



CITY PARKS

PUBLIC PLACES, PRIVATE THOUGHTS

CATIE MARRON

ESSAYS BY

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY OBERTO GILI



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DEDICATION

TO MY FAMILY—DON, WILLIAM, AND SERENA

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Introduction | CATIE MARRON

LIKE SO MANY ADVENTURES, this book started with a trip to Paris. I was twenty-three, and went there for the first time with a friend between the Christmas and New Year holidays. I remember the vibrant white winter light, the small hotel on the Rue de Rivoli where we stayed, and our huge splurge of lunch at the old world restaurant Le Grand Véfour. And of course, walking a lot.

The clearest memory of all, the one that is etched in my mind as bright as the winter light, while all the others have dimmed, is my first visit to the Luxembourg Gardens. It was on a brisk, sunny morning, and a surprising number of people were out, most of them gathered around the boat basin soaking up the warm sun. As I watched the scene before me, tears came to my eyes. Something about the contrast between the formal, beautiful setting and its natural, everyday humanity moved me deeply.

Each time I've visited Paris since then, I've made a pilgrimage to the Gardens. Even, if need be, happened twice, I had to stop en route to the airport. I've grown up with this park. I used to go alone then with my husband, and together we introduced our children to the park's grounds.

My favorite memories with them are of watching or pushing handcrafted model boats around the pond where I'd sat so many years before. One year, my husband, Don, surprised me with a small nineteenth-century watercolor of the Luxembourg Gardens, which centered on the pond. I feel as if I can tell the exact spot where it was painted. While talking to Amanda Harlech, who wrote on the park for this book, we said we should meet at the boat pond. I mused on which of the several entrances we'd each choose to get there. I have my favorite, as I'm sure she does.

Since that first trip to Paris, I've been fortunate to visit a number of the world's most vibrant and revered cities, and I noticed after a while that I always gravitated to the nearest park. I started to look for books about my favorite parks and wondered why there were so few. On cold winter evenings, I dream about picking up and vagabonding around the world with my children to photograph city parks. But that didn't happen. And then this idea, which I'd quite forgotten, came back to me last year, and I began to think of a way to put it all together.

Like a winding path through Prospect Park or the Borghese Gardens, creating this book hasn't been a straight line. It's been a maze, full of delightful surprises. The most fortuitous occurrence happened very early on. I was in a bookstore and saw Oberto Gili's latest book of photographs. Many years ago he and I had worked together on a project for Anna Wintour, the editor in chief of *Vogue* magazine, but I hadn't seen him since. Coming across his book prompted me to call him and, as this idea about a book on parks had recently come back to me, I suggested it to him. He seized on it with enthusiasm and has been the one who has traveled far and wide, to twelve countries on three continents, bringing back treasures of photographs, which form the backbone of this book.

I've tried to include most of my favorite parks and cities. Then, having those in my heart, I worried about matching the right writer to the right park, that is, someone for whom the park already had deep and personal meaning. In a few instances, the writer actually preferred a different park, so we changed direction.

Just as each writer involved here has his or her own unique voice, and the photographer has his own distinct eye, each park has its own soul, one that has profoundly influenced the culture of its surroundings and the multitudes who enjoy it. Yet the parks' similarities speak to fundamental needs of urban dwellers worldwide. Parks are essential to city life, and they have been since the mid-eighteenth century, when cities became crowded and people needed an escape from the tussle and bustle of chaotic, noisy, dirty street life. They are, first and foremost, free.*

Think of how many people have made friends or encountered romance by strolling through a park or sitting on a bench, catching a child's ball, or comparing notes on dogs. Recently, I watched a French movie, *My Afternoons with Margueritte*, based on a true story about two people of different generations and backgrounds who become lifelong friends through afternoons spent sitting in the local park. One day, the older woman reads a quote from Albert Camus to the younger man, which to me sums up what city life would be without these havens of green: "How to conjure up a picture, for instance, of a town without pigeons, without any trees or gardens where you never hear the beat of wings or the rustle of leaves—a thoroughly negative place, in short? The seasons are discriminated only in the sky. All that tells you of spring's coming is the feel of the air, or the baskets of flowers brought in from the suburbs by peddlers . . . ?"

Not long ago, I went for a late afternoon walk and iced tea with a friend. After sitting on a bench on Central Park's formal promenade, known as the Mall, we walked the equivalent of two city blocks before splitting off to go our separate directions. In that short distance, we saw men playing music, donations welcomed and received, a young man hawking jokes for a dollar, children kicking a ball, a man blowing huge, glistening bubbles using two sticks and some string, and others sitting as we just had. Curiously, we didn't notice people on their cell phones. In the distance, I saw bicyclists and joggers speeding through the main transverse, and the famous bandshell, which people use in the morning for yoga or in the afternoon for skateboarding or on a Sunday as the starting point for a race, to say nothing of its intended purpose for performances.

