

Hotel Venice and the Bohemian Blue

by C.F. Pierce

“Only one thing that I did wrong
Stayed in Mississippi a day too long”
Bob Dylan

Allegro et libre

“Time to check out,” I say looking at sailboats and surfers gliding on the blue Pacific from the open window of my hotel room in Venice Beach. I inhale minty incense and gaze down at a dark-skinned woman in a sombrero seated behind a cloth-covered folding table under a green canvas umbrella beneath a row of towering palm trees. Laid out before her are glazed ceramic skulls with empty eye sockets decorated with white teeth and yellow flower petals to celebrate el dia de la muerte. Her stall, one in an endless line, is between a wrinkled woman in a purple head scarf by a wooden sign displaying the words “Fortune Teller ” and a man in dark glasses and a white beard seated behind square oil portraits, painted head shots of Jim Morrison and Jimi Hendrix. I tap my feet to the reggae beat emanating from three black musicians, playing bass, drums, and guitar in front of the Boardwalk Cafe. Behind them on a stretch of grass is a nylon orange dome. The moment has come for me to shut down my laptop, toss my T-shirts and toothpaste into my suitcase, say ciao to Venice and hop into my fast car and blast back on the 10 East all the way to the wide open blistering heat of the inland. But I can't do it. Not yet.

I had put in a request for two weeks leave from the City of Cactus Medical Center where I wear a long white coat with a rubber stethoscope coiled around my neck and people call me "doctor." The plan was by no means R and R. I wanted the time off to live my dream of getting away to some beach or exotic island and writing the Great American novel. Fourteen days is not a lot of time for such an endeavor. But it'll have to do, I thought. Enough for a serious start.

The novel is about an offbeat physician with issues--write what you know, isn't that what they say? He is an MD by day and rock musician by night, guitarist in a heavy metal band called DSR which stands for drugs sex and rock 'n' roll. After one particularly spirited late night gig and after party, he crawls into the clinic sleep-deprived and zombied out and prescribes the wrong medication to a patient who goes into a coma then dies. At first, no one else knows about the error. To deal with the guilt, he consumes alcohol and self medicates. His behavior changes and people start asking questions. As for the title, I'm pondering: "Heal Thyself," "Doctor Rocker," or "Ain't No Cure."

I'm onto something, I have no doubt, but need a few more days to make it truly great. When I return to the desert, I intend to continue. But I am afraid it won't be the same, once I am away from my coastal community of crazies.

Before I change my mind, I fire off an email to the clinic: "Unfortunately, I will not be able to make it in tomorrow. I have a fever. I will let you know as soon as I am ready to come back."

"Sorry to hear that," replies the hardcore woman in HR, who checks her email 24/7. Heaven forbid she'd give it a rest on Sunday. "Hope you feel better. Be sure to bring in prescriptions and receipts for medical visits."

For Alison, with whom I am supposed to have dinner tonight, I opt for text to communicate my updated return plans. “Sorry babe. Been bit by the bug. Must be something going around. Need to stay put a few more days. I’ll give you a buzz soon.”

The terse reply was almost immediate: “Call me.” Alison is very devoted. But when it comes to my literary ambitions—or art in general—she doesn’t get it.

I walk under the sun by sea with my yellow pad and canvas beach chair, which I implant in the sand across from a brick building with a metal plate by the entrance that discreetly says Venice House. I did some digging and learned it’s a rehab clinic. I get to work on the next chapter, the part where people start asking what’s up with the doctor.

I barely start scribbling words and phrases into my yellow pad when I hear the high treble sounds of a violin playing Mozart from the boardwalk.

I turn my head and then stand up.

The violinist of Venice has long dark hair and intense brown eyes. She is wearing a long silky black evening dress. The music fills the salty breeze with a complex melody from an allegro movement of some concerto. The notes are extracted from hollow wood by fast delicate fingers dancing on nylon strings with perfection. She moves her bow up and down with intense concentration while surfers in wetsuits walk by her crossing the hot sand to brave the waves.

As I walk towards her, my movements feel nonvoluntary. I am in a quasi-hypnotic state, as if I were possessed.

I stand before her hanging on every note and watching with eyes wide open under my shades.

I can't understand why she is fiddling by the sea and not performing in some symphony hall with plush seats, high ceilings and crystal chandeliers. Dollar bills and quarters are strewn on the red velvet interior of her worn out violin case set out on the concrete sidewalk near a canvas backpack and rolled up nylon sleeping bag.

