



## In My Bottom Drawer

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**I**N MY BOTTOM DRAWER – actually a leather holdall bought from a charity shop specially for the purpose – lies a bundle of notes and books about Venice. The idea is that I will formulate a novel from these.

Most of the notes were made during my dozen or so visits to Venice, and I can recognise the ones scrawled while bobbing across the lagoon on a growling vaporetto or scribbled while wearing gloves on a cold café terrace. Among the Venice books I have bought, read and put into the holdall are novels, including *Across the River and Into the Trees* by Ernest Hemingway (terrible), *The Talented Mr Ripley* and *Those Who Walk Away* by Patricia Highsmith (both terrific). There's *Venice* by Jan Morris, of course, as well as a guidebook dating from 1884, which is full of poetic quotations, and there's a memoir, *Venices*, by Paul Morand, an interwar dandy, snob, and Vichy collaborator who wrote, 'The privately owned gondolas nod their iron prows sadly as we pass by; we disturb their slumber.'

My interest in Venice dates from the mid-seventies, when I watched *Don't Look Now* on late-night TV. The melancholia of the film was redoubled by the fact that I was watching it alone on New Year's Eve. But I soon became so immersed in its deliquescing dreamworld that 1977 (I think it was) became 1978 without my noticing.

My determination to write a novel about Venice was redoubled five years ago when, following the death of my father, I discovered some photographs of him and a friend in Venice in the nineteen-fifties. He



wore his ‘visiting-the-continent’ outfit: white trousers, open-necked shirt with cravat, jumper draped over his shoulders. I never went to Venice with him, but he often talked to me about the place, and the photos made me feel I had a filial duty to write a Venice novel.

I do have a loose idea for a plot, but the strength – or possibly weakness – of the book will be its emphasis on mood and atmosphere. What appeals to me about Venice is the above-mentioned dreaminess, which has one basic element: the canals don’t look like canals; they look like streets full of water.

I might have started my Venice novel a couple of years ago, but for a conversation with a novelist friend, who knew nothing of my plan. We were discussing the work of a mutual enemy (ie a more successful writer) who’d just produced a novel with a First World War setting. ‘We don’t need another First World War novel,’ my friend said, ‘any more than we need another novel set in Venice.’ It was enough to deflect me at the time, but I have a feeling the world will be getting a Venice novel from me, whether it needs one or not.