

Venice is Not Sinking / Venezia non sta affondando.  
Fabrica / Marsilio

## Baccala

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By Guillermo Rivero

During the last week he has been missing. She has been dead for a couple days and has yet to be found. Nobody is looking for her; while everybody in Venice knows that he is missing and they are all looking for him. It is the second week of January and Venice is cold. Most of the times Venice is foggy during this month but now it is sunny and the sky is clear. Venice in January is a very different Venice from the Venice of Summer time. In January, Venice is honest and life happens in this city. Venetians die and go missing. Ester has been dead, rotting away in her apartment in Cannaregio for the past couple of days, and nobody misses her. Mario has been missing since the last days of December and his family posted missing notices all around Cannaregio.

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With only one real expectation, Mario woke up every day. He thought about his family and how to make them happy. Mario was a man of simple pleasures. To describe him better, one would have to describe his favorite time of the year: the week between Christmas and New Years Eve. This week was his favorite time of the year because he knew his kids were happy because of Christmas and he still had to prepare one big party, after which they would be also very pleased. He worked all year, he sold ice cream in one of the most touristy streets of Venice. His ice cream store was one of the few ice cream stores open in winter, this meant bigger revenue for Mario. He had been working all year to enjoy his two-week break. When the break arrived, he could only think about the parties he had to plan and prepare; he only thought about his family members that would ride the train down to Venice to have a fabulous dinner at his home.

Ester was an old Venetian, she was born in 1918. She was 4 when Mussolini came into power. By the time Italy fought the Second World War, Ester was married and she was loyal to the fascist government. She grew up in a world that was changing. When she was a young widow and the Second World War ended, the world was a very different place. Italy was not a fascist state anymore; moreover, her dad, brother and husband died during the war and she had to raise two babies alone. She was going to be alone for the rest of the life. Ester stayed in Venice, it was her home. Her kids have families of their own now. They moved out of Venice in the eighties. Looking for better employment opportunities, they moved out from the romantic city to the industrial areas of north Italy. Ester stayed in Venice and kept her work as teacher in the Istituto Veneto per il Lavoro. She would instruct people in physiotherapy. Ester went Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays to Fondamenta Abazia, Cannaregio, 3560, 6 hours for 35 years of her life.

Mario was 17 when he arrived to Venice. The eighties were starting and Venice, as always, was enjoying the benefits of the myth and magic of the gondolas for honeymooners, the immediate inheritances of the golden age of the Dolce Vita, the artsy concurrence at the biennale and the respect for its Film Festival. As he arrived from Udine, he found work at the Gelateria in Stada Nova, where he kept working for the next 25 years. It made him happy to serve ice cream to Venetians and tourist alike. The best days for him were when his kids had to go visit him; he would show them how to make ice cream and all the secret ingredients to make the flavors. He was always a hard and honest worker. During the weekends, Mario would not go to work during the football match of the Inter, so he could watch it with his

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sons. They would watch every game at a sports bar where the Inter fans would go; the international games of the Inter as well of the Italian national team, they would watch in the same bar. Watching football games and spending time with the family after work was all he could ask for. He had it and he was blessed.

During her days as a retiree, Ester barely spoke to anyone. The only time of the day when she would speak, was when she frequented the trattoria in the Fondamenta Cannaregio. At 11:30, she would have a daily Aperol spritz with two olives. She would hear the local gossips, stories about the other families. She would regret not being close to her sons and grandsons, not knowing their stories; however she would not try to contact them. In the trattoria she would find out who was doing what, with whom and how. She would hear and almost never talk, but every now and then she would tell a story of her own. Specially when the stories were about shopping and taking care of things. She always knew where to shop at better prices and how to deal with little housewife things. She was an encyclopedia of answers concerning material things. Sometimes she would have more than one spritz, then she would complain about her kids. She would still go home and not contact them, even if she felt she needed to talk to them.

This year as he was preparing the festivities for the dinner on New Years Eve, he went to the local fish stand in Fondamenta Cannaregio. He was starting to prepare one of the main courses of the evening, when he remembered that last year his baccala with potatoes and olives did not taste as amazing as he wished. For a moment he felt sad, because of the memory of him failing to please his family, but he decided to make the baccala again, just he needed to ask someone about how to make it better. The trattoria in front of the fish stand was full, he knew some of the people there. They were all locals, and they had at some point been clients of Mario at the Gelateria. They were all over 60 years old, they were all retired. He could ask them about the baccala, ask for some tips or recipes. He went in and joined a table of old ladies.

He asked if he could sit with them, he was in the mood of chatting. He ordered a round of spritz for every lady in the table. They thanked him profusely. He had a cappuccino first and then joined them with a spritz. First, they chatted about the weather and the foggy winter; then about the Christmas parties of each family. Ester said nothing on that subject. But when he revealed his intentions about the baccala preparations, Ester had the best recipe of all. When

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she was young and in love with the man who died in a bombing of the Allies while defending a lost fascist cause, she prepared a great baccala dinner for him, weeks before his death. She never prepared the baccala again. She never prepared it for her kids, never gave them the recipe and never talked about it, until now. She said she would give him the recipe, all the secrets to it, and the special baccala preparation she had discovered in 1943. It was a mixture between her mother's and mother-in-law's approach, and she said it turned out to be the best way to prepare the salt cod.

