# Twilight in Venice

## Stephen Carroll

## Published by MIRA Books

Extract

# Prologue

On an oppressively hot summer day in a leafy Melbourne suburb, a thirteen-year-old girl sat slumped in a garden chair. The trees and shrubs in the deep garden drooped under the weight of the heat; even the vine that ran along the wrought-iron grille was barely holding on. The day, bored with its own density, had curled up under the green leaves of the garden and was waiting for night to fall. The birds, vocal in the morning, had given up. The house sat deep in its own silence. The wisteria, the flowering bougainvillea, clung motionless to the air.

Lucy, one leg draped across the arm of an old cane chair, was dribbling in her sleep: a girl in an old cane chair, a study in rest. Below, at the bottom of the hill, the river may very well have stopped too.

There was a groan, an ache, of a sound that became the saddest of music. It came out of the family stereo, through the opened French windows of the lounge room, through the mosquito wire and the decorative shutters, then poured into Lucy's ear. Slowly, she lifted

her head, wiped her mouth, and turned towards the source of the sound.

It was one of those moments upon which a whole life turned, and which, when looked back upon in later years, acquired an air of unreality, but which unfolded quite naturally at the time. This music would be her life. Simple as that, not even her choice. This music, she was convinced then and in years to come, had sought her out; travelled across oceans, over fields and mountains, just to be with her. In the time it took for the music to pass from the lounge room to the verandah, she came to a decision. 'That,' she whispered to herself with a steely resolve beyond her years, 'that will be my life.' And when she looked back on that moment, years and years later, it would not amaze her.

And when she rose from the chair and her feet landed on the warm lawn, as she followed the trail of that music up the garden path and back into the house, there was a faintly registered sense of setting a vast mechanism in motion with herself one of its many moving parts. And, whatever it might be that she had set off, Lucy knew, with unshakeable adolescent certainty, that she would follow this thing through until it was done. For an event had taken place, and now something awaited her. But what? She wandered in from the garden, sleepwalking up the hallway of the house, following the music that had woken her, sure that if she followed it for long enough it would bring her face to face with that something.

# PART ONE

# Chapter One

FORTUNY stood, in the crisp air of a bright winter's day, beside a low wall that bordered the street. To one side the river Arno flowed swiftly. The rain had been heavy across the northern part of the country the previous week and the water was high. He admired the clarity of the day, the castle on the hill upstream, the sun on the buildings across the river and on the trees that hid the many large houses of the city's bankers and the heirs of the Florentine merchants.

Retired musician, acclaimed cellist, his name for decades synonymous with the instrument and with playing at its finest, Fortuny was a distinguished figure, the most distinguished on the street. As a very young man he had once seen Ezra Pound crossing a large square in Venice, his distinctive black felt hat and his dark coat wrapped about him like a cape, as he had headed towards the Accademia. For an old man, the poet had carried himself with unmistakeable dignity, and Fortuny had raised his hat in brief salute, murmuring 'Maestro'—but not loud enough for Pound to

hear. As he had replaced his hat, the poet had swept up the wooden bridge and across the canal.

Fortuny had resolved then that, when he reached a certain age, he too would wear a black felt hat, a dark, double-breasted coat that wrapped about him like a cape, and carry an ebony walking stick.

Now, at the age of sixty-two, he stood by the wall in his hat and coat—the stick not yet required. People passing on the footpath glanced at him, not only because of his clothes and distinguished air but because of his bearing. He looked noble, and indeed he was. Fortuny was not from Florence, but from Venice, and his aristocratic lineage could be traced back to the early days of the Doges.

His ancestors, a minor line that had entered the *Lista D'Oro* in the late fourteenth century after buying their nobility at the end of the wars with Genoa, had travelled as far as Cyprus in the service of the Republic. The name had always been the same, except that in the early days it had been spelt with an 'i' at the end—like, Fortuny was fond of saying, Foscari.

The family, before acquiring its noble status, had made its money from trade. They had been merchants. Peppers from Egypt, wines from Naxos, even cotton from Limassol. And over the centuries the family had served *La Serenissima* in various ways, but mostly in civil administration and trade; in Khania, Nicosia, Famagusta. It had often been dangerous work, so

much so that when the Turks had finally conquered Cyprus, four family members had been lost in the space of one year. Two had been disembowelled in the street, one decapitated, and another flayed in the sunshine, his skin later stuffed with straw and the body paraded, headless, about the town. Fortuny still recalled his grandfather telling the story and, to his father's annoyance, laughing that the life of the modern public servant was never so colourful.

But the family survived. That occasion marked its most serious brush with extinction. After news of the deaths reached Venice, the only surviving son was dragged from his monastery and married; the union produced five sons and three daughters. In later life, his job done, he returned to the order of St Francis and later died in a small monastery on a hilltop overlooking Florence.

