

## HERETIC'S FORK

By Nancy Branka

The teenager in the ticket booth only looked up from his phone when Melanie coughed for his attention. Too-dark hair, too-pale face, multiple piercings. In a vintage FIFA World Club Italia t-shirt. She smiled at him, grabbing seven euros from her wallet. Even the Goth kids in Italy were obsessed with soccer, it seemed. He slid a ticket under the acrylic panel and Melanie entered Museo Della Tortura.

She had planned to pass the time shopping along the crowded cobblestone street through the center of town. But the pull of the museum's garish posters proved stronger than the tchotchkes, leather purses, and colorful ceramics. After her two traveling companions were done with Mass in the Duomo, they would meet for lunch and Aperol Spritzes. That was the plan.

Melanie shivered as she slipped her ticket into the back pocket of her shorts and stepped into an exhibit room. Tuscany's heat had been desert-like since they arrived, but the AC here was too much. She moved out of the current and took a deep breath, surveying the room.

The posters outside suggested a Madame Tussauds Wax Museum type of establishment—a tourist trap with a macabre sense of amusement. But it was not, she could see. *BECOME AN ALLY AGAINST TORTURE* painted in an elegant script dominated the wall as one entered, repeated in five languages. This was serious.

Narrow beams of light spotlighted each exhibit in an otherwise darkened room. At the far end, a stone cave or cell—she wasn't sure which—had been hollowed, fenced with iron grating. *Okay, here we go.*

She stopped in front of a guillotine. They had used this very instrument every week in the piazza just steps from the museum, the placard said. The same piazza where she and her friends would be lunching. Centuries later, the blade still shone.

She moved to a series of rusty chains with hewn wooden handles. Like whips, but more deadly. She leaned closer, reading. The scourge chains had been used to beat heretics into submission. Ana Italo had been a witch. Antonio Gallo had refused to renounce Satan. Roberto Scalia professed that the earth moved around the sun. On and on, one story darker than the next.

Then, an iron-spiked interrogation chair. What dark words, desperate arguments, must have been pled from this chair. Galileo, wasn't he Italian? She could vaguely recall from high school history that the Church had accused Galileo of heresy—despite him being a devout Catholic—because he believed the earth rotated around the sun. What would his interrogation have been like, believing in God, but knowing something the Church refused to embrace? She tried to remember whether they killed or just imprisoned him. *BECOME AN ALLY AGAINST TORTURE.*

Behind her, a hunched man shuffled into the room. Engrossed in reading, she had not heard him enter.

“Buon giorno, signorina,” he said. The voice raspy, an almost-whisper. She turned. “Viene con me.”

He wore a faded but clean uniform and had a grandfatherly look—gentle, weathered, harmless. He gestured for her to accompany him.

“Speak English...?”

He seemed not to have heard her question and walked away, the drag of his shoes on the stone floor the only sound. If only she'd learned some Italian before the trip.

His meaning was clear, though. She looked around to confirm she was alone in the room, and followed. Perhaps this could prove interesting. Her mother always said these were the little experiences with locals that made extraordinary trips.

A single beam of light reflected at odd angles in the dark hall he led them through. To her left, a large collection of skulls peered from floor-to-ceiling glass shelves. Fabricated from resin? She couldn't be sure, and she hadn't the words to ask.

They arrived at a second room, with displays similar to the first. He led her to the far wall and stopped before a wood-and-leather chair. It crossed her mind that this was the size of an electric chair—worn and nicked. On the seat of the chair was some kind of pronged and leather-strapped device. Glass encased the entire exhibit. The man pointed to the placard. “Heretic's Fork, Tool of the Inquisition.” This was the torture tool of choice, it said, for the local Roman Catholic zealots, forcing heretics to convert or be burned at the stake.

Melanie bent forward with a macabre curiosity to study the contraption on the chair. Secured to the black leather neck strap was a rake-like set of double-pronged forks. When the Heretic's Fork was buckled on the neck, the placard explained, one set of sharp prongs rested under the chin, the other on the chest. Any movement of the head would pierce the chin and chest.

