

The Glassmaker

BY CARISSA SUMNER



“TELL ME AGAIN how I came to work at your glass furnace, Maestro,” Miro begged. At twelve years of age some would say Miro was getting too old for this game, but the warmth of the furnace and the familiarity of the glassmaking tools made him feel cozy.

The master glassmaker, Paolo Tiepolo, rotated the iron rod and pinched the hot glass with tongs. Out of the glass, he pulled wings, a head, a tail. He knocked the glass bird off the end of the rod and smiled at his helper. “In 1655, I ordered three bags of sand to make one hundred goblets for the Doge’s Palace. But what does the gondolier bring?”

“Two bags of sand and a little boy!” interrupted Miro. “But you didn’t have any little boys to help in your glass furnace, so you decided to keep me!”

THE DOGE’S PALACE IS WHERE THE GOVERNOR OF VENICE LIVES.



Illustrated by Lucia Sforza

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In reality, Paolo had chosen Miro from the orphans at the Basilica of Saints Maria e Donato on the Venetian island of Murano, where he lived and worked as a glassmaker. But this was the story he had told his wife when he brought Miro home. The couple had just given birth to their fifth girl, and Paolo needed a *garzonetto*—a boy to help in the glass furnace. As a *garzonetto*, Miro fetched buckets of water, reheated the glass, and handed the maestro his tools.

Paolo enjoyed Miro's company in the furnace, but his wife remained aloof. Whether the signora was bitter at not having any sons herself or whether it was the sand she had to wash out of Miro's clothes, she kept her daughters away from Miro and spoke few words.

As for Miro, the wish he made each night was to be promoted from *garzonetto* to *serventino*. If he was a *serventino*, he could breathe life into glass through the blowpipe, helping the maestro create the space inside vases and cups. And maybe, just maybe, a promotion would also earn him Signora's approval.

Today's project was a flock of glass birds, each a different color. Paolo consulted his book of glassmaking secrets. The handwritten book had been his father's and his grandfather's before that. Paolo came from a long line of Venetian glassmakers who each added his own recipes and discoveries to the book. With one hand on the page and the other hand searching in his cabinet of ingredients, Paolo pulled out copper and iron to make green glass, cobalt for blue glass, and lead and tin for white glass.

Paolo got up from the workshop bench to go see if his wife needed any help. One of their five daughters, the kindest one in Miro's opinion, had a suitor visiting. Alessandra's suitor was a nobleman. Although being a Venetian glassmaker had its drawbacks, there were privileges, too. Namely, the daughter of a glassmaker could marry a nobleman.

Miro stacked wood next to the furnace and thought about what it would be like on the island of Murano if Alessandra left to marry this nobleman.

When they were both smaller, Miro and Alessandra would hide out on the roof together and have a contest: Who Can See the Farthest?

"I can see Signore Gritti's tunic and trousers hanging on his laundry line," Miro would offer.

"I can see the orange lilies in Signora de Bossi's window box," Alessandra would counter.

"I can see the gondoliers unloading wood on our island."

"I can see the gondoliers across the lagoon in Venice."

"I can see across the lagoon, too. I see the Campanile in the Piazza San Marco."

The game would progress until one of them claimed to see the pope himself in Rome.

"Miro!"

Miro startled at the sound of his name. He did not expect to see Bartolo, Alessandra's nobleman suitor, here in the furnace.

"Uh, hello, Bartolo. Do you want to come in?"



ALDOF MEANS COLD
AND DISTANT. A
CAMPANILE IS A BELL
TOWER.



But Bartolo was already in and picking up the completed purple and red glass birds and examining them. The ruffles on his fashionable shirtsleeves brushed a bird of red glass. It wobbled before settling again on its glass feet.

Bartolo looked behind him and closed the door.

“I won’t waste your time, Miro. I come to you as a friend of the English. A Venetian, yes, but one who knows how to use friendships outside Venice to my advantage. The new English ruler, King Charles II, is jealous for knowledge of your glassmaking techniques, and we both can benefit.”

Benefit? Miro didn’t know what to say. Did Bartolo call on Alessandra because he was in love with her, or was he courting the daughter of a glassmaker for his own purposes?

As if Bartolo was reading Miro’s mind, he continued. “Sacrifices must be made, and in the end there may be certain parties who feel as if they have been slighted.”

“But Alessandra . . .”

“You’re a fool, Miro! I offer you a partnership in making more money than you’ll ever earn as a glassmaker—garzonetto, serventino, even maestro—and all you can think of is Alessandra. Forget it.”

ACCORDING TO THIS BOOK, WE NEED
TO GET THE FIRE GOOD AND HOT.
PUMP FASTER, LADYBUG.



PUMP, PUMP.
PUFF, PUFF.



MEWY
PUFF,
PUFF!

Bartolo stormed out. When he slammed the door, the bird of red glass tipped over but did not break. Miro picked it up and stroked its smooth glass feathers, as if reassuring it that he, Miro, would never betray Paolo, Alessandra, or the glassmaking secrets of Venice.

The door opened.

Not again, thought Miro. But this time it was Paolo, and he was smiling.

“That settles it, my boy! The wedding will take place next Sunday! Isn’t that Bartolo a gentleman? He is no glassmaker—that is you and me. But what a wonderful thing it will be to have him in the family.”

For the second time that day, Miro did not know what to say. He picked up the bird of red glass again and felt its weight.

“Jealous, eh?” Paolo laughed.

That night Miro could not sleep. It seemed like no matter which way he turned, the hay in his mattress was poking him the wrong way. Should he warn Paolo of Bartolo’s duplicity? What about Alessandra? And would he ever become a *serventino*?

