

winning entry sean dune NAT Junior Rose  
June's young waters Azure's  
- Julie Lennane

### The Glassmaker

The hidden workshop was difficult to find, but once found, I never forgot the way. If I had been given directions, there would have followed hours of stumbling in cobbled alleys, cursing the sameness of the Italian stones. Geography of foreign towns had never been my forte, but had I been blessed with a sense of direction, I might never have met the glassmaker.

The day had been hot and heavy, a humid blanket that only falls upon the world before a summer storm. Night had drawn in as I wandered about the town, shadows lengthening long before I realised the way back had become a mystery. The storm broke as I dithered over my course, first one raindrop, then another splashing to the street as the sky exhaled and let go its heavy load. Too long it had carried the rain, and I made a dash in what seemed to be the right direction as the heavens opened and came spilling down. Somehow, I took a route I would remember – through the side street by the church, passing an alcove where a cat nestled behind the Virgin Mary, through an archway and stumbling past the establishment between a grocers and a tobacco shop.

Defeat conceded, lost and in need of directions, I was soaked to the skin with the warm night's tears. The shops were closed, shuttered windows looking down like sun-bleached eyes, crying in the rainy dark. Rivulets of water blurred my sight, but the only sign of life came from the premises beside me – a light in the window. Despite the hour, the notice on the door read 'open.' Decision made, I pushed my way inside.

The door was heavy, metal-crossed wood, old and stiff at the hinges. No tinkling bell announced my arrival, but as I wiped the water from my face, I knew I had found somewhere most unusual.

Shelves stretched away on either side of the door, cloaked in darkness. I could see the outlines of shapely, round creations, vases or bottles of some sort. Colours gleamed in the orange light emanating from a room beyond the far counter, another door leading to some back area of the shop where the light shone out. Not much could be distinguished, but I could see mobiles turning gently on the ceiling, sketches papering the walls. The shop was small, cluttered, yet immaculately organised. Not a speck of dust sullied the fingertip

I ran along a shelf edge, gently touching the cold glass pieces carefully arranged.

*"You break it, you buy it."*

Even with my limited Italian, I understood that, and jumped a foot out of my skin. There was a tall figure standing in the back doorway, illuminated by the glow I could now see was a furnace, the essential tool of a glass-blower.

*"Sorry...I...directions?"* I suggested, cringing at my own attempt. I had come into this man's shop after dark, quite likely disturbed his work and nearly broken his wares. To put the cherry on the cake, we probably wouldn't understand each other.

A chuckle broke the darkness, electric lights blinking to life. Strong arms were folded in reproach, shoulders leaning idly against the doorframe. "Do I look Italian to you?" the glassmaker asked, deep-set eyebrows over bright eyes and a half-smirk. He spoke English without the town's local accent, and certainly didn't look like a native. I had expected a little old man with the characteristic dark hair and eyes, crotchety and ill-pleased to see a wayward tourist girl.

Little had I thought the glassmaker might be a good-looking fellow of thirty-something, warning me away from the shelf with the speech of a Londoner.

"Um, no," I said, embarrassed. "Sorry."

"That's two languages you've apologised in," he told me, switching off the light as he headed back into the far room. "Feeling any Swahili coming on?"

I loitered for a moment in darkness before his voice summoned me in. "Well, if you want directions, you're going to have to ask in here. I'm a little busy at the moment."

Pausing only momentarily, I followed. After the darkness, it took a moment to adjust.

"Whoa," I breathed. The glassmaker wasn't looking at me, instead busying himself with his work. The light of the furnace gave the workshop an ethereal glow, recently finished glass bottles and decorations twinkling in the firelight.

He had made all sorts of shapes and colours, red rounded bottles and green Celtic swirls, multi-coloured sheets which could have been window panes stacked carefully on benches. There was more space back here, the area of a craftsman's mind – full of ideas, brimming with potential. I watched him for a moment, taking a long metal tube from the fire and blowing into it, turning it carefully and with watchful eyes as the molten, glowing shape expanded and filled out with air. Despite the heat, I could tell this glass would be blue, ballooned in the shape of a raindrop.

Looking up, the glassmaker smiled at me. "You wanted directions?" he prompted. I fell back to earth, remembering why I was here in the first place. The warmth of the furnace was already drying me off, though the rain still poured outside the open window. "Yes," I said. "Could you tell me how to get back to the square?" I could find my own way from there, make it back to the apartment unscathed. My friends would worry if I wasn't back soon.

"Sure," the glassmaker shrugged. "Go left from the shop, head straight until you come to the waterfront. The square is down the main street, to the right." Once I found the waterfront, I would be fine. I thanked him, and turned away, heading towards the door. I stopped, however, and looked back, just as he glances up and caught my eye.

