

ON MY WAY: A STORY OF JOURNEYS

I think, just as we get to know each other a bit more, this is the bit where I should give you my backstory.

You can call me Gabs and what I want to tell you while we're on our way is that there's a book I keep coming back to, wherever I go. At the age of 19, I moved from Como, Italy, to Scotland, in a small town on the East Coast. It was the Autumn right after the Brexit vote and a sense of unease was in the air alongside the smell of the ocean salt. It added to the awkwardness of my attempts at speaking another language, a difference I'd learn to make my own over the next four years. When I left Scotland to move to London, about a year ago, Calvino's *Invisible Cities* was my goodbye gift to the faces and places I left behind. It was my way of saying: I was here. Just briefly.

In the book, Marco Polo, the Venetian explorer, talks to Kublai Kan about all the cities he'd visited on his journey from Italy to the far East. But weary of his ever-expanding empire, Kublai Kan wants to hear about one city and one city only: Venice.

[OVERLAPPING ITALIAN TRANSLATION]

Every time I describe a city, I tell you something about Venice.

Replies Polo. And when Kublai Kan insists, he says:

[OVERLAPPING ITALIAN TRANSLATION]

Once they're fixed in words, images in my memory get erased. [...] Perhaps I'm afraid of losing Venice all at once, if I speak of it. Or perhaps, speaking about other cities, I've already lost Venice bit by bit.

This story that I am writing for you is made of journeys. It's the journey of my migration from Italy to London. It's a journey away from an older self, afraid to be openly gay in the place I grew up in. It's a journey towards a sense of belonging, a future self that I could build from scratch. This story is also made up of journeys backwards to look back and to discover, bit by bit, the images of a lost Venice in the reflections of London. Finding a way in this city, from this perspective, means to travel back towards the darker waters of my one-time home, lake Como.

This story is made of journeys, and they are queer journeys: rarely straightforward, they're the wayward paths of self-discovery, they're journeys towards the unknown land of queerness, past and present, personal and political.

A while back, during my relationship with a man with a Scottish accent, I wrote down a short poem in a hurry. It went like this:

*To be twenty-one and free
And to love another man
Somewhere else*

In my mind, to love and to move are not that different: they're both actions that tend towards something else—they're a constant act of displacement, they speak of an ever-spreading self.

[SOUNDS OF THE TUBE] Growing up in Italy, London had always appeared as a queer city—I visited it for the first time ten years ago, in 2011, and since then I thought of it as my final destination. It looked like the place to find myself and to be, perhaps, a different self from the one I'd built at home, or that others had built for me. London was another place, it had another language, it was somewhere else. It was perfect.

In other words, London was a place where I could be openly queer. Cities seemed to have a queer quality to them—I found out during one night out in Milan, when as a teenager I first saw two men holding hands and felt the ground shake under my feet. London appeared just like Milan in that sense, but it was farther than just a train ride away. Moving to London wasn't a matter of a day trip, it required radical change. And I felt I needed that.

But it would be too simplistic to just say that the city is an inherently queer place—in a way, this was a simple discovery, made during walks back at night, or through the looks and unkind words of strangers. This troubled relationship between the city and queerness runs deeper—the choreographies of cruising and the dynamics of illegal sex that queer men engaged in around public spaces, or simply the fact that queer men could be seen meant that, to an extent, the modern city was built to exclude men like myself, to render them invisible.

It is against this configuration of the city that the gay liberation movement took its first steps in the 1970s. Fifty years on from the first London Gay Pride, in 1972, this story is also the story of feeling myself part of a larger community throughout history. It's about my discovery of those who claimed the streets of London and the world as queer spaces by marching on them.

[MALE VOICE] *The emphasis of gay liberation was on coming out—*

This is what everyone I interviewed seem to agree on—and in the words of someone who'd joined the Gay Liberation Front, or GLF, from its early inception,

[MALE VOICE]—coming out meant being visible [...] because the idea was one of coming out and making people aware that we weren't just the odd sort of person, there were lots of us.

This is another reason why the journeys this story is made of are queer ones: they are often pointed backwards, towards the past of a community that I imagine myself part of. During my walks around London, I started looking for the urban traces of a history that is both personal and political. I am at once looking for a younger self in this city, who imagined a gay future I am now living—and I am also seeking traces of a queer past that makes me feel like a piece of a larger puzzle and encourages me to live openly today.

But this is also a story of discrepancies and of jumps through time. As I move from now to before and from then to the future, I track the journeys of those before me, the people I met, those who were there 50 years ago. They did not simply seek visibility in the present; rather, through acts of urban protest, gay liberation also asked questions that point to the future:

What does a queer city look like?
Is it possible to imagine a different city altogether?
And how do we build it?

[EXTRACT AUDIO RECORDING OF MARIO MIELI'S INTERVIEW WITH RAI, 1977]

Among the people who sought an answer to these questions in the early '70s was Mario Mieli. Born in 1952 and raised, just like me, in the outskirts of Como, Mario's story was also made up of journeys. Over several trips to London, he joined the Gay Liberation Front before returning to Italy, where he became a leader of the local liberation movement *FUORI!*, meaning "out", and also an acronym for Italian Homosexual Revolutionary Unity Front.

I will leave the description of Mario to those who'd met him in those times, and that were kind enough to speak to me:

[MALE VOICE] He would have been about twenty, and had not yet turned his attention to political theory. But like many young Italians of his generation, he would always have to be the "most revolutionary"

[MALE VOICE] Mario, [...] I thought was a bit too intellectual for me, very very charming, right, but I think I didn't understand a lot of what he was talking about [...] He involved himself in many of the activities of the GLF, he went on the marches [...] he had two personas, one was the elegant, all dressed in black, you know, stylish Italian student, and the other one was... when he went a bit crazy and put on the make-up [...] I don't think I ever saw him in a full dress, but there were some very camped up outfits and

hefty make-up, but it was more what we would call now gender bender rather than radical drag.

[MALE VOICE] he was rather formal in his dress in a way [...] always very well dressed, which is an Italian thing I suppose, always very elegant too, he had a wonderful collection of amber necklaces, quite big, chunky beads and he wore lots of them with his drag, that's what I really remember about Mario.

After years of fierce activism, revolutionary theatre, and the redaction of the influential book *Elements of a Homosexual Critique*, Mieli took his own life in 1983 and is now buried in an anonymous tomb, not far from where I used to live, near Como.

Mario's story struck me deeply—his journey seemed so parallel to my own, not because I was an activist like him, but simply because of the many coincidences: the queerness, of course, but also just how close the places we grew up in were, and the parallel move towards the United Kingdom at the age of 19. But what also struck me about Mario was the invisibility of his story—all these coincidences did not prevent me from only hearing about him at the age of 23, while in London.

Had his story been hidden from me? Had I not looked for it hard enough?

I wanted to find out more about Mario's time in London—looking for the traces he'd left behind, the addresses he'd lived at, the places he visited. And on this journey I met the people he'd met, read what he'd written.

I discovered an entire invisible city that I wanted to bring to light—like the cities that Marco Polo talked about to Kublai Kan, this was a strange city, a queer city: a place suspended, called both London and Londra, a place made by the memories of those who'd lived in it and reconstructed by my research.

This is a story made of journeys—this is my journey. And you're invited.