



Canal Grande

A novel by
Hannu Raittila

Translated by
Andrew Chesterman

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WINTER

The fog continued into a third week. Diving down out of bright sunshine the plane had glided into a bank of low cloud just above the ground only a few hundred metres before the runway. I didn't see the airport or the surrounding area. I had noted from the map that between the sea and the mountains there was a broad plain. Presumably the airfield had been built on this low-lying land, where only floods might hinder the operation of the flights.

Snell gestured towards the fog and said we needed to take a taxi. The Councillor for Cultural Affairs is a fat woman. She was breathing heavily after having to walk down the escalator. I had pressed the button, but nothing happened. I went with Heikkilä in the direction Snell had indicated, looking for a car. Saraspää shouted through the fog that we shouldn't go far because the sea was over there.

Snell spoke to some official and kept repeating something. The word was vaporetto, but it didn't make any sense to me then. She didn't seem to understand what the uniformed man was explaining. Saraspää went up to them and asked if Snell was unaware that the vaporettoes and taxis didn't operate on the lagoon in this sort of weather. We would have to get into town by car. I no longer understood what they were talking about. Seagulls screamed somewhere close by, and there was a smell of fish.

We took a bus through the fog. The trip seemed to take ages, but I suppose it was because we could see nothing of the landscape we were driving through. We came to some place where there were rows of cars. This became clear as we walked forward. Out of the fog emerged one car-bonnet after another. They were lined up like the vehicles of a motorized troop unit in the collection area before an attack. I thought we were in a supermarket car park, but there was no sign of any shoppers pushing trolleys. We would have heard the

clatter if they were being pushed around. On the other hand, I didn't know the local opening times. Did they have a siesta?

I was a bit surprised at the number of the cars. I had been told that there was no car traffic at all in the city. And no supermarkets either, apparently, although the whole settlement had been founded by traders. The smell of the sea was persistent, and the fog stuck to the surface of my poplin coat in tiny droplets. Beneath our feet the asphalt changed to paving-stones. Nothing else of Venice was visible.

We walked along by the wall of a building. The sound of cars faded. There was only the splashing of water on the left, and Heikkilä warned us not to stray from the side of the building. He said the pavements were narrow, even in this main street. He reminded us that the traffic routes here are canals. We were walking along one of the biggest ones right then. A train approached and stopped with a hiss. There was a hasty, confused announcement, after which the electric engine whined and clacked in the fog like a large animal. Snell was badly out of breath. We went up some steps. Heikkilä explained that we were on a bridge, we were now crossing the Canal Grande.

On the other side of the canal Snell and Saraspää began wondering again whether to take a taxi or a vaporetto. Heikkilä said the word meant a water bus. I realized that a taxi, too, was actually a boat. Snell examined a brochure, evidently a local timetable, and said vaporetto number one stopped near the hotel where we had rooms reserved.

Saraspää said vaporettos only do one departure in three. No one asked why. A big diesel engine suddenly accelerated right next to us and there was a whiff of naphtha. The revolutions slowed and the engine noise became more distant, as if a heavily laden truck had released the clutch and set off laboriously in low gear. We heard the water churn and then sharp waves slapped the stonework almost at our feet.

Without a glance at timetables or maps Saraspää added that vaporetto number one stopped on the other side of the canal and we would have to walk half a kilometre through the alleyways to the Rialto Bridge and then all the way back along the opposite bank of the Canal Grande. The alleys were labyrinthine, criss-crossed by little canals and with

deceptive twists and turns, so that a pedestrian would very soon be walking in the opposite direction without even realizing it. He said that in such a fog, and with all our luggage, we should not take a single step into the sidestreets.

In the water taxi Heikkilä gave a running commentary on the famous palaces and other buildings we were passing. Heikkilä is an adjunct professor at Helsinki University and has a senior researcher's grant from the Finnish Academy. He was brought into the team as an expert in cultural history. He is never at a loss for words. In the plane he had already been telling us about his research on medieval and Renaissance city states.

I would really like to have seen all the palaces Heikkilä described. When checking through the project's documents I had of course seen pictures of houses rising straight out of the water, with jetties where normal buildings have steps. I had also seen the building plans for these houses and I knew they were on foundations made of larch piles.

All of a sudden the driver snapped at Heikkilä. Embarrassed, he stopped his commentary on the history of the invisible buildings along the canal. Saraspää began to laugh. The boat slowed and stopped at a jetty built of marble slabs.