She thought about that, then read on. When the victim could no longer fight off sleep, it said, their head would nod reflexively, the prongs piercing the skin, forcing the victim to try desperately to remain awake. When ultimately unsuccessful, they would slowly bleed to death.

Melanie let out a breath and straightened. How many times—in macroeconomics class or during an indie movie—had she struggled to keep her eyes open, holding sleep at bay? What would that feel like to know that each nod would produce a cut?

The last line of the placard noted, "A replica of the Heretic's Fork is available for visitors to experience. Please clean after use with sanitizer provided."

On the other side of the room was an identical chair, but without the glass enclosure. *Really? Does everything have to be an "experience" these days?* She looked over at the man, his face devoid of emotion, gesturing to the chair. "You try?"

What would the harm be, really? A selfie opportunity. She fished for her phone and put the backpack on the floor, then sidled into the chair, phone resting on her thigh, hands gripping the broad wood armrests. The man reached into a box on the floor for the Heretic's Fork, a mess of rusted iron and beat-up leather. Melanie tightened, skin tingling. It looked too ancient to be a replica. She smiled half-heartedly.

"Signorina, per favore." He held out the apparatus, gesturing for her to strap it on her neck. This poor old man, paid to play out the museum curator's dark vision. *BECOME AN ALLY AGAINST TORTURE.*

She bent forward as he gently adjusted the strap on her neck, buckling it at the back, so close the musky mix of his sweat and aftershave nauseated her.

Strap in place, he stepped back. Melanie's hands went to her neck, assuring herself the strap didn't restrict her airway.

"Signorina, per favore, ancora." The man stepped forward. She wanted to raise a hand for him to stay, but propriety kept her motionless. American travelers could be so rude. That was not her. So instead, she forced a smile.

He smiled back and gently pressed her hands back to the armrest and fastened the wrist straps.

At her neck, the sharp upper prongs touched lightly under her chin; the bottom prongs prickled through her T-shirt.

Melanie closed her eyes. To be a nonbeliever in the seventeenth century—a horrible predicament. Acquiesce to the Church's bullying and go against your principles to support their tyranny? Or refuse to submit and endure torture and likely death. Severing fingers and genitals. She'd seen a thumb in a case in the other room. Castration. A set of iron tools on display. Burning at the stake. Lithographs on the wall. Unimaginable pain for those who stood by their beliefs. Sickening.

She would have been a coward. She knew that. The pain would have been too much. She would have submitted. Crumbled. In shame. Anything to avoid the cutting, the burning, the death. Yet so many held to their beliefs.

Melanie began to feel lightheaded and opened her eyes, trying to steady herself. She needed the man to unbuckle the straps. Desperately. "Please! Signore, per favore!" she pleaded, panting an exaggeration of suffocation to show him what she wanted. What she needed. He looked at her quizzically, unmoved. She couldn't breathe. She fought against the leather. Feeling faint. Woozy. That was the last she remembered before passing out.

#

Mass finished at ten past noon, late. But how lucky—they'd seen the children of the parish receive their first communion. Now, the families gathered on the steps of the Duomo, arranging little groups for photos, kissing and congratulating each other.

The hubbub charmed the two tourists. "The girls' dresses, oh my god! Did you see the one that was a miniature wedding dress?" As they walked to the cafe, they chatted about the children—the beautiful ones, the naughty ones, the pious ones.

At the top of the hill, by the shop that proclaimed itself “Gelato World Champion,” the women stopped. There was some kind of commotion below. An ambulance, with flashing lights. A crowd of onlookers. Curious, the women shouldered their way through the other tourists, dog walkers, and strollers on the busy lane.

“It’s at the Torture Museum,” one said as they arrived at the crowd. “How odd!”

Next to the museum entrance, a small girl sobbed quietly as her mother comforted her, “Nessuno che conosciamo. Lei starà bene.”

The two American tourists had jostled for a better view. The mother acknowledged them with a half-smile. “Fainted,” she said, then turned back to her daughter.

Inside the ticket booth, a goth teen looked on, barely interested. The ambulance doors slam, the stretcher safely inside.

“Show’s over,” one of the Americans said with a shrug. “Time for lunch.”

The crowd cleared as the ambulance drove away. On a cobblestone, a drop of blood glistened in the sun.

#####