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A BRIEF EXPLANATION OF TIME

ALLA VENEZIANA

The City of Water runs by its own clock. Venice and its neighbouring islands have always felt frozen in time – and perhaps they are. It is a city built on wooden piles over a lagoon, veined with canals, and its aesthetic and much of its exquisite architecture have remained unchanged for hundreds of years. The boats may have engines now, but time still seems to run at a different speed from the outside world.

One of Venice's glittering treasures has for centuries been the glass on its attendant island, Murano. Glass is a peculiar substance, the sand it's manufactured from magically turning translucent or even transparent when melted. There is some debate about whether glass is a solid or a liquid. Science teachers have mistakenly taught that, long after it cools, glass continues to flow – albeit at its own glacial pace – citing the example that very old window panes are sometimes thicker at the bottom than at the top. The truth is that the glass is not flowing down, imperceptibly slowly, to pool at the bottom of the pane; the thickness is a result of the way glass panes were once made. But perhaps the myth is perpetuated because we want to believe that glass, like the island where it is produced, abides by its own natural laws. Like Venice and Murano, it has its own pace.

People who make things also have an ambiguous relationship with time. Painters, writers, woodcarvers, knitters,

weavers and, yes, glassmakers: creators often enter an absorbed state that psychologists call flow, in which hours pass without their noticing.

Readers, too.

It's surprisingly hard to gauge the rate at which time passes – whether it moves faster for others than it does for you. How would you know if all the clocks in one place moved at a different speed from elsewhere? Or if the artisans of the City of Water and the Island of Glass seem to be ageing more slowly than the world beyond?

PART I

GOBLET, BEADS AND DOLPHINS

If you skim a flat stone skilfully across water, it will touch down many times, in long or short intervals as it lands.

With that image in mind, now replace *water* with *time*.

Start at the northern edge of Venice, stone in hand, facing the glass island of Murano, half an hour by gondola across the lagoon. Don't throw the stone yet. It is 1486, the height of the Renaissance, and Venice is revelling in its position as the trade centre of Europe and much of the rest of the world. It seems the City of Water will always be rich and powerful.

Orsola Rosso is nine years old. She lives on Murano, but has not yet worked with glass . . .

The canal wasn't as deep as Orsola thought. When she fell in, the water's coldness jolted her and she flailed about, sinking until her foot touched the muddy bottom. At that moment what had seemed so deep and powerful suddenly lost its mystery. She heard her mother cry out, but her brother Marco was laughing as Orsola came up spluttering, the water only to her shoulders.

'You pushed me!' she cried. '*Cretino!*'

'Orsola, *basta!*' Laura Rosso scolded. 'People are listening.'

They were. Muranese residents were standing in the doorways of the glass workshops that lined the fondamenta, laughing at the Rosso girl in the canal.

'I didn't push you,' Marco retorted. 'You're so clumsy, you went and fell in, *bauca!* What a stupid sister I have!'

Orsola and her mother and brothers had been returning from a visit to her aunt and grandmother on the other side of the island. Her nonna was poorly and insisted on seeing them, convinced she was dying, though she was well enough to get up and hand Orsola a little sack of pine nuts she had recently bought at the market, because she didn't want them to go to waste if she did die. Zia Giovanna rolled her eyes at the thought, but Orsola carefully took the sack from her grandmother and promised to give it to Maddalena, their servant. The Rossos had been walking back beside the Rio dei Vetrai – the Canal of the Glassmakers, which cut through the part of Murano where many of the glass workshops were located – when Marco bumped her hard and she went reeling into the water. She did have the presence of mind to throw the sack of nuts behind her as she fell. That was what the family pointed out whenever they later retold the story: that young Orsola had had the sense not to waste precious pine nuts.

Giacomo, always the kinder brother, and never as interesting as a result, picked his way down nearby steps covered in algae. Kneeling in the muck, he reached over and pulled Orsola up the slimy stairs. She fell onto the *fondamenta*, gasping and spitting out water, then lay there for a moment, mortified. Only drunkards fell into canals, or people out at night who had lost their bearings in the dark.

