

## On the Rialto

by Finn Briscoe

“On the Rialto,” he said to his wife, “It was so beautiful.”

“What does it mean?” she replied, “Where or what is the Rialto? Is it a river, is it a planet? What is the Rialto?” They were not well-traveled. She had never left the shores of Titusville, Florida, and he had ventured only slightly farther, mostly as he swam leisurely alongside a pretty woman or a couple who caught his eye.

They were unusual puffer fish, although not that unusual. Many of their friends and colleagues could actually communicate in limited English, which is better than many humans in Florida. They were seen as snobs by some of their less educated puffer pals because of the new words that Pierre brought back to the beautifully sculptured home that Phoebe carved out in the sand near the Titusville reef, but they didn't care.

Pierre was a roaming soul and could often be seen cruising along the shoreline when the surf was minimal, following one or two humans as they strolled along the Playalinda Beach in Titusville, eavesdropping on conversations meant to be private.

It never occurred to most of the people who noticed a puffer fish swimming alongside them in a foot or two of water that he could be listening to their conversations even though they were mostly rocket scientists and other smart people who worked for NASA. Sometimes really smart people can have a good vocabulary and a lot of knowledge but very little imagination. Who, except somebody with a lot of imagination, would think that Pierre could hear under water, much less understand human speech in English? Of course, more than one couple did remark on how strange it was that a puffer fish was following them a long way as they walked along the beach. Pierre had seen them pointing at him and knew very well the phrase, “It's really weird,” which was used to describe the fact that they had been accompanied by a puffer fish a half mile or more as they took a supposedly solitary stroll.

The morning that he overheard the woman say “On the Rialto,” to the man with a blue beret, Pierre wished once again that he could speak out of his small mouth with beak-like teeth. He would like to ask the woman to repeat the other words that came with those three which seemed so precious to her. Her body language spoke volumes as she evoked what must have been a beautiful memory of what had happened “on the Rialto.”

When Pierre came home that day to find Phoebe chomping on a crunchy crustacean, he spun a story of a relationship that had blossomed into something extraordinary “on the Rialto,” and as Phoebe took in the tale of the woman in the gorgeous green gown and the man in the blue beret, she became a bit jealous. It was strange that a woman was wearing a gorgeous green gown on the beach. Somehow she doubted it, chalking it up to Pierre’s use of hyperbole to describe the women he followed. But although she knew Pierre was attracted to the women in a strange pescahominid way, she always knew that he couldn’t fertilize their eggs like he did hers, and that was enough to calm her protective puffer passions. She was deeply in love with Pierre, and he with her, but nonetheless his mind wandered. Often.

The woman in the gorgeous green gown’s name was Julia. She had recently returned from Italy where she’d gone with her man Rupert, he of the blue beret. They were rocket scientists at NASA and had been going out on and off for about a year.

After the first two dates where they were feeling each other out like boxers in the opening rounds of a title fight, they’d kissed on the lips when they said good night on the second date, and Rupert was hoping things might get physical the next time they got together.

Julia called him up and told him a friend gave her some killer pot and they could smoke a bowl or two at her house if he’d like to. It had been awhile for Rupert since he got high. He’d been drug tested after accepting his present job before he could start work, and you never know when you might have to change jobs. That’s what Rupert usually thought about smoking pot if he

thought about it at all, and besides he hadn't had any connections for weed since he'd left the university and joined NASA.

So when he got to Julia's place he was curious and a bit excited but kinda apprehensive. Julia was relaxed. When he came into her apartment she walked right up to him, so he kissed her, a long, deep kiss, a French kiss, too. That was nice.

They sat down on the couch and took a couple of hits off her bong, and the rest, as they say, is history. The pot made them very sensitive physically, so it wasn't only the sex, but also the touching all over that gave them both great pleasure. They liked the experience enough to repeat it two times per week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays. One night, Rupert had a couple of beers to go with the pot and was really feeling his oats. He had his arm around Julia on her second hand couch when he turned toward her, gazed into her beautiful green eyes, and blurted out,

“Julia, let's go to Italy for vacation.”

“Rupert, you big wanko.” She sat up in surprise and stared back at him. “Let's do it.”

Neither had ever been there, but they'd both heard and read that Italy was a country filled with beautiful art and romantic places. You'd be surprised what interests some rocket scientists have besides rockets and science.