In time, the new shoots were once again directing the Republic's trade in the Aegean, the Adriatic and the Mediterranean, especially Corfu. There were whispers of Jewish blood, of curfews, of extended family members being forced to make their way back to the ghetto by nightfall.

But by the time the French converged on Venice, the Republic had fallen, was sold off to Austria, and the family was once again on the verge of bankruptcy. They refused state charity, adopted the French 'y' to the family name, and fell back on imports and ex-

ports. Over the years, the profits were siphoned into real estate so that, by the turn of the nineteenth century, the family members managed to survive and maintain the style of living they had come to regard as their birthright. And all from the spices, wines and cloth that had paid for their nobility in the first place.

It was Fortuny's grandfather, Eduardo, who broke the family tradition, having no feeling for trade in his marrow, his heart or his brain. He became, instead, a painter, studying at Le Havre, and later in Paris where he met the young Braque. In that year, 1900, he decided he had little talent for creating art, but a natural gift for recognising it. He returned to Venice, married, had a son, and set up a profitable business advising both the old and the new rich on the crucial matter of their artistic investments. And if an ancient family, with a sudden liquidity problem, needed to sell off part of its private collection, they were more than pleased to have an understanding figure to turn to, one who just happened to know that a gallery in Chicago was looking for a Ruysdael; a person who could guarantee that the whole matter would be conducted with absolute discretion.

Eduardo Fortuny was astute, with years of family wisdom in judging character and a keen, trained eye for the real thing. Very soon his fees were commensurate with the respect in which he was held, and the family never traded in peppers again.

But his son was impatient with the world of Old Masters, and sought to regain the power the family had once possessed. In the early 1930s—despite Eduardo's repeated advice to leave politics alone, that he had no talent for it—Fortuny's father, Vincenzo, joined the Fascists and eventually became something of a confidant to Mussolini. He entered government service as an amateur diplomat and took on the responsibility with a high seriousness that some found faintly comical. But he was as serious in this as he had always been about the family's history, for it was he who had first researched, then commissioned, the illuminated family tree that was currently stored in the study of the family house. He constantly looked back to the days when the family had had influence and power, and whenever his father was home it seemed to Fortuny that he was always mentally preoccupied. His lasting memory of his father was of a man who, like Il Duce himself, seemed vaguely delusional, with a faraway look in his eyes as if watching the last of the afternoon sun on a broken column.

When the Americans and British arrived late in 1943, the reprisals began immediately and Fortuny's father and mother were shot in the street a week after Mussolini had been strung up with piano wire by the partisans. His grandfather had died of a stroke in 1940. There were no other children, and Fortuny suddenly became the last of the line.

Now, here he stood in Florence, enduring a busy city intersection and waiting for the lights to change. He took his hat off and ran his fingers through his hair, which was always remarked upon as being silver, not grey. Fortuny was still a young man. He was consistently told it was a miracle, or that he had made a secret pact with the devil, for his face, his gestures, his bearing all bore the stamp of a young man. Even his sixty-first birthday party had become an occasion not to mark the passage of the years but to mark the triumph of Fortuny over time.

As he stood contemplating the clutter of the city, a young woman passed, dressed in the style of dark business suit that this generation of young women wore with a casual ease that he simultaneously admired and felt uneasy about. Something lost, something gained, he mused. When he thought of the women he had known, women of flesh and substance, he could never imagine them dressed like these young creatures. Neither would he ever want to. But there was something both alluring and alarming in the confidence of these young women, in the way they strode through the world—in the way that they implied they just might dismantle you even as they desired you—that was transfixing. As he contemplated this, his gaze rose to meet the young woman's eyes and he saw that she was staring directly back at him. Her eyes lingered upon him briefly, signalling pleasure at what she saw, and

even suggesting in that split second that if ever time and the business of the world should conspire to bring them together then…who knows? She was, in short, giving him the eye, and there was even the hint of a smile, as she noted that the look had been registered, before she turned the corner and was gone. He nodded slowly, acknowledging to himself that it was nice to be noticed. Yes, nice, but unsettling. Why was that? He raised his head to the skies, contemplating the question.

