
and
Franco Lucentini

Translated by
Gregory Dowling

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All the characters and events described in this novel are imaginary and
any similarity with real people or events is purely coincidental

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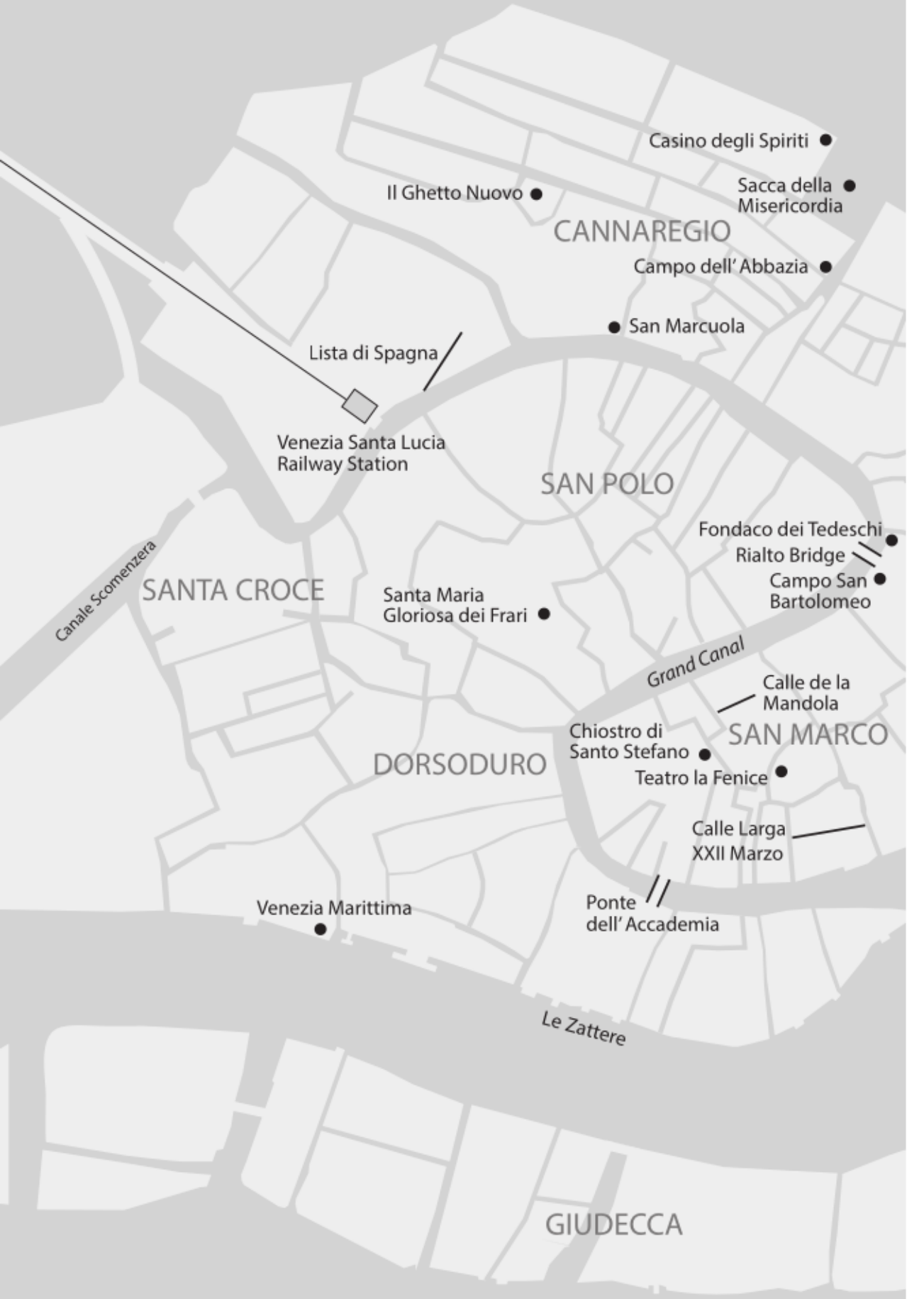
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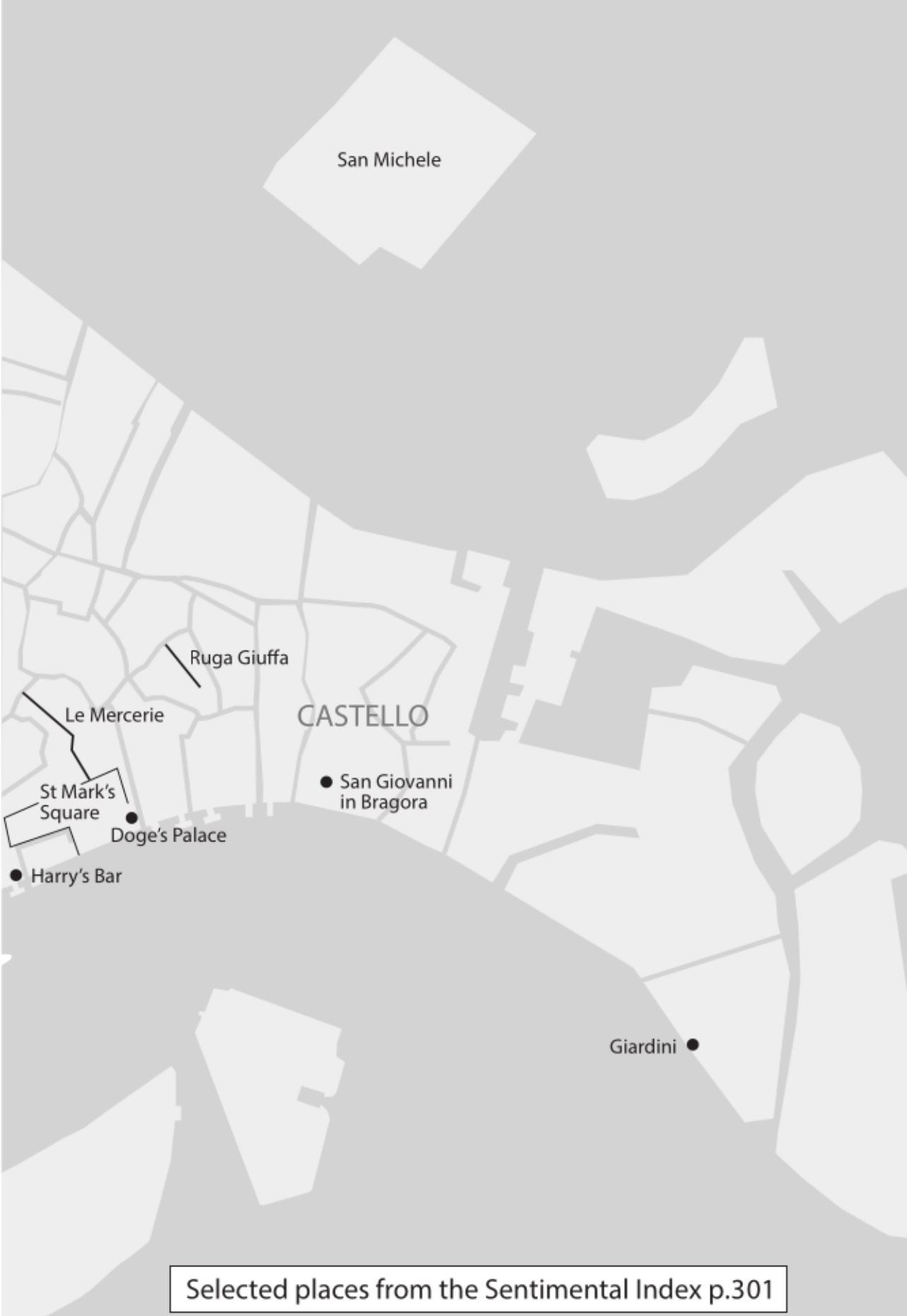

