

THIRST

by
Rachel Cusk

From the 2007 Asham Awards anthology
Is This What You Want?

Arriving in Venice the Gibsons - mother and daughter - were inexplicably startled by the omnipresence of water. Julia Gibson had concerned herself too much with the practicalities of the trip; her daughter Charlotte too little. It was a sort of fashion, in their circle of friends, for a mother to take a brief holiday of this sort alone with her oldest child, particularly if she was a girl and pubescent; as though it were the subject of general agreement that these two family members

required special consideration and privileges, whether to mollify or reward them it was unclear. Julia and Charlotte were spending three nights away, which vaguely seemed the correct number to satisfy either requirement. It might have been this air of diplomatic import that caused the character of their destination to recede, as businessmen and politicians were said to zigzag around the globe without ever quite knowing where they were. They could have been going anywhere: the airplane itself, for example, seemed both neutral and unaccustomed enough for their vague and ominous purposes. It was some time since Julia Gibson had last troubled the world for anything: mostly she forgot that it was there. It did not seem unreasonable to her, strapped to her seat in the dry blue parabola of the heavens, that she should choose now to descend on it. Here and there the sky was streaked with white; the stealthy tracks of other aircraft, which gave the sky a used and somehow dishonourable look, as though the marks were the evidence of a whole subterfuge of business and pleasure that went on indifferent to the drama below.

At the airport it seemed they were expected to board a boat, and it was there, rising and falling riotously on the choppy waters with their cheeks red from half an

hour of waiting on the shifting wooden pontoon in the cold fresh maritime evening, that the singularity of their predicament made itself known to Julia and her daughter.

'If Daddy had had his way we'd be in Madrid!' Julia cried out over the noise of the engine, grasping Charlotte's arm in its padded coat sleeve whose slippery material resisted her fingers. 'Do you know what I think? I think he didn't want us to have too much fun.'

She often spoke in this way to the children about their father. It was a means of disclosing to them or to herself, the site of an injury she had borne, not unwillingly, for the sake of them all. In the privacy of her maternal world she lifted her garment and displayed her scar, the seam of her cortated self which retained areas of numbness and, still, of unpredictable tenderness. It was true that he had suggested they go to Madrid. He hadn't seemed able to explain why he had. He said he thought they would enjoy it, that was all. Julia had never been to Madrid, but the taint of its availability told her everything she needed to know about it. There were several possibilities: one was that he actually didn't want them to have too much fun; another - not unrelated - was that he wanted to go to

Venice himself; another, draughtier possibility, was that he was right.

'Do you think you'd have preferred to go to Madrid?'

She clutched Charlotte's arm again and pumped it up and down against the cold. The cold was imaginary - the boat was heated inside - but Charlotte's physical passivity often aroused her in this way.

'I don't know,' Charlotte said. 'I don't know what it's like. It depends.'

'Well, I think it's very *interesting*,' Julia said, furrowing her brow as though with an effort of exceptional sincerity. 'I think there are lots of museums and, you know, *public buildings*, monuments and that kind of thing. I think it's a great administrative centre.'

Charlotte said nothing.

'Whereas Venice-' Julia gestured with her hand towards the window, through which was visible the fortuitous pink light of dusk over the lagoon, 'Venice is a magical place, a fairytale place. It's unique. It's like going back to visit the past. Did you know there aren't any cars in Venice? Not a single one!'

'Why not?' Charlotte looked concerned, as though the absence of cars were disadvantageous and sinister.

'Because there aren't any roads! Instead they have

canals. You remember about the canals. I told you about them.'

'No, you didn't.'

'Darling,' said Julia severely, 'I did.'

'Is this it?' Charlotte said presently, roused by the slowing effortful vibrations of the engine.

A great bank of stone buildings radiant with electric light had silently manifested itself to one side of the boat, set back from the water. The big inscrutable facades of hotels succeeded one another all along the seafront. On top of one of the buildings tall hoardings spelled the word CAMPARI.

'Anyway, there *are* cars,' Charlotte observed.

