Carnevale, From Behind the Mask

Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.
Oscar Wilde

The intercity train from Milano finally approaches and begins to cross a long, thin, seemingly endless bridge. Peering hungrily out the window, I try to block out the reflections with my hands and scan the horizon for our destination. Darkness is descending and so are dark gray, voluminous clouds; all I can see is the vast expanse of water we are traveling over.

"*Stazione di Santa Lucia*," is announced over the train's loudspeaker. My new husband and I gather our many large bags and belongings and make our way to the doors, as the train slowly wheezes and crunches to a halt.

After disembarking, we follow the crowd through the exit. This is our first visit to this city, and we hope the crowd is heading to our destination. Heavy rain suddenly begins to fall. Dense droplets gather momentum and splash all over the stone pavement in torrents. We have not seen rain in almost two months, and we are shocked, umbrella-less, almost having forgotten what rain looks like. Heads down, we dash for cover.

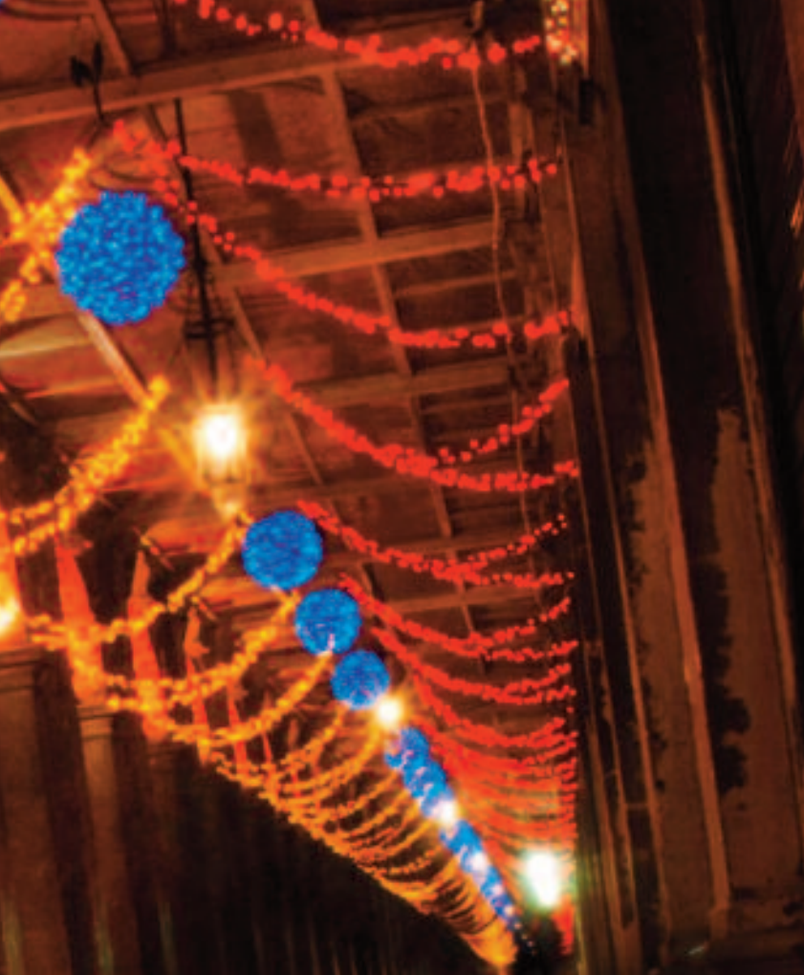
We pause for breath in a sheltered alcove and gather our bags closely around us to keep them as dry as possible. As we look up to decide our next move, there it appears, slowly out of the deluge, an apparition gradually becoming clear. Venice, mythic Venice, romantic Venice, impossible Venice, emerges out of the teeming rain. Involuntarily, I gasp. We are meters from the Grand Canal in all its glory.

