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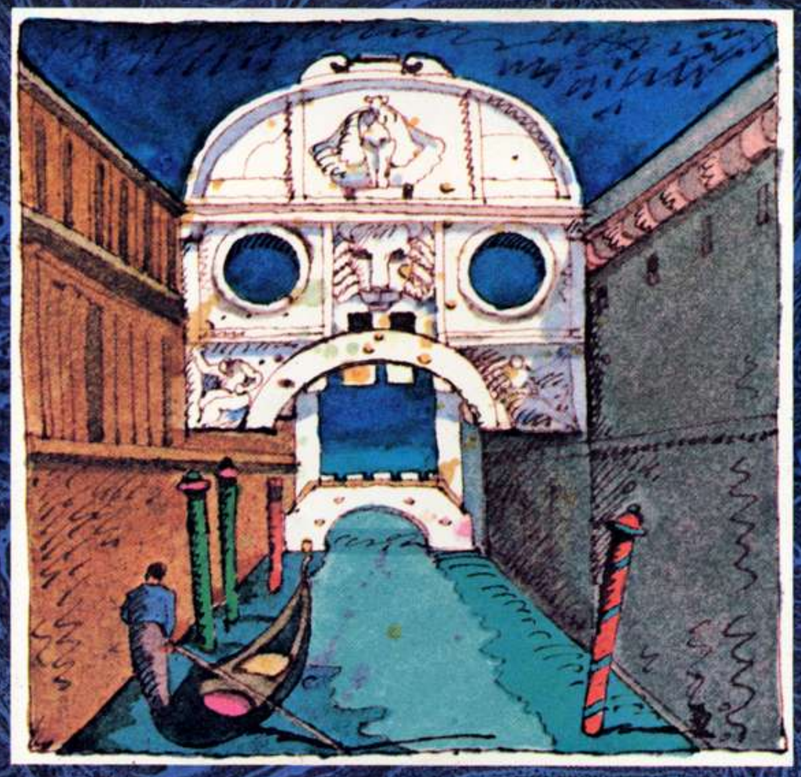

The moment the aging Gustav Aschenbach—musician, artist, philosopher—steps into the gondola that will carry him to Venice, he feels a strange new release, and his weary heart thrills. He sits down among the luxurious cushions of that singular conveyance, the gondola, unchanged from the days of the balladeers, black as a coffin, and so silent as it slides in the water that only the splashing of the boatman's oar breaks the stillness.

The year is 1911. The voyager has sailed to this most improbable of cities over the high seas. There, Venice, with its brilliant welcome, greets him as ever,

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the airy splendour of the palace and the Bridge of Sighs, the columns of lion and saint on the shore, the glory of the projecting flank of the fairy temple, the vista of gateway and clock.

The lonely artist, his health failing, has come to this most fashionable of Europe's resorts. Only recently Aschenbach had collapsed while conducting his music in Munich. But there is more still. He had been suffering not merely from physical fatigue but—a deep discontent with his own too-disciplined life. He craves freedom, forgetfulness—in

short, an impulse to flight surged in him. "My heart needs to question the world," he declares to his friend Alfried, "to find a place where I can lose myself and contemplate my life and my destiny without disturbance."

What Aschenbach cannot guess is that this fabulous, magic, foreign place to which he comes seeking renewed life, hoping to find his inspiration again, conceals his ruin. Yet the hints are there. Premonitions on every side of him: in the grotesque figure of the young-old man on the steamer to Venice, playing the buffoon, babbling, bowing and scraping to hold the attention of the youths; in the brutish, muttering gondolier, who runs off without his pay; and in the glimpse of a diseased man slumping to a lonely death in the midst of a busy railway station....

The haunting story from the masterpiece of the great German writer, Thomas Mann, lives in every nuance in the hands of its Italian director. Luchino Visconti has touched the very source of Mann's inspiration, even to recreating Aschenbach as a composer. Mann, much affected by the death that summer of the famous musician Mahler, whom he had known briefly in Munich, sketched

his physical likeness in Aschenbach, even to the borrowing of the musician's given name, Gustav. And the stage upon which the characters move is the Hotel des Bains, the original setting for Mann's story which stands on the Lido today, and was returned to its fullest glory by Warner Bros. for the film of Mann's story.

