

Fortune Cookies

Tucked discreetly between the old Calles of San Polo where merchants of Venezia's illustrious past came to indulge in the company and pleasure of women, Chiara continues to ply her trade as an extremely young and talented courtesan in the apartment along Calle De L'Agnella which she had inherited from her grandmother, complete with the works of antique furniture and family portraits. She often wondered if her ancestry had anything to do with her chosen profession and how women of the past used to practice their trade in the vibrant quarters of San Polo.

Blessed with a vivid imagination, she created her own versions of what it must have been like in the former notorious red light district- home to many Venetian prostitutes. While prostitution remained as the oldest profession in the world, preceding that of the merchants who traveled far and wide to trade, Chiara felt that there was definitely more to the carnal acts of sex and a commercial transaction of the flesh. She thought about the merchants who fell in love with the many prostitutes, spurned lovers and intense arguments that took place over Fondamenta delle Tette.

Like the courtesans and geishas of the Orient, Chiara was an accomplished classical dancer, capable of witty banter and deep literary discussions. Proficient in five languages, she enjoyed serving a diverse clientele as she broadened her own perspective of life by living vicariously through all the characters she met.

Unlike the old days, Chiara observes the modern rules of modesty and does not parade her flesh to the public to attract male costumers like the courtesans of the past at Ponte delle Tette. The little bridge today stands quietly like any ordinary one, one out of the hundreds of bridges peppered over this wonderful island. Its name literally translates to 'Bridge of the female breasts'. It's easy to imagine the vivacious atmosphere from Campo S. Maria Mater Domini to Calle Tamossi, with merchants coming and going, and women parading their titillating flesh in the night. This infamous bridge, once a meeting point for acts of debauchery, sits forgotten as tourism gives it little credit with the intense competition of other attractions.

Imagine a centre of flesh parade where prostitutes expose their breasts from the windows of their apartment to solicit potential customers. And there was also a great importance for their need to do so to differentiate themselves from the many men who masqueraded as women in the 17th century with their flamboyant outfits and immaculate makeup loitering in the same district.

The exchange of bodily fluids and relationships established that grow over time; the familiarity of sex and the transient space and time of this location that served the needs of men centuries ago. Today, it's unbelievable that this little quiet corner of San Polo used to be a busy spot, bursting with energy complemented with sensory treats of colours and sounds.

Chiara had an ingenious idea to connect tourists and Venetians alike to the rich historical past of this city surrounded by water. She started leaving facts, riddles and anecdotes on pieces of paper, tucking them conspicuously in the walls in the little nooks and crannies of the Calles stretching from the regions of Santa Croce to Cannaregio leading back to San Polo; giving unknowing tourists the extra details of this island steeped in history- details unavailable in the typical travel guidebooks of today.

Sometimes these notes led new customers to her, while other times, she was glad enough that her effort to connect and communicate with someone was received. Whether or not the recipient reacted to the message or riddle, it didn't matter because she knew that she made an impression nonetheless. She usually wrote in English, sometimes Italian and Spanish. And on days when she felt exceptionally confident, she wrote in Mandarin characters and Japanese Kanji.

Given the meandering streets of Venezia, she herself had difficulties remembering where she left the notes as she took various routes each time, through the island when she went out to run

errands. Of the routes she frequented, her favourites lay along Corte Pisani, Calle De le Oche, Rio Tera Secondo Soto S. Rocco in the Santa Croce and San polo districts.

Of these little notes and anecdotes, some were facts about this city built on a salt marshland at the mouth of the Adriatic Sea; others were random or strange, like little stanzas of poetry she'd composed or a simple random observation that she thought she'd share.

Unknowingly, she had built up a small group of followers amongst the locals who did not know the identity of this mystery writer, but continued to keep a look out in the Calles for new messages and notes as if they waited with anticipation to unravel some secret plot. Some took extra effort to deliberately try out different routes walking home, hoping to stumble upon new "secret messages". With each new route taken, one tended to get lost. Her popularity soared as people went out of their way and sacrificed their own convenience just to find something to light up their day. While few discovered her identity as she even entertained a few customers who found their way to her, she tried to remain as discreet as possible and made them promise to keep her identity in confidence otherwise she'd never entertain them again.