A scary guy in a black mime outfit and white makeup covering his cheeks stands next to me and blurts out "Isn't she great? For 150 bucks she can do a private concert in your home or hotel or wherever, just for you."

Pretty bizarre I think. But if I don't accept, I know I'll regret it.

"She's incredible. I don't get it. Are you her manager?"

"Not exactly. My name is Ian and I'm an actor. As you can see, I also perform on the boardwalk but that's just for fun. I'm expecting a major part in a feature film real soon. Real soon," he repeats with an angry edge and a wild-eyed look that makes me a bit uncomfortable.

"I see."

"How about that private concert?" he asks. "Trust me you won't forget it," he adds with a wink.

"You're on." I say nodding.

"Sofia, you have a new admirer," shouts Ian. Sofia, who is at intermission, forces a smile.

"Where are you staying?"

“I'm at the Hotel Venice, right on the boardwalk.”

“Say boss, I will need the money in advance.”

I pull out my wallet and pay him.

“She'll come by at about 9. Be ready. You here on vacation?” He asks.

“Something like that,” I reply.

Heading back to my hotel, I think about the classical concerts I saw in Europe when I was an army brat and my dad was stationed at Camp Ederle near Vicenza. At least once a month, we would drive to Florence, Milan or the sinking city with canals and bridges that inspired my current hangout.

The concerts were often performed in Gothic cathedrals where we sat on wooden pews and listened. You didn't have to be fluent in Italian to appreciate string quartets in candlelight by images of saints and guardian angels in red and blue stained glass.

I remember the piano lessons I took on an old baby grand at the elementary school auditorium at the base. I remember playing the Moonlight Sonata and the teacher saying with a thick Italian accent, “you need to play it more legato.”

On the boardwalk, young dancers in pink bikinis, their faces covered in silver paint slow pedestrian traffic while somersaulting to loud rap music.

I pass a souvenir shop facing a tattoo vendor. Through the window, I see a life-size black and white poster of Amy Winehouse. I stop to look at it and nearly collide with an electric guitar player on

roller skates. He has a turban on his head and has a small amplifier attached to his waist blasting fuzzy lead solos from his Stratocaster.

When I step into the lobby of my hotel, something is different. On the wall across from the reception desk, I notice a rectangular canvas painting that occupies most of the wall.

"That wasn't there this morning when I walked out, was it?" I say to the clerk.

"No. We just got it. Check it out," says the blond clerk behind the counter. I picture him hitting the waves with his surfboard as soon as his shift is over.

The imposing tableau strikes me as something one would expect to see at the Louvre or the Uffizi. There is a small wooden boat in the middle of a deserted ocean. Most of the canvas is covered in different shades of ocean blue. A round orange sun is just above sea level in the background. Standing in this boat is a bearded man in a denim apron holding a paintbrush in one hand and a pallet in the other. He has a traditional black beret. His paintbrush with reddish orange paint on the end is touching the canvas which is on an easel in the middle of the boat, which is noticeably low on the surface of the sea. Water is entering a small crevice on the hull visible on the waterline. The man holding the easel and paint brush is so immersed in his creation, he is unaware that his boat is slowly sinking.

By the bottom right corner of the gold carved wooden frame, I notice a white card with black italicized font. I lean over to read it.

Manfred Thomas,
English (1971-1998)

Descending Into Bohemian Blue, 1996

Manfred Thomas was born in Oxford, England and immigrated to the United States in 1994. His sculptures and paintings have been displayed in various exhibits in Manhattan and Boston. In 1996, he moved to Venice, California, where he remained until his death.

“Pretty cool, isn't it?” says the clerk.

“Yes,” I reply. “But not very realistic.”

* * *

Poco a poco accelerando

The red illuminated numbers on the round metal clock read ten o'clock. I'm sitting back on the leather-like sofa re-reading my torn and beat up copy of “The Moon and Sixpence.” On the glass coffee table is the latest edition of The Atlantic and The Paris Review. I tried writing earlier on the small wooden desk with my IBM laptop but only managed a couple of sentences before being distracted by the upcoming concert.

