

# VAPORETTO 13

A novel by  
ROBERT GIRARDI

Delacorte  Press

VAPORETTO 13

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Also by Robert Girardi

*Madeleine's Ghost*  
*The Pirate's Daughter*

*Look at it, peering with its cold smile  
into the blue decayed glass.*

—Osip Mandelstam

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Girardi is the author of two previous novels, *Madeline's Ghost* and *The Pirate's Daughter*. His work has appeared in *The New Republic*, the *Tri-Quarterly Review*, and *The Washington Post*, and he is a past recipient of a James Michener Fellowship. He lives with his wife in Washington, D.C.

# 1

ELIZABETH LAY PANTING on the steel table, her yellow eyes dark with fear. Dried blood stuck with hair streaked the runnels, the air was thick with antiseptic fumes. She struggled to get up; I held her down with both hands as the assistant administered the muscle relaxer. A small cry caught in Elizabeth's throat when the hypodermic needle pierced her skin, a single forlorn note answered by the remorseful caw of a parrot through the thin walls of the examination room.

"They know, they always know," the assistant said darkly, and dropped the spent needle into a pedal-operated chrome garbage can. She was a wiry teenage girl with spiky blond hair and six earrings in each ear. She wore thick-lensed Buddy Holly glasses and a dog collar around her neck, perhaps to show her solidarity with the animals. Her lab coat was streaked with brown stains, a button stuck into one lapel announced that she was a FRIEND OF PETA, and that MEAT IS MURDER. Another button urged me to FREE THE CRUSTACEANS and showed a lobster escaping from a pot of boiling water.

"How long do we have to wait?" I said, trying to sound as calm as possible, but she could hear the agitation in my voice.

"Chill, Mr. Squire," she said. "Steve is cleaning up from the last one. Kind of a mess. A big German shepherd that got mashed crossing 95. Some people"—she hesitated and her eyes slid away from me—"don't take good care of their animal companions."

Elizabeth twisted under my grip and I began to sweat. The muscle relaxer didn't seem to be working. Suddenly, a series of shrill musical notes sounded from my jacket pocket—two long, two short, two long, two short.

"That your beeper?" the assistant said.

"It's not a beeper, exactly," I said.

"What is it then, a portable phone?"

"It's a market watch."

The notes sounded again. A drop of sweat formed between my eyes and dripped down the bridge of my nose. It took an act of will to keep from letting go of the cat to check the digital readout.

"You should have left that thing at home," the assistant said, frowning.

"Impossible, I'm an FX trader, my work depends on it."

The assistant looked puzzled. "You do special effects, like for the movies?"

"No." I attempted a smile. "Foreign exchange. I trade in international currencies for a bank. Reuters—that's the news service—sends an electronic message every time something happens that might affect the exchange rates, and the market watch receives a signal and sounds off. It could be a flood in China, the death of a world leader, higher interest rates for home loans . . ."

The assistant held up her hands. "Hey man, save it for later. You should really be dealing with your cat right now. Why not pick her up, give her a hug. You won't ever get the chance again."

"She doesn't like to be picked up," I said. "She likes to come to you." But after a minute, I picked up Elizabeth with some effort—she was a big female longhair, part Maine coon, part everything else, weighing almost sixteen pounds—and for once, she didn't protest or try to jump down. She went slack and laid her head along my



arm and began to purr loud enough for the assistant to hear. I cradled her against the jacket of my eight-hundred-dollar Brooks Brothers suit, feeling absolutely rotten.

"See, that's sweet," the assistant said. "How long have you had the poor kitty?"

"She's almost eighteen now, she was my mother's cat," I said, talking fast, "you could say I inherited her when my mother died. But the cat never liked me, she never liked anyone but my mother. And now she's got diabetes, I have to give her shots of insulin every day, you know, it's very difficult, she scratches, she bites. And my fiancée is allergic to cats, her throat swells up whenever she comes into the house. And there's another thing, I'm going out of the country for six months for my bank. . . ." My voice trailed off. I set Elizabeth back on the table and she spread out in a relaxed puddle of fur and began to lick her white paws.

