

VENICE IS GONE

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To the two cities I love most:

to Berlin, to Venice.

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Self Publishing - Berlin 2019
Multilingual Version available:
ENG – GER – ESP – ITA

Abstract

In September 2013, the International Journal ***National Geographic*** published a physical map of what the Earth could look like in the not too distant future. A planet completely different from what we know today.

What are we really doing to contain the effects of global warming? And what if the melting process of the Arctic suddenly sped up?

We will no longer talk about a time in the "*future*" and all be faced to a "*now*": we would be forced to act here, together, right now.



Photo Credit:
National Geographic

The Journey

Not much was known to us yet.

The only thing we were certain of, was that, after all those years of studies, predictions and warnings, it has finally happened.

Marco and Juna were on their way to Italy. There were no videos on the social media about it yet and fragmented news were broadcasted on the German radio: “The earthquakes continue to make Europe tremble and make us fear the worst for Italy. We are waiting for further details from our team on the ground, but it seems like immeasurable damage has been done...”

Marco left Venice years ago and Juna never dared to ask much about it. She knew that it was not a simple matter of economic crisis; there was more to it, something she sensed had to do with his father. Because of his dad’s incurable drinking habits, things have never been well between them. The booze, the fights, the gambling; money won and immediately gone. It was the norm back then.

When Marco moved to Berlin, he felt like he was born anew.

His new position at the Ministry of Cultural Heritage was all he ever dreamed of and he quickly fell in love with the German capital.

“The past is over” - was his new motto and so, he never missed the chance to savor his new life filled with outing to all kinds of concerts, events and eccentric art exhibitions. Berlin was something else, something he’s never experienced before. Completely free and careless, filled millions of individuals who looked forward to the future, without forgetting to enjoy the most of their lives. Nevertheless, the past for Marco has yet to be laid to rest, at least, some of it.

“Marco, we’re almost at the border, what are we gonna do once we get there? It looks like the Austrians have blocked all the roads. I think they might be giving priority to international rescue. Whatever happened, it must be pretty bad” she said.

“Yeah, I see that too Juna. I’m trying to think of what we could do but nothing comes to mind. I only know that we absolutely must cross this frontier!” he replied with conviction.

“I have an idea. What about we show them our badges from the ministry and pretend we were sent to oversee the recovery of patrimonial heritage?” Juna suggested.

“Yeah that’s a great idea! I only hope they won’t make a fuss and ask for more papers... Hey, we’re finally at the border! Let me go have a look and try to...”

“Nein!!!” she answered dryly. “You wait here. Trust me”.

At the frontier of Austrian and Italian territories, the line-up was endless. Hundreds of cars stood still with their engines turned off. Some people were getting out of their cars seeking explanations; others had totally given up.

It was the month of July and so it was the summer holidays, half of Europe was on vacation, and what other holiday destination than Italy? The sea, the lakes, the impressive Dolomites but also delicious food, the high-fashion culture and incomparable history and art.

As Marco was thinking about this all, Juna made it to the custom agents with the documents in hand. She wasn't actually sure her plan would work, but she had to try.

Out of the blue, an agent at the checkpoint addressed her: “Miss, I can see your badge. It is from the German Federal Government, right? I imagine you're here for the same reasons as your colleagues from Vienna eh? They are in our office at the moment and should be leaving shortly. If you join them now, you'll be in Italy shortly. I must warn you, however, that near Verona you'll have to ask the Italian authorities for more information”.

It was too good to be true, Juna couldn't believe it! "Mission accomplished!" she thought. She quickly thanked the agent without asking too much and immediately rushed away.

"Quick, Marco!!! Take everything you need, we will pass with a team of ministry agents from Vienna" she exclaimed full of pride and satisfaction.

"Really? Oh Juna, *du bist Fantastisch! Fantastica!*" he shouted euphoric mixing up German and Italian. But they had to hurry, the others were now waiting for them.

Within minutes, the group boarded one of the Forest Guard Jeeps. Crossing the small mountain villages, they noticed that there seemed to be an agitation amongst the inhabitants. They kept trying to stop the Jeep, which they knew would transport diplomats. They wanted to know more about what happened and, often, for water.

"But I don't understand, why they keep asking us for water?" Marco reflected aloud.

Thomas, the Austrian guide who was the head of the little expedition group, answered: "Oh it's not that they're thirsty, they're just terrified of what's happening. Have you not heard!? Three massive earthquakes of magnitude seven hit the peninsula. Florence and Rome have suffered various damages but the worst hit was Venice..."

“...the water levels have risen enormously and the lagoon is now completely indistinguishable with the open sea. Everything has been submerged. That's why they're asking about the water”.

