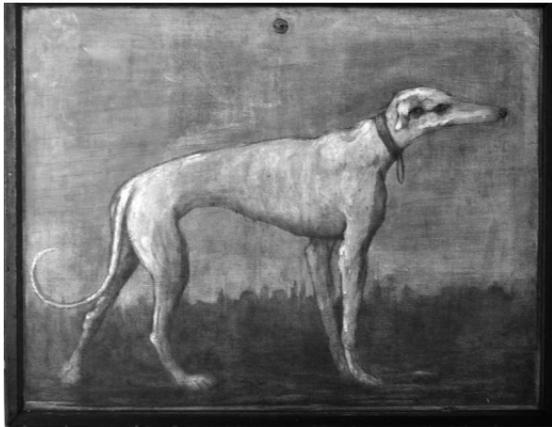


# PICCOLO: an Intern's Tale

from Venice to Williamsburg and  
back

by

*Piccolo Fortunato*



Painting by Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo

Venice, Italy, 1793

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## **Piccolo: an Intern's Tale**

from The Tales of Piccolo: Book 1

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## Acknowledgments

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## From Venice

Call me Piccolo. I was born in Venice on Christmas Day at the turn of this century to a proud family of Italian greyhounds who have lived and worked for many generations in the *sestiere di Cannaregio*, a quiet neighborhood of morning markets and small cafes beside the green waters of the Grand Canal.

My father Alfonso Fortunato was a sculptor whose own father and grandfather had followed the occupation of stone-cutters—while it is said that our family had for several ages supplied Venice with artisans skilled in mosaic, metal work and glassblowing. And so my father, a descendant of many traditions, had from a young age trained me to carve the wood, chisel the stone and with the small blue flame of my torch to cut and weld the steel.

My mother Isabella, renowned for her gracious nature and the sheen of her fawn and cream colored coat, often said that we resembled her ancestor whose portrait had been painted against a hazy silhouette of our city in 1793 by Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo—and that the Venetian master much revered the canine apprentice who labored in his studio. Although this story may well have been apocryphal, I certainly believed it whole-heartedly as a pup.

In more recent years my mother's family had fallen on hard times when her father, a Roman racing dog of

superior strength and legendary speed—a veteran of a cruel sport that only ended in my country with the closing of the Cinodromo track in 2002—had broken his leg and been put down, forcing my grandmother to split up the family to live with various relatives. Having moved in with an elderly aunt of limited means in San Polo, Isabella was sent out at a young age to beg in the Mercato di Rialto.

One morning, just beyond the arched bridge on his way to the *pescaria* to purchase oysters from the lagoon for his midday meal, my father first saw this statuesque beauty. Day by day she was charmed by the short-legged artist in the pork pie hat who presented her with small bags of biscotti, some filled with jam or flavored with anise, and the ones he soon discovered were her favorite, the *biscotti di regina* studded with the pale white seeds of the sesame plant. By the end of that mild summer, despite her aunt's objections, they wed in la Chiesa di San Felice, a small church a short distance from the house where I was raised.

Isabella too was an artist, and as a puppy I sat by her paws on our balcony overlooking the Canale di Cannaregio where I watched her paint with much delicacy and detail our sestiere—a district bustling with workmen and shopkeepers and vendors with their icy crates of sardines and baskets of crabs and bulbs of bright green fennel. When Mama painted, it came to life—the purple red radicchio with its curling white veins, the overlapping movements of the boats and barges and



people walking along the quay—the light as it filtered through the white wing of a pigeon. She could even paint the coolness of the evening as it fell like a shadow over the deep green and shifting waters of the canal.

In my father's studio I learned to love the clang of steel, the fizzling spray of sparks from his welder, the smell of burning metal and the underlying rumble of the

compressor that accompanied the air hammer and chisel as he sculpted stone. But in the stillness that surrounded my mother as she painted, I learned the quiet between each moment of creation.

And so, though my schooling was limited, I learned from them the various ways of the artist—an education that led us every Saturday to the Gallerie dell'Accademia where my mother would sketch the angels, clouds and crucifixions, the saints, the noblemen and the occasional hound in the foreground of the Venetian masters. Her favorite was Tinteretto, whose father dyed cloth, making him the little dyer, who like me without going to school had learned his lessons from looking very closely at the great art around him. A story, I realize looking back, was a nudge for me to pay attention to the framed wonders around us, instead of the adventures of Tintin open on the floor beside me as I lounged there in the Renaissance room at her paws.

Even in Rome that summer when we visited the Vatican, Tintin and his bright and admirable friend Snowy occupied my thoughts—which only for a moment were drawn in by an ancient work of art. It was a marble sculpture, whose artist's name has been long forgotten, of two seated greyhounds that the tour guide said were at play. But looking up from the pages of *Tintin in Tibet*, I disagreed. All eyes turned to me, and I said that they were not playing at all, but that one was healing the other, licking his wounded ear. The tour guide glared at me for the interruption and then raised her flag for us

to follow, but my mother smiled and whispered, “Good observation, Piccolo, but their kind will rarely admit that.”

One day my mother was mixing gesso and water in a glass bowl when my father came to her and gently nuzzled her neck beneath her rosebud ear.

“Isabella,” he said softly. “I am going to America.”

“Alfonso,” she whimpered, licking his blue-black muzzle with deep affection. “The voyage is long and the dangers in that distant land are many. I beg you. Stay here with us in Venezia.”