Selected places from the Sentimental Index p.301

I

WHEN MR SILVERA AT LAST DECIDES

1.

When Mr Silvera at last decides (look, look, Mr Silvera!) to loosen his seat belt and lean over his neighbours to get a view out of the window, Venice has already disappeared; all he sees is a distant fragment of aluminium-coloured sea and an immediate trapezoid of solid aluminium, the wing.

"The lagoon!" repeat the tourists in his and the other two parties that fill Flight Z114. "*La lagune! A laguna!*"

As ever, they find it indispensable to name rather than see the cities and temples and statues and frescoes and waterfalls and islands and all the lands and waters they are paying to visit. Look, look, the Colosseum, the Sistine Chapel, the Casbah, *les Pyramides*, *la tour de Pise*, the lagoooon… They sound like invocations intended to arouse imaginary entities, to make them exist for a few seconds before they slip out of the magic circle. Five or six of them naturally try to retain the lagoon for ever with their cine cameras and Instamatics.

Indifferent to these illusions, Mr Silvera settles back in his seat, his long legs stretched out obliquely in the aisle and a benevolently automatic smile ready to spring to his lips. When seen in profile, he is a man of about forty, tall and thin, with the sharp-cut features of a head on a medallion,

the slightly rounded shoulders of a sportsman – a keen tennis player, for example – who at some stage, for some reason, gave up the game completely; or perhaps those of a chess player, curved by long meditations over the bishop. His thin, delicate, nervous hands suggest poker or roulette, but also skilled contact with porcelain, parchments, musical instruments; and with female stockings, with silk and lace and tricky necklace clasps. An unusual man, who is blandly (stoically?) doing a job that seems a little incongruous for him, somewhat menial. A group leader. A tourist guide and escort. They usually choose younger people; the other two parties on Flight Z114 are led by a French girl who never stops laughing and a stocky peasant type with a blonde wisp of hair over his eyes.

Silvera took charge of his party this morning at 6.15, outside the headquarters of Imperial Tours, the London travel agency for which he has been working for some time now. The coach journey to Heathrow Airport was sufficient for him to become acquainted with these twenty-eight people, or at least to slot them into his memory, which is prodigious and accustomed to making instantaneous classifications. The usual types, the usual clientele of Imperial: pensioners, small-time shopkeepers, small-time office clerks and artisans, all of recurring nationalities; mostly English and French, but also South American and Canadian, a few Scandinavians, two Jamaicans, two Indians, one Portuguese with an adolescent daughter whose large nocturnal eyes never leave Mr Silvera. Even the names are always the same: Johnson, Torres, Pereira, Petersen, Singh, Durand…

Flight Z114 has stopped off twice, at Brussels and Geneva, and picked up the other parties. At Geneva it also took on board three passengers whose flight to Venice and Athens

had been cancelled: two Greek businessmen and an Italian woman who is now sitting across the central aisle from Mr Silvera.

A wide-hipped hostess bustles her way down this corridor, looking for any last paper cups to collect, and Mr Silvera instantly pulls in his long legs and smiles at her. But she remains peevishly sulky, absorbed in amorous fantasies or, more likely, thoughts of trade union squabbles.

Silvera makes the tiniest motion of a shrug, adjusts his smile by a thread, and the Italian woman, on the other side of the aisle, returns it. Passengers are no longer treated with respect reminiscent of grand hotels, with nursery-school solicitude, their mischievous, resigned eyes say to each other; but then what can one expect with this kind of tourist rabble? They should be thankful to be taken as far as Venice, considering the fares they have paid.

The machine touches down, brakes with a great angry blast and rolls to a halt along the edge of the lagoon.

"Well," murmurs Mr Silvera, getting to his feet, "well…" His height appears to give him a vague superiority, which is belied by his threadbare tweed jacket, by the little holes singed into the front of the raincoat he is now putting on. The girl who keeps laughing is already at work with her party; the blonde peasant is instructing his horde, the most numerous, to remain calm and disciplined. "Well," sighs Mr Silvera, pulling down his bag. He notices that his Italian neighbour is trying to reach her small case, pulls it down and hands it to her chivalrously.

"Thank you," says the woman.

"Ah," says Mr Silvera, his eyes far away.

Then he is swallowed up by his group, please, please, Mr Silvera, there are overcoats and scarves to be collected,

bags to be extracted from the overhead lockers, packages to be retrieved from under the seats, impatient passengers to be restrained, slow ones to be incited. The Portuguese girl follows him with her head bowed, her eyes gazing up at him from beneath beautiful black lashes, and she too is "counted" at the foot of the staircase, where Mr Silvera and the two other group leaders stand in the wind, dividing up their flocks. But it is not she who is offered Mr Silvera's hand when descending the final step. This act of homage (performed with melancholy detachment and an indefinable air of complicity) is for the Italian lady. "Thank you," she repeats, gravely.