Juna and Marco were astonished. They could not yet understand or even imagine a catastrophe of such magnitude. The cities destroyed were some of the most beautiful and historically important in the world, rich in art, but above all densely populated. It was a real geographic upheaval and one of the most serious humanitarian emergencies that Europe had ever seen.

“The scientists had foreseen everything, but the Italian government did nothing for years” added Martha, a South Tyrolean colleague of Thomas. “They did not listen to us when we explained the risks and consequences of global warming.

All that major artistic heritage acquired over the centuries and never a plan to safeguard it, can you believe it? It was convenient for tourism, right?

It brought most of the country's income and now Venice is gone”.

For Marco and Juna, that situation seemed absolutely strange and uncanny, almost unreal.

From that moment onwards there was only silence on board.

The Revelation

The emergency camp was near Verona, just outside the city. Ambulances and helicopters of the Civil Protection were returning full of visibly shocked people. It all looked like a scene from a war movie. What was immediately obvious was the lack of organization. Everyone seemed to be running around and nothing was getting done. There were no precise orders yet, no action plan, nothing.

Rescuers did their best to find more lives to save. It was the Italian attitude: lack of coordination and means, but fortitude and sense of duty never failed.

Marco remembered that he kept a photo in his wallet. It was a picture of his father, with his name and date of birth written on it.

He wanted to ask the rescuers workers if they have seen him, but Juna had another plan: “Listen, let's split up and try to figure out where they are bringing the injured. It is useless to stay amid this chaos. We have to go directly to the hospitals or the facilities where they're taking the survivors”.

Marco began the search but the thought remained in his mind, repeating itself over and over: “He can't be dead, not yet. They surely must have saved him and brought him elsewhere, like Juna says”.

At that moment from a Firefighter's helicopter shouts were heard: "Venice area! Ready for takeoff!". Instinctively and thoughtlessly, Marco jumped up aboard. He had an urge to see with his own eyes. He had to look for home, his home. He was incredulous of what Martha and Thomas said of the situation; it could not be true.

The helicopter took off and within seconds, everything became dramatically obvious: a huge expanse of water where there used to be roads, houses, fields and factories. Hundreds of cars were dragged by the current and dark spots of petrol made the situation even more dangerous.

Several people tried escaping the flood by clinging to light poles and trees; many more had climbed on the roofs of the higher buildings and remained there helpless, completely impotent in the face of the immense force of nature that had swept everything away.

And what was left of Venice? Nothing, a city under water. All but the tallest bell towers. Marco immediately recognized the bell of San Marco and he was taken by an unstoppable, hysterical and desperate laughter. He was at once rejoiced to see that symbol that used to make him so proud; "*The landlord*" as he had always called him affectionately.

He also noticed the area of *Santa Croce*, where on Sunday afternoons he used to play football with all the other kids. The *Punta Della Dogana* was gone. It was one of his favorite places, the ridge between the *Canal Grande* and the Island of *Giudecca*.

The famous *Fenice* theatre, all the museums, the old churches, the narrow and long canals of that surreal yet very real labyrinth: the Adriatic Sea had come and taken it all away.

Marco used to collect quotes of important artists and at that moment, that of the great Truman Capote came to mind: "***Venice is like eating an entire box of chocolate liqueurs in one go***".

It was just so: an explosion of works of art, colors and never-ending charm. Something unique and inimitable, something to be forever proud of.

Nevertheless, within few hours that concentrate of history, art and beauty had disappeared. No more laps. No more *gondola* rides for tourists, no more exciting waiting for the next *Biennale*.

The traditional Feast of the Redeemer? Historical Regattas and the Carnival? It was already part of the past, because it was true, damn true, Venice was gone.

The flight took just over half an hour and upon his return to the base, Juna was there, waiting for him.

“I’ve learned that most of the victims were taken to the cities of Milan and Brescia but it’s still difficult to understand...”

Juna’s sentence was interrupted by a heavy military helicopter that was landing just a few meters away from them. There must be some *big shots* on board, the two thought.

An army general was followed by several infantry soldiers out of the helicopter. It seemed they were carrying something, or rather, someone very important. Indeed, shortly thereafter, the Prime Minister appeared in person.

The few journalists scattered on the field gathered around the new arrival in a matter of seconds. “Prime Minister, what can you tell us? How many victims are there? Couldn’t anything have been done to avoid the catastrophe?”

With a gesture of the hand, just like an old dictator, the official man silenced the crowd. Then responded with the useless and pathetic refrain, seen and heard over and over again: “As you can see, I’m here on the field with General Rossi and our crew of specialists and we’ll do everything we can to...” the politician began.

“Shut up, you hypocrite!!! The responsibility lies with you politicians, it’s yours alone!” Marco thundered in anger, among the group of journalists.