Her curiosity about others and the world led her to the friar's church some 500 metres away, to speak with men of God.

She stumbled upon the confession box and nodded to the priest who approached, she had nothing to confess and did not feel the need to relieve her mortal sins on someone else. She wanted to talk to the priest about him and his thoughts- after all many considered them messengers of God, the middle person between the layman and spiritual enlightenment.

Then, she had a better idea. She sat in the booth and decided on a reversal of roles as she asked the priest "So, son and servant of God, what do you have to confess today? Or what have you not confessed for the past years of your life since you joined the Friary?"

This had never happened to him before and probably was the first in the history of the church's confession box. He was shocked by her forwardness as she started interrogating him in the box. He told her repeatedly to leave if she were not to respect him and the order of the Friary. She reluctantly left, as he didn't seem to relent to her pleas to understand him and their order. With his repeated reluctance to speak with her unless she had a confession to make, she started a new series of narratives about this priest, tucking pieces of paper filled with phrases and random ideas about in the Calles of San Polo. She was searching for new characters and situations to write about and share.

Of the many notes, some read "He has a mole under his left eye."

"He's balding and likes to scratch his forehead because he's really conscious about it."

Little did she know that this very same priest was having an existential crisis and fighting his depression for some time now. Increasingly, he found no resolve in mankind, the deeds they commit as he absorbed the confessions of the sins of others, from daily mortal sins to the most perverse and intimate desires. Instead of being numb to it over time, he built up this mountain of psychological baggage questioning the importance of God, his purpose as servant of God and the motivations for people to live the way they do. They simply have to confess it, only to be forgiven immediately after.

There wasn't anyone in the Friary he could speak to, as his doubts about himself and his profession would probably lead to his immediate expulsion from the Friary. Having neither kin nor friends to discuss his moral dilemma, he decided to pay someone to listen to him.

He didn't fancy the idea of visiting a professional therapist, as that would reflect badly on him as a person of faith and most of the time he felt that the specialists sometimes simply said what the

patient wanted to hear. It's all a placebo effect and placating the psychological unrest of the confused party.

He had a better solution. What better idea than to pay a courtesan to listen? He felt that could perhaps give him a better perspective of right and wrong and why people do what they do. He had personally picked up little educational facts about Venezia on his way home and through the meandering streets, only to find out some months later from a group of old ladies gossiping at the grocery store, that they were written by a young courtesan who resided in the former notorious red light district in San Polo.

Before paying her a visit, he was intrigued by her way of trying to establish some form of communication with the world and desperately looked to find more clues and hints about this fascinating character. He wanted to be a little more well prepared meeting this stranger if he was going to share some personal details of his own with her.

Venezia was the first factory in the world. In 1104, the Arsenale was founded and had apparently produced one warship nearly everyday.

The Frair looked forward to finding more of these little facts tucked between the walls. Each day he was more intent to find another. It became a daily obsession for him. Finding each note felt like Christmas morning. He deliberately took different routes so that he could get lost and possibly stumble upon a new message.

For the entire year as he fought his melancholy, this treasure hunt and daily anxiety took away his depression and negative emotions about his question of faith and religion and the hope left in mankind. In all, he found 5 notes; the 4 remaining read

While Venezia is surrounded by water, there is rumoured to be less than 20 plumbers in the city of Venezia.

“_年，_泥使 吸引超_ 1 5 00 万游客到_ __.”

Venecia tiene cerca de 150 canales y 409 puentes; mientras tanto existen más de 3000 callejones.

Venezia has no sewage system. The household wastes goes into the canals and gets washed out into the Ocean.

Finally, the last note he found was radically different. A stanza of poetry that read,

Save me from wretched world
Of troubles so deep,
For me to close my eyes
And sanction sleep.

