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Holy Venice!

My entire life I have been somewhat directionally challenged, “somewhat” here meaning hopelessly and completely. For that exact reason, when I went backpacking in Europe in 2008, it was agreed that my brother and two friends, all three very practical, well oriented engineers and travel companions would be doing the navigating while I was in charge of the itinerary. That arrangement satisfied all parties and worked flawlessly (as much as anything can work flawlessly on a trip with four 20 year olds) for a month, until we hit the historic, magical maze that is the city of Venice.

My father, an amateur photographer and great lover of the arts had warned us that Venice was an artist’s dream, every corner revealing a perfect opportunity for a sketch or photograph, slowing down any traveler open to the beauties of that ancient city. Of course, none of the travel guide pictures showed Venice like we were seeing it, covered by a thin blanket of white snow, a phenomena so rare even the very few italians still living in the sinking city seemed in awe of it.

Maybe it was for this reason or for the very cold early January weather, but the streets seemed deserted late one night as we were trying to find our way back to our hostel. My trusty navigators had plotted a course through our map and seemed very sure of themselves as we turned corner after corner, crossed bridge after bridge and the minutes ticked by. Venice is not a big city and at one point it seemed to me it was taking a bit too long for us to reach our destination and the men, much to their own dismay, admitted we might be a bit lost.

Freezing and sleepy, I made a suggestion that we enter the nearest building for some warmth, light and to consult the map that had apparently betrayed us over an hour earlier. That building happened to be an old church, one that didn’t show up in any guide or map. We walked in and, at first, the church seemed as deserted as the alleyways outside, dark and ominous, but at least warm. And then, like something out of a movie, a figure stepped out of the shadows carrying a candle, seemingly taken aback by the presence of four young foreign tourists, late at night on a church no one seemed to know about. His surprised expression soon broke into a smile and he welcomed us in with the enthusiasm characteristic of the italian people, speaking words that even us, as portuguese speakers could not understand. After informing him we did not speak italian, the priest switched to english, much slower and broken, but without reducing that smile that spread all the way to his eyes.

We sat down, he brought us hot tea and told us all about his church, or at least tried, with the joy of someone who doesn’t see a lot of visitors and is eager to share the knowledge about a hidden, forgotten treasure . We learned that the

walls of that little middle of nowhere church were filled with enormous paintings by none other than Caravaggio and that he and two other priests lived and worked there. We spent a good hour listening to him and offering information of our own adventures and after tea was done and sleep was finally too much for us to bear, we said goodbye to our friend who gave us directions to our hostel. I never learned his name or the name of that church, but I'm glad of it now. That encounter will remain one of my most cherished memories of that trip, something that existed in that moment in time just for us and I'll never know, had I looked back after leaving that night, if that church would still be there or if it would have been swallowed by that cold, snowy Venetian night.