Little pairs of headlights sped up and down beside them making spiky orange shapes in the gloom. There was traffic on the water too. A huge olive-coloured ferry trawled past them and headed out to sea. Half the people on the boat stood up and began to file towards the door with their bags and coats. The conductor shouted something.

'This is Venice Lido,' Julia said decidedly. 'It isn't Venice itself. Lido is a sort of resort. It has a famous beach.'

'So why doesn't everyone just come here instead?' said Charlotte, with the archness that her mother

particularly detested because it was undeniably the area of life in which Charlotte expended the most effort.

Julia was silent until their boat had crossed the dark lagoon to Venice and they could see it standing like a golden crown on the black water. She was silent as they passed the Arsenale with its compact shadowy masses of trees and the first bridges like little frowns over the probing canals. She was silent even as they glided past the spectacle of what she guessed from her reading to be St Mark's Square lit up in the darkness, and the cornucopia of the Doge's Palace, and the gold pate of the basilica, feeling that Charlotte would profit from the opportunity to become thoroughly mystified before Julia need take it upon herself to enlighten her any further. Wooden moorings stood everywhere out of the water in thick bundles and amidst them ranks of tethered gondolas floated, most of them covered in tight tarpaulins; a precaution, she supposed, against the January night, or an indication of their unseasonality. The sight was both charming and slightly morbid. The boat slowed and hovered, and then taxied in sideways to a little lit-up grey and yellow station with a sign that said *S. Marco*.

'This is it,' Julia said in a wistful tone, as though they

had arrived at a place where she had already lived a whole life, a life that had recently and grievously come to an end. She rose from her plastic seat and made her way down the boat with their suitcase. After a long hesitation which she sensed rather than saw, Charlotte got up and followed her.

A friend had told Julia that there was only one place for them to stay in Venice, and although this statement bore some of the inferences of Madrid - its suggestion of Julia as a level at which things could be pitched - she had called and reserved a room there. The friend had seemed surprised that Julia had got in. Normally, she said, you had to reserve months in advance. She concluded that it was the time of year that explained it. They got on another boat, a *vaporetto*, which was much slower and barrelled heavily up the Grand Canal with such a juddering commotion that Julia's enthusiasm was revived as though it had been shaken.

'We're here!' she shouted, gripping Charlotte's shoulders; and then, 'This is the Grand Canal - one of the most famous sights in the world!'

'You can't really see it,' Charlotte observed. 'It's too dark.'

'Don't worry,' Julia said, 'we'll be spending our *lives* going up and down it.'

'Will we?'

'Of course we will. Why, were you planning on just staying in the hotel for three days?'

Charlotte shrugged. 'I don't know.'

'You can do that if you want,' said her mother, 'but it would be a shame.'

'Anyway, I couldn't do it,' Charlotte said presently, gazing out through the foggy windows at the black water and the extravagantly gracious form of a church floating by. 'You wouldn't let me.'

'Why would you *want* to?' smiled Julia. 'That's a very strange thing to want to do in Venice, don't you think?'

Only a few months earlier Charlotte would certainly have responded to this by saying that she hadn't *said* she wanted to; now, however, she merely turned her head, causing her mother to feel a sense of destitution, of a shortfall, that was both troubling and corrective. She became immediately aware of the groomed, brown-eyed glances of the other passengers, to whom the nature of this exchange appeared to be apparent; and for an instant she had the picture of herself flamboyantly clothed in the coarseness of her relationships. Once, years ago, on a family holiday in France, she had seen a woman slap her daughter's cheeks, a girl the age Charlotte was then. The woman

was good-looking; so was the daughter, which lent the scene a certain stringent drama.

'Water!' she cried out again, when they were off the *vaporetto* and following the map through the narrow sepulchral streets to the hotel. She ran up the ramp of a small bridge and positioned herself at its apex in the dark, dropping the suitcase in order to fling out her arms over the cold motionless ribbon of a little canal that lay there exuding vapours. She had hoped to make Charlotte laugh, which Charlotte obligingly did. 'Water, water everywhere!' Julia exclaimed, so that muffled figures passing over the bridge turned their heads.