“You left us alone for years. You should be ashamed. You like money, huh? Where are the resources for the territory? Give us back our towns, our houses and give me back my father, now!” Marco raged, in a single breath.

He couldn’t take it anymore. Everyone knew. Everyone in Italy had always known that the politicians were the real problem. The same shady individuals in power and the same promises never kept.

The televisions and newspapers always in defense of the masters on duty while everything slowly collapsed. Corruption, degradation and the decline of what had once been a great country.

In the seconds following Marco’s explosion, the crowd remained silent, no one even dared to breathe.

The journalists recorded and got everything on camera. General Rossi approached the Premier and whispered: “Mr. Prime Minister, remember that we are broadcasted live on the national channel and in the middle of a nation-wide catastrophe”.

The powerful old man had to get out of that embarrassing situation, as soon as possible.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Who am I? Why does it matter!?” answered Marco. “I am an Italian citizen and I expect you to get to fulfill your duty immediately!”

Juna stepped forward. Emotionality did not lead anywhere and she felt she had to intervene quickly.

“Um... Excuse him Mr. Prime Minister, his father is amongst the missing and we are unable to trace him. You have to understand the tragic moment...” she said, making Marco retreat.

“I understand, miss, do not worry. We are here for this reason and we hope to rescue those still alive in the ruins. Please, speak with General Rossi and maybe you can get up-to-date news about search” the Premier said in turn.

General Rossi walked forward and invited them to follow. Marco wanted to keep on ridiculing that old fool in front of the whole nation, but Juna took him by the hand and walked him away. They had more important things to do.

In the small tent set up by the Italian Army, there were several technological devices. Images broadcasted through drones allowed the military to manage and coordinate aid. The maps had now to be redone. The geography of the whole area had totally changed.

“We know that you're looking for someone. It's not easy, but with the help of local authorities, we're keeping track of the people rescued. Here, you can have a look at our database. It's updated every minute” said aviation computer technician, Sergeant Felli.

He received specific orders to help Marco in his search for his father. Juna acted cleverly, once again, but somehow she now seemed troubled.

She had never seen Marco so beside himself, with eyes red of hatred and that face fueled with anger. His voice also seemed unrecognizable. It was as if he was battling some old enemy within himself.

Except Marco has not changed. He was only experiencing strange feelings; he knew very well that it was better not to visit Italy too often for him. He wanted to avoid being constantly overwhelmed by memories of hope, anger, pride, and disappointment... It was all too difficult, if not impossible, to manage.

“There! Look! The photo of your father, I think it’s the same than the one here in our list of rescues” exclaimed Sergeant Felli, while looking at one of the screens.

“Really? Does that mean he’s alive? Let me see the file. Are you sure it’s him? Where did they bring him?” asked Marco in one breath.

“Yes, he’s Paolo Venier, born in Lido in 1951. He was taken to the Milan hospital in emergency a couple of hours ago. Actually, hold on...

...it seems Mr. Venier was transferred from another hospital” answered Felli.

“What do you mean? Was he already in another hospital then?” asked Marco worried.

“Yes, it looks like it. He was in a hospital in Venice for a few days but it doesn’t say why, there’s not much information about it. I’d advise you to board on the next helicopter and go to the Niguarda Hospital in Milan. Best of luck!”.

“Thank you very very much Sergeant!” exclaimed Marco. They had to hurry, the helicopter was about to leave.

Freedom

On the opposite side of Lake Garda, everything had remained intact. Flying over those areas Juna remembered the happy moments with family, camping, by the lake. Every summer they chose a different destination, usually some place in Italy. Even if all these shocking events involved her directly as well, she stayed composed. All this could be fixed and she would help to do so.

Aboard the helicopter, the two found themselves in the midst of many rescued elders and children. They were soaked and all needed medical attention, but most importantly, they needed comfort and courage. Some of them cried incessantly with tears running down their cheeks, others remained silent, completely under shock.

Many of the youngest asked for their pets and some, less fortunate, for their siblings or parents. They had left everything behind and the chances of seeing them again were slight.

The helicopter landed in Milan and Marco helped the staff to move the patients whose conditions were precarious.

Juna held two little girls in her arms and stepped down the vehicle before giving them to the care of the first available nurse.

“Are you ok? Where did they find you? Are you injured?” asked the same nurse.

Marco took out the photo of his father and held it up so she could see it: “We are fine, thank you. We are looking for this man, my father. We’ve been told that he has been transferred to your hospital”

The nurse nodded and pointed to the entrance: “Go to the third floor. There, you will find an information center where they can help you. Remember to be patient as there are many people like you looking for their family members. Good luck!”

Marco took Juna by the hand and ran down the stairs. He felt so close to the goal, he was almost there. He no longer held thoughts of the past, he just wanted to see him and hold him in his arms. He was there and he was his father.

