

Letter From Venice

by Andrei Navrozov

The Women's Movement



After an uninterrupted spell of a winter month or two here in Venice—all footsteps in the evening mist, and quiet conversation about the best way to cook pheasant, and a Neapolitan card game called “seven and a half”—what one notices on arriving in London is the way women move. First of all, it's the speed. Within the most madamed, to say nothing of pompadoured, porcelain leafiness of Chelsea and Knightsbridge, one is suddenly startled by the ku-klux-klan of the gunlock, stopcock, and clockwork to-ing and fro-ing associated with the streets of Manhattan in the bull days when young clerks, who called themselves bankers, first began walking to work wearing running shoes while carrying their walking shoes with them.

Secondly, it's the angle. In the streets of Italian cities, in Venice as in Florence or Rome, women move with a hyperbolic serenity, with that stochastic smoothness which flows from the notion of an easily and pleurably achieved moral aim. The overall impression is that of the graceful Brownian swarming one expects to find at the threshold of an Oriental gateway, whether what lies beyond the gate is a mere sultan's bedchamber or some heavenly paradise. I quote from the Second Sura of the Glorious Qur'an, which a Syrian girl called Hala once gave me for my birthday on the charming and solemn condition that I always keep it on the topmost shelf of my bookcase:

To each is a goal
To which he turns;
Then strive together
Towards all that is good.
Wheresoever ye are,
God will direct you.

This really is the philosophical layout of a typical piazza in an Italian town, a theatrical souk studded with busy cafés and

encrusted with somnolent shops, where the chorus of women swirls through the ranks of seated, or at least contemplative, men like a jewelled comb through a storybook beauty's hair. God is a good director. His productions are interesting.

By contrast, even in the King's Road, Chelsea's perennial tourist seraglio with a reputation for charivari, incense, and idleness surviving from another era, one rarely catches a glimpse of anything other than the abrupt zig of the angular shoulder and the nervous zag of the plastic mannequin head. My point is that, to men, women represent life, and I've grown tired of looking at life that is all jagged shards, as though in a smashed rearview mirror of a badly parked builder's van. I wonder if this means I've finally grown tired of London.

The fashionable cinema in the King's Road is showing a new American film called *Charlie's Angels*. Ordinarily, in the history of the imagination of the world, East or West, angels belong to God and are God's, but in Hollywood they are Charlie's. Accordingly, on the film's posters, the actresses chosen for the part of angels appear to be angular, scrawny, hostile, wingless, and frozen in the abortive indelicacy of a martial-arts pose. Please imagine a painting in which a divine messenger might be required to make an appearance, such as the Annunciation, and judge what sort of Virgin, and what kind of God, would be consistent with the face and the demeanor of one of these creatures. As though to complete the bestial conceit, the actresses have been photographed and celebrated in the press upon being presented to the Prince of Wales, heir to the throne and defender of the faith. Charlie's angels, get it?

The mass image is so radically and incontrovertibly a new departure in the history of the Eternal Feminine that an Italian magazine has run a cover story on the emerging global trend masterminded by Hollywood toward *un fisico bestiale*, a bestial physique. The accompanying cry of dissent, an anguished counterclaim that “*a noi piacciono sempre morbide*” (we Italians still like them soft), is supported by a huge photo-still of the superstar of the moment—Monica Bellucci *tutta curve*—all curves, now appearing in

Giuseppe Tornatore's film *Malèna*, a story of seduction set in Sicily that has been setting box-office records here. In the picture, Miss Bellucci is clad in the nostalgic and intricate armor of femininity that brings to mind the Raymond Chandler phrase “cute as lace pants.”

It is interesting to note that all the places where women have cast off womanhood down to the last, seventh veil, such as the United States, Germany, Holland, and the Scandinavian countries, are famous for both the production and the proliferation of pornography. The places where women continue to exhibit the hyperbolic serenity of which I speak, such as France, Italy, and the rest of the Mediterranean countries verging on the Muslim world, are equally famous for the design and manufacture of women's clothes, including lace pants, which is a much bigger industry than pornography. In other words, no sooner does the woman publicly declare herself free to become a judge, a priest, or a banker than publicly she is made to strip naked. Whereas—in the absence of such a vociferous declaration—while in fact being perfectly free to judge, pray, or bank as she wishes, the woman is a protected object of cultural veneration and a mainstay of the national economy.

I'm neither flirting with Islamic fundamentalism nor affecting the barroom habits of thought now called “male chauvinism.” I'm merely doing what I have done since coming to Italy, using the modern, changing London as a foil for my increasingly real life here. My friend Andriana M— is a Venetian in her 70's, but in the foggy aftermath of a supper I gave for her, she found no fewer than three telephone numbers inside her handbag, all slipped in there by rather younger men who were so taken by her beauty, her charm, and her wit that they had forgotten that a liter of Russky Standard, even when chased down with pickled mushrooms, marinated herrings, and sturgeon caviar, divides into two with most remarkable consequences. My neighbor Donatella A— is only half a generation behind, yet so luminous is her face, so serene her movement, and so hypnotic her whole dynamic silhouette that it is not uncommon for men of almost any age to freeze, openmouthed,

while watching her cross Campo S. Stefano in the company of a golden retriever. And Stella C—, a young mother, tragically widowed, vestal, with the face of a Cimabue Madonna, is somebody to whom I imagine an absolute stranger will one day propose, on bended knee, with a small bouquet of mainland daisies and a diamond rivière from Chatila of Old Bond Street and Rue du Rhône, in the middle of a crowded *vaporetto* during the lunchtime rush hour.