The glassmaker smiled. "Do you want to wait until the rain lightens up?" he asked. Unsure of why I would risk staying at this hour of the night, I nodded. There was something about him that intrigued me. Pulling up a stool at his invitation, I sat and watched him work, skilfully creating without hesitation or fear of the heat.

Eventually, I worked up the courage to ask, "What's your name?"

He glanced up from his work, adding spirals of lighter blue to his intricate design. "Lee," he told me. "You?"

"Cate."

He nodded, glancing back to the glass.

"And how does a girl end up in a shop, in Italy, at night, Cate?"

I shrugged, wary of him. "I'm here with friends. You know, student stuff." Lee nodded again. "I used to do student stuff," he said sagely. "But I didn't like being a student, so I stopped."

"How does a student from England end up making glass in Italy?" I asked, unable to contain my curiosity. Lee looked up again, raising an eyebrow. "The nine-to-five life wasn't for me," he said easily. "I had my...unusual hobby and two hundred pounds in my pocket. The story is rather mundane after that."

"What happened?" I asked, curious. He shrugged, grinning in the furnace light as he left the glass raindrop to cool. "I got on a plane. The winds blew me around and across Europe for five years, but when I ended up here, I never left."

I had always envied those with the ability to drop everything and reinvent themselves. That bravery wasn't something that could be learned or found; it was within you, or it wasn't. There was a spark in Lee's eyes that made me believe the obscure artist had been that reckless youth, a boy thumbing lifts and riding rails around the continent. Maybe he had spent a week in Paris, a month in Amsterdam, just a night in Rome before coming further north. He was the only one who knew his adventures, had seen the colours that inspired the tinted glass.

"Do you have any family?" I asked. Lee shook his head. "Not anymore," he replied softly. "I'm a lonely soul, me." He sounded surprisingly cheerful about it, facing me now with his work complete. I looked around the workshop again, seeing the multi-faceted designs catching the light, from the tastefully simple to the stunningly intricate. "For a lonely soul, you make such beautiful things."

Lee smiled gently, moving to close the window. "Sometimes, beauty is worth being lonely for. This world has become too crowded, no-one has the space to appreciate the —" He knocked against a table-corner, leaping back too late as a tray of green glass tumbled to the floor. Fragments flew in all directions, like my hands to my mouth at the destruction of his beautiful work. They must have taken hours, but Lee didn't look angry. He simply reached for a sweeping brush and began cleaning up. I cast my eyes about, finding a dustpan beneath

a counter. Stooping to help, we swept up the shattered glass together, fragments sharp and lethal now their design had been broken.

"They're so fragile," I said quietly.

Lee took the broken glass from me, putting it into a bucket beside the furnace. "It's the nature of my work," he said, dusting off his hands. "Everything breaks eventually. Why try to seek permanency when there is beauty to be found in front of you?"

We stood and looked at each other for a moment; the glassmaker and I. The lost student and the artist come to rest here, in a little town tucked away in the hills. Somehow, I knew he wasn't talking about glass, but life.

"The rain has stopped," I said softly, and indeed it had. The storm had been brief, barely breaking before it had moved on. Lee glanced out, only seeming to notice as I did.

"Here," he said, turning to a shelf. His hand danced through the air for a moment, hovering over the pieces into which he had poured his creativity and love. The glass held the colours of his travels, the sparkling blue of a fjord in spring, a forest green in the summer sun, cities bustling yellow with evening's glow and the clear ice of the mountain lakes at night. A lifetime written in fragile, breakable art, but far from finished yet. He selected a small ornament and reached out to me, pressing it into my surprised hand. Looking down, it was a small, glass fish, clear but with scales tipped in marine blue.

"Fish can symbolise change and transformation," Lee smiled. "Keep it. Remember what it means." I reached for my wallet, but he waved the money away. "Today was a good sale day, it's on the house."

We walked to the door together as he reminded me of the way back. I would make it home soon, though my friends were bound to be worrying.

"Thank you," I said, standing in the wet street. Lee smiled as I glanced in the window of his shop, filled with various beautiful designs. Each was unique, not one the same as the fish he had given me.

"You're very welcome," he replied. I started to walk away, but he called in my wake.

"Cate!"

I turned around, Lee still standing in the doorway as the furnace in the back room faded to embers. "Remember what I said about fragile things?"  
I nodded.

The glassmaker smiled. "It really doesn't matter if you break the fish."

I couldn't help but laugh. After our goodbye, I made my way back, lying in bed for a long time before sleep would come.

The next morning, there came the wondering, the indecision about what to do. Get on a train, perhaps? The world was my oyster, and there were a thousand places I could go.

But, from my bedside table, I was watched by a small glass fish, reminding me of a little place between a grocers and a tobacco shop. Smiling to myself, I carefully put the fish in my bag.

I had a lonely soul to visit.