Laura Rosso helped her daughter to her feet and began to dry her with her shawl. 'Cold you are, and dirty,' she muttered. Glancing around to check that people had lost interest, she nodded at a door close by. 'You should go in to the Baroviers and warm up by their furnace.'

'She can't do that,' Giacomo interjected. 'They'll never let her in.'

'They won't let a girl catch her death, even a rival's

daughter.' Laura glanced through the door's iron filigree window, her face a set of calculations, then pulled it open and beckoned to her daughter. 'Quiet, now. Keep your eyes open, and report back what you see.'

Orsola hesitated, but her mother was not someone you argued with. And she was cold and wet, and the nearby furnace was tempting; she could hear its muffled roar. She scuttled in, her mother pulling the door to and shutting her off from her family. Looking back through the small window, she noted Marco's smirk, Giacomo's worried face, Laura's shooing gesture.

Orsola headed down a passage that opened out into a yard, empty of people but cluttered with crates and barrows full of broken glass and stacked wood and long glass canes in many colours leaning against the wall. The ground glittered with fragments of glass, like multi-coloured frost. There seemed to be little order to the yard. Surrounding it were small buildings: a storeroom for more glass and the ash and sand and lime to make it; a room with its door ajar, where she observed shelves stacked with plates and bowls and platters, vases lined up of different shapes and sizes and colours, rows and rows of glasses, chandeliers like octopuses tangled together – all waiting to be packed and eventually shipped to Amsterdam or Lisbon or London or Hamburg or Constantinople, cities Orsola sometimes heard her father speak of. To one side was a small shop where visitors could buy a variety of finished products.

The Barovier arrangement was similar to the workshop of Orsola's own family, though the Rossos' was smaller and Lorenzo Rosso was meticulous about order and cleanliness. His apprentices complained of spending their first months laying out tools and wheeling barrows back and forth, and never handling hot glass. Each workshop had a different style, dictated by the maestro's character. It seemed Maestro Giovanni Barovier was the messy sort.

Despite this, the Baroviers were the stars of the glass world. From disorder, Giovanni's father Angelo Barovier had conjured up countless inventions, including *crystallo veneziano* – clear glass that transformed the work on Murano once other maestros were allowed to copy it – and *calcedonio*, a glass that looked like chalcedony stone. The Baroviers had also pioneered the practice of drawing glass into long canes, which all glassmakers now used in making the decorative elements of goblets and chandeliers and plates. Angelo had died years ago but Giovanni was carrying forward the traditions in carefully guarded methods. All glass families had their own secret recipes they held close. They would not want intruders coming in to see what they were up to.

Orsola hesitated by the door leading to the workshop. She could hear the furnace, and men calling out to one another as they worked. Why was she here? Surely she would be discovered and tossed out like a broken bowl. But her mother had been firm, and so she opened the door a crack and slid in, her stomach tight.

The workshop was full of men, pulling punties – long iron rods – in and out of the furnace with molten globes of glass on the ends, twirling them, rolling them on a marver – a flat iron sheet – squeezing them into moulds of various shapes, placing finished pieces in the annealer to cool down slowly. Boys fed the fire and swept and carried buckets of water back and forth. All were moving around the maestro seated at his work bench. Orsola recognised this particular buzzing energy, though the Baroviers' workshop was bigger and louder than Lorenzo Rosso's, with more whistling and shouting. She knew to keep out of the way, and crept closer to the fire. Her movement caught the eye of one of the *garzonetti* – young boys who helped out around furnaces with an expectation of becoming a *garzone* – an apprentice training to work in glass. He was sweeping the floor, and froze when he saw

her. Orsola held a finger to her lips. Don't shout, she silently pleaded. Don't give me away.