Three months later, their first stop was Rome. It was everything they'd imagined it to be. An ancient and ageless past mingled comfortably with a tumultuous today full of chaotic life on the streets and quiet moments in the small piazza near the Airbnb room they rented from Elena. Elena had lived in California for three years while her husband Prospero got his PhD in marine biology from USC. Elena told Julia and Rupert as much as she could about the art and archaeology that they could only begin to experience on their short 3-day visit to her beloved Roma .

Prospero was working on a project with the Italian Ministry of Health, monitoring three species of Tetradontidae, or poisonous puffer fish, which since 2003 had been invading the eastern Mediterranean through the Suez Canal from their native habitat in the Red Sea. He didn't mention

his work with the poisonous puffers to the couple, saying only that Florida had an interesting marine ecology, and it was a shame how the coral were dying as sea temperatures rose. He was tired of talking to tourists at breakfast, even rocket scientist tourists.

Elena was a bit more outgoing and worried about her rating on Airbnb, so she did her best to tell Rupert and Julia what were the must-see sights in Pisa, Florence, and Venice, the next three stops on their trip, which were also the last three stops on their trip. Eight days is a short time to see a country with an ancient and ageless past mingled with multitudinous, or maybe multifarious, modernity. But it's better than nothing.

Several days later, somewhat overwhelmed by Florence's magnificent art and architecture, Julia and Rupert boarded the train for the two-hour ride to Venice. Along the way, Julia told Rupert that she was about museumed out and would just like to relax. The work of Michelangelo and his minions had left her feeling stupefied and small. Who doesn't feel that way sometimes in the presence of greatness? Like where did this dude come from?

Even while surrounded by hordes of tourists from all parts of the globe who gobbled up some of the magnificence with their annoying presence, Julia and Rupert felt fortunate to experience the brilliance and splendor, the grand and powerful beauty everywhere they went. They were giddy gobblers, too. The websites and brochures had said that the painting, sculpture, and architecture in Florence were breathtaking, and it was true. Now Julia wanted to catch her breath and relax in Venice. What was Rupert thinking?

Rupert had a trick up his sleeve. No, he wasn't an off-duty magician in a high stakes poker game, just a gangly nerd of a rocket scientist with a gorgeous rocket scientist girl friend, and Julia's sentiments played right into his hand. Rupert had contracted a singing gondolier through TripAdvisor to pick them up at their hotel the next evening, meander melodiously along the small canals, then row out into the Grand Canal and deliver them to the iconic Ponte di Rialto where he would propose to Julia.



Rupert was prepared. Tucked inside the innermost pocket of his backpack was a diamond ring from JCPenney. He wasn't an expert on jewelry, but he'd gotten 30% off the list price and another 15% off for opening a credit card account, and 45% was a pretty penny on this diamond ring, believe you me. The only thing that bothered him was that there were a lot of people on the Rialto Bridge in the pictures he saw, and while it was the perfect spot for a proposal, he was sometimes a bit shy.

The next evening was their last night in Italy, and everything was going to plan. The gondolier picked them up at the Hotel Bonvecchiati and meandered down the canal singing a song that Rupert hadn't heard on the endless youtube playlists of Italian love songs he'd listened to before the trip. When they turned down the Rio de San Salvador, passing beneath the quaint and charming Ponte del Lovo, then swinging out into the Grand Canal, the gondolier belted out a passionate ballad of love lost and found again underneath the Ponti di Rialto, which now appeared on cue in front of them on said Grand Canal. Julia looked at Rupert with an almost beatific smile that had about a 20% chance of looking like an ironic sneer and said lovingly, "Really, Rupert?"

Rupert thought things were going well as they disembarked at the foot of the Rialto Bridge and traipsed up the stairs to get a sweeping view of the canal from atop, where he was prepared to pop the question. When they were about half way up, a large group of teenage Chinese tourists came cavorting down the steps, chasing each other playfully on the way, and a hefty girl shoved to the side by two skinny guys bumped into Rupert as he was attempting to surreptitiously pull the ring out of the innermost pocket of his backpack. The ring went flying. Oh my God! But luckily, in an

amazing stroke of good fortune, he grabbed it mid-air just as it was about to clear the balustrade.

Phew, that was close. Julia acted like she didn't notice.

