

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 tell myself, looking at sailboats and surfers from the open window of my hotel room. I inhale minty incense and gaze down on a dark-skinned woman in a sombrero beneath towering palm trees. Laid out before her on a folding table are glazed ceramic skulls with empty eye sockets decorated with white teeth and yellow flower petals to celebrate *el día de la muerte*. Her stall is between a "Fortune Teller " in a purple head scarf and a bearded man in dark glasses selling oil portraits of Jim Morrison and Jimi Hendrix. I tap my feet to the live reggae beat. On the stretch of grass behind the drummer of the three-piece band sits a nylon orange dome. The moment has come for me to turn off my laptop, toss my T-shirts into my suitcase, hop into my car and blast back on the 10 East to the blistering heat of the inland. But I can't do it. Not yet.

I had requested two weeks leave from the City of Cactus Medical Center where I wear a long white coat, a rubber stethoscope coiled around my neck and people call me "doctor." It was my dream to get away to a beach or island and write the Great American novel. Fourteen days is not much time for such an endeavor. But enough for a 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, lead guitarist in a heavy metal band called *DSR* which stands for drugs sex and rock 'n' roll. After one particularly spirited late-night gig, the sleep-deprived zombie crawls into work and prescribes the wrong medication to a patient who goes into a coma and dies. He alone knows about the fatal error. To deal with the guilt, he consumes alcohol in excess and self-medicates. Coworkers notice changes in his behavior and start asking questions. As for the title, I'm considering: "Doctor Rocker," "Heal Thyself," or "Ain't No Cure."

I'm definitely onto something but need a few more days to make it truly great. When I return to the routine in the desert, away from the coastal community of crazies, I will finish it but fear it won't be the same.

"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 any medical visits."

For Alison, with whom I am supposed to have dinner tonight, I opt for text. "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 midday sun by the blue Pacific holding my writing pad and aluminum beach chair, which I implant in the sand across from an unassuming brick building, a rehab clinic. The words *Venice House* are discreetly displayed on a metal plate by the

entrance. I get to work on the next chapter, the part where people start asking what's up with the doctor.

I barely start putting words and phrases to paper when I hear the high treble sounds of a violin playing Beethoven from the boardwalk. I turn my head and 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 pass, crossing hot sand to brave the waves.

As I stroll toward her, my movements feel involuntary. I am in a quasi-hypnotic state, almost possessed.

I stand still to listen, hanging on every note and watching with eyes wide open under my shades.

Why is she is playing fiddle 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 torn violin case set out on the concrete sidewalk near a canvas backpack and rolled up nylon sleeping bag.

A scary guy in a black and white striped shirt, black beret, with white makeup covering his face, black lines accentuating his eyebrows, and red lipstick stands next to me. He blurts out "Isn't she great? I can tell that you are someone who appreciates great music. For 150 bucks, she can do a private concert just for you. In your home or hotel or wherever."

"She's incredible," I say. Several seconds of silence. "I don't get it. Are you her manager or something?"

"Not exactly," he laughs. "Name is Ian." He holds out his hand and I shake it. "As you can see, I do mime on the boardwalk but I'm also a stage and screen actor."

"That's interesting," I say.

"Yeah. Up for a big part in a new movie. Should get word real soon. Real soon," he repeats with an angry edge and wild-eyed stare that makes me uncomfortable.

"I see."

"How about that private concert?" he asks with a wink.

I hesitate, but realize if I don't do this, I might regret it. "OK. Why not?" I say nodding, thinking *what the hell are you doing?*

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

"Where are you staying?"

"I'm at the Hotel Venice, right on the boardwalk. Room 305."

"Perfect. She'll come by at about 9 tonight. Be ready. Cash is good. And tipping is welcome. You here on vacation?" He asks.

"Something like that," I reply.

Heading back to my hotel, I think about piano lessons when I was a military brat in Italy, trying to master the Moonlight Sonata on an

old baby grand in the school auditorium at the base in Camp Ederle. I should have kept it up.