Then she spied someone standing among all the moving men who made her forget the *garzonetto*: a woman, slightly to one side, hands on hips. Everything about her was square: her broad shoulders, her forehead, even the pinned bun of her grey hair. In contrast to the activity around her, she remained very still.

This was Maria Barovier, daughter of Angelo, sister of Maestro Giovanni. Orsola knew of this woman, had seen her from a distance, stumping along the riva or across Campo Santo Stefano or sitting at Mass, her eyes closed as if she were asleep, her jaw set sharp like a spade. Maria Barovier, a rare woman glassmaker, who let fools feel her keen tongue. She was known as Marietta, but Orsola thought the diminutive did not suit such a formidable woman.

She was frowning at a thick glass cane held out to her by one of the *garzoni* – a narrow-faced youth a year or two older than Orsola's brother Marco. 'No. The red should be more prominent, for the balance, otherwise the bead will be swamped by the white and blue. Do you never listen?' Her voice was deep and annoyed. 'Where's the mould? I'll have to show you again, and I'm bored of doing that.'

The lad wore the fearful expression of most new *garzoni* when they weren't sure of their position. As he looked away from his employer, his eyes fell on Orsola. They were very dark, almost black, and Orsola felt pinned to the spot.

Maria Barovier followed his gaze. Her frown did not change, not even when she noted the canal slime down the front of Orsola's dress. 'Out, Rosso,' she barked. '*Spia*.'

Orsola fled, scabbling at the door in her haste to get away. Absorbed in their glass, the men didn't even turn; this was a drama for women and apprentices. She crunched quickly across the crystals in the yard to the outer door and stepped back onto the Fondamenta dei Vetrai. Though she'd only

been away for a few minutes, it felt like hours, as if she'd gone into a new world and come back. Her family had disappeared. They would be waiting at home, her mother expecting a full report, even though Orsola had seen very little. Glass families were not unfriendly, but they didn't share their spaces, their work, their secrets. Occasionally the maestros drank together and played cards, complained about tariffs or Rialto merchants across the lagoon trying to gouge them or the fickle Venetian Council of Ten issuing new directives that limited what they could or could not produce. But they never talked about the glass they made. It was the Muranese way to be supportive of the island and the industry in general, but to criticise others' work behind their backs: techniques not refined enough, work derivative or dull. Their own was always better.

Orsola had been by the warmth of the Barovier furnace barely a minute and was still wet and cold. She ran along the fondamenta and over the Ponte di Mezzo towards home. Bruno, a burly young boatman familiar to every Muranese, was rowing along the canal and about to duck under the bridge. He pointed with his oar at the slime streaked down the front of her dress. 'Mucky pup!' he called. 'Your brother told me you jumped in the canal. Practising to be a mermaid, are you, or a dolphin?'

'I didn't jump! He pushed me.'

Bruno chuckled. 'Which Rosso should I believe?'

She scowled and ran on, ignoring other remarks made by neighbours about how dirty and clumsy she was. Reaching the Rosso compound, she pushed at the iron door that opened onto the glass yard, with storerooms on one side and on the other a courtyard leading to the family house. At the back of the yard was the workshop, with its furnace burning all day and night. It was never allowed to go out except during August, when it was too hot to work and the glassmakers took a summer break. A passage down the side

of the workshop led out to a small dock on the lagoon from where boats could take glass pieces going to merchants in Venice, or drop off the sand needed to make glass or wood for the furnace – constant loads of wood from barges that came from *terraferma*, the mainland, where there were many more trees than on the islands.

Orsola wanted to go to the workshop furnace to dry herself in its bright, intense heat, but her mother would expect her to show her face immediately. She turned instead to pass through the courtyard to the kitchen, which had a different kind of warmth – a smaller fire for cooking that didn't have to be as hot for boiling water as for melting glass. Sometimes when she needed very hot or very low heat, Maddalena would slip dishes into the various parts of the workshop furnace, though Lorenzo Rosso always looked uncomfortable when she trespassed in his workspace.