From the open window, I make out muffled voices and the sounds of shoes and skateboards scraping the boardwalk between intermittent breaking waves. The television is turned to the foreign film channel. Yesterday a retrospective of the work of Luchino Visconti. Today it's French classics, Truffaut's Four Hundred Blows. The black and white scenes of the streets of Paris with the different instruments playing the same melody by Constantin always get to me. I remember seeing it at the repertory theater near my college over and over again and wanting to study filmmaking.

The woody aroma from the open bottle of Chianti that washed down the pasta bolognese from the Italian restaurant on Main Street still lingers in the room. I see four unread texts on the bubble icon

of my mobile device. I don't need to open them to know what they say.

It occurs to me that I have no way of contacting Sofia. No phone number, no email. At last, I hear a knock on the door.

Sofia stands in the dim light of the hallway against pale yellow walls. The opening guitar riff from Nirvana's "No Apologies" is seeping under the door from one of the nearby rooms. Sofia is clad in the same thin black dress and is wearing her backpack. The black canvas material looks fully extended. It must be heavy. She is carrying her violin case. Her eyes are covered by large, pink-tinted sunglasses with a white frame.

"I wasn't sure you would make it," I say as I open the door.

She smiles. "I'm sorry I'm late," she says with that hard-to-pin-down accent. "I am not very good with schedules these days."

"Why don't you come in?" I say.

Her head moves side to side to take in the room. I inhale an off putting odor, perhaps a perfume that has gone bad.

"May I use your bathroom?"

The words are slightly slurred and it smells like whisky on her breath. I try to decipher the accent. Is it German? Dutch? Something East European?

"It's over there," I say.

She places the violin case on the glass table then takes off her heavy backpack and carries it into the bathroom with her. I notice a slight tear in the back of her dress by the shoulders

She closes the door and locks it. I hear running water.

Three minutes later she re-emerges.

“Are you ready?” she asks in an animated upbeat tone of voice, standing straight, almost cheerful, bearing little resemblance to the woman I greeted moments before.

She puts her nylon backpack and violin case on the mahogany TV cabinet.

I look at the sack and nod, wondering how much white powder candy she has inside of it.

“Ok if I stand by the window?”

“Are you going to keep your sunglasses on?”

She removes the sunglasses and places them with her other belongings. I notice a red welt under her left eye.

“How is Ian?” I ask.

“He's in one of his moods. He didn't get the part he was counting on. He's pretty nice—most of the time. Except when he's in one of his moods.”

She places the violin under her chin. She methodically picks up the bow. She makes a stern expression and closes her eyes. The bow touches and tugs on the strings and high-pitched tones emerge. This is far from her first performance. She could do this in her sleep.

I am barely leaning back on the couch when I hear the solo part of Mozart's passionate 5th Violin Concerto.

I would be totally immersed in the music, but my mind keeps going back to the treats in her backpack. It was not long after dad's tour in Europe. We moved to Oceanside so he could be near Camp Pendleton. That arrest in the nightclub in downtown San Diego with my musician friend Mark when I was 20 years old. We were snorting a little coke in a corner booth of the Balboa Bar. Who would notice? Hardly anyone was there. The arrest, the handcuffs, the rehab program that taught me that former addicts can never be casual users. What an experience. It got me interested in med school but almost kept me out of it.

Despite all I know, I am fighting an intense temptation to ask her what she has in her backpack.

She finishes the piece and I applaud enthusiastically. With a quizzical expression, she inches closer toward me and holds the violin in one hand and the bow in another.

“Did you just want the music or did you want the full performance?” she asks.

I sit up. Not sure what she means but I want to find out.

“Full performance absolutely.”

Still standing holding her violin and bow, she says, “I should tell you it'll cost you extra.” she says.

“How much?”

She leans over and whispers in my ear. I reach for my wallet and hand her the bills.

Without missing a beat, she pulls her dress over her head and stands before me naked. I scan her pale and thin body in the dim light. Too thin? Too pale? And what's that funny scent? Before I can decide, she plants her mouth on mine, kissing me hard and pulling up my T-shirt and then reaching for my belt buckle moving her mouth down my chest and then lower to where my trousers once were.

She is less engaged in this part of the performance, almost robotic. If I had to guess, her mind is elsewhere, on a stage with her violin between her chin and shoulder in a long strapless ball gown before a dark audience of admirers who were taught as toddlers to refrain from applauding between movements.