But my father was a dog of a willful and adventurous nature. And though he came of a diminutive breed, his father had trained him in physical culture—just as Papa trained me from eight weeks old—so that his offspring could withstand the hardships of independent living and ply our various trades. Born of an ancestral line of hunters, known for our endurance and strength, we Fortunatos have always preferred to work than to be the idle objects of attention.

Sadly my mother and I watched him pack his leather satchel with his sculpting tools—the chisels, mallets, gouges, hammers, files, a grinder and his torch and followed him to the corner of the studio where on a low sofa beneath a tall lamp he used to read with Mama side by side, reading and discussing both classic and contemporary authors. He now ran his paw along the smooth surface of the shelf he had had made from a

hardwood plank, which as a pup I helped him sand and then brush on the many thin coats of tung oil so that it shone deep and red with a swirling grain.

“Take good care of these,” he said nodding toward his books, which included his vintage first edition titles of the Modern Library, many still wrapped in their dust jackets, and twenty-three titles of the Tintin series that he had lovingly collected over the years. Their covers showed more signs of wear from having been read to me nightly as a pup, who even when with jelly on my paw I left an unintended smudge, was never scolded.

“And these,” he said, nodding toward his prized collection of Blue Note records and vintage albums of Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald and Tony Bennett, the great singer of New York whose voice my father’s closely resembled—whose own father in Calabria had long ago packed a suitcase and prepared for this same journey, who like Alfonso must have had to find a way to say good-bye. From the pale blue cover of the oldest album in his collection, my father took the record from its sleeve and placed it on the turntable and sang along with all his heart, *Because of You*.

And then Isabella joined him—her soft, warm voice enveloping each note as he held his muzzle close to hers and dipped and spun her around the living room. I nodded and attempted to smile, but as happens with my species, I sneezed with great emotion when their dance ended and they kissed.



We could have lived forever in that silence that surrounded us like a cave.

And perhaps we should have. But then the time drew near for his ship to depart, and from the nail above the shelf Papa took his pork pie hat.

Mama whimpered though he tried to reassure her. "Biscotti," he said, for this was his sweet name for her. "My Biscotti, don't cry. For as soon as I make my fortune, I will send for you and the bambino."

But sad to say that letter never came.

For over two years we waited, making our livelihood selling mama's smaller works, mostly watercolors and pastels, to the tourists who flocked to la Piazza di San Marco—each morning pulling our cart to the square where she would display her work and set up her easel to paint throughout the day. At noon she would give me two euros to run to one of the many crowded *bàcari* to nose my way through the crowd of locals and tourists who gathered at the counter to order *cicchetti*, the delicious bites prepared from whatever was fresh that morning in the market, my favorite being the small plates of *crostini*, fried pieces of bread topped with paper-thin *prosciutto* or the creamed salt cod that tickled my nostrils.

I remember one day it was so difficult to choose that Mama became worried in my absence and left her place in the square, only to find me with two paws on the glass display case, my eyes wide, transfixed by the abundance of those savory snacks. From the doorway she barked, snapping me out of my daze before ordering two plates of *polpette*, the delicious fried meatballs that had been my father's favorite, a dish he would always wash down with a splash of wine poured into his bowl from the porcelain jug.

Sitting at a small table—a privilege for which tourists had to pay, but for us was free as Alfonso had been great friends with the owner of that cichetteria—and having licked the last delicious crumb from my plate, I told her what was in my heart. “Mama, I am a big dog now, and

the time has come for me to go to America to look for Papa.”

“But, Piccolo,” she whined. “What if you do not find him? What will you do in that big country that swallowed him up without so much as one word for his family? I fear that place, Piccolo. America she is hungry and will swallow you up like your papa.” Isabella bowed her head, and her ears quivered as she sniffled.

“Mama, don’t worry. I have a good set of paws to work and a good nose to match. Believe me, Mama. I will find Papa.”

“But what if you don’t? What if this America, she gobbles you up as she gobbled up my Alfonso?”

“Don’t worry, Mama. I promise to find Papa, and fortune as an artist in America.”

While in the duffel bag I placed my portfolio thick with photographs of works I had completed and drawings of those I would one day make, Mama left the corner of the dim room where we slept and passed under the blanket that hung from the ceiling. You see, dear reader, ever since my father’s departure our life had become difficult, and we had given up the duplex apartment which had been both studio for Papa and our home in Cannaregio for a more affordable ground floor room where the constant dampness caused us both sinus problems throughout the fall and winter. From the corner where we kept her easel and our cart, Mama brought a blue bag of biscotti that

she set down beside my duffel bag, a gift for me her only son on his voyage to America.

With the last of our savings Mama had paid for my passage on a ship called *Preziosa*. When at noon on that spring day we caught the vaparetto for San Basilio, the slip from which she would sail, *la Marangona* tolled from the bell tower of my beloved piazza, and my tail sagged motionless behind me. After I boarded the ship, my mother stood on the promenade and howled with the sadness of our parting as the last thin line of land faded in the distance. I then dragged my canvas bag to my cabin where I climbed onto my mattress and circled it several times before pawing the blanket and falling into a troubled sleep.

But being a young dog on his first adventure, when the morning light spilled over my porthole, I leaped from my bed and out the door. Up the iron stairs I bolted, my nostrils flared, inhaling all the smells that washed over me on waves of salty sea air. Every deck, every railing, the entire ship from bow to stern, happily I sniffed. My ears alert, I listened avidly to all the conversations that flowed around me. One evening in the dining room, I overheard the passengers at my table speak of a famous American artist.

