

Locks of Love & Hate*

By MARK GILCHRIST

This week, our conversational couple is in Venice, Italy, walking among the canals and bridges, and dining on delicacies tapas-style, right from restaurants' street-side cases. The topic? Why humans are the most banal species On This Planet Earth. The food? Italian.

"This," he said, holding a padlock clamped to an iron fence along the Rio del Carmine in Venice, Italy, "is exactly why we can't have nice things." It was the first padlock they had seen in Venice, one of the first cities to ban the recent fad of "love-locking."

"It was a beautiful scheme, really," he said. "I mean, such symbolism and such legacial permanence!"

"Legacial?" she said. "That's not even a word..."

"In your opinion," he said. "Anyway, I just wish that we had a clunky padlock fastened to an innocent fixture so that you and I could have a public symbol of our love to shove down the world's throat."

"Our what?..."

"Just think," he said. "Every time someone walked past it, they would say: 'Wow, I sure admire those two people, they must really be in love — a padlock and everything!'"

"Be in what?..."

she said. "Is this going somewhere?"

They walked across the **Rialto Bridge** over the Grand Canal, their feet above stones that had been placed there more than 460 years ago. "Maybe you should start at the beginning? Save the rant for later?"

"Umm, what?..."

"What are love locks?" she said, stabbing the last piece of ham from their cup of antipasti and smearing it in olive oil. "Enlighten us."

"Oh, sorry. Right. So, we don't know exactly when or why the craze started, but it hit Europe first, in 2005 or so... after Federico Moccia's book: **"I Want You."** hit the teen-lit market, locks just started padding up everywhere."

"Like a virus — must have been a startling sight," she said. "Mostly on bridges, though, right?"

"Yes, that's the idea. You attach a padlock somewhere on a bridge, because bridges connect... they, well, it — heck, I'm not sure why bridges — but then you toss the key in the water."

"For fish to choke on?"

"Right — no. So you throw the key away, and BAM! Your love will be hopelessly locked forever."

Our couple mingled with tourists in the little shops on the Rialto, the

scene of a market for more than eight centuries. They bought a few sticks of skewered shrimp, grilled and seasoned, and ate them as they walked along the canal.

"Well, I think it's charming that people want to be a part of something big," she said.

"A big eyesore?"

"A tradition... It's lovely..."

"A tradition?" he said. "Wait... how is it lovely?"

"Well, it symbolizes durability, for one. A padlock is a sign of a durable connection."

"Connection to what? To the fence? The bridge?"

"Ridiculous, yes, but that's love."

"Oh, please, what's love got to do with it?" he said as a gondola slipped by, its gondolier too hungover to croon for his passengers. "It's all about climbing onto a meme. This ritual is completely void of relevance to the real world."

"A ritual is only as powerful and binding as in the minds of those who believe in it," she said. "So there."

With no motor vehicles allowed, our couple easily strolled the streets, dodging only selfie-stick-brandishing tourists, some of the five million who visit Venice each year.

"C'mon, it gives you a story to tell, a narrative to prove your love," she said. "They don't seem to mind love locks in Germany."



The Rialto Bridge in Venice, Italy is a very wide, pedestrian bridge lined on both sides with shops.

"Yeah, well, those silly Germans are just giddy for love..."

"The folks in Lovelock, Nevada are embracing this," she said as they watched workers hoist a wheeled cart over a garbage boat and empty its contents into the boat. "They built structures there just so people can lock their love to them."

"Yes, I've seen that in other countries. What a clever way to both give in and cash in on this fad!"

"My, you're turning yellow," she said. "Aren't we jaundiced today?"

"Well, you know how that began?"

"The locks? You said..."

"No, my cynicism for people's selfish displays of... of whatever."

"Right, we are talking about you, as usual."

"Well, anyway, it was in Oklahoma City in 1998, three years after the **bombing** of the federal building."

"The one that killed more than 100 people?"

"Yes, well, 168. I visited the site,



Enjoying a slice of pizza beside the Trevi Fountain in Rome while watching couples take selfies, or "wefies," or "bothies," whatever.

and I was appalled."

"Such destruction..."

"Yes, well, the site had been cleared by then, but what was tragic was the amount of litter people left there in the name of tribute."

"In the name..."

"Yes. People left thousands of pieces of junk there, tied to the fence surrounding the site. The media kindly spoke of things like teddy bears and toys, and that is sweet, but there was so much junk."

"Junk? What?"