The man at the hotel desk directed them to a *trattoria* which he thought might be open at this time of year, although he couldn't be sure. It will be a good sign if it is, he said mysteriously.

Three times during the night Julia woke with a sensation of physical urgency, which each time she was surprised to recognise as tremendous thirst. Again and again she rose and went unsteadily through the darkness of their room with its obscure forms of furniture, to stand in the harsh light of the little bathroom and drink water. On the way back, not driven now by need, she was able each time to look at Charlotte asleep in the other bed and to feel a yearning

for her which the object of Charlotte herself failed to satisfy; which, if anything, she actually intensified by having supplanted the version of Charlotte in which the roots of Julia's love and knowledge lay. In the morning Charlotte claimed that she too had made numerous journeys in search of water, which seemed incredible, when Julia had traversed the night like a sentry and never once noticed her daughter even stir. It appeared that Charlotte's night had occurred separately from Julia's, in some parallel, autonomous universe of incipient adulthood. In the little breakfast room that looked out over the garden and where Julia was brought coffee and milk in heavy silver jugs in whose sides her distorted image wavered, the Gibsons obliquely examined the other guests. There was a slender elderly gentleman with a brown lined face, dressed in a dark blue suit. With him sat a young boy who wore an expression of benign politeness and whose dark hair was brushed so that it lay neatly flattened back from his face. They conversed in heavily accented English. By the window sat a large, middle-aged couple who ate steadily without speaking. There was also a family - two adults, two small shiny-haired children - who smiled and smiled, at each other and at everyone else.

'I think the food must have been very salty,' Charlotte said.

'I suppose it might have been,' Julia said. 'I don't know.'

'It was. They must have put so much salt in it.'

'Why do you think that man and his grandson are speaking in English when neither of them *are* English?'

Charlotte looked them over glancingly and shrugged.

'Maybe he's not his grandson,' she said.

'Well, what else would he be?'

'What does it do to you if you have too much salt?'

Julia noticed that Charlotte had gathered her hair into a bunch beside her ear, so that it stuck out from the side of her head like a spigot. She was wearing a little turquoise ring on a thin silver chain around her neck and a heavy metallic bracelet that slid around on her wrist and banged repeatedly against the watch Julia and David had given her. Her large imperturbable eyes were fringed with blue mascara. Her concern with the deleterious effects of salt seemed visibly to rattle and ricochet around the taut walls of the mind behind them. Julia felt a new comprehension forcing itself on her, that in this business of differentiation, of growing up, it was not Charlotte who was departing

but Julia herself; Julia who was increasingly guilty of acts of abandonment, in the matter of the spigot and the mascara and of Charlotte's midriff, which she liked to leave exposed at all times so that this tender, private piece of flesh had taken on an anonymous, public character: it was Julia who was disaffected, with this new, unexpected flourishing of her responsibilities. She had had to learn so much in order to teach her children how to exist, and now the curriculum extended all the way up to the point where her own studies had been interrupted; where questions of self, of her own self, lay neglected and unanswered. She had witnessed numerous examples of how other women dealt with this problem, and none of them encouraged her.

'I don't think it's very good for you,' she said. 'But I feel strangely purified, don't you?'

Gratifyingly, Charlotte seemed to give this assertion concerted thought.

'Maybe,' she said, nodding.

They went to the large public art gallery that was conveniently near their hotel, where Julia found herself by turns costive and pedagogic in her representations to Charlotte of the glories of Italian painting. As a student she had spent a term in Florence studying art,

and a pulse still faintly beat through that long, attenuated vein; moreover, it had always been accepted by the family, apparently without effort, not just that art was an interest of hers but that it was actually important, which led her to consider how much else she might have incorporated into the legislature of her children's emergent selves and how painlessly. The number of other people in the gallery - not negligible - was like a shadow cast by the great crowds of the tourist season. She and Charlotte found the central Bellinis and three paintings by Giorgione before confining themselves to the two rooms in which the works of Tintoretto and Veronese were displayed.