Such are the human types whose fascination I can never see waning, and the streets of London now strike me—as the streets of Manhattan did 20, and more than 20, years ago—as almost completely bereft of the life they represent. They are the actresses who have been auditioned by God, the director, and chosen to play the part of the angels in an action film without an opening sequence, whose final meaning is civilization. They are now being blacklisted, pushed out, and replaced by Charlie's globally projected inventions, with the immediate prospect of barbarizing mankind more effectively than any religious fanaticism or political doctrine. For what all the artifacts of civilization—our basilicas and our railways stations, our iconic Madonnas and our reclining odalisques, our farthingales and our lace pants—ever had in common was that they made up a spectacle worth watching. Well, no more, says Hollywood. No more, repeats Madison Avenue. No more, echoes the King's Road.

This is why the women's movement is all wrong. *Un fisico bestiale* and a boring, boring director.

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Letter From Indonesia

by Doug Bandow

Jakarta's Seething Volcano



You had to look closely to see the thick strands of barbed wire in the shrubs in front of my hotel. I've traveled all over the world, including to Kosovo, but this

was the first time I've stayed in a hotel that was fortified. The staff explained that it was there in case of another riot: Mobs tend to target businesses, especially those owned by Chinese.

There were no riots while I was visiting, but I sensed a country ready to blow. So, naturally, there are people who want America to get involved—not that Washington has ever been far from the action.

For three decades, the now-enfeebled Suharto won U.S. support by opposing communism. Along the way, he built a kleptocracy that turned his family into billionaires. But he stayed in power by spreading the cash. Today, quiet neighborhoods host beautiful homes owned by retired generals and well-connected businessmen. Some of the wealth even made it down to the mass of people. Symbols of Western influence—Pizza Hut and McDonald's, for instance—abound.

The 1997 Asian economic crisis, however, turned the vast wealth gaps into a political minefield. U.S. and International Monetary Fund aid could not prevent the riots that led the military to discard Suharto. The result is an unstable democracy headed by President Wahid Abdurrahman, whose physical incapacities and mental inconsistencies long ago lost their charm. The country seems to be slowly sliding into chaos.

There's nothing necessarily wrong with a fragmented Indonesia. Whether Aceh and Irian Jaya end up independent of Jakarta is not of earthshaking importance to America. But whether a breakup occurs peacefully is of concern, and that doesn't seem likely. Indeed, Indonesia is driven by the kind of cultural conflict that should most worry the United States: a modern religious war.

Tensions in the Moluccan Islands run back to colonial times, when the Dutch relied on their coreligionists to help them rule. One former Indonesian official complained about "all the time bombs left by the Dutch." A Christian-dominated secessionist movement in the Spice Islands sputtered along for years.

For nearly two years, Christians and Muslims have been battling in and around the provincial capital of Ambon. As many as 4,000 have died, and more than 100,000 people have fled. Many have made the treacherous boat trip to surrounding islands. There are more than 8,000 Christian refugees on another island in the city of Manado, and more are arriving daily.

The killing is primitive but effective:

Weapons include bombs, guns, even machetes. Death is a daily occurrence. In denying that a massacre had occurred last year, military spokesman Lt. Col. Iwa Budiman explained that "It was just normal fighting between the two sides."

Lobulisa Leo, a retired general, notes that local Christians and Muslims "would start fighting, and then normally two or three days later settle it. This was a normal happening." In his view, local people have tired of the killing. "Ambonese, Christians and Muslims of Moluccan origin, are fed up." But with the arrival of Laskar Jihad, or "holy warrior troops," the problem has spread beyond the locals. The Muslims "must follow the provocateurs, or they will be killed."

What makes this sectarian conflict so fearsome is the rising impact of fundamentalist Islam. Warns Lobulisa, "Lately Indonesia has sent a lot of students to get their degrees in Muslim countries, Muslim universities. They brought back Muslim ideas—represented by the Hezbollah forces."

As a result, since World War II, the impact of "more radical Islamic elements" has been spreading. More ominously, "I have seen it in the army," says Lobulisa. In January 2000, more than 80,000 Muslims marched in Jakarta to demand a *jihad*, or holy war, against Christians; Amien Rais, head of Indonesia's parliament, appeared at the rally, explaining that "Our patience has limits."

In the beginning, Moluccan Christians were able to defend themselves. But Muslims advanced because they were "backed up by those outside," explained a retired military officer. Some Indonesian soldiers sent to the islands to stop the killing have intervened on behalf of the Muslim majority; others have turned over their weapons. And a number have simply stood by as Jihad forces arrived. "The military hasn't done anything," complained one Christian leader.

That comes as no surprise. Then-Defense Minister Juwono Sudarsono admitted that "some or even many members of the army" have become a "major cause of the clashes." He wanted them discharged, but acknowledged that there was nothing he could do.

The government's responsibility is unclear. So far, President Wahid—who, in August, offered a plan to bring peace to the Mideast—has been incapable or unwilling to stop the killing. Some also blame Vice President Megawati