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Expressivo

The bedroom of the suite looks out on a narrow alley with parked cars. Sofia rises from the bed naked, walks over on the white carpet to her backpack and pulls out a pack of cigarettes and matches. She lights it with a match and sits on the side of the bed.

“So what are you doing here anyway? Vacation?”

“Writing a novel.” Her eyes open wide. The room is lit by a floor lamp with a beige shade. I'm still on the bed under the long white sheet.

“You're a writer?”

“I'm a doctor, if you want to know the truth. I'm actually a heart surgeon. I think of it as my day job. I'd really like to be a writer.” I sit up.

“Let me guess. You want to be remembered for something more than saving lives, is that it?” She says this with that accent I again try to nail down.

“Something like that.” I stand up to get dressed.

“What's wrong with saving lives?” she asks.

“Nothing,” I say, buttoning my jeans. “Although it can be stressful even when all goes well. And when families of patients don't get the desired result, don't get me started.”

She takes a puff from her cigarette and exhales the smoke which fills the room. I hand her a glass to use as an ashtray. I have a fleeting thought of what the folks at the hospital would say if they saw this but it thankfully passes.

“Must have been a lot of work to become a surgeon.”

“Science always came easy to me.”

From the alley, I hear a car door opening followed by the sound of ignition and hum of movement as the vehicle rolls off the premises.

I turn on the clock radio. The soft jazz piano of Bill Evans' floating pulse rhythm accompanied by drums, bass and tenor sax fills the room.

“I understand. I have known composers who wanted to write great modern symphonies that would be played by future generations.”

“Where did you perform? I can tell you didn't always play on the beach.”

“I don't talk about that. May I use your shower? Hot water is not reliable where I'm staying.”

“Of course. There's plenty of soap and shampoo and towels. Go ahead.”

“If you're a doctor, can you write me a prescription for fentanyl? I have terrible back pain after a recent accident. I can get it on my own, but this would save me a lot of time and trouble.”

“What's your name?”

“Why?”

“I'll need it for the prescription,” I say. I'm not planning to write it. But I want to know her name.

“Sofia Ivanovich.”

“Can I ask you a question, Sofia Ivanovich. Is the full performance really necessary? Don't get me wrong. It was great. But do you really have to do it?”

“Yes, it's absolutely necessary. And yes, I have to do it.” She walks to the bathroom and takes her backpack with her. I hear the running water.

I sit by the little desk and turn on my computer. The screen lights up. I search “Sofia Ivanovich violinist”.

Articles pop up mainly in Italian. Then one pops up in English.

Violinist in Florence Cleared of Manslaughter

Sofia Ivanovich, violinist with the Orchestra of Italy was cleared on Manslaughter charges by a judge in Florence. She had been charged with gross negligence after her 2 year old daughter drowned in a bathtub. It was alleged that she had been rehearsing for a concert and left her toddler unattended. Because of procedural errors, the judge refused to find her guilty.

Ms. Ivanovich immigrated to Italy from the Ukraine and had achieved local success. It is unclear how this incident will affect her career. Since her arrest, she has not performed publicly and is not scheduled to do so.

“That explains a lot,” I mutter to myself.

I notice she left her open backpack on the floor outside the bathroom door. On top of a pile of clothes, I spot a round metal box. The shower water is running. I unsnap it quickly and see the familiar white powder. I hear the water stop running and quickly put it back and go to the room with the sofa.

Sofia is standing now with wet hair and a towel and takes the bag before closing the door. A few minutes later, she reappears in a long T shirt and sandals.

“I had better go, Ian will be waiting.”

“Wait, I'll write that prescription,” I say, pulling a pad from my suitcase. I write it and hand it to her.

“Be very careful,” I say, handing her the slip. “This medication is extremely powerful and should only be taken in very small dosages.”

“Thanks. If you don't mind, I'd like to ask you something. If you could choose between being a rich doctor who saves lives or a poor

writer whose novel is discovered and becomes a classic after he dies, what would you choose?"

"Probably the latter," I say.

"The real deal," she says nodding with a sad smile. "Heaven help you." She opens the door and walks out.

* * *

Agitato

The final hours of a restless night. I lie awake in predawn darkness and process the evening events. How did Sofia get to this place? I sit up and discover more messages from HR and Alison. I need coffee, a strong cup.

I toss on denim shorts and a black T-shirt with white lettering I bought at a concert in London many years ago. It says, "The Cure."