'We're not messing around here,' Julia said. 'We're just going straight to the point.'

'Shouldn't we look at everything?' Charlotte enquired, as they walked past whole walls at which Julia did not even glance.

I can't, Julia wanted to say. What she couldn't do - not any more - was squander time on what was merely exploratory or reflective; she couldn't lose herself in the connective tissue, the stems and foliage. She already knew too much about that side of life. She sought only the big blooms, the gold, not because she was vain or insensible but because there was

desolation in her heart, and savagery: it was a landscape blackened by the needs of others, in which she had acquired a great knowledge of survival; a sort of volcanic terrain where emotion came in big bangs of hot, violent feeling. That was how it sometimes seemed. Often she felt rather regal, though that too caused her to disdain all but one level of human endeavour.

There was an exhibition of Carpaccio, where Charlotte was taken with a painting called *Il Sogno di Orsola* and Julia found herself detained by one of a series depicting the life of Mary. The painting showed a room in a house where various women were occupied in domestic tasks. A baby - Mary - had just been born and her mother lay in bed, raised on her elbow and looking at the scene with an expression on her face Julia recognised, the expression of someone who has left their own body and been returned to it changed. Charlotte's painting was very beautiful. St Ursula had yellow hair and lay very still and flat in her neat white little bed, in her room that was everything desirable in a room, while a handsome young angel stood and watched her sleeping. Later, in the gift shop, Charlotte bought a bookmark with the image of the angel on it.

They walked around the maze of the city in the perfect pink cold sunlight and encountered the charm of its canals and bridges, its unexpected piazzas and quiet alleys and hidden churches, its atmosphere of monitored decay and of self-knowledge, and Julia found that the sleeve of Charlotte's coat was less slippery when she gripped it so that their talk grew warmer and fitted easily back into its proper setting in the past; and for a while all this beauty distracted Julia from her own creeping feelings of ugliness until it began to transform them too, so that when she caught sight of her own reflection in the little shop windows she saw possibilities and even enigmas there, and in the evening when they returned from their restaurant and met the dapper old gentleman and the boy on the stairs, the old man stood back and bowed cordially and said *'buona sera'* and the boy smiled as though he were pleased.

In the morning there were new people in the breakfast room, an Englishman in his twenties as tall and thick and lush as a shop-bought lily, who wore severely fashionable black-framed glasses and primrose yellow corduroy trousers, and stalked around campily fetching things for his companion, an ancient bald little man in a tweed suit. The smiling

family smiled at Julia and Charlotte with the intensity of renewed acquaintance. Charlotte said that she had been up in the night again several times drinking water. Julia had filled a bottle and put it beside her own bed, and over the course of the night drained it to the bottom.

'Lucky you,' Charlotte said. 'I had to get up every time.'

'You can have it tonight.'

'I must have got up about six times.'

'I'll fill it up for you and you can have it by your bed.'

Julia said she thought they might devote the day to Tintoretto, who had lived in Venice all his life and whose works were everywhere around the city. In the Scuola di San Rocco there was a vast room in which he had painted the whole life of Christ on the walls and ceiling. Charlotte's downcast eyes widened over her plate.

Julia said: 'Don't you want to do that?'

There was silence.

'It's just that we looked at paintings yesterday,' Charlotte eventually replied. 'I thought we were going to do something else today.'

'Like what?'

'I don't know. Go to some shops or something.'

Julia's friends held the belief, far more passionately than Julia herself did, that the world was a terrible and dangerous place in which the chance to realise the desires of one's children offered a kind of moral, or perhaps merely emotional, harbour. *Poor Charlotte*, these friends would have said, laughing.

'We didn't come to Venice to go shopping,' Julia said.

She realised in the same instant both that she wanted to shame Charlotte and that Charlotte was not ashamed.

'The shops are just as much a part of it as everything else.'