The crowd has mostly headed for the *vaporetti*, Venice's floating buses. There is not a single car, bus, or motor vehicle of any kind on the narrow *calle* of Venice. The *vaporetti* are now bulging with the crowds arriving for Carnevale. Getting our large suitcases and ourselves onto Venice's waterbuses does not look promising. Scanning the scene, we notice, further along, smaller, private boats with captains looking for customers. These must be the water taxis we have heard about. We look at each other and realize that this is how we will be making our entrance into our *Venezia*.

Blinking through the driving rain, we manage to communicate that we are going to the Piazza San Marco. Our bags are precariously passed over the canal into the water taxi, and I am helped aboard as the boat rocks in the water. We head for cover in the cabin while our bags soak up some more rain out on the deck.

The water taxi is an elegant, highly polished timber motorboat. Inside the cabin, cushioned seats offer a welcome refuge from the rain. We huddle together and begin to take in where we are. Looking out the cabin windows, we hear the motor coming to life, and feel ourselves backing out from the Grand Canal and making our way into the narrower canals that meander and entwine the city.

Even under now inky black skies, we can make out the decadence and decay of the centuries-old buildings



lining the smaller canals. Through watery windows, we see them crumbling gracefully in muted Tuscan colors—apricots and peaches, ochres and light golds—illuminated by lampposts. We pass mysterious arched gateways with steps leading straight into the canal—we guess these must be the garages where Venetians keep their boats, their only way of traveling around Venice other than by foot We pass gondolas tethered for the night, blue tarpaulins pulled tightly across them to protect their plush interiors from the elements.

Turning into yet another canal, we whiz back through a thousand years of history. Byzantine, Moroccan, Baroque, Gothic, and Renaissance influences blend into each other. I lose count of the multitude of small bridges we pass under, each one unique and distinct from the rest. Wrought-iron railings, plaster colonnades, rustic brickwork, moss and algae: the textures of Venice are rich and infinitely layered.

And I now understand why Venice has been a refuge and a retreat for so many writers and artists throughout history.

The last tiny canal opens up to the wide expanse of the lagoon and San Marco becomes visible as the water taxi turns in a wide arc. The motorboat slows and putters into the dock. After disembarking, we walk into the deserted piazza and stand before the grandeur of Saint Mark's Basilica. The lagoon bubbles up through the grates, and the wet cobblestones reflect garlands of colored lights. We are drenched to the skin, no longer trying to hide from the rain in alcoves. Saturated, our hair soaking wet against our faces, we welcome this baptism into Venice, the watery city.

Venice is a small island city floating in the middle of the Laguna Veneta, protected from the Adriatic Sea by the long, thin barrier island of the Lido. Built on 117 smaller islands, Venice is connected by 150 canals and 409 bridges. There does not appear to be a single straight line in Venice: there are no right angles, towers are precariously out of kilter, ancient buildings seem to defy gravity, bridges arch, narrow alleyways twist and turn—some only wide enough for one person to pass at a time. Even the Grand Canal itself is shaped like a large backwards S, turning the city into a giant yin-yang symbol, or an image of two hands clasping each other.

Carnevale di Venezia, or the Carnival of Venice, is a yearly festival held two weeks before Ash Wednesday. For centuries it has been a time of Venetian revelry, extravagance, and decadence leading up to the Roman Catholic observance of Lent. The word *carnevale* is thought to be derived from the Latin *carne vale*, meaning "farewell to meat." Carnival was a way of using up meat and other rich food, as well as providing a necessary catharsis before Lent, the forty days of fasting and purification between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday.

The first recorded mention of the Carnival of Venice was in the eleventh century. In 1094, *carnevale* was mentioned in a charter signed by the thirty-second Doge, the chief magistrate of the Republic of Venice. By 1296, the Carnival of Venice had become an official event, and the Senate of the Republic declared the day before Lent a public holiday.