This last message was of a completely different tone and manner, sounding slightly melancholic. He decided it was time to meet this intriguing lady and make her acquaintance. Convinced that it wasn't a jigsaw puzzle to fix to put together the messages, he decided to end the hunt with his mounting frustration with his lack of luck and opportunity to find more. He enquired extensively about this courtesan and decided to pay her a visit.

While he heard mostly bad things about her, surely it was because of her profession and the endless gossip that can possibly be said about a courtesan was understandable. Despite this, he was confident of being objective as he believed that she definitely had her personal reasons for choosing her profession and he was in no position to judge anyone for their choices.

With clear objectives to speak with someone personally about his problems, he was void of lusty intentions. Sure, people would laugh if they found out a priest was visiting a courtesan to have just a "chat". It was just another way of dealing with his problems, rather than going to a professional therapist. He wanted a layperson to listen, someone ordinary and not trained to specialize in treating someone psychologically. He felt, rather than being objective and rational, it became clinical.

He was sure there would be perverse individuals in his profession that continued to indulge in debauchery like the days of Sade's novels or like the monks from Umberto Eco's "Name of the rose". There were all types and he accepted that. But, now he had to address his own personal faith and the psychological turmoil that was taking the life out of him.

The first time they met, they got along so well and started to meet frequently to talk about love, life, art and everything human. It was only after a few meetings, he realized that she was the same lady who came into the booth and insisted on a reversal of roles between priest and ordinary layman.

As he built an excellent rapport with Chiara, he began to trust her with secrets and confessions of the people and got her opinion on the different issues that concerned him. She didn't really offer a solution to his problems, but in many ways she made him feel better by listening attentively to what he had to say, and offering an alternative opinion on how to view certain issues. There wasn't anything he was not comfortable talking about and they became the best of friends.

He started seeing her every week, but never out in public to avoid becoming a topic for gossip. Sometimes she baked cookies for their little tea parties in her apartment and at times she folded little messages and place them in the dough before baking, like the very commercialized fortune cookies in Japan that lead to the same practices in Chinese restaurants all over the world. Occasionally, they had theme parties and he really enjoyed her company and her childlike innocence that he found particularly charming.

She talked about her customers, gave vivid descriptions of them, their fetishes and how she dealt with every client, each with vastly different temperaments. Some were demanding, while others were weak, lonely and in short, lamentable. He was initially uncomfortable with her stark honesty about sex and people, but this awkwardness diminished over time over their weekly meetings. He enjoyed their "sessions" immensely because it gave him a broader perspective of people's minds and why people are motivated to do what they do.

Their friendship grew over time and he started talking about his motivations in life and why he chose his profession. At times, his own paranoia caught up with him because he really shouldn't be associating with a courtesan given his religious obligations. But, if this friendship was taking away the mental purgatory he was going through daily, he felt it was definitely worth the while. As they established a dear friendship with each other, they began to create stories about the varied characters they met. Ironically, both of them met the strangest of characters at their job and often saw the ugliest side of each person.

Anecdotes were shared, but the names of the characters were always kept in strict confidence, the little bit of professionalism that they both continued to observe. Occasionally, the people they talked about had similar characteristics and the uncanny likeness led Chiara to think that her client could possibly be the same person in the confession box.

He was never strictly religious as a child, but for the lack of ambition and his parents' indoctrination of God and religion, he made a decision when he was 21 years old to give himself completely unto the service of God. It wasn't till the recent years that he started to doubt the good in mankind and the hope for humanity. He wasn't sure if this was an existential crisis, a phase that he would overcome and learn to deal with as he developed as an individual.

With Chiara's persistent persuasion, the Friar finally relented and started to divulge explicit details of the people who came to him in the confession box. The amazing confessions gave her a brilliant idea of incorporating these characters and their personal secrets into the messages she'd leave around the city. After all, it is the inhabitants that maketh the place. It gave a different side of a city- the people's darkest secrets shared in public with anonymity. After all, who would find out about her relationship with the Friar and one would never guess that the anecdotes on the notes were in fact, truths of real people who resided in Venice. A much deeper and darker side of the city's inhabitants, bordering on perversity and criminality.