'What, as much as things that have been here for five centuries?'

'Yes!' exclaimed Charlotte, with a defiant toss of her head. 'It doesn't make things automatically good just because they're old, or because they're paintings by one man.'

Regarding Tintoretto's *Slaughter of the Innocents*, Julia felt confirmed in her belief that the world was no more dangerous or terrible than it ever had been. The building was gloomy, and as cold as a tomb. It was an atmosphere of discouragement that intensified the discovery of the paintings, riotous with life, that covered every wall and ceiling on two floors. Charlotte

sat huddled in a chair in her coat and didn't look at anything. Julia took her time, as ebullient with self-satisfaction, as capacious and eager as though she were being fattened up for something, but what? The bodies of the women were so monumental that they seemed almost incapacitated by their own frozen knowledge. Tintoretto had a way of painting their fleshy shoulders slightly askew and their heads turned to one side, as though they were perennially responding to some call on their attention. An answering stature aroused itself in Julia's breast. She looked at the mangled forms of the dead children, their little feet, their limp rounded arms, their soft curly heads. She had loved her children so; and now it sometimes seemed as though that love were a grand expense for which she continued to pay in instalments, a single and increasingly remote instance of indulgence. Yet it was only that in those early days she had not guessed at how far her sincerity would be stretched. She was like an actor in a long-running play, who every night must replicate the same drama and feel the same exhaustion afterwards: it was the fact that it continued to tax her in its repetition that was so perplexing. To feel a melancholic, liquid surge of empathy at their little heads and hands and feet, that was her single trick. Sometimes, by contrast, David

made her cry in arguments and it was like some ancient hydraulic event occurring in the bowels of a vast old house; a long, rumbling, catastrophic pause after the tap had been turned on, at the end of which a strenuous trickle of stinging brown water would emerge.

In a shop by the Rialto she bought Charlotte a dolphin made of purple glass, by which Charlotte had claimed to be enchanted. In the busy street, in the pink and blue tints of dusk, beside the big, pale, cold canal where the *vaporetti* drew furrows in the water as though in the surface of milk, their disagreement modulated into a series of quiet and comforting transactions; as though some unpleasant but necessary operation had been performed from which they were both recuperating. Julia had been prepared for the writ of Charlotte's taste to run much wider, but her choice of the dolphin seemed almost like an appeal for Julia's sympathy, or even a commentary on her expectations. How could a girl who coveted a purple dolphin be blamed for anything? Julia bought her a bag of chocolates and a Spanish fan with a picture of St Mark's Square on it, and in a cluttered little shop in a side street they spent an hour looking at painted Venetian masks while outside darkness filled the city as though

it sat at the bottom of a well. The shop was warm and dusty and bright with electric light. It smelled of wood and paint. The young Italian woman behind the counter told them that in the past Venetian women used masks not only during Carnival but as a regular tool of mystification. Charlotte lifted one to her face. It had a plume of pink feathers and scrolls of sequins around the eyes.

'What do you think?' she said.

She turned and looked at herself in the mirror. She did not ask why the women had wanted to disguise themselves: Julia wondered if she knew, or thought she did. She saw her daughter suddenly irradiated by the desire not to see or to know, but to take; to take life where the fine, feather-like divinations of her youthful instinct told her it lay.

'Very mysterious!' the woman cried out, laughing, as though she were not at all weary of people doing in her shop what Charlotte had just done.

Charlotte turned in her exotic, cruel plumage to her mother.

'Can I have it?'

'I don't think so,' Julia said, with a smiling roll of her eyes at the woman.

'Why not?'

'Because I don't think you would use it.'

'I would!'

'And because I've already bought *far* too many things,' Julia said, with another roll of her eyes.

Charlotte turned and regarded herself again in the mirror.

'Then I'll buy it myself,' she said, speaking to her reflection.

Julia did up her coat and went and looked at a display of masks nearer the door.

'Come on, darling,' she said. 'It's late. I'm sure the *signora* wants to close up her shop.'