Masks have always been a central feature of the Venetian carnival. The oldest document referring to the use of masks in Venice dates back to 1268. Venetian masks emerged in a climate of cultural and religious suppression and constraint during the Middle Ages. In a highly stratified society, masks not only disguised the wearer's personal identity, they erased social boundaries by hiding the wearer's social class and status.

The wearing of masks during the rest of the year was considered a serious threat to the Republic of Venice. The mask had many dubious uses in a small city where

everyone knew each other: Venetian gamblers wore masks to avoid their creditors; nobles and peasants alike wore masks to seek anonymity for promiscuity and other indiscretions; even some clergy were known to disguise themselves with masks to go dancing. The infamous Giacomo Casanova (1725–1798), a native of Venice, describes his visit to the convent of Murano to meet the Ambassador of France's mistress: "I decided to hide as Pierrot. . . . The broad morning coat, . . . its long, very broad sleeves, his broad pants . . . hide all. . . . I went down to the parlor, which was full; but everybody makes room for this extraordinary mask, the being of which nobody in Venice knows. I get ahead walking like a nincompoop, as the character of the mask demands, and I go to the circle where they danced. I see Punches, Scaramouches, Pantalons, and Harlequins."

In an attempt to control year-long bouts of immoral behavior, the Doges of Venice passed laws limiting the use of "mask and cloak," as well as dancing and the use of drums, to within the Carnival period between the festival of Santo Stefano on December 26 (Saint Stephen's Day) and midnight on Shrove Tuesday. The penalties for wearing a mask outside of the Carnival period were severe. Men would be sentenced to two years in jail, eighteen months of galley rowing service to the Republic, and also charged a fine. Women were whipped from the Piazza San Marco all the way to the Rialto Bridge and banned from entering the territory of the Venetian Republic for four years.

The eighteenth century was the high point of the

Venetian Carnival. The French writer Ange Goudar (1708–1791) commented on its expansion: "In other states of Europe, the madness of Carnival lasts only some days: here they have the privilege of extravagance six months of the year." Carnival in the 1700s began with a series of balls in the Piazza San Marco, and Vivaldi wrote operas especially for the Carnival season. Even the young Mozart was present at the Venice Carnival of 1771. The French writer and traveler Maximilian Misson (c.1650–1722) describes San Marco covered with "one thousand kinds of tumblers, masks, and musicians" and thousands of courtesans and foreigners from "all the corners of Europe." He observed: "During Carnival they push to the limit ordinary profligacy, they refine all pleasures. The entire city is dressed up: vice and virtuousness hide as well as ever."

We had traveled from Australia to be married in New Orleans, and we had planned our honeymoon in Venice to coincide with the city's yearly two-week carnival in February. On our first morning in Venice we awake to sunny skies and make our way to the Piazza San Marco, eager to experience the heart of Carnevale. Before we have even entered the square, we encounter our first masked creature walking over a bridge. My groom, a professional photographer, lifts the ever-present camera around his neck to take his first photograph in Venice. The masked creature stops before us and in slow, elegant movements engages with the camera. My husband offers profuse thanks and tries to strike up a conversation, but the creature slowly waves her hand, bows, and utters not a word.

As we step into San Marco we enter into a fantasy world where we are astounded by the multitude of elaborate living art pieces "installed" around the plaza. Otherworldly creatures adorn colonnades, pillars, and corners of buildings in one of the world's most ornate cities. Each fantastic character is wearing a mask and costume more elaborate than the last. The level of detail and embellishment is dazzling. Pearls, gilding, sequins, beads, feathers, flowers, lace, and even butterflies decorate impossibly intricate costumes. Characters carry orbs, scepters, canes, even candelabras. Masks are worn over masks, fabric is layered over fabric, texture over texture. Some carry dolls that wear perfect miniature replicas of their own ornate costumes. Vibrant carnival colors explode against the muted, watery backdrop of Venice. Who are these anonymous living sculptures? Where do they come from? Who makes their costumes? Are they sponsored by the city of Venice, or are they visitors joining in the theater of Carnevale? It is impossible to find out because none of them will speak to us; one by one we realize that they live in a strange, silent world where their guises do all the talking. They seem to occupy another dimension that we can observe but never enter.