The ladies had their spritz and left. They only spoke to Ester because of pity, but they all had to run their errands and talk to the families. They would all meet up at the Circolo Ricreativo Culturale Anziani Cannaregio, at Fondamenta Riformati 3152; Ester was not member. Ester and Mario talked about baccala for hours. They were really enjoying the conversation. Mario remembered every single detail of the recipe. It all made sense, he could see how it was a better procedure. He enjoyed Ester very much and decided to invite her for the party of New Years Eve. She accepted, she felt comfortable with him. It was late for her now and she wanted to go home to watch the afternoon soap opera. She said goodbye to Mario after the recipe was completed. Mario was very excited about this recipe and decided to start preparing everything right away.

He left the place and decided to go buy all the ingredients at his favorite vegetable store on the other side of Venice. For that he decided to take the Vaporetto from Fondamento Nova instead walking across Venice, he was a bit tired and wanted to go home fast. Sometimes walking is faster, but the cold weather and the buying all the ingredients and carrying them did not sound so promising. He walked to the Fondamenta Nova Vaporetto stop. On the way there he was surprised that he missed a turn and got lost for a moment. For someone living in Venice that always comes as a surprise. He retraced his steps and found out where he made the mistake, he corrected it and continued walking in the direction he needed. He crossed the Jewish Ghetto on his way, when he was headed to the Campo of the Jesuits, he had to cross the Canale della Miseridordia. He fell down to the water. He had been feeling light headed but he thought it was the combination of coffee and alcohol early in the day. He was about to have a heart attack and he had it when nobody saw him fall. Strange moment in Venice when nobody is watching at you but you are surrounded by people. Momentous timing when you have a heart attack over a bridge and you fall into the canal and you don't float to be seen but you sink not to be found. Extraordinary accuracy of events, when you are the only one willing

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to cook the perfect baccala dinner, with the perfect recipe which will be perpetuated with disaster, and you die with the recipe not being written or cooked. Bizarre coincidence of dying on your favorite time of the year and drown with the plans of cooking the perfect dinner.

Ester was watching her favorite soap opera when Mario was having his heart attack. If she had seen him die on screen, she would have cursed the writers of the screenplay because it was overdramatic and it would be incredible that not a single Venetian had seen him die. She would not have believed it. In fact she would not believe it when she found out he was missing. She found it the harsh way. Just as every other day, the next morning she went to the trattoria to have her drink with the girls. She was expecting Mario to show up with questions about the recipe; she was expecting him to show up with a confirmation of the invitation. He was silently floating in the canale della misericordia; still not a single soul had seen him. It was the 31<sup>st</sup> of December and she did not know where the party was going to be. She left the trattoria later than usual, she even missed her soap opera waiting for Mario. He was still suspended under water. She left and while she was leaving she asked if the owners of the trattoria knew where Mario lived, but they didn't. She started roaming around Cannaregio looking for him, she could not see him anywhere. That is when she noticed a group of worried people asking about him, screaming his name, knocking on every door to question if they had seen him. The answers were all the same: No, we have not seen anyone with that description, nor anything strange around here. His body was under cold green water, he was peacefully suspended and heard the shouting people calling his name. The body could not respond, but as long as nobody saw him he could almost swim coordinately. It was a magical moment when the body of Mario wanted to go back home. He even smiled as he started to float under Venice trying to serve his family one more time and make it easy for them to find him.

Ester saw the people looking for him and panicked. She did not know how to react, she wanted to have a nice New Years Eve with them and they did not even know her. She wanted to tell them about the conversation she had with Mario the day before but she thought it was inappropriate; even if it wasn't. Ester went back home and cried. She thought about her husband and the happy months they had before the war, she thought about her dad and her brother and how they never came back from the front. She thought about her losses and the very few things she won in life. She thought about her kids and how she lost them because she never recovered from the lost of the love of her live. She was sitting on her couch crying and remembering her not so Dolce Vita. Ester was crying on New Years Eve, she had no baccala

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with her special recipe, she did not have a warm welcome in a family that could have been hers, she did not receive a phone call from her sons or her grandsons. She was alone as she always thought she was. She was crying for the kid she met the day before and went missing after they talked. The next day she stayed in, hoping to see Mario next week, after New Years Day in the tratoria. Anything could have happened, maybe he was just missing for a night and he was found in a hospital or the police would find him, or something, she thought. The next morning the tratoria was not open but instead of only informing the clients that it was closed; the tratoria was also informing that Mario was missing. There was a missing notice on the door of the tratoria. In the next couple of day the missing notices spawned across Venice, specially across Cannaregio, his neighborhood. She knew something was wrong with him, she felt it. He had talked about his family and how much he loved them and wanted to prepare the perfect baccala with her recipe; she knew that their love for him was making them look for him, posting the notices, asking people. Venice is not so big, he cannot disappear like that, she thought. During the first week of January everybody knew he was missing, but nobody knew where he was. It made the newspaper, everybody was looking for him. His patrons of the ice cream store were preoccupied for him, his friend were posting bill and his family, who did not celebrate the New Year, was praying for him. He was floating from Canale della Misericordia to Rio Sensa. He was going home.