The woman made a smiling gesture to the heavens, as though it were not in her power to decide to want such a thing.

'I'll pay for it myself. You'll have to give me the money and I'll pay you back.'

'I don't have any money,' Julia replied benignly.

'You do!'

'I don't. It's all spent.'

'What about the money you were going to spend on dinner?' Charlotte said imperiously from behind her mask.

There was a pause.

'Let's go and talk about it,' said Julia meaningfully.

'We can always come back tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow, no,' interposed the woman. 'Tomorrow we are closed.'

'See? They're closed tomorrow. We have to do it *now*.'

The three of them looked at one another.

'Charlotte,' Julia said. 'I'm going.'

She put her hand on the brass door handle. The woman turned away and busied herself with something behind the counter. Julia opened the door and let in a stream of cold air, and when Charlotte did not come, as much out of consideration as anger, she let herself out of the shop and closed the door behind her. Standing in the little stone alley in the dark, she looked at the bright tableau of the shop window, with her daughter and the woman standing in it like two actors on a stage. Charlotte let the hand holding the mask slowly fall. With a downcast head she replaced it on the shelf. The woman was standing now with her arms folded, gazing obliquely at something through the window. She nodded as Charlotte passed her and through the glass Julia heard her say '*arrivederci*'.

'I'm sorry,' said Julia, who was not sorry at all, when Charlotte was outside.

'Just leave me alone,' Charlotte said, folding her arms

and walking ahead.

Later, she *was* sorry: she found herself succumbing to the theory that the world was in fact a terrible and dangerous place, amidst whose manifold confusions she had thought to crush her daughter's tentative ideas of beauty. Shouldn't they all just cling together, and be as kind as they could? On the *vaporetto*, with Charlotte sullen and sighing on the seat beside her, she became aware of the scrutiny of a girl sitting opposite them, a girl in an immaculate white woollen coat and high-heeled boots whom Julia guessed to fall exactly between their ages, as though she were the missing part of their set and this might explain why she was looking at them so intently. She gazed at them with her large, clear eyes. Her plump, glossy lips were motionless. The more she stared the more Julia felt her perplexity. She seemed to find Julia and Charlotte inexplicably squalid. A thick, pale fog had suddenly descended over the canal, and through the window Julia saw the black beaks of the tethered gondolas rising and falling on the water in the gloom. Their agitation was disturbing: it was faintly lunatic, their interior rocking. The white air closed around them.

'You can choose what we do today,' Julia said the next morning - their last - at breakfast. 'The flight

doesn't go until five. We'll do whatever you want.'

'OK,' Charlotte said. She seemed only slightly surprised. She straightened in her chair and looked around her with an aura of election.

'I've drunk so much water that I think I've washed away my soul,' Julia added.

'Is that a good thing?' Charlotte asked.

What Julia liked about children was the way they started where you left off, like runners waiting down the track with their hands outstretched for the baton. They took it - what was irreducible and final, what resisted all the sifting and the efforts to comprehend - and they ran; ran on lanky legs out of your failure or your contentment or your unwearying ambivalence and left you to unfold, to find your own level again.

Julia said: 'I think it definitely is.'

They found a painting in a church near Tintoretto's house of the young Mary being presented at the temple. She was a little golden child, a girl, ascending a great rounded stone staircase in a pool of light. The broad, twisting women were here again: she had made her path through them where they sat or stood on the stairs. At the top a towering bearded man in clerical

garb waited, dreadful, judging. The women turned and looked at her as she passed. They admired her and they were frightened for her. They were seeing something new.

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Rachel Cusk was chosen as one of *Granta's* Best of Young Novelists in 2003. She is the author of seven novels: *Saving Agnes*, which won the Whitbread First Novel Award, *The Temporary*, *The Country Life*, which won a Somerset Maugham Award, *The Lucky Ones*, which was shortlisted for the Whitbread Novel Award, *In the Fold* and *Arlington Park*, which was shortlisted for the Orange Prize and *The Bradshaw Variations*.