Some of the masked creatures decorating the Piazza San Marco are alone, some are in pairs, and others are in groups. As we wander from creature to creature, we begin to notice that the most extravagant of the masked creatures are entirely cocooned within their costumes. They are completely covered, head to toe, by full-faced masks, high-necked collars, long sleeves, floor-length dresses, long gloves, and closed-in shoes. There is no evidence of even a wisp of human hair or a hairline; it is all covered by hats, headdresses, scarves, or hoods—and

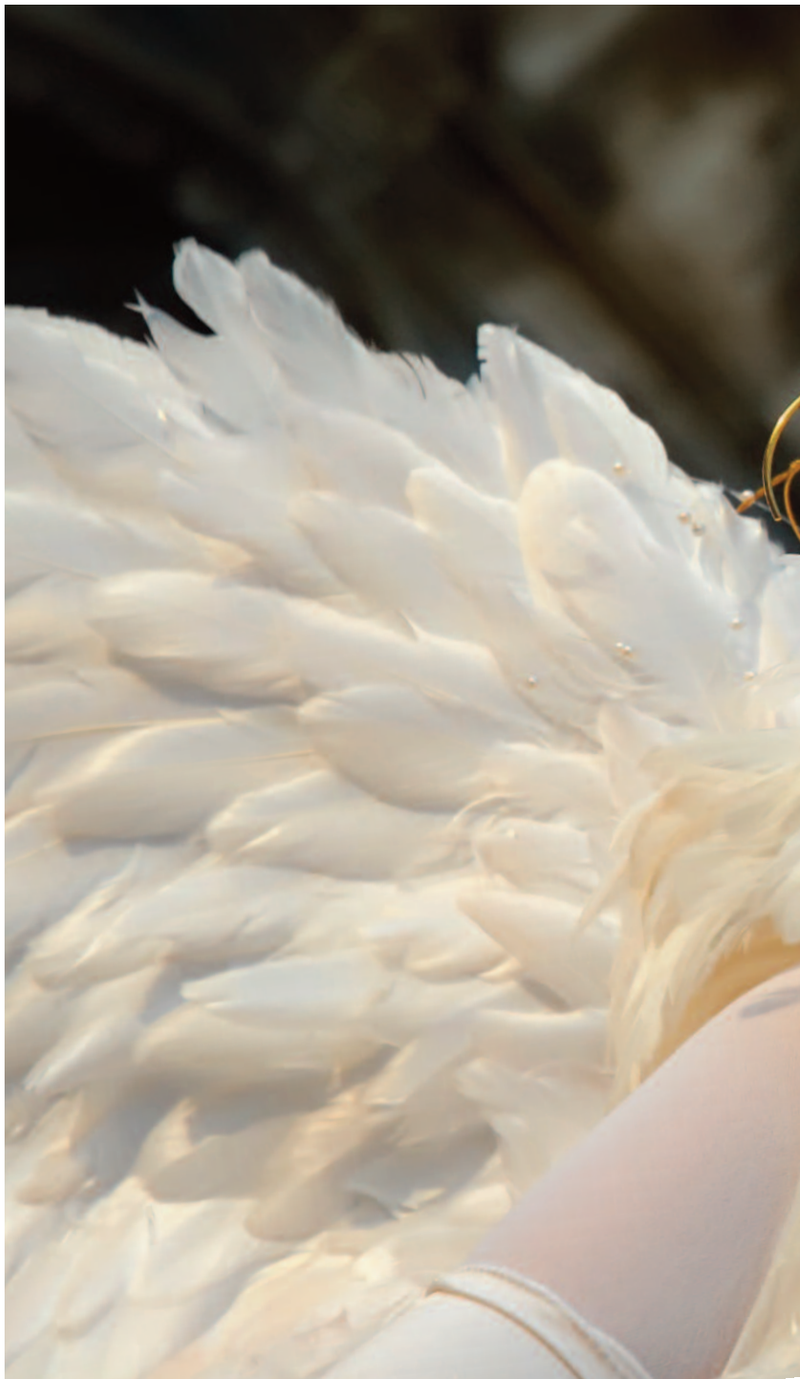
often by a combination of all four. The only part of these creatures that is recognizably human is their eyes peering out through the eyeholes of their masks. And even the area around their eyes is painted black to hide all evidence of human skin. The masked creatures appear as slow-moving mannequins with human eyes, all adopting dignified poses, seemingly detached from this world in a silent realm of masks. Most of the masks are eternally youthful, with high cheekbones and smooth, flawless complexions. There is no way of knowing what the real people behind these masks look like, or what their occupation, race, age, gender, background, or social status might be. For all I know, they could be celebrities or royals going incognito. Yet, part of me is tricked into believing that the mask is a replica of the true appearance underneath.