When father got leave, we would go to concerts in Gothic cathedrals in Milan or Florence and sit on wooden pews listening to string quartets in candlelight by images of saints and guardian angels in red and blue stained glass.

On one occasion, he took me to the original sinking city with canals and bridges that inspired Abbot Kinney to build a replica in America.

Young dancers in pink bikinis and faces covered in silver paint slow pedestrian traffic on the boardwalk while somersaulting to loud rap music.

I pass a souvenir shop facing a henna tattoo artist. Through the window, I see a life-sized black and white poster of Amy Winehouse. I stop to look and nearly collide with an electric guitar player on roller skates in a white turban with a small amplifier attached to his waist blasting fuzzy solos from his Stratocaster.

When I step into the hotel lobby, something is different. Across from the reception desk, a large rectangular canvas occupies most of the wall.

"That wasn't here this morning, was it?" I say.

"We just got it. Check it out," says the blond-haired clerk behind the counter. I picture him on his surfboard riding the waves at the end of his shift.

The imposing tableau is one I would expect to see at the Louvre or the MET. 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 the boat is a bearded man in a denim apron holding a paintbrush in one hand and a pallet in the other. His brush with reddish orange paint on the end is touching the canvas which is on an easel in the middle of the boat. The vessel 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 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.

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Poco a poco accelerando

The red illuminated numbers on the clock radio read *10:00*. I sit back on the leathery sofa flipping through a torn copy of "The Moon and Sixpence." Laid out 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 laptop but only managed a couple of sentences before being distracted by the upcoming concert. I'm wondering if I should've just said no.

From the open window, I hear muffled voices and skateboards scraping the boardwalk between the crash of 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 gets to me.

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 already 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" seeps under the door from one of the nearby rooms. She is wearing the same thin black dress. Her backpack looks full, the canvas stretched to the limit. She is carrying her violin case in one hand and plastic shopping bag in the other. 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.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she says smiling in that hard-to-pin-down accent. "I am not very good with schedules."

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

She rotates her head taking in the room. I inhale an off-putting odor, perhaps a perfume gone bad.

"May I use your bathroom?" she says, slurring her words, the smell of whiskey on her breath.

I try to decipher the accent. Is it German? Dutch?

"Over there," I say.

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 sets her belongings on the mahogany TV cabinet and walks back carrying only her violin and bow. I wonder what is inside the backpack. I notice a slight tear in the back of her dress by the shoulders

"Ok if I stand by the window?"

"Are you going to keep your sunglasses on?"

She removes the sunglasses and drops them in her open violin case. 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."

She places the violin under her chin, methodically picking up the bow with a stern expression before closing her eyes. The bow

touches and tugs on the strings and high-pitched tones emerge. She could do this in her sleep.

I lean back on the couch and recognize the dramatic solo passages from Mozart's 5th Violin Concerto.

I would be totally immersed, but I am distracted, wondering what she may have stored in her bag. Not long after dad's tour in Europe, we moved to Oceanside so he could be near Camp Pendleton. I was sitting in a nightclub in downtown San Diego watching my classmate Roxy, a lead singer in an indie rock band, perform on a small stage. I was 20 years old. I was snorting cocaine in a corner booth. Who would notice? It was a weeknight and the place was practically empty. Before I knew it, the cops burst in and put me in handcuffs. The arrest, the rehab program that taught me that former addicts can never be casual users. An experience that got me interested in med school but almost kept me out of it.

Despite all I know, I am fighting a huge temptation to ask her what she has in her sack.

She finishes the piece and I applaud enthusiastically. She inches closer toward me and holds the violin in one hand and the bow in another.

"Did you just want the concert or did you want the full performance?" she asks with a quizzical look.

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 still unclothed. She advances on the white carpet to her backpack and pulls out a pack of cigarettes. She lights one, standing by the side of the bed. I study the tattoo on her abdomen, a sleeping child with wings.