Their rendezvous were kept discreet at irregular hours of the day to avoid any suspicion of routine meetings. She would leave him messages in the same crevice in of a particular alleyway to set the next meeting, in rotation of apartment numbers, from odd to even. Neither day nor time was fixed and it was often coded in case another hand picked up the intended appointment message.

It became almost like an illicit love affair they were having, only that their relation was truly platonic and neither had sexual intentions about each other. With all the new ideas and stories Chiara was hearing from the Friar, she started writing with a fervent intensity churning out many more messages to tuck into the little crevices of the walls in the Calles. Little did she know that with the increased frequency of her distribution of these messages with such intimate details of others, she was drawing more attention upon herself as the probability of one finding the notes increased exponentially. The locals who found these salacious details started to gossip and increasingly, many started to know her as the courtesan who wrote these strange anecdotes, but many speculated whether they were true or not.

Exhausting most of her options to draw more inspiration for her writings, the little notes she left in the Calles, she decided to take up a part time job in a cafe by Piazza San Marco so that she might eavesdrop on conversations of Venetians and tourists alike to increase her expanding pool of characters and their secrets.

For sometime, she decided to take a rest from writing new notes and also to keep others in suspend. That also meant she ceased communication with the friar for a while for her moment of literary retreat as she explored the new avenues of creating new characters and ideas.

For weeks, the Friar diligently checked the walls for the much-anticipated next appointment but he didn't hear from Chiara. There was no other way to contact her except to go to her apartment. He made his way to her place cautiously; making sure that no one was following him. He walked briskly, with purpose, like all the Friars traveling this city would. When he arrived, a sign of *Vendita* was hung outside the apartment. Something was amiss, because Chiara would never have put the apartment on sale and leave without a word. It was difficult for him to go the neighbours to enquire about her, given both their professions. He made his way back to Friar, desperately searching for signs for a message he might have missed, a trail that would lead him to some answers. Perhaps someone had found out about their friendship and she was now in trouble, or could she have been abused by a demanding customer and kidnapped? There were no other conclusions he could draw from that. He took another route to return to the Friar, taking his chances that he might find a message should he take another path.

And he did find a message.

Written on the little piece of paper in the familiar neat cursive handwriting was a recent confession that he had divulged to Chiara not so long ago. And suddenly, it all started to make sense. She didn't know what responsibilities she had to bear while she took on those personal secrets of others.

He imagined the worst scenarios that could have happened to her. Kidnapped? Murdered?

He tried to imagine how it all ended and who made the funeral arrangements. Was it a lonely procession as she had no family or real friend to see her through the last moments? In typically Venetian funeral style, a sole coffin that sailed down the Grand Canal, lined with flowers, with nothing to shout about. A simple ceremony for the simple girl he knew filled with enthusiasm for life. She could even make a 0.50€ traghetti ride from one side of the canal to other seem like a 60€ luxurious ride on the gondola. It was pretty much the same idea, and all one simply had to do was let their imagination do the work. As she would always say "There are so many ways to beat the ugly side of tourism. Pay less and enjoy so much more! Just let your mind wander!"

A few months later, he was both relieved and embarrassed that his fear was completely unfounded. He found a note tucked in the confession booth where they had first met.

"I loved my weekend waitressing at the cafe so much, I sold my grandmother's apartment and I have bought over Caffe Florian. We've been meeting so many more people there. Come by for a coffee sometime. We also have fortune cookies. Only now it's like magnetic poetry, people play with the one liners and make poetry."

Today, some people continue to stumble upon little notes tucked in the crevices of the walls, amidst the graffiti street art and occasional wallflowers that add more character to the Calles. So, as you thread carefully through the tight Calles today, rather than keeping a constant look out for dog poo while finding your bearings with your map; keep your eyes wide open as you walk down the tight passages, you never know when you might find a message.