Besides the fantastical costumes, there are examples of traditional Venetian masks and costumes dating back centuries. In the center of the square is a temporary stage that has been erected for a traditional *commedia dell'arte* performance by masked characters. *Commedia dell'arte* originated in the sixteenth century, and is based on comic improvisation and stock characters. Although the play is spoken entirely in Italian, the stock characters become clear: clownish Arlecchino, swaggering Capitano, perky Columbina, greedy Pantalone, and duplicitous Pulcinella.

Heading through the Piazzetta to the lagoon, we encounter a group wearing the Bauta, one of the most popular early Venetian disguises dating back to the eighteenth century. The white Bauta mask covers the whole face, has a blunt chin line with no mouth, and is angled away from the face to allow the wearer to breathe, eat, drink, and talk easily without removing the mask. It is worn with a black tricorne hat and black cloak. The shape of the nose changes the wearer's tone of voice, creating total anonymity. It was used for a variety of purposes, some illicit or criminal, others personal or romantic. It is said that even some monks and nuns wore the Bauta to disguise the occasional love affair. The Bauta became a standardized society mask regulated by the Republic of Venice—only Venetian citizens had the right to use the Bauta.

One of the more macabre traditional masks on parade at Carnevale is the white-beaked mask of the fourteenth-century plague doctor known as the Medico Della Peste. The hollow, birdlike beak held the plague doctor's breathing apparatus, consisting of aromatic flowers, herbs, spices, camphor, or a vinegar sponge. Plague doctors believed that the strong-smelling substances would counter the "evil" smells of the plague and prevent them from becoming infected. The mask's round eyeholes were covered with glass discs, creating a bespectacled effect. The plague doctor's costume consisted of an ankle-length overcoat, gloves, boots, and a wide-brimmed hat. They used wooden canes to point out areas needing attention and to examine their patients without touching them.