"Ah," murmurs Mr Silvera, without looking at her. He moves off towards the airport buildings at the head of his flock, who all walk with their heads turned towards the aluminium expanse of the lagoon, since not a single cent of their cheap package fare is to be wasted. The French girl's party has beaten them to the passport checkout and customs, but from there everything proceeds smoothly, since nobody checks anything, and soon Mr Silvera is beyond the barriers, coagulating his twenty-eight, preventing them from dissolving amid the toilets and the bar. "No, no," he says indulgently, "no cappuccino, please, no vino."

They go out into the wind again, and a few coaches are waiting at the entrance. But they disband towards the lagoon, which begins a few yards to the left and fades into a fuzzy horizon. Five or six slim motorboats with little flags fluttering at the stern are bobbing up and down among the seagulls, by a jetty. "Taxi?" asks one of the sailors. "*Venedig, taxi? Taxi Venise?*" he repeats, indicating a distant point over the waters.

A few yards further on, the blonde peasant's party are dropping into a plump cabined boat, amid laughter and

screams. A protest ripples through the massed eyes of the twenty-eight: And what about us?

"No boat," says Mr Silvera firmly, "no boat, no *barco*, sorry." The prices charged by Imperial, he explains, do not permit the sea approach to Venice, across the grey lagoon. For Imperial there is instead a fine Italian coach, all in red, which will cross the famous bridge.

"A famous bridge?" the twenty-eight say, consoling themselves.

Yes, the longest in Europe, lies Mr Silvera, hustling them back to terra firma. He will stay here another moment or two to check that their luggage has been correctly stowed on the porters' boat and correctly dispatched to its destination.

Now he is left alone on the jetty and he gazes at the lagoon like a prince, a *condottiere* finally taking possession of it; or perhaps like one bidding farewell to it, who has lost it for ever?

One of the motorboats moves away from the bank, traces an elegant parabola in the water and heads swiftly towards Venice amid the shrieking seagulls. Next to the flag at the stern, for the last time, the Italian woman from Flight Z114 is standing: I am standing.

"Ah," murmurs Mr Silvera. And he does not respond to my wave, he does not raise his hand, while his raincoat flaps in the November wind like a frayed grey banner.

Thus did I meet him, thus did I see him for the first and (so I thought) last time.

2.

I had attached no importance to the fact that Mr Silvera was a group leader, a tourist guide, escort or whatever you

call it. He had naturally struck me at first glance amid that airborne rabble, and I had recorded him and his ancient medallion profile with an almost professional interest but without puzzling over him any further, without pausing to wonder how he had ended up among those clods who never once stopped calling out "Mr Silvera, Mr Silvera!" to him. I had filed him away in an imaginary auction catalogue under the heading *Traveller: unusual, even a little mysterious*, and had then gone straight back to my own business.

Now, I cannot say what impression he would have made on me if I had first conflated him with his profession (let's use this term). Which of course is a perfectly fine one – don't get me wrong – for penniless students who want to see the world in the summer (Rosy's son and a daughter of my cousins Macchi have done it for years), but which, in November, when practised by adults with parties of that kind, can only be defined as wretched. Signor Silvera would have probably lost all credit in my eyes. I would have written him off with some commiserative murmur along the lines of "Poor guy, what a thing to have to do at his age," or maybe, given his surname, "Just think, a poor Sephardi reduced to that level to scrape a living." A failure, a down-and-outer, a bum. No man ever manages to rise above first impressions of that kind. And so: *afterwards*, things would have gone differently; they would probably never have gone anywhere at all.

But instead, thanks to my fortuitous and rather sleepy inattention, here I am, reflecting on my *own* profession (let's use this term again) and finding significant points of similarity with his. It's no less vagabond a profession. A profession in which one must ingratiate oneself with one's clients in exactly the same way, swallow affronts and humiliations, be constantly ready with flattery, with placatory remarks

and soothing comments for perfectly horrible people. It's a profession which causes one to live and work alongside beauty, to seek it out, to evaluate it and to illustrate it with utter indifference – indeed, without even seeing it any longer. Maybe I exaggerate, but it strikes me now that the only difference between a tourist escort and myself is this: he gets remunerated with a laughable salary and an occasional petty tip, while they pay me with crackling cheques from prestigious banks.