The assistant looked down at the cat and back at me, eyes narrow through the thick lenses of her glasses. "You mean there's nothing really wrong with this cat and you're having it put to sleep?"

"There's the diabetes," I said. "And she's old. How many years does she have left? Six months in a kennel would kill her."

The assistant crossed her arms. "You're really despicable," she said quietly. "I take my cat in twice a week for kidney dialysis and she just turned twenty. You're murdering your cat because she's an inconvenience. That's just despicable."

Before I could respond, the vet came in wearing a clean lab coat with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. He was a hairy man. Hair grew out of his ears and his

nostrils and connected his eyebrows in a continuous bridge.

The assistant turned and walked quickly past him through the swinging doors. "This one's all yours, Steve," she said. "Don't need me here."

The vet nodded at me blandly and went over to the stainless steel cabinet in the corner, its shelves cluttered with bandages, swabs, forceps, and other medical supplies. He took a long hypodermic needle from a black case and filled it with a solution from a small bottle marked with the skull and crossbones and stepped over to the table.

"Last week one woman brought in a violin and played it while her cat died," the vet said. "The animal apparently really enjoyed violin music, particularly Mozart. It died very peacefully. Any last words you'd like to say to your cat?"

"No," I said. "Let's get on with it."

I pushed Elizabeth down against the table again, and this time she did not struggle. She rolled over on her side like a ship run aground and held one paw in the air, purring. The doctor felt along the thick fur of her belly for an artery.

"I like to get them near the heart," he said. "Quicker that way." He took a roll of fat between his fingers and inserted the needle. I closed my eyes. Elizabeth made a sharp noise and a jolt ran through her and into my fingers. When I opened my eyes a minute later, she was still alive, her breath coming in a raspy panting. She turned her head toward me, and it seemed her yellow eyes held the answer to a secret that had been plaguing me since my mother died. Too late. I watched as the light faded there, and felt her body go limp in my grasp.

"She's gone now," the vet said gently. "You have sev-

eral options for the corpse. If you want to keep the ashes, we can cremate her in a private ceremony for one hundred and seventy-five dollars, that price includes the urn. If you're not interested in keeping the ashes, we can cremate her communally for seventy-five dollars, or—"

"How much if I bury her in the backyard?" I interrupted.

"Fifty dollars," the vet said, frowning. "That's the price of the visit."

I took Elizabeth's body, wrapped in a blue plastic bag the vet assured me was odorproof, and put the bag in the trunk of my Saab Turbo. That evening, after I left the bank, I sealed the bag in a metal biscuit box weighed down with stones, wrapped the box with speaker wire, and punched holes in each side with a screwdriver. As the last streak of red faded from the sky in the west, I drove over to the waterfront in Southeast. There, a half mile above the Navy Yard, a narrow canal branches off the Anacostia and dead-ends between a tire warehouse and a closed Pepsi bottling plant. The water of the canal was still and black in the industrial light.

I stood on the edge of the embankment, took the biscuit box in both hands, and flung it out into the center of the canal. The loud splash echoed against the dull brick sides of the buildings. Immediately the box tipped to one side and began to fill with water, and in less than fifteen seconds it had sunk below the surface and was gone. Hands in the pockets of my trousers, I stood for a minute watching the subsiding ripples, a late moon rising over the tire warehouse.

"She was sick and old," I said to myself, "and she never liked me." But these words did not relieve the unaccountable pressure on my heart, the secret conviction that I had just committed a terrible crime. Just then, my

market watch began to beep, two long, two short, like the tolling of guilt itself. I hurried back to the Saab and drove back to my town house in Arlington Mews. When I sat down at the kitchen table with a shot of Glenkinchie on the rocks to check the digital readout, my hands trembled: *FX trader murders cat, dollar plummets. No. Civil war in Liberia. Hundreds killed, heavy fighting, Monrovia.*

Bad news for any fool trading in Liberian dollars.