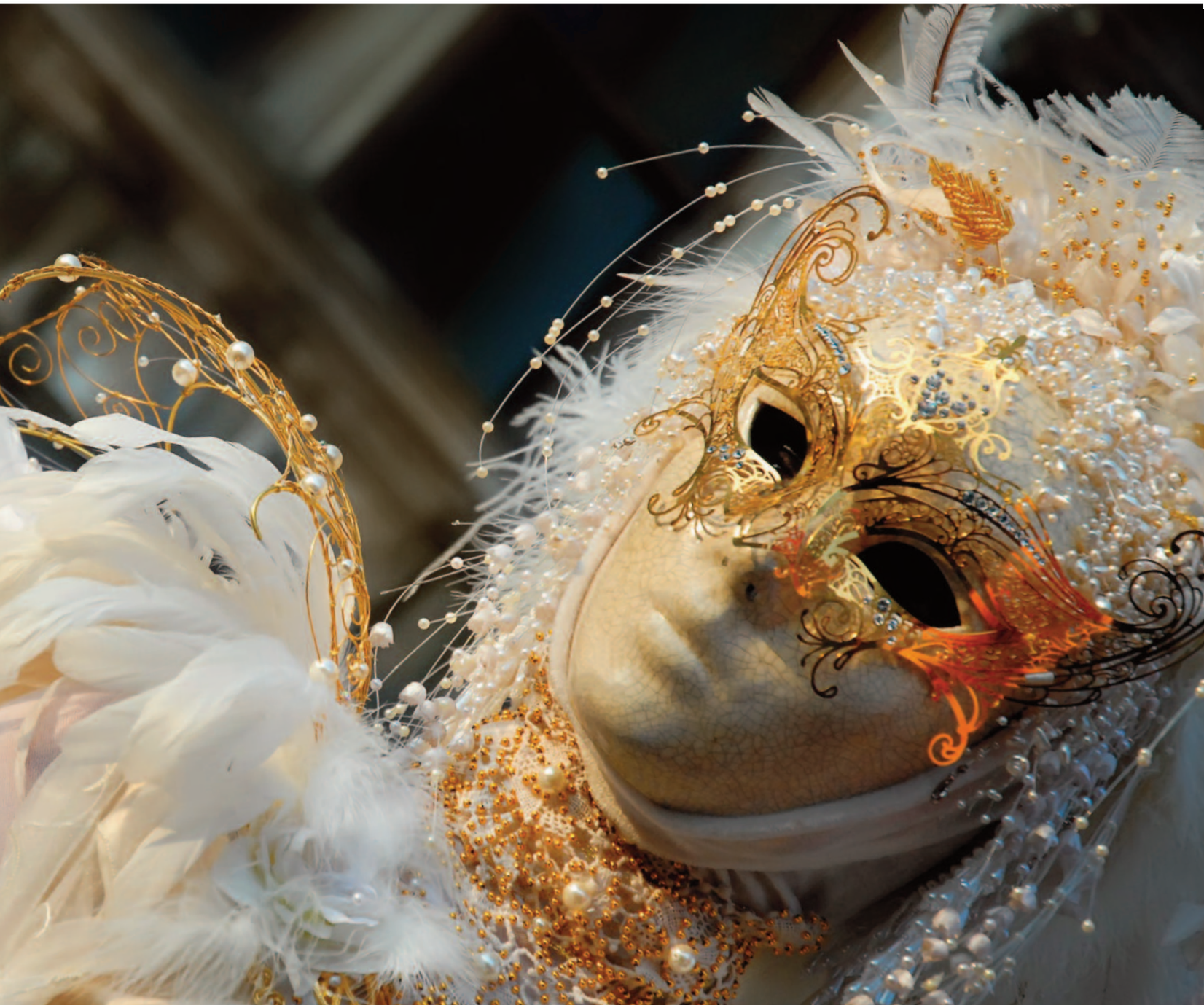
As if a honeymoon in Venice during Carnevale is not romantic enough, our second day in Venice just happens to fall on February 14th, Saint Valentine's Day. Surprisingly, for a city that is celebrated by many as both