“Excuse me?” I asked, “But who is this famous artist, and how might I meet him?”

They told me his name was Guy Gizárd, an American artist of international fame, and although he was rarely

sighted in the dining room or other common areas of the ship, he was known to walk the uppermost deck at dawn.

So thrilled was I at the thought of meeting a real American artist that I did not sleep in my bed that night, choosing instead to curl up on a lounge chair near the spot where he had been sighted. I brought along a small wool blanket which I pulled over my frosty nostrils to await the sunrise and the appearance of Guy Gizárd. I imagined that being a great artist, Mr. Gizárd must have awoken so early to study the effects of light on the open sea. Eager to join him in his study of nature, I waited throughout that tail-chilling night.

But just before dawn heaviness overtook my eyes while on the briny air I smelt Mama's risotto simmering in the black ink of the squid. Stretching before me in my dream, la Piazza was silent and empty at dawn when in the distance I heard the wooden wheels of our cart on the slabs of stone that paved the square where my mother now approached, pulling it alone. "Piccolo, Piccolo," she called to me, and my paws twitched with the same joy I felt as a puppy racing to meet her.

But then from her slender back sprouted two grey and white wings. Flying to the pier from which my ship had sailed, she landed on a barnacle encrusted piling where she craned her neck and squawked raucously as a splash of icy water awoke me from my dream to see a noisy seagull perched on the railing of the *Preziosa*.

Sitting up, I watched the star-filled night grow faint along the horizon where a long stroke of pale orange and another of violet separated the sea and sky, and my old life in Venice from the strange events that were soon to follow. Against that backdrop I saw the silhouette of a short stout man who wore a long leather coat and leaned over the rail. When he straightened up and turned around, he was dabbing his mouth with a handkerchief. His scrawny legs were bare beneath his coat, and on his feet he wore the same white slippers I had seen on other passengers.

“Are you alright?” I asked, tossing off my blanket and approaching the man who looked pale and ill.

“Nothing wrong with me that a little hair of the dog, can’t fix,” he replied, taking a silver flask from his inside pocket, unscrewing the cap and tipping back his head to drain the contents.

“What dog?”

“As in hung over?”

“Hung over what?”

“You know, like an eighteen wheeler slammed into your brain after you put down a few too many.”

“Put down?” I repeated the dreaded phrase.

“You don’t drink, do you?”

“Only water, and on special occasions a little wine with Mama and Papa.”

“How old are you, kid?”

“Three.”

“No wonder, you’re just a baby.”

“Baby?” I replied indignantly. “I am a full grown Italian greyhound of an old and honored family, the Fortunatos of Venice. And I am going to America to find my Papa.”

“Fortunato, huh? Son of Fortunato,” he pondered aloud.

“You know my papa?” I barked. And unable to contain my excitement, I jumped with my front paws landing squarely on the stranger’s chest.

“Down, get down. This coat is worth more than your life,” he cried as he stumbled backward, grasping the ship’s rail.

I fell onto my haunches and felt a pang of shame at having so abandoned all control in front of the stranger. My ears tilting downward, I apologized profusely, and showing the ultimate sign for sorry, I rolled on my back and allowed the man to rub my belly.

“No, problem, kid. But to answer your question no, I don’t know your dad, but I have heard of the Fortunato family. Who hasn’t?”

My chest swelled with pride to think that our name was known beyond the narrow streets of our neighborhood and I gave my paw to the man who shook it in his hand.

"I am Piccolo Fortunato. And you, sir? Are you Guy Gizárd the famous American artist?"

"The most famous," he replied with a belch.

"Please, Mr. Gizárd, I too am an artist. And I am very interested in the town called Soho in your country."

"Soho, kid? What've you been living in a cave? It's all happening in Chelsea. Has been since the 90s."

"No, I was not living in a cave," I said dipping my head submissively. "But in the back room of a ground floor apartment near the Canalosso which Mama rents for 10 euros a week."

"Ground floor? In the acqua alta you're like three feet under."

"Many times we were in la Piazza when the sirens would sound and water would rise between the paving stones. Then we would pack our cart and hurry home to carry the few belongings we had not sold along with Mama's paintings up the stairs to join our neighbors on the second floor to wait for the waters to recede. We are accustomed to this. But it is the dampness in the nostrils which is a hardship. And the fact that due to poor wiring, in the evening it is difficult to read. Yet it is where we have had to live while we await the return of my father."

"Don't worry about it, kid. Life's got its ups and down, maybe you're due for a change of fortune, eh, Fortunato?"

It was not the first time I had heard that joke, but I bared my teeth slightly as I had come to understand was an acknowledgment of humor. Guy Gizárd scratched me behind my ear, and I stood beside him at the railing watching the shifting colors give way to a cool white sun on the horizon.

“That’s better, kid. So, let me guess, you’re an artist, huh? Got a portfolio?”

“Yes, I do, and in it over a hundred photographs of my sculptures and drawings for a hundred more.”

“Then, young Fortunato, meet me in the dining room at midnight for a nightcap. How’s that for starters?”

“For a starter that is excellent. But as I do not have a night cap, I will wear my welding cap, thank you,” I replied as my tail wagged, lashing Guy Gizárd’s bare leg.

“Don’t mention it, kid, I’m always looking out for the underdog. It’s just my nature.”

“You are a very kind man.”

“Whatever. Just be there by twelve, and we’ll toss back some Jack Daniels.”

“Excuse me, but who is this Jack, and why would I—how do you say, toss him back?”