Hence our separation: he off with his herd on the vaporetto, I in a motorboat to my hotel on the Grand Canal and the fiction of an olde worlde welcome: *how are you, back as a Venetian again, did the journey go well, what weather eh, there's some post for you, shall I prepare a Manhattan, a pot of Chinese tea?* That sort of thing, all trotted out with an air of professional familiarity designed to make me feel at home even after an interval of months. And the old valet Tommaso, who handles the elevator with the gravity and solemnity of a chamberlain assigned to Louis XVI's hot-air balloon, declaring as if to himself, "More beautiful than ever." He too is a professional; he comes out with a phrase like this but lets you know it's the grand-hotel translation of the vernacular "phwoar" or of some cruder expression that rises from his worn-out loins (but are they as worn-out as all that?).

I checked with a fleeting glance in the generous, omnipresent gilded mirrors, noting that they were equally professional. I saw (and immediately catalogued, without forgetting the "fine frame in contemporary style") a *Portrait of a Young Woman* attributable to "Tuscan or Umbrian master of the early sixteenth century", with the influence of Botticelli or Lippi on the one hand, Perugino on the other. Raffaellino del Garbo? Apart from the *ensemble de voyage* of Franco-Japanese

school (Issey Miyake), the subject presented definite affinities with various Madonnas by this artist, as it did with the blonde and fascinating *Lady in Profile* which Berenson (with the subsequent agreement of my friend Zeri) attributes to him in Baroness Rothschild's collection in Paris. The portrait was even more satisfying as Raffaellino, or someone on his behalf, courteously omitted the "AETATIS SUAE XXIV" and the age could reasonably be brought down to XXX or even less.

On the thick carpets we crossed paths with a party of Japanese visitors proceeding in silence and in double file, like schoolgirls. All men, all dressed in black. "At least they don't give any trouble," Tommaso remarked condescendingly.

"Do you get many out of season?"

"More and more of them, all year round. I don't know, they say they're tourists, but I reckon they come here to copy Venice. You'll see, one of these days they'll get round to making one of their own, a perfect imitation." But he at once repented of his joke, which he must have cracked successfully innumerable times. "Venice can't be imitated," he declared with pride.

And yet his is an impression I have sometimes had myself, in this over-scrutinized city: as if all those millions and millions of admiring eyeballs had the same imperceptible and perpetual power of erosion as the waves, each glance a tiny grain of Venice filched, sucked away…

Without even unpacking, I phoned Chiara to get confirmation of my afternoon's appointment. I was to visit a collection of pictures, which were old but of uncertain value, and if appropriate to try and ensure their sale to Fowke's, the auctioneering firm I work for. Chiara is our local correspondent

and I had already had the appointment confirmed two days earlier. But one never knows in Venice. In this city where haste is unknown, things can always get put off to the following Monday.

"Hello, Chiara? I nearly got stranded, but here I am. Are we still all right for three?"

With the anticipated disappointment (disappointment is the rule in this job) I listened to her saying that three was still all right but the pictures were anything but all right; various people had already seen this much-vaunted Collezione Zuanich and found it to be a mere collection of daubs.

"Authentically seventeenth- or eighteenth-century, I'm told, but daubs."

"Who's seen them?"

"More or less everybody by now. They've even sent someone from the Sovrintendenza, but it's clear they're not going to put any restrictions on them, it seems they're minor stuff, 'mere items of interior decoration', as they put it. The only one showing any interest at the moment is Palmarin."

"A wasted journey then."

"I tried to let you know in Paris, but you'd already left. Anyway, now you're here, don't you want to have a look for yourself?"

"A look's fine by me."

"And then there's something else, a tip-off about a villa in Padua, which comes from Palmarin himself. We've got an appointment with him for five o'clock, if that's all right."

"Fine by me too."

I unpacked, had a quick shower, then phoned to get myself invited round to Raimondo's, my greatest Venetian friend.

"Angel," he said, "a sole with me. At once."

"I can't, I've got an appointment right away."

"Dinner then."

"I was counting on it."

"What immense joy."

Pronounced in his husky voice with its carefully flat, distrait, offhand tone, the hyperboles he continually uses never fail to make me laugh. He is a malicious gossip, a fierce fault-finder; but never at my expense, because I know his secret and am in a position to blackmail him. It was that time I came upon him dragging a heavy suitcase over a bridge to help an old German woman, somewhere near the Frari. He tried to get out of it by sighing, "What can I say, years of association with Scoutmasters in my childhood."

"No, my dear, I own you," I said, smiling mercilessly, "now I know you have a heart."

His *palazzetto* in Ruga Giuffa, always full of multicoloured guests, is perhaps closest to the Venice of times past.