I push open the white wooden door of the hotel entrance and step out onto Ocean Front Walk and face an uncrowded beach. The sea is a bluish shade of gray. No sun at all on this quiet morning. I spot a solitary cyclist in a helmet and white jersey speeding along the curvy bike path. I feel a chill and realize I should've worn my long sweatsuit. It occurs to me that we are in the final days of September.

Ahead of me, a handful of people are congregating in front of the Boardwalk Cafe. I see several sleeping bags and a tent next to a torn up pizza carton, a brown leather shoe with no laces, a plastic laundry basket, and a small wooden stool.

A barefoot woman with wild thick wavy hair is wearing a beige blanket with a native American design of black triangles and green

lines. She is holding on to a metal shopping cart. Purring quietly in the top compartment is a calico cat.

Next to her is an unshaven man in an unbuttoned flannel shirt and nylon pants fastened well below the waist revealing no undergarment.

I approach and hear someone yelling "She's not breathing."

I recognize Ian. He is shaking someone on a sleeping bag, a pale and unconscious woman. This is not happening, I say to myself. Sofia's eyes are half open and rolling back up to her head.

"Give me some space," I say. "Come on. I need to get through here."

"Who are you?" I overhear but ignore it.

Ian moves back, still in his black mime outfit.

I quickly bend down by the sleeping bag, pressing my bare knees on the asphalt beside her upper torso. Only her head is visible. The rest of her body is covered by the sleeping bag. I look for the zipper of the nylon sleeping bag and pull it down with urgency. Her long white garment from last night covers her to her legs.

With both hands interlocked, I press down on the center of her chest while continuing to shout "call 9 11." I lift my hands and press down again. "Naloxone," I shout. "Does anyone have Naloxone?"

"What the hell is he talking about?" I overhear.

"He's talking about what you take when you've done too much and ain't breathing," I overhear.

100 compressions a minute, I say to myself. You know the drill.

I tilt her head gently and lift up her chin. With my middle and index finger, I pinch her bloody nose. I seal my mouth over hers and I feel her cold and pale lips. I blow steadily and firmly into her mouth for one second.

Her eyes are rolling back. "Has someone called 9 1 1?" I ask. She's not responding. She might need a defibrillator, I'm thinking.

"They are on their way," someone says.

I hear a siren, but don't look up. My eyes are locked on Sofia. I feel a firm hand on my shoulder. I turn and see a man and a woman in their early 30s. On the sleeve of their blue shirts by the shoulders is a patch with a blue cross.

"I just tried 30 compressions and EAR," I tell them.

"Thanks for your help. We'll take it from here."

They place a bag valve mask on her face and lift her on a gurney and push her in the back of a white van with a thick stripe and the words "Emergency Ambulance" painted in red.

Ian shouts, "where are you taking her?" His eyes are opened wide, a look of madness and rage.

"Are you her next of kin?"

"Yes," says Ian.

"Venice Hospital."

"Will she be all right?" No answer. He glares at me and repeats the question.

"I don't know," I reply.

I hear the ring from my cell phone in my pocket. I pull out the device and without checking the identity of the caller, I say "yes" with impatience.

“Is this Dr. Stevenson?”

I take a deep breath and move away from the crowd to the other side of the pavement where the stalls will soon be setting up to sell their creative wares.

“You're a hard man to reach, doctor. This is Mary from the City of Cactus Clinic. We want to know doctor if you will be coming back to work. And if so, when can we expect you.”

“Absolutely,” I say. “I am definitely planning on returning to work.”

“When, doctor?” she says, raising her voice, doing nothing to conceal her irritation. “You have patients with serious conditions who require your attention. We have had to cancel appointments and procedures. When exactly can we expect you back?”

I look at the wide stretch of grass with palm trees separating the boardwalk from the beach. I gaze up at the brick wall of my hotel and see the open window of my room before looking down again and scanning the row of tarps and tents that line the pavement by the shop windows.

My eyes settle next on Sofia's black violin case lying flat on the wet stained lining of her open sleeping bag beside empty bottles of beer. From the corner of my eye, I see two muscular men in dark blue uniforms approaching. They have weapons attached to their waist and wear badges. Finally, I turn and face the sea.

I peer past the foamy waves breaking over the sand and search for the horizon. But I can't see it. It's not visible, still covered by a thick layer of morning fog.

“Good question,” I say at last. “I don't have the answer.”