“Jack’s a real American, and tonight I’ll introduce you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Gizárd,” I replied and ran to my cabin to review my portfolio and consider how best I might present my work that night.

I sensed that this man Guy Gizárd was about to change the course of my life, so I scrubbed my yellow welding cap in the sink, and with the metal file from my tool roll I cleaned the rough edges from my nails, and with a length of thread I flossed between my teeth. But had I known the true intention behind his invitation, I might not have selected my collar with such care and anticipation.

The hours dragged throughout that sunless day as I padded back and forth on the decks. Finally the misty evening gave way to a drizzly night, and at twelve o’clock I entered the dining room and asked the waiter to seat me at the table of Guy Gizárd. Proudly, I set down my portfolio before him and watched with nervous anticipation. As I observed that Mr. Gizárd had in fact decided not to wear his night cap, I removed my own and placed it on the table

“Alright, kid, let’s see what you got,” he said flipping past the images of my marble, wood and stone carvings as well as the assemblages of steel I had made in my father’s studio. My heart raced and my stomach felt queasy. At first I wanted to take my book and run from the room thinking with shame that he did not like my work. Then when he tossed my portfolio carelessly aside, I felt a growl rising in my throat at the disrespect.

Fortunately Mama had taught me to think before I speak, and so when the great artist nodded approvingly, I was glad I had not shown my anger.

“Nice work. You really seem to know your stuff. But, kid, you’re all over the place, you’ve got to focus.”

“I don’t understand, Mr. Gizárd, is it not good for an artist to master many methods and styles?”

“It’s all about the brand, always has been. Collectors want to know what they’re getting, and I’m telling you, kid, stick with the steelwork. You got potential, but it’s got to go in one direction if you want to get ahead.”

“I see,” I said even though I couldn’t really understand, being disoriented by the newness of my surroundings and his unusual advice as Papa had always taught me to be a master of all materials.

“What’s the plan?” he asked, tipping back a glass filled with amber liquid.

“I have only two. To do my artwork and to find my papa.”

“Let me guess. He took off to America to find fame and fortune, and never came home?”

“Yes, exactly, but how do you know this?”

“Let’s just say I know the artistic temperament.”

“Again, you are correct. My papa, he is a true artist.”

“No doubt, kid. But just remember, America’s a big place— and New York City’s even bigger. Take just about any street in Manhattan, and there’s more distraction than you can shake a stick at. A young artist gets here with one intention, but a thousand temptations pull him in that many directions. There’s something for every appetite, and once you’ve fed one, there’s another taste you want to try.”

Out of respect I remained quiet, but in my jaws I felt a quiver, the urge to bite the man who had insulted my father’s good character—for Papa would never have strayed from his two intentions to make art and to return home to his beloved Biscotti.

“But appetites and rent take money. How much you got on you?”

“Eighty nine euros,” I said, proud of the money that I had saved after the purchase of my ticket for the voyage to New York City.

“In New York City, kid, that’s bupkis.”

“Bupkis?”

“Like barely enough for a decent meal. And when you got bupkis in New York, kid, you’re nobody. And when you’re nobody, that’s when the trouble starts.”

“What kind of trouble, Mr. Gizárd?”

“All sorts of trouble, bill collectors, city marshals throwing you out of your place. Shelters, soup kitchens,

then cops harassing you," he said nodding at me as if I might be in such danger.

"I have never lived on the streets."

"Lots of loners end up there. So before you go looking for your papa, you need to get yourself set up. Make some connections, meet the kind of people who can help get you to the money."

"But I don't know anyone in America. How will I meet these people?"

"Well, you're off to a good start, kid, because right now I'm about to introduce you to that friend of mine."

In the corner seated on a stool at the bar, a young man in a white jacket had started to doze off. Mr. Gizárd snapped his fingers, startling him awake.

"Bus boy, bring me a bowl from the kitchen for my friend here."

To be called friend by such a great and powerful man I felt proud and sat up even straighter in my chair.

Before me the bus boy set down a porcelain bowl with a golden edge. Mr. Gizárd reached across the table, and I watched his thick hand tilt the square bottle with a black and white label, pouring the amber liquid into my dish.

"But where is your friend, Mr. Gizárd? Will he be joining us?" I asked, scanning the dining room, empty except for the busboys who were stripping the dirty linen from the other tables.



“He’s right there in front of you, kid. Jack Daniels, a real eighty-proof, blue-blooded American. Go ahead lap it up.”

The smell of the amber liquid offended me, and I did not want to drink. But wanting to please my host, I took a sip that blazed over my tongue and down my throat.

“Don’t worry, the next one’ll go down easier, always does,” said Guy Gizárd refilling his own glass. “So you want to be an artist in New York?”

“Very much, Mr. Gizárd.”

“Stick with me, kid, and your work will be all over. Galleries, museums, you name it. But, you have to follow my lead. First of all, let’s see you make my friend Jack disappear.”

With much apprehension, I set my paws on either side of the bowl, leaned forward and drank. Streaming down into my stomach like flaming oil, the whiskey blurred my vision and made every muscle in my body clench. I pushed the empty bowl onto the carpeted floor and swayed as I tried desperately to focus on the many images of the great American artist whose words echoed across the table.

“Really packs a wallop, don’t it?” he said laughing with a snort.

I nodded at the many faces of Guy Gizárd, watching his many hands draw many briefcases from the floor and

set them on the table. Then his many fingers removed from them what appeared to be countless pages.

“What are those?” I slurred.