MIRO MUST HAVE fallen asleep, because he woke in the morning to hear the gondoliers calling out to each other as they drove their loads of spices, silk, wood, and glass. Then he heard Signora tsking about him oversleeping and her needing to get his wool blanket to hang in the sun.

“Here, let me help,” Miro offered and tugged the edge of the blanket.

“Too late. I’ve got it.” Signora pulled from the other edge of the blanket.

Miro released his end and out tumbled a bird of purple glass, loosely wrapped in a piece of paper.

“What is this?” Signora demanded while Miro wondered the same thing. She smoothed the paper, and Miro could see one of Paolo’s recipes for coloring glass, except the handwriting was not Paolo’s. The handwriting had more flourishes, like it came from someone of a higher class.

“You seek to destroy us!” Signora accused.

Miro remembered Bartolo picking up the purple and red glass birds and examining them. He remembered Paolo’s book of glassmaking secrets lying open on the workbench. But he did not get a chance to protest, because Signora was rushing out to tell Paolo.

Miro thought Paolo might dismiss him immediately, but when he entered the workroom, Paolo motioned for him to load the furnace with wood.

“I don’t want to believe you were trying to steal glassmaking secrets,” Paolo finally said.

“Maestro, please . . .”

“Ah,” Paolo held up his hand. “Your words are of no use, Miro. You will have to prove your innocence. I cannot risk the scrutiny of the Council of Ten, and you know what happens to glassmakers who try to reveal our secrets.”

Of course, Miro knew. Everyone knew. The Council of Ten guarded the glassmakers and their secret techniques vigorously—so vigorously that in 1291 the Council moved all

DUPLICITY MEANS
DECEITFULNESS, BEING
TWO-FACED.



A SKUNK.

the furnaces from the mainland of Venice to Murano. They said it was to prevent the city from catching fire, but everyone knew it was so the Council could control the glassmakers and their knowledge.

Few glassmakers ever left Murano. The penalty for leaving the island without permission or for revealing glassmaking secrets outside Venice was death.

“Signora wants to get rid of you immediately, but I persuaded her to give you a chance. In one week, Alessandra will marry Bartolo. You know as well as I that he would never want to work as a glassmaker, but I could put the furnace under his management and keep it in the family. Signora’s recommendation. But I hope you can prove somehow . . .” Paolo trailed off.

This gets worse and worse, Miro thought. Bartolo in charge of the furnace? He would sell glassmaking secrets to all of Europe! How can I prove it is Bartolo and not me who would be a traitor to Venice?

THE DAYS PASSED in silence. Miro went about his work at the furnace, swept up, fetched buckets of water, handed Paolo his shears and tongs. But gone was their easy banter. Whenever Miro thought Paolo wasn’t looking, he stole a glance at him, and he seemed to be looking past Miro like he was waiting for some kind of evidence.

He knows, thought Miro. He knows it wasn’t me who stole the recipe and the bird of purple glass. But he doesn’t know who did, and he doesn’t know what to do.

One afternoon, Miro climbed to the roof to think. With the chimney behind him, he could see all the way from the vegetable gardens right below him to the gondolas across the lagoon. But he was the only one playing *Who Can See the Farthest*.

He heard footsteps.

“Just two days and we will be wed!”

Bartolo and Alessandra! Did they see him? No, they did not, because now Alessandra was asking Bartolo if she could wear his coat and—this was strange—he was refusing. Alessandra must have thought he was making a game of it because she reached for it. But Bartolo, suddenly angry, grabbed his coat out of her arms—and out fell Paolo’s recipe book of glassmaking secrets!

“Why—” Alessandra started to ask, but she didn’t get to finish because Bartolo began pushing her toward the edge of the roof.

Miro jumped out from behind the chimney. “No!” he heard himself shout.

Alessandra and Bartolo both stopped and stared at him.

“Bartolo is trying to steal Maestro’s glassmaking secrets! He is the one who put the bird of purple glass in my bed!”

Alessandra gasped. Bartolo tried to grab Miro and Alessandra at the same time, but they were too fast for him. Together, they pinned Bartolo down. Miro handed Alessandra the book, and they both held on tight to the struggling Bartolo, his nobleman’s wig now askew.

Paolo must have heard the racket because he was the next person to appear on the roof.

NOW BLOW THROUGH
THE PIPE TO INFLATE
THE MELTED GLASS.
CAREFUL, IT’S HOT.



2,800 DEGREES!
HOT! (DEEP
BREATH) PUFF!



DON'T SNEEZE!
(OOF)

MEW!

PERFECT! JUST LIKE ME!
BEAUTIFUL AND DELICATE.



AND FILLED WITH
HOT AIR! HA, HA.

“What’s this?” He surveyed the scene, and Miro could see him take it all in. Surprised, but comprehending.

“I won’t be marrying Bartolo, Papa,” Alessandra said.

THE NEXT DAY, Miro and Paolo were back in the furnace making a pitcher. Paolo blew into the iron blowpipe, and the glass expanded. Miro handed him tongs, and Paolo shaped the spout, all the while rotating the iron rod.

“I want to thank you again for protecting Alessandra, Venice’s glassmaking secrets, and our family business.”

Paolo attached the handle, and Miro helped him knock the completed pitcher off the iron rod.

“I know I can trust you with more responsibilities in the furnace, and I want to promote you from garzonetto to serventino.”

“Oh, thank you, Maestro!”

“Well,” Paolo winked. “It was Signora’s recommendation.” 