In the kitchen Marco was sitting at the long table where the family took their meals when it wasn't warm enough to eat outside in the courtyard. He was steadily making his way through his grandmother's pine nuts while Laura Rosso chopped onions and Maddalena fried sardines for *sarde in saor*, the sweet and sour dish they often ate.

'Your dress!' Maddalena cried. 'What have you been doing? Take it off this instant!'

Laura glanced up from her onions. 'You didn't last long. What did you see?'

Her eagerness, coupled with Marco's nonchalance – he was now tossing pine nuts in the air and catching them in his mouth – made Orsola wonder if it had been planned, her brother deliberately bumping her so that she fell into the canal next to the Barovier workshop and had to go inside.

'It was busy there, lots of men,' she began.

'What were they making?'

'I don't know.' She had been absorbed by watching Maria

Barovier rather than the maestro. 'Goblets, I think.' Most glassmakers made wine glasses, so it was a safe guess.

'You didn't even notice what they were making!' Marco jeered. '*Bauca!* You should have let me go instead.'

So she *had* been sent. A small part of her was pleased she had been chosen instead of her brother.

Maddelena snatched the sack from him. 'Stop eating so many or there won't be enough for the *saor!*'

'Maria Barovier was there,' Orsola continued.

'Marietta?' Laura Rosso set down her knife to concentrate on her daughter's words. 'What was she doing?'

'She was talking to a *garzone*. Scolding him about cane.'

'Cane, eh? Did you see it?'

Orsola nodded.

'How thick?'

'Like Papà's thumb.'

'What colour was it?'

'Red, white and blue.'

'Strange colours to put together.'

'She said the red was important. For the balance.' Orsola stopped. '*Rosso*,' she repeated. Her family's name. It suddenly occurred to her that Maria Barovier had known she was a Rosso – knew who she was. But she didn't tell her mother that the glassmaker had called her a spy. 'It was for a bead. She mentioned a mould.'

'Beads! Red, white and blue beads. And not just pulled cane, but moulded too.' Her mother looked thoughtful. '*Per favore*, put that dirty dress and shift in the pile and find something dry to wear. Not a word to anyone about this bead. I must tell your father.'

Orsola stripped off her damp clothes and dropped them in the dreaded pile of laundry, which never seemed to lessen. The men and boys in the workshop sweated so much from the heat of the furnace that they changed their clothes daily, and she and her mother were constantly heating water and

stirring laundry in a vat full of stinging lye or hanging out shirts and breeches and underclothes to dry by the fire, or laying out wet sheets in the bleaching fields behind the convent at Santa Maria degli Angeli. Laura Rosso hated doing laundry, and Orsola sensed that when she was old enough to handle it on her own, her mother would turn the task over completely to her daughter to hate.

That night Orsola perched in a corner of the kitchen with Giacomo, rolling back and forth between them a marble their father's assistant Paolo had made for them. Marco was poking at the fire. Lorenzo was drinking wine while Laura patched one of his shirt sleeves, which had been burnt by a piece of hot glass.

'Marietta Barovier is making something new,' Laura said to her husband. 'I heard rumours from some of the maestros' wives. Now I know. She's making beads.'

'Beads, eh?' Lorenzo Rosso remarked. 'That's nothing to be concerned about.'

'It sounds like special beads. Fancy beads that may sell well.'

'But we don't make beads, so there's no competition there.'

'Perhaps we should.'

'Should what?'

'Make beads.' Laura sounded irritated, as if she wanted to tell her husband to *keep up*.

He shook his head. 'We do well enough with glasses and pitchers and bowls. We would have to pull cane if we wanted to profit. My men don't know how.' To make cane – whether the kind for producing beads or that for other glasswork – men had to pull a piece of heated glass between them, thinner and thinner, into a cylinder. It required a long alley, as well as skills that others had already perfected. The Rossos bought cane from other glassmakers rather than pulling their own. Lorenzo also limited what the workshop made to glasses and pitchers and bowls, reasoning that it was better to make a