We disembarked, Snell after considerable hesitation. Being a large woman, she took some time to pluck up courage to step onto the jetty, which was half a metre lower than the rocking deck of the boat. I held out my hand and Snell leaned on it so heavily that we both almost fell into the canal, dragged down by the councillor's weight.

January 8.

Arrived in Venice. The days before were nothing but rushing about, a nervous flight from thoughts and memories. I get so muddled I just can't cope with simple travel preparations I have been through thousands of times. I arrange my toilet bag again and again, with the intention of ensuring an adequate supply of medicaments for the trip. In the middle of the packing, a glass pill bottle falls to the floor and breaks. I go into town to get another one. The editorial secretary of the Suomen Kuvaletti periodical suffers the consequences of all this when he stops me quite innocently on Alexander Street and says he has heard about my trip, that I am a member of an "international team of experts".

The poor fellow then asks me for a cultural piece on the upcoming carnival, and there in the middle of the street he gets a right earful of my views on Venice and its carnivals. Blinking in confusion, the young journalist stammers something about Finland's participation in the preservation of Europe's cultural heritage. With venom in my voice, I ask what heritage he is talking about.

"It's the loot of a pack of gangsters," I snap, when he wonders how the artistic treasures of Venice should be defined. The wretched man is startled at my outburst, but still tries to splutter something about Italy and the Renaissance. I totally lose my temper and bawl at him – Were the Medicis or the Borgias anything else than the mafiosi of their time, just the same as the guys who these days establish theatres, art galleries and cultural magazines in Russia? And the robbers of Venice have always been the greatest thugs of all! Heads begin to turn in the crowd. I leave in some haste; curtain...

Once in the plane, an obligatory whisky highball. Half way through the flight I hear with relief the captain's announcement: Venice is hidden in thick fog. Blessed nebbia! I am saved. Two or three G&T's downed in quick succession mean that I arrive at the Aeroporto Marco Polo in a distinctly mellow mood.

A delightful intermezzo on the way to the hotel: our councillor, of considerable size and eternally short of breath – the esteemed chair of our "team of experts" – tries to get the airport staff to order a water taxi to the centre. In this total

pea-souper the water traffic on the lagoon has obviously been cancelled. We have to take a bus via Mestre to the Piazzale Roma, from where we walk, hugging the walls, to the railway station square. Here at last we pick up a water taxi, driven by a real Venetian character.

One of our experts, Heikkilä, a university professor of history, gives us a voluble introduction to the important buildings along the Canal Grande, and their history. Because of the fog, we obviously see no glimpse of these palaces. He blathers on and on like a tourist guide, until the driver has had enough and growls: "Non è Canal Grande!" The taxi had left Ferrovia along a side canal so as to cut out the upper bend of the Canal Grande...

Otherwise, the prof and Marrasjärvi, the engineer who has been hired as an expert in construction technology, are good fellows. I am especially taken by Marrasjärvi, who seems to be a quintessential Finnish man. Heikkilä and I have a couple of amaros in a bar near the hotel. He recalls, with a laugh, the tourist trip on the Canal Grande and its embarrassing finale. It turns out that he doesn't know Italian. But he does speak Latin! Speaking slowly and pronouncing carefully, he makes himself understood, to the great delight of the listening Venetians.

January II.

The fog continues. I have never, not even in this city, seen such fog. I walk along familiar alleys and canal banks in a state of total confusion. There, out of the foggy mist emerges a familiar bridge railing, and over there a miniature carving on a palace's door frame or a baroque knocker twisted into fantastic forms, all enveloped in swirling tongues of mist, now vanishing, now reappearing, so that after a moment you wonder whether what you see is of this world or emerges from the recesses of your own mind. And yet this city is the creation of merchants with no illusions, who have valued only tangible materials and goods. When I go back to the hotel, I leave behind me a lazily swirling passage in the mist, which gradually closes into an opaque wall of fog.

Two weeks passed and I still hadn't seen a single one of the Canal Grande palaces we were supposed to be saving. Of the whole city of Venice I had only seen the paving stones beneath my feet, crumbling brick walls along which we had to feel our way in the fog, and heavy, decorated hardwood doors. Sounds of water surrounded us everywhere. In the damp air was the smell of the sea, and ships' sirens hooted on the canals and on the lagoon, which I knew surrounded the city, as I had checked out the geography of the area on my maps.