“Your ticket to fame and fortune in America. Sign this contract and I will set you up in your own studio, kid, where you can turn those sketches into sculpture.”

“But why?”

“Let’s just say I love good art,” he said, producing a pad of ink from his pocket. “Just make your mark here, and I swear those steel pieces will not only be in the Gallstone Gallery, but stick with me and your work will be in the next Gauntley Biennial.”

Although the room spun around me and for every busboy I saw three, those words rang clearly in my ears: my work in the next Gauntley Biennial. I offered no resistance when Guy Gizárd grasped my paw, pressed it onto the ink pad, then onto that contract making my mark, the paw print of the Fortunatos of Venice. Again he reached for that dreaded bottle to refill his glass and picking up the bowl from the floor, filled it again to the brim.

“Now we won’t consider our deal sealed until we drink a toast.”

I placed my paws on the table but felt nothing beneath them. I swerved, leaning forward, aiming my muzzle at the amber pool, but missed and losing my balance fell head first to the floor where throughout that night alone

I lay on the whisky sodden carpet that fouled my dreams with its sour stench.

My head pounding, I awoke the next morning with the leather boot of Mr. Guy Gizárd jabbing me in the ribs.

“C’mon, kid. Time to get up and get going.”

Dazed, I rose and followed him to the deck where the harsh light blazing off the water hurt my eyes. “My portfolio,” I said dimly recalling the night before. “I must retrieve it from the dining room.”

“Don’t worry, kid, I got it,” he replied, snapping a leash onto my collar and leading me down the gangplank into the mobs that gathered to greet the passengers of the Preziosa.

A leash. I yanked at the chain that tautened between us.

“Calm down,” said Guy Gizárd, pulling me along by his side as he strode down the pier. “It’s just a formality. It’ll come off as soon as we get to the studio. Besides, this is New York City, and I wouldn’t want you to get lost.”

Guy Gizárd led me to a parking lot where a semi-bald man in a blue blazer waited. The sunlight glinted off the tiny gold cross that dangled from his ear, and his overly sweet smell made my nose twitch and my stomach churn.

“Mason, this is the one I was telling you about. Kid, Mason Maldonado, my assistant.”

Handed the leash, the man yanked forcefully. I snarled and snapped at his manicured fingertips.

“Don’t worry, Mason. This one’s all bark and no bite.” he said dipping down behind the door of a sleek silver car held open for him by his driver. “And Mason, give it a break with the Givenchy knock-off, I could smell you from the boat.”

“What do you mean, knock off? I bought it outside Macy’s.”

“Whatever, just take the dog back to Brooklyn, and I’ll be by in a couple weeks to check on him.”

“But where are you going?” I asked, my head hurting even more with the movement of my jaws. “I thought I was going with you to the town of Chelsea?”

“Relax, kid, you’ll get there. But first you’ve got to make the work, right? South Street,” he said to the driver who closed the rear door and moved around to the front seat.

“I don’t understand,” I said scratching at the car door, confused why after all we had discussed, he was leaving me on the end of a chain held by this man, Mason Maldonado.

The tinted window rolled down. “Hey, watch the paint,” Mr. Gizárd growled. I sat down on the gravel of the parking lot, and though I tried to control them, three whimpers rose from my throat.

“Alright, alright, don’t worry. Just go with Mason, and he’ll set you up, okay? You’ll have the studio all to yourself, and you can start knocking out that steel work you showed me last night. And, Mason, keep an eye on this one.”

Then the dark window glided up and the Lexus pulled out of the lot, turning into the flow of southbound traffic.

“C’mon, you heard the boss,” said Gizárd’s assistant, tugging on the leash. “You got work to do.”

He pulled me through the crowd. My head bowed in shame. I followed at the end of the chain that bound me to his thick-fingered hand, studded with rings and a fat wrist encircled with gold bracelets.

At the edge of the parking lot he opened the door of a blue jeep.

“Go on, jump.”

With the smell of leather overtaking the heavy scent of his cologne, I leaped onto the backseat where he set down my leash before walking around to the driver’s side of the vehicle. For a moment my haze lifted and I thought to myself, “Run, Piccolo, run!” But it was another voice in my head that held me back, the voice of Guy Gizárd whispering his promise from our meeting the previous night. “Stick with me, kid, and your work will be in the next Gauntley Biennial.”

And as the key turned in the ignition and the engine hummed, I shifted my attention to the city beyond the

dashboard. Riding through the streets of New York with the window rolled down, I forgot my distress. From the many restaurants wafted the scents of foods I couldn't identify but that made my mouth water, and on every corner the smell of meat grilling rose from the stainless steel carts of vendors.

"Yo," he said, glancing up into the rear view mirror. "You hungry? Want a hot dog or something?"

"A hot dog?"

"Don't worry, it's not what you're thinking. A frankfurter, you know, like a sausage."

I distrusted this man, Mason Maldonado, but the suggestion of meat sounded so appealing that although I tried to control them, my tongue rolled from my mouth and my long tail beat against the door as he pulled the jeep up to the curb.

"Gimme one with the works," he said to the man who raised a hatch and dipped down a pair of tongs into the steaming well. He rested the long meat onto a pillowy white roll, and then from glass canisters scooped out chopped onions and relish that he spread over the hot dog that peeked out from between the split halves of the bun. Mason handed the man two bills that he tucked into the pocket of his stained apron.

Pulling away from the curb with one hand on the leather bound wheel, Mason turned slightly to hand me the hotdog over his shoulder. Instantly the mingled

smells of savory meat and sweet tomatoes revived my senses. I bit down past the fluffy bread and into the casing of the frankfurter that snapped, releasing the oil, heat and spices into my mouth.