Down at the restaurant I ordered a sole out of sheer laziness and looked absently around, noting once again how impossible it is in Venice to see people who are individuals. All these people, knocking back Manhattans or Bellinis, including myself no doubt, looked as if they were there on behalf of some foundation, university, international association, great industry, great museum. I even expected the honeymoon couples to have identification tags on their lapels or expense-account receipts in their Gucci handbags.

And outside, the famous canal put on its usual parade of tourist figurines, all of them stuck inside the vaporetti as if in an album of elementary ethnology: a cargo of blonde Teutons and Scandinavians here, a clutch of Asian faces there, interspersed with dark bundles of Spaniards or Greeks, each party clustered tight around its Mr Silvera. Although

I must in all honesty point out that I didn't give a passing thought to Mr Silvera – and this strikes me as incredible, unforgivable – now I would like to know every detail, every fragment, every instant of those unrecorded hours (without me!).

But they can be imagined. They can mostly be reconstructed.

3.

When he has checked that the last of his charges has boarded the vaporetto ("*Vite, vite, Madame Dupont!*"), Mr Silvera pushes his way through the crowd and finds himself standing behind a group of Russians with shaven necks. The Portuguese girl sticks close to him, lowering her eyes and blushing when he turns to ask if everything is all right, *tudo* OK?

In every group there is always an adolescent who falls in love with Mr Silvera, always a pair of aged spinsters with inexhaustible energy, always a couple of quarrelsome spouses, always a hypochondriac, always a pedantic and grumbling know-it-all, always a nosey gossip. It is like travelling with a set of samples, thinks Mr Silvera, whose varied career has included experience as a costume jewellery salesman. The stones, models and metals change each time, but the necklaces remain necklaces, the brooches, brooches.

He has passed through Venice several times in his role as a group leader, but he knows the city well, having been there on previous occasions and in less superficial circumstances. However, Mr Silvera never talks about these other Venices of his, he keeps them strictly separate and makes no use of them in his present job. He could show the twenty-eight a less obvious palazzo, enliven a campanile with an anecdote,

highlight a certain garden, illuminate a certain dome, but he restricts himself to the indispensable minimum: the Ponte degli Scalzi, Canale di Cannaregio, Fondaco dei Turchi, Ca' d'Oro, Ponte di Rialto… He omits the Riva del Vin and, after a brief hesitation, also Palazzo Bernardo.

"Look, look, Mr Silvera, a real gondola!"

"Ah," says Mr Silvera, "yes, indeed." He knows the names of other local boats (*gondolino, caorlina, mascareta…*) but does not reveal them. Because it would be a waste of breath, he tells himself, because certain things are of no interest to anyone nowadays, least of all to his twenty-eight. But the truth is that this latent Venice of brocades, golds, purples and crystals cannot even be touched upon without a pang, and, more importantly, this has nothing to do with the schematic, impersonal Venice of Imperial.

Sant'Angelo, San Tomà, Ca' Rezzonico, Accademia. The vaporetto passes from one side to the other of the Grand Canal, draws up, unloads thirty Danes, takes on thirty children on their way back from school, sets off again to the next landing stage with a prosaic, laborious jerk, like a water mule.

The party has to get off at San Marco in order to visit the homonymous piazza, the homonymous basilica and the Palazzo Ducale. But before they go to the Doge's Palace, they must eat. Mr Silvera knows that if they do not eat at the established hour, they become irritable; if led back through the centuries to witness the fall of the Bastille, the sack of Rome, the battle of Thermopylae, at around one o'clock they would nonetheless begin to show signs of disquiet, to exchange meaningful glances. *When are we going to eat? Surely it's time to eat?* And there would be at least one woman who would feel dangerously "empty", and another more

far-sighted woman who would open her bag and offer *a biscuit, Mrs Gomez? Agradece un bombón, señora Wilkins?*

And both of them would turn reproving eyes on Mr Silvera, who would gain another minute with the Bridge of Sighs and Giacomo Casanova.

Since the twenty-eight confusedly believe Casanova ended up in this jail due to trouble with women and escaped for love of a woman, Mr Silvera leaves them in this belief, triggering a game that never fails in its effect: choosing the group's Casanova, here, at once, right now, on the Riva degli Schiavoni. Amid peals of laughter that alarm the seagulls, the title is finally bestowed on Señor Bustos, a vivacious little man of about fifty, whose wife is inevitably more flattered than he is. The game will keep them happy till this evening, it will be resumed at irregular intervals over the next few days, it will enjoy a brief return of favour right at the end of the trip, and will then be recalled with pleasure by the party concerned. In a thousand years, perhaps the only thing Señor Bustos will remember of Venice is that fleeting companions dubbed him Casanova.