“So what are you doing here anyway? Are you on vacation?”

“No. I am writing a novel.” Her eyes open wide. The room is lit by a floor lamp with a beige linen shade. I'm still in bed under the 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.

"You want to be remembered for something more than saving lives?" She says this with that accent I struggle 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 hard when families of patients don't get the desired result."

She takes a puff from her cigarette and exhales, filling the room with smoke. I hand her a glass to use as an ashtray. If the people at my hospital saw this image—I put the thought out of my mind.

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

From the clock radio, Bill Evans' jazzy piano version of "Autumn Leaves" accompanied by tenor sax fills the room.

"I understand the need to create something that lives on after the artist. I have known composers who wanted to write great modern symphonies that would be played by future generations."

"I suspect you haven't always played on the beach."

"May I use your shower?" she replies.

"Of course. Go ahead."

She advances a few short steps then turns around. "Could you write me a prescription for fentanyl? I have terrible back pain ever since my accident."

"What's your name?"

"Why?" she asks, raising her eyebrows.

I say nothing.

"Sofia Ivanovich," she volunteers.

"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." She moves to the bathroom taking her backpack with her. I hear running water.

I sit behind the small desk and turn on my computer. The screen lights up. I search "Sofia Ivanovich violinist".

Articles pop up, mainly in Italian. Finally one 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. Since her arrest, she has not performed publicly.

I notice her open bag on the floor outside the bathroom door. On top of a pile of clothes, I spot a round metal box. I listen for the sound of running water from the shower. I unsnap the case and recognize the familiar white powder. The sound of water stops. I replace the lid immediately before returning to the sofa.

Standing with wet hair and a towel wrapped around her, she seizes 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 with resignation, pulling a pad from my suitcase, still processing her tragedy.

"Be careful," I say, handing her the slip. "This medication is very powerful."

"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.

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Agitato

The final hours of a restless night. I lie awake in predawn darkness and process the evening events. 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."

Downstairs, I push open a heavy white wooden door and step out onto an uncrowded Ocean Front Walk. The sea is a bluish shade of gray. No sun 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 we are in the final days of September.

A handful of people are assembled by the locked doors of the Boardwalk Cafe. A tent, a torn-up pizza carton, a brown leather shoe with no laces, a plastic laundry basket, and a small wooden stool grace the facade.

A barefoot woman wrapped in a beige blanket with black triangles and green lines leans on 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 a body on a sleeping bag, a pale and unconscious woman. *This is not happening*, I say to myself. Her 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, still attired as a mime, moves back.

I quickly crouch down, 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 nylon sleeping bag. I look for the zipper of the nylon and pull it down with urgency. Her long white garment from last night covers most of her body.

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.

"Has anyone 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.

The repeated blare of a siren rattles me, but I don't look up. My eyes are locked on Sofia. A firm hand touches my shoulder. I turn and see a man and woman in blue shirts. On the sleeve by their 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.

The cell phone in my pocket rings. I instinctively grab the device, accept the call and 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 peddlers of creative wares will soon be setting up stalls.

"You're a hard man to reach, doctor. This is Mary from the City of Cactus Clinic. We want to know if you will be coming back to work. 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 who need to see you. We had to cancel appointments. When can we expect you back?"

I open my mouth to answer but no words come out.

I look at the wide stretch of grass, palm trees separating the boardwalk from the beach.

I gaze at the brick wall of my hotel and see the open window of my room before scanning the tarps and tents lining the pavement by shop windows.

My eyes settle on the empty beer bottles and stained lining of Sofia's sleeping bag, her violin case an arm length's away on the concrete. From the corner of my eye, I spot two muscular men in dark uniforms approaching, holstered weapons on their waist.

I turn toward the sea. A solitary gull stands motionless on wet sand. I look over the crest of foamy waves in search of the horizon but can't see it. It's not visible, still covered by a thick layer of morning fog.

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