

FIRST SPRITZ IS FREE

by Kathleen González



"California! Welcome back!" Bepi sees me coming and puts the chips basket atop the glass counter. "Spritz Aperol?" he asks, but why? He knows that's what I come here for.

Spritz and a sense of coming home.

Bar Tiziano doesn't look like much: It's not an open-beamed gem from the fifteenth century; no copper pots hang over the oven, no spindly, spiny *cicchetti* peek out of the glass case. Instead, big windows light the bright interior, and a black and white photo on the wall shows a well-dressed American woman walking down the street while a man on a Vespa cranes his neck to ogle her. Tourists stream in to grab bottles of *acqua naturale* from the refrigerated case, and locals with their fluffy little dogs gesticulate with the hand not holding their drink.

I've known both Bepi and Claudio, the other long-time barista, since 1997 when I spent six weeks in the nearby Santi Apostoli neighborhood. One time we all went out for white pizza, but usually I just stop in for my first spritz upon returning to Venice. When I ask, "*Quanto le devo?*" Bepi rolls his eyes and walks away with my empty glass. Claudio turns up the corners of his mouth in a semi-smile. "For you . . .," they say and shrug. And I'm addicted.



In Spring 1996, I traveled to Venice for the first time with nine of my students, my parents tagging along. Our tour bus had dropped us at Piazzale Roma, we crossed a couple bridges, then boarded the *vaporetto* up the Grand Canal. San Simione Piccolo's dazzling green dome winkled in the sun, and light bounced up onto my face from the waves. I saw the raspberry and burnt orange Hotel Principe. Inside

my chest and belly, things rearranged themselves. My heart climbed up into my throat, and I couldn't look at the others in my group.

I hadn't just entered Venice. It had entered my blood and my consciousness.

I thought, "I have to live here some day."

I thought, "This is the most amazing place I've ever seen."

I thought no more thoughts because I was inundated with longing and awe instead.

We wandered, we got lost, we took refuge at a *trattoria* where I overindulged in espresso and tiramisu and became dizzy. My dad told the waiter that I'd be happy to work in the kitchen with him, so he rubbed his finger against my palm. Singers serenaded us in our gondolas, while we gaped at the palaces and mossy walls and watched little fish jump in the canals. We dead-ended at more canals than I can remember, but also I stood slack-jawed in the Basilica San Marco, engulfed in gold light. Little did I know that these few hours would signal such a shift in my life.

Being a teacher, I was free to return to Venice that summer for a wonderful two weeks. I rented a tiny, beamed room at Hotel Bernardi near Campo Santi Apostoli. Owners Leonardo and Teresa befriended me. From my room near the lobby, I'd hear another American woman testing out her rudimentary Italian with Santina, the front desk clerk, and I thought, "Maybe I should try that."

As a lone creature seeking connections, I returned daily to nearby Bar Lucciola, where the barista Alberto soon started explaining Venice to me.

"You see, in the afternoon this same guy comes here for his *tocai*.

In Venice, in the afternoon we have the *ombra*, the little drink.

Have you tried the spritz yet?" He set this bright red aperitif down in front of me, a smiling orange slice nestled at the bottom, a fat green olive speared on a stick. I wanted so much to like it—it was a gift from my first friend in Venice—but it was so bitter! I had been raised on candy and sugar, not biting red liquids. And yet spritz became the drink I equated with Venice, the first drink I always ordered, the drink to sip as I wrapped myself in Venice again each time I returned.

In the hot midday, I'd tuck my sundress around my legs and sit in a shady or breezy spot—the end of the Punta della Dogana, or the archways on the Rio de l'Alboro near San Mois , or under the Pescheria arcades. On my final day, a



gondolier left the *traghetto* to crouch down and ask my name. "What you writing?" he asked as he pointed to my journal. This was Max, whose chatty friendliness led to a longer conversation about gondoliers, which led to the idea for a book.

Or really, it was just an excuse to return to Venice the next year.



But here's where things became more complicated. Back home, I had a boyfriend I had spent ten years with. The last few years had been rough, and he didn't object to my separate vacation. So in 1997 I returned to Venice for six weeks to write the book that became *Free Gondola Ride*. Max introduced me to Stefano, his brother Giannino, Stevio, Sandro, Paulo, Luca, and

others. I spent my days surrounded by men who gave me all the attention and compliments I hadn't been getting back home. "He want to try with you," Stefano would explain as one of the guys would take my hand. Paulo began giving me Italian lessons as he rowed the *traghetto* back and forth at Santa Sofia. I would hurry back to the little apartment I was renting from Leonardo's aunt, next to Hotel Bernardi, to record every tantalizing encounter with these men.

I fell deeper in love with the city.

But I also began to love myself, to see myself as deserving of more than I was getting from my boyfriend.