## 2

PANGLOSS WAS A SMALL, elegant establishment on P Street, done up in blond wood and oriental carpets, with no more than ten tables and a menu that changed every day. Handcrafted cuisine, according to *The Washingtonian*, was the latest dining trend inside the Beltway. The waitress sat down with us to explain the menu. She was an attractive girl who wore no makeup; her unconventional waitress outfit consisted of a colorful peasant dress, Birkenstocks, and homemade earrings.

"The fish is very good tonight," she said. "Chilean sea bass, it's a very firm fish and very fresh. And the veal is nice. But I wouldn't recommend the venison unless you really like game. This recipe, with a raspberry sauce, really allows the gamy taste to come through." She went down the menu, appetizers to dessert, discussing each dish in the same candid manner. We weren't patrons at a very expensive restaurant, it seemed, but guests at the house of a friend who loved to cook.

After we had made our selections and chosen the

wine, the waitress went off to discuss matters with the chef. Cynthia watched her go, then reached under the table and squeezed my thigh. Cynthia looked fine to-night. Her hair, glossy and black, was pulled smartly over one shoulder, her body in perfect physical shape. She jogged and played tennis and had been on the varsity women's crew at Michigan. Tonight she wore a simple square-collared dress of gray-blue silk. Everyone who knew her said she was a good catch.

"Don't you love it here?" she said. "The treatment you get is so personal. They want to be absolutely sure that you have a great meal."

Warren grunted from across the table. "You pay enough," he said. "They damn well better make sure you have a great meal."

His wife, Karen, hit the padded shoulder of his jacket with her small fist. She was already slightly drunk from her predinner cocktails at the bar. "Can't you ever think about anything but the bottom line?" she said. "You're a jerk! Look at this place. It's really charming. Perfect for Jack's good-bye dinner. Don't you think Jack?"

"Yes," I said. "Thanks for suggesting it."

"What the hell," Warren said. "Capitol Guaranty's picking up the tab."

The food, when it came, was excellent; on the waitress's advice, no one had ordered the venison. The women talked about politics a little self-consciously, then about patio furniture and dogs with more authority. Cynthia was a dog person. She wanted to get a collie after we were married and I sold the town house in Arlington Mews for something with three acres of yard and a rumpus room, out near Herndon. "Just think, Jack!" she said. "A big fluffy collie, like Lassie!"

I didn't know what to say to this.

Warren and I left them eating dessert and went over to the bar, a glossy half moon of blond wood in front of the window overlooking the traffic of P Street. He wanted to talk a little last-minute business over a *digestif*, he said. He was a big, meaty man with a thick neck and a large head of silvering hair. He had a sports background, had played college football at Tulane in the early seventies, and was in the habit of giving last-minute pep talks. He ordered an expensive eau-de-vie from the wan Korean barmaid. She put down two glasses and poured two healthy shots.

"Refills are on me," she said, smiling, but I could see her mind working: Best to keep the high rollers happy.

Warren raised his glass. "I suppose I should say *chin-chin*, isn't that what they say over there?"

"Yes," I said, "*chin-chin*." The stuff burned on the way down, and had a sour aftertaste. It was called *Domaine de la Tour de Folie* and came in a blue glass bottle shaped like a fish.

"Odd name for the stuff," I said, examining the label. "Tower of Madness Estates."

Warren smiled. "That's exactly why you're my point man," he said. "You're someone who notices every damn detail. You've got eyes that look beyond your trading screen. Some of these guys in the Room, and I won't mention any names, all they see is little arrows flashing up and down, dollar signs. One click, two clicks. You see the big picture. I know it's been tough on Cindy postponing the wedding, but the bank needs you on the ground there at least until the elections."

Warren was Capitol Guaranty's FX manager, with a better record in the win column than anyone at the bank, but he still had the college athlete's naive respect for anyone who had read a book. Actually, it had been

years since I'd read any book cover to cover. My undergraduate education in the Great Books program at St. John's in Annapolis had left me with a passing knowledge of Aristotle, a smattering of Latin, and one of the few people in America who had actually finished William Harvey's lengthy treatise of 1628, the *Exercitatio anatomica*, in which that eminent physician first posited the circulation of the blood.

