

Taking Leave

by Luisa Brenta

A walled city traditionally has three ways out — or in, for that matter. I had come in through the most obvious — the Wall Gates — some three years before and I was now living there — a medieval Italian city, with narrow alleys and tall dark towers that point to one and the same telescoped sky. I must have had my good reasons, to move in then; I was also starting to suspect that I had my good reasons to move out, by now. But a walled city doesn't let you out any more easily that it has let you in earlier.

A walled city does have three ways out, traditionally; but the obvious Gates are for everyday traffic only; not for leaving an era behind, not if you plan to take your soul with you. Two ways are left, that can prove significant: Underground, through those long tunnels, that protect you from enemy fire but could collapse on you any minute; or Over the Walls, in full daylight, hoping you make it down to the other side before someone spots you.

This particular city offers access to a very special Underground trip, as the sexton of one of its twohundredsomething Romanic churches was explaining to me right now. Whatever scarce light came in from the church windows, painted glasswork reflections on his face. His eyes lit up here and there in the dark, dancing with pride as he explained that “his” church harbored the Planet's only direct access to - Hell.

“It's right there, lady, right under that stone. You are almost standing on it. Yes, that is a good idea, do step back, good idea. The only tunnel to Hell - directly. And it is certified.”

“Certified?”

“Sure is, lady, tested and certified. It was tested right after the hole appeared; it was tested, so now we are sure.”

“What, was — ‘tested’?”

“The hole, of course, we tested the hole.”

“You tested the hole? How did you test the hole? Who, tested the hole?”

"How would I know which one of us did it, lady, that was before my time, like elevenhundred, before my time. Before my grandfather's time, even. It was when that Sinner who had just lost everything at dice stormed into the church swearing like a Turk and threw a stone at the statue of the Madonna, and the Madonna opened a big hole under his feet and he fell into it screaming".

"Oh, how horrible!"

"Yep. And the whole church smelled like sulfur. And we kind of figured out that the stench was coming from Hell, where the sinner probably was by now; and we also figured that the hole that had opened under his feet had been a miracle from the Virgin Mary, and the way we knew that, was that the Virgin Mary had been carrying Baby Jesus in her arms, when the sinner threw the stone, and she had ducked and switched Baby Jesus from one arm to the other so that the stone would not hit Him. And the Virgin Mary being a statue, that was a proper miracle."

He's now come even closer, eyebrows and index finger raised at my face, waiting for some adequate expression of awe on my part.

"But we also tested the hole itself, anyhow, we tied a dog to a rope and rolled it down into the hole, and watched it come back up all charred bones and nothing else. Yes Ma'm."

Now, he gets a proper reaction. He is probably mistaking the horror in my eyes for sacred wonder - and that's fine with me, if it makes him happy. But I dash out of the church, leaving a larger tip and a much faster goodbye than the local culture would require.

Back on my bicycle — the most efficient means of transportation within the Walls — I head for the Walls themselves, for the top of the Walls, where you can see outside. I'm pedaling like mad, I need to get there, I need air. I have an uneasy feeling about what the Story of the Hole is supposed to teach me.

Is that what happens to you in this city, in any Walled City, if you go deep into things? If you go down deep into yourself? Is Hell supposed to be waiting for you there, is Hell due and expected, if you dare to look? If so, I know I am doomed ...

The last step up to the top of the Walls opens onto the glorious Tuscan sundown. Red as Hell, as wide as Paradise, it fills my eyes and explodes in my head. God, this smells good. I am suddenly drunk with open space. Breathe in. Breathe in from the sky and then out into the stones and down into the ground — this old, old ground can take it.

Guess it will have to be the third way out — Over the Walls.