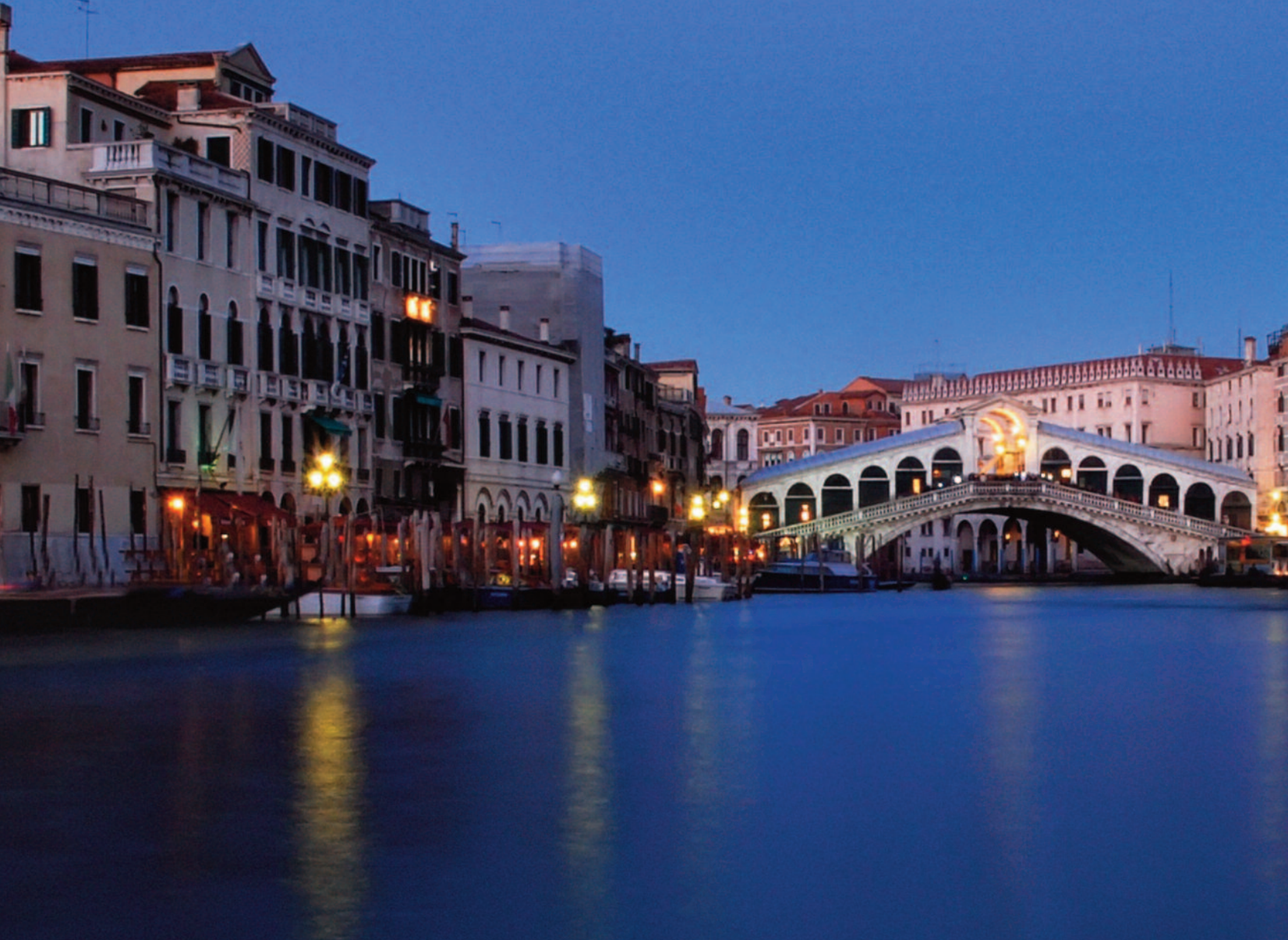


the most beautiful and the most romantic in the world, there is almost no evidence of Valentine's Day in *La Serenissima*. There are no Valentine's Day posters, no banners in windows, no shops selling red hearts full of candy, and not a Valentine's Day card to be found. I am reduced to buying a postcard and turning it into a Valentine's Day card. Perhaps when you live in what is arguably the most romantic city on earth there is no need to single out one day a year as the Day of Lovers. Of course, my beloved had brought the perfect card with him from the United States—an impossibly intricate pop-up card depicting the canals and balconies of Venice with the inscription: "The most romantic place on earth is . . . right next to you."

Since our wedding was of the destination variety, my wedding dress hangs in the wardrobe of our Venice hotel waiting for its trip back to Australia. The combination of my wedding dress, the beauty of Venice, and Valentine's Day is too much for my photographically inclined groom. He asks if he can take some bridal photos of me in the streets and squares of Venice. Normally I am not comfortable drawing attention to myself, but what bride would turn down a second chance to wear her special dress, in the city of Venice, no less? And with the city filled with the most outlandish costumed characters I have ever seen, I am sure to go completely unnoticed.