“Not bad, huh?”

I nodded, my mouth too full of this flavorful new snack to speak.

Looking out over the river as we cruised across the Williamsburg Bridge, I observed the sun on the water that glinted like shards of glass, dividing the skyscrapers behind us from the approaching patchwork of rooftops and water towers.

“Which way is Chelsea?” I asked, hoping to catch a glimpse of that famous town, licking the last smudge of the sweet sauce from my paw.

“Manhattan, that’s where we just came from. And that’s Brooklyn coming up ahead. And down there, that’s the East River, about as clean as those canals you got back in your hometown.”

“So you have been to my city?”

“Me, Venice? Plenty of times. In fact, the first trip in my life was when Guy took me with him to set up the Biennial back in 80.” His gaze fixed on the traffic light, he was silent as it seemed to me his mind had wandered back and was sniffing around the yard of some distant place. The light turned green and with a shrug of his

shoulders, he seemed to shake off the reverie. "But that was long before you showed up in la Piazza, huh?"

"Yes, I work with my mother in San Marco, but how do you know?"

"I, uh, know from Guy," Mason faltered. "Yeah, he mentioned he met an artist from, yeah, Venice and that he wanted to set you up in the studio in Brooklyn for a while. Just long enough so you could get some work done."

"Is Mr. Gizárd always so generous with young artists?"

"Listen, dog boy, I think I had enough questions for today," said Mason slowing down on a street where from an open fire hydrant a blast of water arced over a plank of wood that two boys held against the pounding stream. With a push of a button Mason raised the windows as he drove through the deluge.

"Free car wash," said Mason who turned to look me straight in the eye. "And when something's free, maybe you just take it and don't ask any questions. Got it?"

We drove on, past long avenues of storefronts armored by steel doors and vacant lots surrounded by fences crowned with curling razor wire. I sat silently with my nose out the half-open window and my ears tilting back in the breeze. Mason turned down a narrow avenue crowded with shops and sidewalk cafes, then leaned heavily on his horn. "Double-parkers," he complained.



“Can’t even drive around here anymore. Used to be beautiful, like a no-man’s land. Now look at it.”

I did look, and what I saw I admired. Many good looking young people, sleek and long legged who roamed the street, some sitting on steps and others at outdoor cafes. They seemed to me to be a thirsty lot as most of them carried a bottle of water or a tall, steaming cup. A female, whose septum was studded with a thin silver bar, pointed toward me, her arm laced with blue branches and birds.

“Check out the greyhound,” she said to her attractive companion whose dark eyes widened when I said, “Ciao, bella,” smiling as we drove past.

Mason gave me a wink in the rear view mirror. “Yo, dog, I see you like the ladies.”

“Yes, I admire them greatly,” I replied with a sigh.

When we came to Morgan Avenue, Mason veered left and then pulled up to a steel roll gate where a boy in a hooded sweatshirt knelt shaking a can of paint that he pointed toward the bricks.

“Paint one stroke on that wall, kid, and you’re gonna lick it off,” he shouted out the window at the boy who grabbed the board with wheels, threw it on the sidewalk and took off down the block.

“Kids. Got no respect for other people’s property,” Mason mumbled.

His bracelets clinking against the dashboard, he reached into the glove compartment for a small device on which he pressed his finger, raising the gate through which we drove into the courtyard of what appeared to be a silent factory. I caught the scent of a rodent and then heard its squeak as it squeezed through a crack between a basement window frame and the crumbling sill, scurried across the cement, up the side of an open dumpster and dove into the garbage.

“Come on, dog boy. We’ll take the freight elevator up.”

Inside the building a single yellow bulb cast a dim light down the hallway where Mason unbolted a heavy door. I followed at his heels into the dusty elevator where he tugged on a steel cable and the elevator clanked, taking us slowly upward.

“This is it. You’re new home,” he said, leading me out onto the fourth floor.

Whatever doubts assailed me since I had left the ship flew out the open windows of the spacious studio where Mason unclasped the chain from my collar. It was a wide industrial space with a tin ceiling supported by columns. Down the length of the studio ran a yellow rail from which a hoist was suspended.

“An overhead crane,” I marveled as Mason took hold of the controls that hung from the ceiling on a chord. Pushing the button which brought the hoist to us, he lowered the black iron hook.

“Go ahead, dog boy, go for it.” I leaped up to grab hold and Mason raised me half way to the ceiling and then took me for a ride across the studio. “Even a little guy like you could do a lot with a toy like this, huh?”

Being full-grown, I was offended by his use of the words little and toy—but thrilled by my new surroundings where through the open windows wafted the aroma of various meats. I sniffed the air to distinguish the intertwining smells.

“Salami, ham,” I sniffed again. “Bologna?”

“Yeah, you got some nose. That’s from Boar’s Head over on Rock Street.”

I sniffed more deeply.

“And in the distance I smell foul water without movement, a smell of diesel and rotting meat combined.”

“Oh, yo, that’s gotta be the Gowanus, but that’s like a couple miles from here.”

“After all, I am a dog and though limited in range of color, we are gifted with a sense of smell far beyond your ability.” I moved toward the open window and sniffed again “And closer to this domicile, a highly attractive female of your species is passing by.”

Mason moved to the sill and leaned out, looking up and down the street, then waved.

“Yo, Lola, what’s up?”

A bright and pretty voice rose to the window.