Of course, this sort of education makes a man unfit for the world. I had succeeded as an FX trader despite Plutarch and Montaigne and the rest, by exercising those very qualities the humanities deplored—namely, ruthlessness, self-interest, and a single-minded devotion to material gain.

"How's your Italian these days?" Warren said, topping up my glass.

"Coming along," I said, though I had barely listened to the Berlitz tapes, one of which was now stuck in the faulty tape player in my Saab.

Warren leaned close. "What we're looking for Jack is a clear analysis of the scene, and I mean financial and political. We're going to want monthly reports, full of good, juicy stuff. You know how volatile their economy is. After the elections in April, who knows what's going to happen. We're putting a man in Milan at Credito Italiano, and of course Bill Snead's been at Banco di Roma for a while now. I don't mind telling you, we're planning a big push on the lira either way, long or short, the week of the elections. We need stuff that's going to make our decision that much easier. I know you're going to do a great job," and there was just the right hint of menace in his voice when he said this.

I choked down the last of my eau-de-vie, turning my glass upside down on the napkin when he went to fill it

again. "What about the trading?" I said. "How do you want me to handle that?"

Warren shook his head. "Don't sweat making trades," he said. "Keep your hand in, of course. But we're not expecting any real numbers. This is an intelligence-gathering mission. Trading is information, you know that."

Over at the table, the women had finished dessert and were signaling the waitress for the check. I made a move to join them, but Warren hung back a moment.

"Let me give you a last piece of free advice, Jack," he said. "Keep your eyes open, get plenty of sleep, and don't fuck up." As he followed me over to the table, I could hear coins jangling a faint musical note in his pocket.

### 3

THE PAVEMENT STEAMED along P Street. Moisture beaded the windshields of the cars parked at the curb. It was not raining, but the humidity stood at nearly one hundred percent. There is nothing worse than the jungle heat of Washington in July.

"I can't stand it," Cynthia said, fanning herself with her hand. "Get me some AC."

The parking attendant, a squat Salvadoran man with a face like a shovel, brought the Saab around with a screech of brake. I tipped him two dollars and we got into the car, cranked on the air-conditioning and drove down P, and made a right onto Rock Creek. In fifteen minutes, we were on the Beltway headed north. We had booked a room for the weekend at a bed-and-breakfast in a two-



hundred-year-old farmhouse in Harper's Ferry, overlooking the confluence of two rivers and a creek—the Potomac, the Shenandoah, and the Antietam. It was one of Cynthia's favorite places; the rooms were crammed with antiques and there was nothing to do but eat and have sex.

"What's wrong with the tape deck?" she said now, pressing the eject button.

"Don't fool with it," I said. "Try the radio."

She fiddled with the radio for a while, couldn't find anything she liked and turned it off.

"I shouldn't tell you this, because it could get Karen in trouble," she said. "But Warren's got his eye on you. He really likes you. She says they're thinking of moving you up to chief trader when you get back." She smiled and squeezed my arm; her teeth were perfect, a miracle of orthodontics. "It's not so bad postponing the wedding for that, is it Jack?"

I didn't say anything. Cynthia and Karen had been sorority sisters at Michigan. Cynthia and I met two and a half years ago in the bank's courtesy tent at the Virginia Gold Cup. There, the hotshot traders, board members, family, and assorted hangers-on gathered under the white-and-green-striped canvas to munch on shrimp wrapped in bacon, satay chicken skewers, and bite-sized quiches, drink decent domestic champagne and watch the horses go down over the jumps. The afternoon was beautiful, an ocean of undulating grass and yellow sunlight. I wore a crisp seersucker suit and bow tie, Cynthia a sundress with a pink and blue starfish print that showed off her cleavage, a floppy straw hat, expensive shades. We talked and drank champagne, and got a little drunk, and that night, she came back to my town house in Arlington Mews and we had sex on the living room carpet, then on