

Water: Friend or Foe?

By Alex Hart

This tale has been inspired by the city of Venice, which is situated on 100 small islands in a lagoon in the Adriatic Sea.

Water has always been our livelihood. It has supported our city geographically, economically, culturally. We regarded it as our companion, sailing past our homes and businesses, a constant force of calm. Water was our identity. We worked together with it daily, used it to the best of our ability. We respected the water, trying our best not to curb its spirit but instead allowing it to flow through our city as the blue blood pumping through our every vein. In return the water brought us tourists, travellers, dignitaries - a place on the global stage and a position in history.

I've lived on the water all my life. There was nothing more natural than for me to feel the ebb and flow of the canals. When I was old enough to leave the city, as many of my family did before me in search of wider opportunities, I elected to stay. I couldn't exchange my back alleys of streams for those of dirt and drudgery. I couldn't swap my elegant canals for roads of cars and trams. I needed the water just as much as my city did.

Yet now, however foolish it may sound, I feel betrayed. How can it be that I feel betrayed by an inanimate force, incapable of spite or malice? Perhaps because the movement of the water made it seem alive, or perhaps because the varying surges of the waves gave it character?

But now, the water has destroyed our livelihood. It has undermined our city geographically, economically, culturally. My shop in St Mark's Square was utterly destroyed. All my beautiful hand-made clothes, my life's work, swept away on a simple wave. My stockroom ransacked by tides. My safe infiltrated by streams. The tourists fled immediately, reaching out for the safety of their more grounded homes. I was awoken early one day by the mourning wails of firefighters. I could hear shouts echoing across the square, their reverberations sounding somehow different to my still-tired ears. I rushed to my latticed window, pushing it up to reveal the scene below. The whole square was drowning, swamped in a shroud of murky liquid.

My first thought was of the shop, but I was halted halfway down the stairs by a lapping layer of water. I braced myself and plunged into the remains of my store. The water seeped through my trousers at the same rate as despair. I heard on the radio that more than 85% of

the city was flooded. It seemed as if doomsday was luring us to death by drowning as the mayor declared a state of emergency.

I spent days hidden in a state of shock, the blood being pumped through my veins so faintly that I could scarcely detect as each breath escaped my lips. After a few days I was optionless, hopeless, defeated by the very companion which had grown so dear to me. A week later I had to agree to the terms of surrender. My business couldn't pull itself out of its watery grave, and I was forced to join my family on the mainland.

I sold the shop, my hand heavy as I signed the papers. I packed all that remained of my life lived on water, steeling myself as I did so, steeling myself against the thought of a life lived on land. I booked a ferry to take me to the mainland. And though I wanted to look only ahead, though I wished I could forget my old love, as we sailed away from the city I stood by the rails on deck. And I looked over all that once everything to me, now dampened in spirits and weighed down by floods.

And as I left the city I had lived all my life, loved all my life, my last thought was of bitterness, the bitterness that stems from betrayal.

This story is unfortunately set recently, in November 2019.

In November 2019, over 85% of Venice was flooded amidst a season of high rainfall. The mayor, Luigi Brugnaro, said that the water levels would leave "a permanent mark" on the city as a result of climate change. This emergency marked the highest water level in the region in more than 50 years. St Mark's Square, one of the lowest places in the city, was hit especially badly, with many businesses destroyed in the vicinity. The floods also caused the deaths of two people, and many more were injured by fires which started around the city.

Carlo Alberto Tesserin, who leads the team which manages the historic site, said the water had surged into the city's basilica with a force "never seen before, not even in the 1966 flood". He also pointed out that warnings about potential damage from increasingly high tides "went unheeded". This disaster demonstrates the already dangerous impacts of climate change, which will continue to change lives unless otherwise addressed.