“Not much, and you?”

“Same old, same old. Tell your brother I said come by.”

“Yeah, whatever.”

I leaned over the sill and admired the sight of the young female whose long lean legs so like a greyhound’s extended from her short white pants, elevated by the thin, long heels of her shoes. As she approached a car that pulled up to the curb and leaned into the open window on the passenger side, I felt envious of the driver to have so lovely a creature with whom to speak.

“Yeah, that’s pretty amazing how you take in all that through your nose.”

“Amazing to you, perhaps, but essential to my survival and as a source of my artwork.”

“So, yo, Sniff, what do you think of the digs?”

“Digs,” I said, suddenly overcome with a desire to unearth and gnaw a bone.

“As in place to live?”

“Oh, yes,” I said, “a perfect place to sleep and work. And what of you, how long have you lived here?”

“Me? Since I’m like sixteen, seventeen, Guy’s been here maybe over twenty. He bought it back in the eighties when it was still dirt cheap.”

“It is a fine space for any artist.”

“Used to be a factory,” said Mason. “You can see stains from where the machine oil leaked on the floor.”

Under my paws I admired the wide maple slats that long ago had been burnished beneath the soles of workers’ boots.

“You got any idea what a space like this would cost these days?”

I shook my head.

“Five thousand square feet? Cut up into cubicles for these hipsters? Six, eight grand a month easy. Multiply that by three floors, and you’re talking *buku* bucks.”

“And it all belongs to Mr. Gizárd?”

“For a couple years he just rented a space in the basement from some Hassid. But when his work started to sell, Guy bought him out for like a hundred grand. Now? It’s worth a couple mill easy.”

“Mill?”

“As in seven figures?” he said without clarifying my confusion. “But to tell you the truth, I think he was happier when he first showed up on the block. He’d get up around noon, and us kids would come by and watch him work. Later around five, six o’clock, we’d walk him to the bodega where he’d buy himself a six of Bud and Sunny-D and chips for us. Yeah, back in the day.”

“Does he still work here?”

“Not much. He’s got a place on South Street right on the water. This building is well, sort of for guests.”

“And do you sleep in this building?”

“Yeah, I got a space on the ground floor. I been with Guy now, like I said for over twenty years. He’s always looked out for me, and I look out for him.”

I followed Mason across the loft, my nails tapping on the hardwood floor to an area with steel shelving units, neatly stacked with tools and containers of supplies. Boxes of charcoal, rolls of paper, grinders, chisels, blades, a circular saw. Then on a nearby workbench I saw my portfolio and the blue bag from the biscotti which now contained only crumbs. And there beside my welding cap was my leather tool roll, and the duffel bag with my torch hung from a nail on the wall.

“Guy had your stuff sent over.”

“This was my father’s first set of carving tools.” I said, untying the roll with my teeth. “He made the handles himself.”

“Well, from what Guy told me, you’re not gonna be doing any carving. He wants you working on steel and only steel. In fact, he called this morning. Sent me to a welding supply place way the hell out in East New York to pick this up,” said Mason, dragging a cardboard box by its flap from the corner. “He said you couldn’t cut through tin foil with that toy torch a yours.”

“A plasma arc cutter,” I said, reading the side of the box as my tail was beating against a leg of the workbench. “Hobart Air Force 700i.”

“Yeah, the real deal, it’ll cut up to seven eighths of stainless. Guy says that’ll be plenty for you.”

“Yes, it is a very powerful tool,” I replied almost speechless at the magnitude of the gift.

“Well, you gotta get cracking, dog boy. Biennial’s in a couple months.”

“Cracking? I don’t understand this cracking.”

“Cracking, you know, get started.”

“Yes, I will,” I stammered. “I will get started right away.”

“In that room there, you got all your materials. Check it out.”

Peering into the adjoining room stocked with plates of stainless steel and chunks of stone, I saw the trunk of a once magnificent tree that by its smell I knew was cherry. Then I ran my paw over the surface of a cool slab of marble, admiring the rich gold veins that ran through the brilliant black stone.

“Portoro,” I said, “This stone was quarried in the province of La Spezia.”

“Yeah, well, I see you know your stuff, dog boy.”



“Yes, my father, he spent many hours with me in la Basilica di San Marco, teaching me about the various materials and techniques used by the artisans who built it.”

“Yeah, your old man’s pretty smart. And I see you take after him.”

“Thank you,” I said bowing my head, and in turn for the compliment allowing him to scratch behind my ear.

“Yeah, cost Guy an arm and leg, but he’s never gonna use it. Like that hunk of wood. Another waste of money. You don’t know what it took to get it down here from Guy’s property in the Adirondacks. But that’s Guy, he sees it, he wants it, he brings it back. Took three guys with a crane truck, two days to take out the window and get it up here.”

Although most of the bark had already been stripped from the tree, a slender branch with three small leaves extended from the trunk. I took it in my mouth and chewed on it with my back teeth.

“Yeah, he was planning to do some woodwork, but Gloria put the kibosh on that real fast. Steel and only steel she told him and that was that.”

“And who is this Gloria?” I asked taking a small leaf between my front teeth and pulling it off the limb.

“Gloria Gallstone, she’s got a gallery on 23rd—strictly blue chip. Guy first started showing with Galoshian, but then he and Harry had a falling out.”

“Falling out of what?”

“As in couldn’t see eye to eye—Harry had all the big names Serra, di Suvero and Guy didn’t like playing second fiddle.”