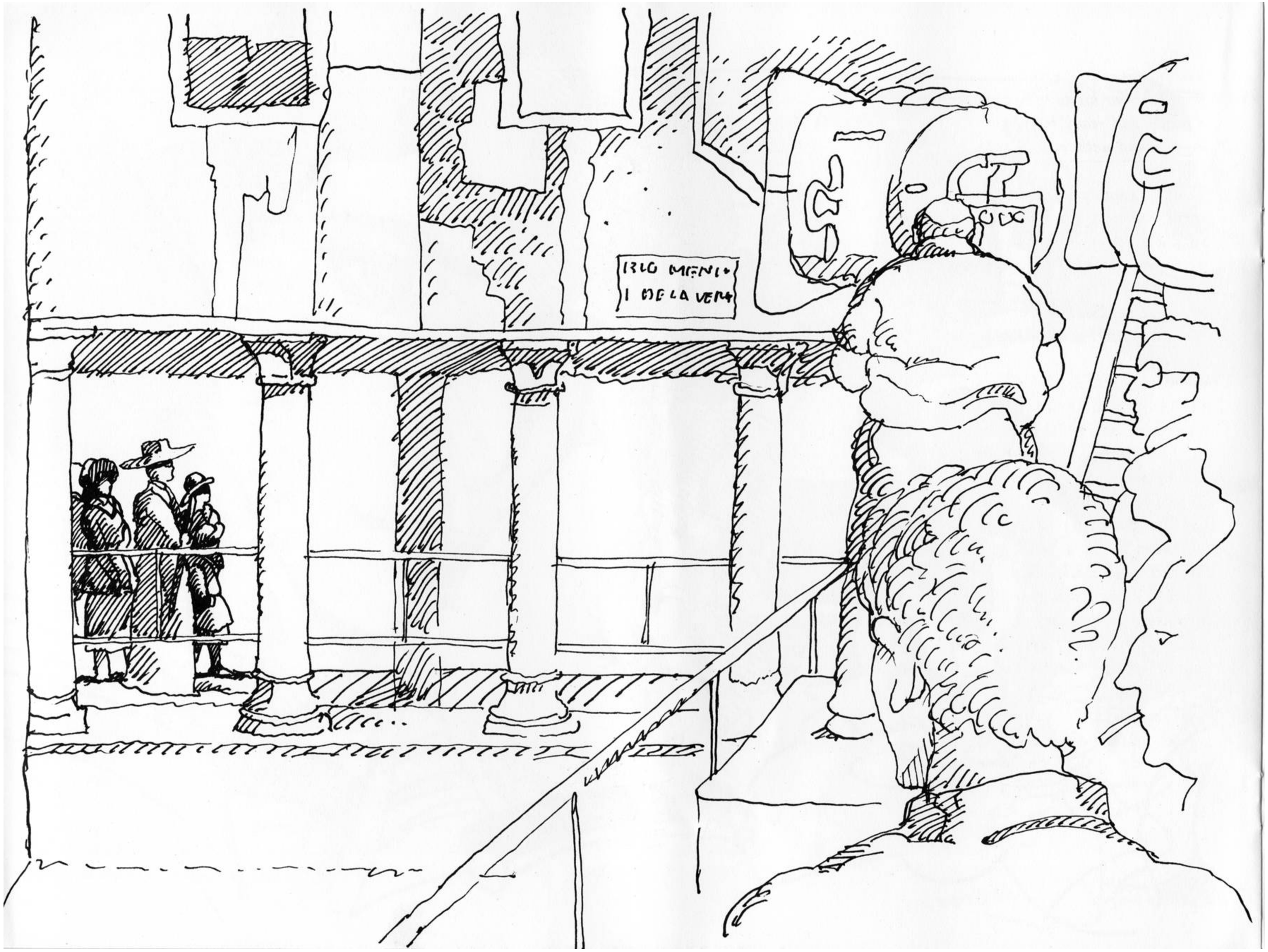
In detail, nothing was omitted: from the crystal goblets, the vintage wines and embroidered tablecloths in the dining hall, to the cherrywood furnishings in Aschenbach's hotel room, which looks out upon the beach over the blue Adriatic. Here is the genteel world of ladies in wide-brimmed hats and parasols strolling on their promenades and through the piazzas, of children in linen and lace, and gentlemen in evening dress: that soft world of serenades melting upon the lagoon on mild summer nights. All of it, the very spirit of that vanished world that opened the 20th century, is evoked by Visconti.