"Yes, I don't know why, just people's uncontrollable desire to get in on the act, I guess. To, as you said, be a part of something big. So basically, they just emptied their pockets of whatever junk they didn't want: old cigarette lighters, key rings — useless crap — and attached it to the fence as some kind of supposed tribute. It's just incredibly selfish."

"Thus the selfie."

"Yes, that came later, but I'm sure many photos were taken of the proud people with their trinkets of tribute."

"Kinda chokes me up, ya know?"

"And then there's Graceland!" he said.

"Memphis..."

"Yes, I walked past there one day, and just could not believe the so-called "tributes" that people scribbled on the **stone wall** out front, and on the sidewalk, even. Just pitiful screams for attention."

An ambulance boat cruised along Rio de S. Polo with its

ing of self-entitlement, and gives the middle finger to the architects and craftsmen who labored so hard to design and build this city, and the taxpayers who paid for it."

"Now, there's a forkful," she said. "Seriously, if you want to do something symbolic, then just do it on your own property, and not in a place that you will never even visit again."

"Your own fence?"

"Perfect. Lock it right out front so everyone who walks past your house will see how much in love you are."

"But, don't you need..."

"Need what? Oh, the French connection? I get it. So, it's just not the same unless you go on someone else's property, to a beautiful, romantic place, and deface it... well, how about this?"

"How about not?..."

"When you go some place romantic, and you feel like lockin' and lovin', then just buy the crappy lock, and take a photo of yourselves there, with the lock, kissing or whatever..."

"Let me guess; you don't lock it."

"Right. Bring it home, and lock it

lights flashing. A boat in front of it sped up to find a wide enough area to pull over.

"But, c'mon, you have to admit," she said, "it does come across as a sweet gesture, locking your love?"

"Sweet? Ha! The Italian writer, Alberto Toso Fei called it: 'Totally banal.' He is behind the **Unlock Your Love**, campaign, which helped clean up this city a few years ago with this notion: 'Your love doesn't need chains... and Venice doesn't need your garbage.'

"The Guardian's Jonathan Jones said the padlocks are; 'One of the shallowest, stupidest, phoniest expressions of love ever devised.'"

"Worse than carving your names on a tree?" she said. "At least this doesn't kill trees!"

No, but it destroyed a part of the Pont des Arts bridge in Paris, and it just ruins the public aesthetic, encourages vandalism by bolstering peoples' feel-

to something you'll see every day."

"Hmm, nice conversation-piecc."

They walked up to a produce vendor on a boat on Rio de S. Ana, and bought a couple of apples, eating them as they strolled along Via Giuseppe Garibaldi.

"What we need are scammers..." he said.

"Don't we have enough already?"

"No, these are... see, these are benevolent scammers."

"Like tooth fairies."

"Like, people who will sell cheap padlocks, all with the same key..."

"Uh-oh..."

"And they let people write their names on them..."

"Can't you just please use your creative powers for good?" she said.

he said. "They also don't care how ugly it will be there, or whether the bridge will collapse under the weight. So, we know they are careless, let's just take advantage of that."

"But, what if they return and find their lock missing?" she said.

"Oh, you naive child..."

"Excuse me?"

"Don't you see? Opportunity — sell them another lock!"

Our couple stood between the ferry terminal and the Doge's Palace, eating gelato from cones and watching people take selfies in front of the **Bridge of Sighs**.

"And don't get me started on the whole 'crazy humans' part," he said.

"Oh, I won't have to..."

"So, what is the only species on earth that will invent, design and build something for a very clear, specific purpose..."

"You can get yourself started..."

"And then just... just completely throw all that away, and use it for something completely different, something totally useless?"

"Okay, okay," she said, "but humans are the only species capable of love, right?"

"We're the only ones foolish enough..."

"Six billion people on this planet," she said. "Six! Half of them men..."

"Yeah, isn't it cool?"

"Three billion men," she said, "and I'm attracted to the one who is absolutely

the least capable of embracing a single romantic notion."

"Okay. So, yeah — you want pizza?"

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"Okay. So, yeah — you want pizza?"

* This rather embarrassing phenomenon is not at all related to the very worthy project; **Locks of Love**.

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A produce salesman in Venice uses his boat for a produce stand.



"Dis-graced-land, Memphis, Tennessee"



On the bridge over the Dniester River in Tiraspol, Moldova. Even this poor country with very few tourists is not immune, but at least the locks appear to me more, well, sincere.



A gondola passes under the "Bridge of Sighs" in Venice.