The next summer I returned to Venice a single woman. I believe that Venice gave me back myself. My explorations of the city really began in earnest. Ca' Rezzonico, Ca' d'Oro, the Ghetto, the Museo Correr, all quenched my thirst for knowledge of Venice's roots. Eating *spaghetti al nero di seppie*, I got squid ink in my teeth. I sipped *fragolino*, spritz, and *sgroppino* after dinner. On the hottest nights, I'd walk in a circuit around the city—from Santi Apostoli to the Rialto to the Merceria to San Marco to Santo Stefano to San Luca to San Bartolomeo—drenching my head under the *campi* fountains and laughing as the water ran down my face and chest. I flirted with baristas but also walked Fondamente Nove in tears, wondering what I was doing there. After tasting all the flavors, I decided *stracciatella* was mine. I scratched my head at the Arsenale lions, scrunched up my nose at *grappa*, and wobbled while I tried to stand in the *traghetto*. Venice sparkled for me, the water changing its moods as often as I did,

the streets pulling me to them and not allowing me to return to my apartment till everything had grown quiet.

Some days I felt like Katherine Hepburn in *Summertime*, longing to join with others, but afraid to commit, wanting to grab life but still healing from the end of my relationship. Venice brought me solace—just standing atop the Ponte Doná at Fondamente Nove, watching the sun illuminate the brick walls of San Michele, calmed my breathing. Just the sight of Venice's silhouette as I rode in on the Alilaguna from Marco Polo, and my heart raced again.

Venice offered its many selves to me: the quiet Accademia with paintings larger than billboards; the Biennale's varied pavilions and palaces I could peek into; Redentore where stars fell from the sky. I returned with friends for Carnevale, was chased by firemen with inflatable hammers, waited for the bathroom with a gorilla, caroused with the Four Gentlemen of Verona, and went to bed with confetti in my underwear.



This love affair lasted for years, with the peaks and valleys any relationship has. I shared Venice with friends, and I made new friends from Venice's inhabitants. I introduced my friends to spritzes, tried them at l'Olandese Volante, at Caffé Noir or Bar Rosso, at Muro, at Banco Giro, at Baffo, or always back at Bar Tiziano. I tried my spritz with Aperol, Campari, even Select. My gondoliers always welcomed me back, and if I were lucky I'd get a free ride back to moor the boat at night. Friends moved away, Alberto sold Bar Lucciola, I struggled to publish my book on the gondoliers.

My California life flourished, though, and I found a new man to share my life with. RJ supported my Venice obsession, helped me publish *Free Gondola Ride*, then helped me hatch a plan for a guidebook to Casanova's Venice. If my body couldn't be in Venice, well, my head could be, and writing about my favorite city fed my yearning. Now when I returned, I saw Venice differently: that cranberry colored palace wasn't just the one across from Marco Polo's house; it was the place where Casanova lived as Senator Bragadin's adopted son. This random street actually led to Casanova's grandmother's house, and this tiny courtyard provided the view from Casanova's apartment window.

Stefano, my faithful gondolier friend, said, "I think you know more about Venice than the people who live here all their life."

Venice provided the introduction to new friends—fellow bloggers, expats, my publisher, and the American woman who gave me my next book idea to explore the lives of Venetian women. Back home in California, I read dozens of books on this city, then returned with anecdotes on every third *palazzo* on the Grand Canal. I explored new neighborhoods besides Santi Apostoli, staying on the Lista di Spagna, near Campo Sant'Agostin, in Castello near Fondamente Nove, in the Frezzeria, or near Sant'Angelo Raffaele. I sang along with Furio Forieri at the *sagra* in Campo San Giacomo da l'Orio. I tried to get lost and found I still could if I left my well-worn habitual tracks. Now Venice gave me a sense of purpose.

Do the churches, palaces, cobbles, canals indeed have inherent beauty? Or do they have that beauty because I have invested them with it through memory and desire? Does Venice's attraction stem from my need for a haven, a paradise, an escape from the trap I was unable to extricate myself from? Perhaps this is true for my early days in Venice, in 1996 and 1997, when returning to the city felt like passing through a hidden door into an alternate universe where I found attention, eyes that found me beautiful, mouths that said so. Venice would forever be a safe anchorage for me because it was the place where I learned to love myself and learn that I deserved love. But now Venice is the vessel for my creative output, for friendships and community. She is my muse and the home of a big slice of my heart.

Max and Stefano and I have watched each other grow older, our hair grow silver, kids grow up, parents die. If the timing is right, they still give me a free gondola ride back to the mooring at Santa Sofia. Leonardo and Teresa's son is now helping to manage Hotel Bernardi. Bepi and Claudio still won't accept payment for that first spritz, and I keep returning, again and again, wondering what else this city will give me.



BIOGRAPHY

Kathleen Ann Gonzalez has independently published four books, her first being *Free Gondola Ride* about Venice's gondoliers, then a guidebook to Casanova sites in Venice titled *Seductive Venice: In Casanova's Footsteps*, and the most recent being *A Beautiful Woman in Venice*, a collection of biographies. She also has essays in anthologies and periodicals, and three of her books have been published in Italy with Supernova Edizioni. Her research and ideas have also been used in a French documentary, other authors' books, and for the exhibit "Casanova: The Seduction of Europe." As a high school English teacher, she has won various awards and recognition for her work. Passionate about travel, Gonzalez finds any excuse to hop on an airplane, particularly to Venice.

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