“Yes, I have heard of this man, di Suvero,” I replied because although I did not understand his talk of fiddles, my father had been greatly inspired by this artist whose bright and towering sculptures had been exhibited along the Grand Canal and had, my father told me, written poetry across the Venetian sky. And it was that poetry that moved my father, then a pup, to become a sculptor.

“So back in the 90’s when Gloria moved from Soho to Chelsea, she took him on. Now she’s the one who calls the shots.”

“Shots,” I said, slightly cringing at the thought of needles.

“Not those shots, dog boy, you know, calls the shots, the ways things gotta go. She gets the clients hungry, and Guy brings in the meat.”

I did not fully understand Mason but this was New York City, and I had much to learn.

“This wood, she is so beautiful and I can see by the girth well over a hundred years old.”

“Well, it might as well be sitting here for another hundred. Guy’s got no use for it.”

“I would be happy to sculpt from it a piece for Mr. Gizárd. To show my thanks.”

“Yeah, well, don’t worry about it. Just stick with the metal—like Guy said, steel and only steel, *capiche?*”

I tilted my head and for a moment studied this stranger who uttered a word in my native tongue.

“Hey, what? A *goombah* from Bensonhurst can’t speak the mother tongue?”

“I am surprised.”

“Don’t be. I got it from my mother, who got it from her mother who came to Brooklyn via Calabria.”

I looked at this man differently now, not as a stranger but a countryman.

“And what about you? An Italian greyhound who speaks like perfect English? What’s that about?”

“It had always been my father’s dream to come to America, and so he spoke often with the tourists and studied English late into the night, so that when his time came, he would be ready.”

“So your Pops can read?”

“Oh, yes. But he not only studied English from the book. He loved American music—your big bands, blues, jazz, and often he would sing the songs of Frank Sinatra to my mother.”

“Nice,” Mason replied.

“And American film. My papa particularly liked the movies of Sylvester Stallone.”

“Another goombah.”

“I remember one Saturday when I was a pup, he came home from the Rialto with a full box-set of the Rocky videos which we watched together many nights. He also brought home Rambo First Blood part one and two, but my mother disapproved of my viewing them. Although several times when she traveled to Naples to see her sister, we did watch them together.”

“That’s one way to learn English.

“My Papa’s English, it is excellent.”

“He didn’t do a bad job teaching you.”

“Whatever knowledge that my father had, he made sure to teach... to me.” I dipped my head to avert Mason’s eye, but he got down on one knee and patted my chest.

“Hey, you okay, dog boy? Listen, what I learned in life is if you don’t think about it too much, it don’t hurt so bad. So don’t think about it.”

What he suggested was not possible, but I gave my tail a single wag to at least show my appreciation for his attempt to counsel me.

“Okay, that’s better,” he said straightening up with some difficulty due to his bloated abdomen. “I’ll be back later with your grub.”

“Grub?”

“Grub, as in nose bag, feed?”

“Oh, my meals. Mama used to make them for me.”

“Yeah, well, I’m actually pretty good myself. I’ve been cooking for Guy for years. He tends to like it hot, but for you I’ll go easy on the sriracha.”

“Sriracha?”

“You know, the sauce—like heavy on the garlic, heavier on the hot.”

“From the peperoncini?”

“And then some. They don’t grow hot enough for Guy. Come here.”

He snapped his fingers and led me past a small, well-equipped kitchen to a side room where behind a heavy sheet of plastic, sun lamps raised the temperature to a high degree of warmth that made me pant. I scanned the long table lined with earthen pots filled with dirt where tiny peppers poked out from under green leaves. Mason reached for a water bottle and then, grasping and releasing the handle, sprayed a veil of mist over the plants.

“You got your jalapeños, serranoes, we even got a couple Carolina Reapers that I got off eBay,” he said holding out one pot for me to observe. When I leaned over the plant to sniff, my nose twitched and my eyes burned. “Don’t want to get too close, dog boy. That there is the most potent pepper on the planet,” he said putting the pot back down on the table. “Like I said, Guy can’t get

enough of this stuff. But I know it's not for everybody, so I'll cook your grub separate."

"Thank you," I said stepping from behind the plastic into the cool, open studio.

"Got any preferences?"

"Meat."

"Steak, lamb, chicken?"

I shrugged because properly prepared they are equally appealing. "But if you don't mind," I added, "I prefer my meat quite rare."

"So you like your *carne cruda*, huh? Me, I like my food fully cooked, but to each his own."

Following Mason to the freight elevator, I sat by his feet awaiting the jaws to part to ride downstairs and explore the streets.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"For a walk."

"Yo, Sniff, there ain't gonna be no walks," said Mason. "Guy says you're here to work, and so you're gonna work."

"Yes, of course, that will be my pleasure, and I am very grateful for the opportunity, but why can I not take my walk?"

"Listen, dog boy."

"My name is Piccolo."



“Right,” he continued. “Remember what I told you, about taking what’s free and not asking any questions?”

“Yes, of course.”

“So don’t ask, okay? It’s the way Guy wants it. And if it’s the way Guy wants it, it’s the way it’s gonna be. So

why don't you get started?" said Mason as he stepped into the elevator. "It'll make you feel better."

I knew he was right, and so as the elevator descended to the ground floor, I walked back to the shelves of materials and took a roll of paper in my mouth which I carried into the open space of my studio and set down on the floor. I then reached for a stick of charcoal, and with a kick of my front paw, unrolled the paper before me. Crouching down on my haunches, I sketched out the shapes for my first series of art in America.