Every time a boat or gondola would pass him, he would move to prevent the helix or pole hitting him. He would see the fishes under the water and they would smile at him, he was smiling back at them. He would remember thing about the place he was swimming in. When he was turning to Rio Sensa he could remember the time he saw three generations of men sitting on the stairs of the church of Santa Maria Valverde. They were talking about the grandfathers new girlfriend. The son and grandson were really happy for him, although concerned for his health. He was replying that he was not taking so much medicine for love making. Mario thought about them that night that they were an exceptional united family, he wished to achieve that honesty with his kids and eventually his grandkids. Now it was to late. When he remembered this scene, he smiled. He was floating back home, and he was smiling.

Ester was getting more and more depressed as the days went by. She realized that the young man she met was no where to be found. She would go every morning to the tratoria to actualize her news about him; to see if he had showed up. She read the newspaper but during the following days, only a better description of him was to be found. The last time he was

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seen, he was wearing a cream colored jacket, a blue wool hat, blue jeans and tennis shoes. His height was 1,72 m, he had light brown hair, green-grayish eyes and was 41 years old. His family misses him and is looking for him, any information about his whereabouts, the police number. As soon as it would get dark, Ester would go to her home and think about the possibilities of him being wealthy, escaping his family, escaping his life. That was very improbable, she also thought.

While floating up the Sensa River, the body was still smiling. If you could have seen the body during its journey, you could have seen an ideal last joy of going back home, trying to go back home. The body swam to the right to cross the Girolamo River, where it had to wait for a couple of minutes on the corner of the river because of the boat traffic. He thought it was strange to have so much traffic, but you never know. Here remembered there the day he was about to sign a membership with the socialist party; they have their seat in this area. He smirked as he remembered how crazy does meetings were. It was 1985 and socialism was not so fashionable, he ran out of the last socialist meeting he went to. He almost fell into the river as he ran out. Now he is in the river remembering his escape. He is almost laughing, if only one could see him.

Ester started to count and recount the things in her apartment. She was distracting herself from the sorrow of Mario not being found. She was being distracted about her family not calling. She was trying to get distracted from the fact that all her life she had collected camisoles and never really used them. She was distracting herself from thinking about all the things she had bought and never worn. She was thinking about the closet full of napkins and hats she had accumulated and never used them. She was counting everything, ordering everything, concentrated in everything but her life. She was thinking about how dusty things were, about how bad some drawers smelled. She was distracting herself from the fact that she had nobody to talk to, and that her kids did not want to talk to her. She was not going to take the first step. She had not eaten in a while. She was sad but active, she was going to get at least some order in her apartment out of this depression. The next morning, in the tratoria she found out that Mario was still missing. It had been 10 days now. She went back home, prepared some pasta with oil and started eating; she ate the pasta, she ate fast, she was really hungry. The pasta was bad, but she was really hungry. She got some olives out of the refrigerator, she had a couple before she started choking and died. She died in her kitchen and nobody saw. Nobody cared, nobody would know, at least for a couple of days. If it was a

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hot summer maybe the body would smell faster, but it was winter, and the weather was really cold and she would not smell for a while. The kids would not call; the ladies in the trattoria would not miss her.

Mario's body was really slow now. After days of being under water it had to take care of not getting destroyed by fishes or seagulls that tried to poke him for food. The body was now getting home. Floating in the Batello river, Mario was about to be as close to home as he could. Still smiling but incredibly bloated and blue, the body was going home. Mario and Ester are blue at this point of their existence. They are both dead, they both died without oxygen and both of them are not to be found. When the body finally arrived to the border of Fondamenta Calle Nova Mario smiled for the last time. Every honeymooner on a gondola made him smile, every gondola with families made him smile, every time a seagull attacked him he smiled. Mario was happy to be back home, he was a body of simple pleasures. The next day the body went up to the surface and it was to be found. He was still wearing his cream jacket, the one he got last Christmas, and his blue jeans the ones he bought one day in Mestre. He was news the next day, but people had already started forgetting him. There was a strange killing a couple days before in Santa Croce, that was news. Mario missing was old news, Mario being found in the canal in front of his house was normal news.

That afternoon the older son called. No answer. The next day the younger son called twice. No answer. The third day both sons called, 5 times in total. Until the fourth day they were worried. On the fifth day the sons of Ester traveled together down to Venice for the first time in years. They traveled to find their mom dead in the kitchen. She choked on an olive. That was the forensic report. Mario drowned while having a heart attack, that was the forensic report. Both families are still in shock. It all happened after sharing a recipe of perfect baccalà.

Soak baccalà in water for two days changing the water at least 2-3 times a day. Cut baccalà into 2 inch pieces. Take each piece and cover them with the flour, bread crumbs, and egg. Place them into a pan of hot oil and let them fry to a golden brown color...

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