Mr Silvera gazes at the outline of the near and distant islands, the stretches of water which, like miniaturized oceans, are furrowed by minuscule prows in every direction, and he thinks aloud in Spanish: "A thousand years, this city is a thousand years old."

Those close to him take this for a memorable item of tourist information and repeat it, deeply impressed: "*Mil años!* A thousand years!"

"Look, look, Mr Silvera! The pigeons!"

"Follow them!" orders Mr Silvera, who knows how to treat his groups. And so, following the flight of the thousand flapping pigeons, they reach St Mark's Square ("Ooooh!

Piazza San Marco!"), where Mr Silvera leaves them all to their reciprocal photographic rites to go and see to the only Venetian meal included in Imperial's "package".

He slips into an obscure *sottoportico*, automatically bending his head, takes two or three narrow alleys, going wrong only once, and in the distance finally espies the sign of the Triglia d'Oro, the trattoria-pizzeria in which two long tables should already be laid and waiting to receive twenty-eight customers. But one sniff is enough to tell him something is wrong: the alley is musty with thousand-year-old cooking smells, with a millennium of tourist menus, but it lacks the pungent, steaming, heavy tang of the immediate future. The Triglia d'Oro has changed its closing day, which has always been Monday. A notice hanging askew on the bolted door reads WEEKLY CLOSURE: TUESDAY.

They have given no notification of this, they have sent no telex to London; a restaurant like the Triglia d'Oro does not send telexes to London or indeed anywhere else.

Mr Silvera stands there thinking, raises his eyes to the hanging signboard above which a seagull flutters, perhaps in search of edible refuse.

Agitated footsteps echo somewhere nearby, then come to a sudden halt. At an entrance into the alleyway stands the Portuguese girl, immobile and scarlet, her hands clasped tight but her head held high.

"Ah," murmurs Mr Silvera.

Bronze and immobile with their long hammers, the two Moors on the clock tower are poised between one and two o'clock. Tourist parties on their way back from places of refreshment are beginning to flow towards the Campanile, the Palazzo Ducale, the Basilica. But as he emerges from the

sottoportico into the brilliant windy shock of the piazza, Mr Silvera at once spots his own group, on the opposite side of the colonnade. It is seldom they venture forth and disperse. They are held together by lack of curiosity, timidity, ignorance of the language (Mr Silvera speaks an undetermined number perfectly, others he has learned and forgotten) and in this case by what they call "hunger".

A kind of delegation advances towards him with a grim air of mutiny, but Mr Silvera is quick to raise his arms and show them the two clusters of swollen blue plastic bags dangling from his hands. "Food!" he shouts. "Drinks! Vino!"

Behind him, flushed and radiant, the Portuguese adolescent marches forward, carrying bottles of wine and two more bags stuffed full of sandwiches, pizzette and cans. Mr Silvera has taken advantage of her in just the way she, without knowing it, most desired: he disclosed to her the unforeseen organizational hitch, sought her help and advice, and together they entered a bar-rosticceria where, with Imperial Tours' emergency funds, they bought sufficient refreshment for the travellers.

"Picnic!" shouts Mr Silvera. "Picnic!" Without saying so, he manages to give the impression that the picnic in Piazza San Marco is a wonderful surprise, a novelty specifically arranged by the agency. One or two people grumble, but without conviction. The idea on the whole attracts them; it is something they will be able to recount later.

Mr Silvera selects two women and a man as if at random (but he has already infallibly assessed them) and entrusts them with the complicated distribution of the victuals. Exactly like the pigeons, almost all the twenty-eight squat on the steps along the colonnade and start to peck at the improvised meal. Some seek paper napkins, some spill their

wine or orange juice on their trousers, some take low-angle pictures of the memorable scene.

Mr Silvera leans against a column a few yards away. The Portuguese girl approaches him with a sandwich and a beer, but he counters her with a courteous refusal, no, thank you, I'm not hungry, I'll have something later… He does not tell her that at that moment eating strikes him as a disgusting, desperate procedure; and yet when the girl returns to her father she bites into her sandwich with some reluctance, almost as if she were committing an act of treason.