As they reached the top of the majestic bridge, Rupert put his arm around Julia, then planted his hands on her shoulders and twisted her body around to face him. As he dropped to his knee, he placed the ring case in the outstretched palm of his left hand and tried to get it open with his right, meanwhile blurting out, "Julia, will you marry me?"

Finally able to get the ring box open, Rupert peered vulnerably up at Julia as a small crowd of tourists gathered around to observe the romantic scene, when all of a sudden a fifteen year old Chinese boy, running late, came bursting through the crowd, tripping on an American tourist's Venetian slip-on loafers he'd recently purchased on amazon.com, smashing into kneeling Rupert, and wouldn't you know it, sending the ring flying, flying high this time. It cleared the balustrade by a good two feet.

Rupert bent over the rail and gaped down as the ring plopped into the murky waters of the Grand Canal. The crowd drew a collective gasp. The Chinese boy, Chaoxiang, picked himself up and took off running down the steps in his designer jeans. Then he stopped, looked back at Julia standing there regally with Rupert hanging over the balustrade and the semi-circle of a crowd around her staring in wonder and thought she must be a celebrity. Young Chaoxiang, whose name means "expect fortune," whipped out his iphone and quickly snapped three photos of Julia, the third with Rupert peering angrily at him as he turned in his direction. As Rupert yelled, "Hey jerko," and started toward him, Chaoxiang tore off running down the steps as fast as he could, nearly tripping over a Canadian tourist's Venetian slip-on loafers also recently purchased on amazon.com.

Julia jumped off her regal perch at the top of the steps, grabbed Rupert by the shoulders, spun him around, and planted a long, delicious kiss on him that he wouldn't forget as long as he lived. The crowd cheered. The American tourist who'd tripped Chaoxiang by mistake was among

many who got a great picture overlooking the Grand Canal of a tall, attractive couple making out on the Rialto Bridge.

Continuing on, Julia kissed Rupert on the neck, then flicked his earlobe several times with her tongue. Then she whispered lovingly, “Don’t worry, you’re a big boy, Rupert. It’s all for the best. I would have said no. It’s way too corny, and I don’t want to get married anyway. Let’s just go back to the hotel room and fuck our brains out.” She looked at him with eyes gleaming, “Oh, and I brought a pinch of weed for one special night in Venice.”

Then she ceremoniously bent Rupert backwards over the balustrade and ran her hands up his legs, then his torso, and into his hair before pulling him toward her in another long, passionate butterfly of a French kiss that left many in the crowd staring uncomfortably at the murky waters of the Grand Canal that had just swallowed Rupert’s diamond ring from JCPenney.

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A month after the long plane ride back from Italy during which Rupert and Julia glowed in the aftermath of an incredible night of fine food, great wine, good pot, and passionate lovemaking, Julia told Rupert they were going to be parents as they strolled along Playalinda Beach in Titusville.

“I knew I wanted to have your baby when you created that insane scene on the Rialto,” Julia confided, her gorgeous green gown flowing in the breeze, telling Rupert what he’d felt in his bones ever since the ring went flying over the balustrade. He’d never own Julia but would be her partner for all the life that is compressed into one of a thousand beautiful and sad and wonderful and laughable moments they would share, maybe all of them within a span of five minutes on the Rialto, maybe for years and years before returning to the Hotel Bonvecchiati as aging grandparents.

“On the Rialto,” he smiled, stopping Julia for a kiss. Pierre the puffer fiish peered up at the romantic embrace of the couple and treaded water, thinking how beautiful the woman was, well actually how handsome the couple was, as he thought of his wife Phoebe contouring their beautiful abode in the sand near the reef back home.

Julia stepped back for a moment to stare adoringly at her big boy, Rupert. As she was taking in his handsome nerd face, in the background she could see Pierre staring at them with his left eye. “It’s really weird,” she said, “there’s this puffer fish that’s been following us up the beach in a couple of feet of water for a while now.”



When Pierre the puffer fish got back to the reef that evening and spun the romantic scene of the woman in the gorgeous green gown and the man in the blue beret “on the Rialto,” Phoebe was engrossed by the tale. Enraptured, she released a myriad of eggs in the water nearby. Pierre, starry-eyed in the moonlight, spread a plentitude of syrupy sperm lovingly around the eggs, and kissed his wife goodnight.