The young man who had glimpsed the figure of Ezra Pound had also spent many hours immersed in the poetry of Mr T. S. Eliot (whom he admired much more, and whom he had had the privilege to meet once on tour). He was more than familiar with the lines that constituted the love song of Signor J. Alfred Prufrock. The signor, he recalled (not having read the poem for some time now), walked the sands of an unnamed beach, his trousers rolled up, seeking young mermaids, but also fully realising that he would be terrified if one should suddenly heed his call and emerge from the water wreathed in seaweed just for him. Ah… He addressed the corner the young woman had just vanished around: There is a touch of that in all of us, eh? *That* would be a poem, would it not? To say to the young man with the rolled-up trousers, Here, here is your mermaid. Now what? So while it was always a pleasure, and not an unusual one for Paolo Fortuny, when the

eyes of these young creatures softened for a second as they rested upon him, and as much as he took satisfaction in seeing it happen, the confidence of these young women unnerved him and he couldn't help but wonder what on earth he would do if ever he came face to face, cheek to cheek, with one of them.

Just then the traffic lights changed. The acceleration of the motor scooters, the high-pitched noise of those tiny, overworked engines, intruded on Fortuny's thoughts, causing him to lift his arms and block his ears, but the traffic was relentless and at the next change of lights he crossed into a smaller street.

The street he chose was no quieter, and at one stage he was almost hit by a careless youth on a scooter who made no apology, provoking Fortuny to the point of pursuing the young scoundrel. He let it rest, but the noise, the fumes, the tiny lanes that were never built for buses or cars all combined to make his walk to the gallery an unpleasant one. Florence, he was at last convinced, was collapsing in on itself. Once, he reflected, it had been a city of flowers surrounded by green hills. Once, undoubtedly, a beautiful city, but now crumbling under the weight of an ugly century.

He determined that he would not visit here again. He had come for the *Birth of Venus* but the walk had upset his nerves. He now sat in front of the painting, trying to enter the stillness inside the frame. Always he had entered that stillness, that quiet beauty which had

resisted all the ugly centuries since its birth. But today he couldn't. The sea-green of the water, the endless blue sky, the hair that flowed to her thighs—thick, floating on the air as if it were still submerged—and the gentle, undulating caps of the waves, the charmed green wood… All failed to work their magic. First the walk, now the tourists passing across his vision in their busloads and the chatter of the guides made it impossible. Fortuny was a man besotted with Venus, but the soft, rounded form of the figure in the shell was constantly being lost to him in the crowd. As he stood, violence rose in Fortuny's throat. Standing a little over five feet nine, he had never been a tall man, but he was imposingly broad across the shoulders and chest, partly the product of his genes, partly the result of a lifetime playing the cello. Impatiently, he forced a path through the crowd with his rolled newspaper. Nobody contested his authority, his right to pass, and he made his way back to face once again the ordeal of the streets.

That evening he rested in his room at a friend's house on a hill, overlooking the river and removed from the clatter and the noise. In the en-suite bathroom he took pills for his liver and spa water for his skin and eyes. At dinner he sipped from a single glass of wine and picked at his plate before excusing himself and returning to his room.

His smooth-skinned features and alert eyes might

indicate a man to whom sleep came with a child's ease. But for a year now he had been waking in the dark, unable to return to sleep until the first signs of light lulled him into a fragile doze.

In the morning a taxi drove him to the railway station. Fortuny gave a last glance at the Church of Santa Sophia Novella opposite the taxi stand, before disappearing into the distasteful world of tabloid newspaper shops, where glossy magazines offered cheap pin-ups and tacky fashion shots of young men and women famous for—what was the phrase?—being famous. So this, he thought, this is the 1990s. This is the outcome of two world wars, of upheaval, revolution and mass death on a scale unprecedented in history. Is this what it was all for? This open-air prison of supermarkets and plastic shopping bags and piped music everywhere. Music, they call it! This is what it was all for? Damn it, he suddenly thought, give me war, revolution, anything but this.

In truth, since he had stopped performing, Fortuny's life had drifted from day to day. He'd lost the very thing by which he defined himself, and nothing—not love, or food, or drink, not even music—could any longer lift his spirits the way these pleasures once had. Fortuny felt worn out simply from the effort of living in this tired and ugly age, because he had lost the one thing that had allowed him to rise above it: the practice and expression of his art.

He waited for the train from Rome that would connect him once more with Venice. Fortuny, the last in a line of ancestors that reached back to the Genoan Wars, stood on the platform, smoking a cigarette and oppressed by the thought that, in the end, it was his fate to have become the full stop at the conclusion of a golden era.

He adjusted his coat and lifted his Homburg, ran his fingers through his silvery hair then replaced the hat. His shoes were polished, his hat at the right angle. The gesture, the manner just so. All was in readiness for the journey. The age in which he lived may have forgotten all decorum and grace, forgotten the proper way to undertake a journey, but Fortuny hadn't. When the train came, he would walk to his carriage over the blown scraps of fast-food containers and discarded newspaper pages of frantic, already forgotten stories. Unhurried and calm, he would proceed: an emblem, a living image of all that had been lost.