As Aschenbach idly gazes at his fellow guests in the main lobby, he can hear the principal tongues of Europe in their refined, subdued voices.

There were long dry Americans, large-familied Russians, English ladies, German children with French bonnes. The Slavic element predominated.

Near him sits a group of young people speaking Polish: three girls, their governess, and a lad of fourteen. At once, Aschenbach is struck by him, fascinated by the boy's perfect beauty. A beauty that summons up the noblest moment of Greek sculpture.
Tadzio, for so he's called, wears an expression of pure serenity, revealing a chaste perfection of form that Aschenbach had never seen consummated so happily in nature or in art. The image of beauty, the very soul of classical simplicity and symmetry…

It was the head of Eros with the yellowish bloom of Parian marble, with fine serious brows….The head was poised like a flower, in incomparable loveliness…
Such beauty in a human being? Here in Venice—that city of many crossroads, that floating dream, that rich mingling of races and cultures, a city which seems history itself—Aschenbach had found a likeness, beauty's essence, so rare



and holy it must surely have been born for his adoration! He is dazzled and ready to follow, eagerly and without a scruple.

From that moment of enchantment, the artist lives his days in a subdued frenzy. He pursues his ideal through the labyrinths of the ancient city. And Venice of 1911 is caught and lingered over by the beautiful camera work of Pasquale di Santis. We wander the narrow alleys in the intense heat, the smoke of street fires suffused with the bitter smell of carbolic acid. Aschenbach makes some halting attempts to speak to his beloved. Tadzio's blurry foreign tongue, not one syllable of which the composer can follow, is music to him. Yet each time he tries to talk, to touch, his own passionate heart thwarts him. And the young god glides by ever unapproachable—admired, idolized, and worshipped. As the vision persists, Aschenbach walks on under the burning sirocco sun, his infatuation growing and with it the panic inside him. For Venice has its own secret, guarded from him and his innocent friend!

The bustling hotel is now half-empty. Tourists are fleeing the city.

The piazzas are suddenly quite deserted, and the stench of disinfectant penetrates everywhere. Baffled and desperate, Aschenbach tries to learn the cause. His questions are rebuffed by the hotel manager, the barber, and ridiculed by the strolling street musician, whose sinister song makes the other guests roar with laughter as though possessed by some demon. There are whispers, there are denials, but the fact is that pestilence has gripped the city. And though the officials continue to reject reports that people are dying of cholera, the disease is seething through the now feverish body of the city.

Finally, the truth is revealed reluctantly to him by the Englishman in the travel office. He warns that disease and corruption run together in Venice: there are surly gangs in the streets, drunkenness, licentiousness, and always the fear of the walking terror, the cholera. "Go, leave now, today," urges the Englishman, "for the quarantine cannot be more than a few days off." Aschenbach longs to cry out to Tadzio and his family—save yourselves! Yet he is powerless. He vacillates, agonizing in the fear of losing forever the stranger god he adores. Like a criminal, he now

must keep hidden the city's calamitous secret as well as his own. Beyond all help, and altogether lost to shame, he livens his appearance with smart ties and succumbs to the barber's ministrations that make him look young again—a young-old man not much different from the revolting buffoon on the steamer.

"The time left us is like hour-glass sand," he has told a friend, "to our eyes it appears to run out only in the end." The thought of his former life of reason and self-mastery makes him wince in revulsion. He must keep silent, stay on, and live this brief time left him, moment by moment.

For in the delirium of his passion, he has glimpsed what few men are fortunate enough to see: the divine beauty incarnate.

So to the very end. Aschenbach sits and gazes desperately at Tadzio, and the lad smiles at him, beckoning like a pale and lovely summoner from the Adriatic…which seems now the waters of eternity.

Some minutes passed before anyone hastened to the aid of the elderly man sitting there collapsed in his chair. They bore him to his room. And before nightfall a shocked and respectful world received the news of his decease.