I put on my wedding dress complete with hoop, do my hair and makeup the best I can, and pin my veil in place. I can hardly believe I am heading out into Venice dressed as a bride, but with no wedding to attend. As we prepare to leave, butterflies start fluttering around my stomach, and I break out in a sweat. *I can't do this*. I spy the





souvenir mask we bought in Saint Mark's Square on the dresser: it is a white half-faced mask trimmed with silver. *It would go with my dress*. If I wore it, perhaps I could muster up the courage to walk through that door.

Out in the piazza there are more photographers flocking around the masqueraders than the ubiquitous pigeons. Carnevale in Venice is a visual paradise that draws photographers, amateur and professional alike. The author John Berendt, who lived in Venice for over a year, believed it was impossible to take a bad photo of Venice. He challenged himself to take one "unbeautiful" photograph. He carried a camera with him wherever he went, and whenever the bells of the Campanile rang, he would stop and take a photograph from the exact spot where he stood. Eventually he admitted defeat.

My new husband finds a vacant column near the Doges' Palace and poses me while he adjusts the settings on his camera. Before I know it, another professional photographer is shooting over his shoulder. My husband instructs me to turn this way and that while a third photographer sets up a tripod. A bevy of tourists notices that a bride is in the piazza, and they come over with their digital point-and-shoots. Soon there is a huddle of ten to twelve photographers pointing their lenses at me. I try to focus solely on my husband's camera and pretend this is not happening, but soon the photographers are calling for my attention in foreign languages, asking me to turn and pose specifically for them. Part of me wants to walk over and calmly explain that I have not come out to be photographed by the world, just my husband, but that would seem to break every unwritten code of the Carnevale performer. And so slowly, I start posing as directed and morph into one of the mute otherworldly characters that moves gracefully and deliberately, communicating only with a look, a glance, a gesture, a movement.

My photographer husband has been completely swallowed by the crowd of onlookers. Instead of jostling for the best angle, he turns and photographs the photographers instead. I am baffled by the attention I am receiving—beside the fantastically opulent costumes of Carnevale, my "costume" is simple with very little

ornamentation, but I am the only masked bride in the piazza, and it seems the mystique of the bride is universal.

Some English-speaking tourists call out, "Are you a real bride? Did you get married today?" Many want to have their photographs taken with me. A videographer asks if he can film me for a television documentary about Venice during Carnevale. Before I can even nod, a female tourist takes me by the hand and guides me over to another corner of the square to a trim, youthful-looking masked Casanova, and places my hand on his. It seems the crowd can't bear to see the masked bride without a masked groom. Without skipping a beat, we pose elegantly for the crowd, turning this way and that, in various poses toward each section of the crowd as they snap, clap, and cheer. Once they are satisfied, my masked partner and I turn to each other silently; he bows graciously, and I curtsy in return, and for the first time I look into his eyes and realize that behind his youthful mask are the faded, wrinkled eyes of an elderly man.

My husband takes the opportunity to cut in and whisks me away to his favorite Venetian bridge for a special photograph he has in mind. Once the bridge clears of revelers, he asks me to twirl around in continuous circles allowing my full-skirted wedding dress to spin in undulating folds. I twirl and twirl, getting deliriously giddy as I hear the camera's motor drive firing repeatedly on automatic. I no longer worry about the crowd. This is Carnevale: I am behind a mask, I have stepped through the looking glass, and, as the Latin saying goes, once every year you should go a little crazy.

Join us for a taste of Venice during Carnevale at THE NEWTOWNER First Annual Masked Ball on Saturday, February 11, 2012 at the Edmond Town Hall, Newtown, CT. For more information: www.thenewtownermaskedball.com