The office premises we had been promised had not been made available. We had seen them: three rooms in a building on the Canal Grande quite near the hotel. The name of the building was the Palazzo Inverno and it was supposed to be city property. Heikkilä said the name meant winter palace. It didn't look much like a palace. We would be given the rooms at the earliest opportunity. To heat the place some kind of oil-burning stove had been brought. It had been lit shortly before we arrived. There was still a good deal of damp in the rooms. The stone wall sweated like an ice-cold beer bottle brought into the warm. The place smelt as if it had been left unheated for ages.

The street building office was apparently still waiting for some documents without which our contact person, a talkative and overly friendly official, could not hand over the premises. I wondered how Venice got to have a street building office, seeing as there were no streets. Heikkilä grew impatient: relying only on his Latin, he tries to make sense of the official's rapid Italian. He apologized if he had given an inaccurate translation of the Italian terminology of municipal administration.

Anyway, as a bureaucrat myself, surely I should know that administrative titles often didn't correspond to the duties which came to be performed in their names. What did the

Helsinki procurator fiscal actually do, for instance? I denied being a bureaucrat. Heikkilä said there was nothing wrong with bureaucracy, contrary to what people were always saying. He had studied the birth of bureaucracy, which was one of the basic conditions for the development of modern society, as were democracy, the rule of law and free markets. I said I was no kind of bureaucrat. He insisted that all civil servants were bureaucrats. I told him I was not a civil servant.

He argued that we were all currently working for the Ministry of Education and hence in the service of the state. I informed him that I worked for a private engineering firm from which the ministry purchased consultancy services. Heikkilä was astonished. He asked how much I earned. I said I had a monthly salary which was pretty average in my field for an engineer with similar work experience.

Heikkilä knew that private sector salaries were high. He thought I would be expensive for the taxpayers. I told him that the state had to pay more than just my salary. My employer charged a fee for the service, which covered additional costs, the firm's fixed and running expenses and a profit margin. The total invoice was much bigger than my salary. But this undoubtedly still worked out cheaper for the taxpayer than if the Ministry of Education were to establish its own permanent staff of engineers for all its development aid projects.

Heikkilä asked if I thought I was in some developing country. Was I supposed to know where I was, in this fog? Didn't I know I was in Italy, in the city of Venice, he asked in surprise. Italy is an industrialized country and Mestre, right next to Venice, is a centre for the heavy petrochemical industry. Heikkilä said I should go and see the hellish industrial zones in Mestre or the huge Chioggia docks. There, among the containers destined for all over the world, I could consider whether I had come to a developing country.

What could I know about the docks and factories of Venice? For two weeks I had seen nothing beyond the length of my arm. I was nevertheless under the impression that UNESCO was some kind of development organization, and as for the costs incurred due to my stay in Venice, I wanted to keep them as low as possible. I would have liked to be already

A team of Finnish experts is sent on a UNESCO mission to save Venice from sinking. A rich social comedy unfolds as northern cool meets Mediterranean carnival. But beneath the satire, dark undercurrents of human tragedy are slowly revealed. The final pages are a shock, as we realize how much the Finnish experts have not realized.

The tale is told mostly through the eyes of Marrasjärvi, the team's resourceful and ever-rational engineer, who ends up advising the local authorities on how to deal with a sudden freeze. With Finnish sang-froid, he copes with anything that comes his way, and eventually manages to rescue a donkey from an icy canal. The sporadic diary entries of Saraspää, an ageing hedonist, reveal his own dark reasons for coming to Venice. Dr Heikkilä, a university historian, speaks fluent Latin but unfortunately not much Italian. He will lecture on practically anything at any time. The team's leader, the expansive Mrs Snell, applies herself to promoting the Finland brand and spending the project's generous budget. The last voice is that of Tuuli, the team's bilingual secretary, who lives in a different world and saves more than a donkey.

Underpinning the often farcical culture clash there run deeper themes exploring the gap between rhetoric and reality, the limits of rationality, and what might make a good life.

Canal Grande won the prestigious Finlandia Prize for the best Finnish novel of the year in 2001.

HANNU RAITTILA (b. 1956) is a major contemporary Finnish writer whose publications include novels, short stories, plays and radio programmes. *Canal Grande* is the first of his novels to appear in English.

