

Paola Macchiarulo

VENICE

Their walks were always the same: Fiesole and the surrounding hills. They knew the roads that lead into the woods and seem never-ending, only to suddenly come out into a different valley before other far-off hills. They went there nearly every day as soon as the sun had brightened and warmed. They walked slowly, often holding hands, small and a little bent, with identical wrinkles, like a secret desire to look like each other. He carried a long stick in his hand, a companion more than a support; she was almost always in pants that had once been long and red and were now almost pink, tight and short, showing her thin ankles. And always, summer and winter, a straw hat with a red ribbon: "Venezia".

She had been a beautiful girl with deep, black eyes and small, cheerful hands that were slim and gentle. When he (another) began to court her and invite her out, she placed her trust in him and fell in love. He never spoke of love; he intimated it with his care for her, with affectionate gestures. But love is not an intimation, it can be read in the eyes, it warms the lips and animates the fingers. And his eyes, his lips and his fingers were silent, lukewarm.

He let her want for nothing. Almost nothing. The truth

was she wanted for many things – cheerfulness, surprises, warmth – but how to tell him, what to say to him? He gave her much more than she had ever hoped for, a peaceful home, his presence, no worries. There was a gift for every occasion, the sweets she liked, the occasional dinner with friends, a normal life. She was a curious little woman, full of enthusiasm and flights of fantasy. He tried to keep up with her without understanding her. Every year he asked her “What do you want for our anniversary?” “Will you take me to Venice?” “Of course, just that?” She had never seen Venice; she’d read about it in books, seen it in films and imagined it, dreamed it. It seemed to her a magical place, one where she might find a trail that led her to where there was another woman, the one she had been afraid to look at or analyze, the one who hid in the shade like a deer until it was safe to come out and look for water and leaves. They had traveled together many times and visited different far-off places, but Venice, a three hour car journey away, never. And each time there was a different reason for not going; each time the parcel with the bow, a bunch of flowers and the sweets would arrive, but never a reservation at a hotel on the lagoon, for a room overlooking the sea and Torcello, one with reflections of the water on the ceiling. She stopped asking him. But he knew that she was asking him every time he gave her a parcel with a bow, a bunch of flowers and the sweets she liked. He knew that the kiss he received was half of what the man who took her to Venice would get. The years didn’t change her: she stayed a small, curious, lighthearted woman full of smiles and playfulness. She told herself that everything was as she wanted it, that she wanted nothing better. He told himself that he was making her happy, but he never stopped to read her eyes, he preferred offering her a parcel with a bow, a bunch of flowers and her favourite sweets. They got on, by tacit agreement. They would decide on a trip together, on seats at the theatre, a film or

new curtains. They asked for nothing more of life.

He became ill almost without realizing it, fading away gradually. She was always by his side, loving him, bewildered before something greater than her, than them. She didn't have the courage to think about what she would do, she had never stopped to imagine the future: the days all the same, the years without surprises had robbed her of her sense of time. When she was left alone, when the pain had become an intimate part of herself, she started to look around again, but with different eyes. She rediscovered habits that she had discarded many years ago when she got married – silent evenings with books she had never re-read or not yet read, music, long walks by herself – she slowly began to find something that she had lost, she couldn't have said how or where. She thought again of the years with her husband, and looked at the photographs, the presents, the things they had chosen together, the house where they had lived. She searched her mind for that indefinable lack that had once made her unhappy. Her friends gradually helped rekindle the desire for company, the odd dinner all together, little trips, evenings spent chatting. When it came down to it she was no longer young, but not that old either. She was still a curious little woman, secretly full of flights of fancy. Every so often someone a little more significant would appear among her new acquaintances, some man who seemed more interesting or interested. She was quite pleased – it would begin with a film together, sometimes the theatre, a dinner, a day out. Each time she hoped to find whatever it was that would fill the indefinable lack, the indistinct desire, but every time, after a short while, there was nothing left to say, nothing new. Each time she had the same impression of emptiness; she was afraid to tell herself that she was bored. She was always being offered the same words, the same places, usually those the other liked, and she wondered why they weren't enough for her, why they didn't attract her. Her friends silently dis-

approved of her, asking themselves what she was looking for. She knew that she was just looking for something different, not exceptional, something that made her want to make plans, made her enthusiastic, curious.

The years went by; she had her habits and her life, and she became increasingly less willing to accept invitations where she could glimpse the banality, the epilogue she already knew well.

Every now and then a man appeared among her group of friends, maybe a distant relative or someone's acquaintance. He would show up for a while at intervals, a pleasant, quiet man. They said he was always travelling for work, but they weren't sure what work it was. One afternoon, after a lunch in the country to celebrate a birth, he asked her to have dinner with him. She didn't speak much; he, on the other hand, told stories and described distant places. He went around the world wherever there was water to find or channel or stop, in other words, everywhere. They saw each other often when he was not away; he liked the way she listened to him in silence; he took her to the most diverse places, amusing her with his comments, the strange things that had caught his attention, and bringing her strange, unthinkable objects about which he told extraordinary stories. She often wondered when the stories would end, when she would begin to get bored. But she didn't get bored, she loved listening to him and dreaming about the far off places he went to. They got married as if it was the most natural thing to do. They loved each other without shadows, a quiet, cheerful love. He gave up travelling to be with her; the journeys became long walks with bunches of wild flowers, the gift of a new book, the smell of a cake in the oven. For their first anniversary he asked her what she wanted. "Will you take me to Venice?" And there was a room overlooking the sea and Torcello, with the reflection of water on the ceiling, and a straw hat with a red ribbon: "Venezia".