On the third floor a huge crowd waited for any updates about their relatives. The televisions had been turned off, in an attempt to quiet down the panic state of most people present.

Marco managed to make his way to the tiny reception at the far end of the room and addressing the nurse across the counter: “Paolo Venier, 1951. Brought here a few hours ago from Venice! I am his son”

The nervousness was palpable and the situation was unprecedented. The nurse immediately looked at the updated patient list and replied: “Mr. Venier, your father is in intensive care. They are trying to...”

“Tell me which floor and room please!” Marco cut her short.

“Room number 432 on this floor but you must know that...” she tried to continue.

Juna had already found the room just outside in the hallway and Marco did not hesitate to follow her. They had finally made it and could only think of seeing Paolo, alive and out of danger.

They stopped in front of the half-open door of the room and Marco took a deep breath. Juna put a hand on his shoulder and whispered: “Quiet. We’re here now. You go in first.”

The door opened almost by itself.

Marco took two big steps forward and his father was there. Yes, it was Paolo.

The old man teared from emotion, he did not expect this visit. He has not seen his son in so long and he was not ready for it, not yet.

Juna came forward and Marco introduced her as if they were a family dinner, in a normal life situation: “Dad, this is Juna, my girlfriend...”

“...I wanted you to meet her. I made it all the way here in great part thanks to her”

Paolo’s crying slowly stopped. He did not say a word but the expression in his eyes said it all. The happiness to finally see his son again, after such a long time. Marco was safe, and this was what mattered most for him. He was speechless, but that moment of family communion was enough. Being together once again after all those years and in this extreme situation was unbelievable.

They noticed that Paolo was alone in the small room. He was connected to all kind of medical machinery and had difficulty breathing.

The old man made a gesture to beckon Marco over to sit next to him. Then, in a whisper, he said: “I'm sorry for how things went, back then. I was a fool and I lost my son. If only I could go back in time, it would be different...”

Marco barely managed to hold back his emotions. He did not know what to reply, anyways, it was not necessary. Everything was different now, they all knew it. He wanted to take his old man back to Berlin, his new home, and show him what a beautiful city it was. Surely, he would love to see all those parks and art galleries and...

A loud and sharp repetitive sound gave the alarm; Paolo's heartbeat was slowing down all of a sudden. Within seconds, without being able to say much more, Paolo lost consciousness.

Juna ran out to look for help. Two nurses arrived immediately and told Marco to leave the room. One of them followed him. She has been trying to tell him all along...

“Mr. Venier, I suppose you know that your father at the time of the tragedy was already in the hospital in Venice” she began.

“Yes, I’ve been told about it but I still do not know why. I live abroad, you see, and our relationship has always been a bit difficult...” he explained briefly.

“I see. Well, there are no easy ways to say it: your father has cancer and from his medical records, we see that he had almost a year of heavy treatment, there is nothing left for us to do.

The tumor reached the stomach and is spreading fast. By then, the medical team in Venice already had ceased the chemotherapy” the nurse explained.

Juna returned just at that moment, in time to hear those last words. She was shocked. She stared into Marco’s eyes, and embraced him in her arms, tightly, as if the stronger she held him, the more of his pain she could take on her.

Marco somehow seemed not have been shocked by this news. Illness and alcoholism went hand in hand and in that unruly life, Paolo had never wanted anything to do with doctors and medical examinations. Eventually something was bound to happen...

Paolo's eyes were half closed and his mouth remained open. He did not respond to his presence. The irregular breathing was that of one's last moments: he was dying.

It was all clear now. Marco was there for a reason. Something of extreme importance.

"He can still hear me" he thought.

In those final minutes, Paolo was there and he had to listen, he had to be able to leave in peace, without remorse.

Marco approached the bed and touched his father's hand. A flash of emotions pervaded him once again. In his mind, he went back to when as a child he loved his father in that innocent way kids love their parents. Memories of when they looked at the moon together on nights when the tide was high; or when Paolo talked to him openly about sex and love, as if they were two old friends at the caffè... and all the days spent on the boat fishing, free, under the sun...

Paolo had made him feel different from other kids. Others slept at night and went to church on Sundays. But not Marco... He was the son of Paolo Venier, the artist of yesteryear who everyone somewhat loved and feared. Who, however, cared about others. All what really mattered was freedom... to be really free.

“Dad, all is well... I love you...”

“Dad, I forgive you”.

Thanks

To Veronika, for having supported, suggested and sustained me during the creation of this short-story book.

To all the extravagant, free-willed and remarkable individuals who make up the soul of the unique city where I live: thank you Berlin.



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Make Think



**The future is now.
An extremely powerful short-story about
human emotions and awareness of the
climate change. A fragile and unique city.
A journey through a country in ruin.**



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