Parks mirror life. After I'd written my introduction, John Banville's essay arrived. It begins with his reminiscence about his first visit to the Luxembourg Gardens. Amanda Harlech's does the same. John was eighteen, Amanda twenty; I was twenty-three. How uncanny that we referred to that experience and even mentioned our age; proof of how indelible memories of our times in parks can be. Pico Iyer writes about the outer merging into the inner, André Aciman about time, John Banville about the continuity of parks, enjoyed before all of us readers were on this earth, as well as today, and to be enjoyed, someday, after we leave it.

Parks are of the earth, they are of the people, and they give the best possible glimpse of the sky and stars amid the high-rises and rooftops of crowded urban life. They bring pleasure, and my great wish is that this book brings pleasure to you.





Al-Azhar, Cairo | AHDAF SOUEIF

CAIRO'S GREEN LUNG

A GIRL, A YOUNG WOMAN, poses. She leaps onto a marble bench and spreads out her arms. I think of birds; of flight. Perhaps that's what the young man holding the camera is thinking of too; he's down on the paving stones, his camera angled so that the background for the outstretched arms, the fluttering flowered hijab, will be the sky.

This is a piazza high above the city; a long and gracious rectangle through which water runs in a stepped canal. Dragonflies skim the water and catch the light. A little boy with an elaborately painted face jumps in. The rippling stream just covers his ankles. A guard steps forward to scold but the boy's father gently asks, "How can he see this water and not want to feel it?" The guard reluctantly steps back.

It was August, the tail end of the Eid, and it was late afternoon but still hot. The queues at the entrance to the park were long and dense: "Two adults and three little ones," "Four adults," "He's fifteen." Mostly we were Egyptian, but there were Palestinians, Gulf Arabs, Iraqis, a Swiss group. Soon we were through the gates and in the wide entrance square, with a hundred bubbling water jets dancing a welcome and the children squealing with delight as they ran through them, over them, in and out of them. And suddenly it wasn't crowded, and suddenly it wasn't hot. And there were choices: Should we go right? Or left? Or a different right? Or ahead and up? Or . . .

It's odd how I still can't get the hang of the park's geography. Oh, I can look at the aerial photograph, look at the map and understand what is where, but when I'm on the ground it's easy to think myself lost. The garden, though its limits are clear, feels infinite, and in truth I am content to be lost, to wander, for a while, along lanes bordered by Indian jasmine and plane trees and our familiar Egyptian "Guhannamiyya," underhung with a purple flower I've never seen before.

Others are wandering around too. What was a crowd has become small groups, families, couples—in the seventy-two acres of al-Azhar Park there's room for everyone. The park, shaped like a giant lung, lies along the eastern boundary of Cairo, between the thousand-year-old al-Azhar Mosque and the Citadel of Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi—Saladin's spectacular twelfth-century deterrent against the Crusader campaigns rolling across the Mediterranean. The park's most public gate, the one I came through, is on Salah Salem, the motorway that connects the city to the airport. But the area has other gates accessible only by foot, opening out from the neighborhood just below the park and costing less to get through. Since the park was conceived by Karim Agha Khan as a gift to the people of Cairo, and since "those closest have priority on your good deeds," neighbors in the area can come in at half price.

Cairo, historians say, was built around a garden, and was always full of pleasure parks and amusement grounds. Hard to imagine now in a city where flora has to fight so hard for space. The chronicles from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries we read that the people of Cairo were fond of pleasure and "ease of heart," and that on feast days and holidays families went joyfully out to parks and other places of public enjoyment, taking boats onto the river and the lakes. Music filled the air and everywhere there was food spread out on tablecloths and straw mats so that all who were hung

might eat.

But over the last five decades, the green spaces of Cairo have been radically eroded, and the green pleasure grounds bordering the city—al-Qanater al-Khayriyyah to the north and Helwan to the south—have more or less vanished. The riverbank is largely taken up with private establishments, and to catch a breath of fresh air in summer, people have taken to perching on bridges and traffic islands. Now, after the January 25 revolution, the people are retaking ownership of their city, spreading over every available space—and this expansion has shown just how diminished that space has become.

And so it is good to be in Azhar Park and see people walk and talk and sit and play as they must have done for centuries. I watch a family group deployed on a small hill crowned with palm trees, the bright clothes of the women vivid splashes of color against the park's green. I follow a small boy holding tight to the handles of a silver scooter, pushing against the ground furiously with one foot. He balances along the path. And there are young men and women sitting on the grass or on the low walls, looking out over the garden and over their city, making plans. And there's a security man always hovering in case a couple tries to steal more of a touch than he deems seemly, in case the current running between them sparks a fire in the bushes.

We're in transition, we say to each other, from dictatorship to democracy, from oppression to freedom. We'll get there. In an ideal world there would be no guards, no walls, no entrance fee. But in an ideal world there would be at least twenty parks like Azhar dotted all over Cairo, a park for each million of the city's inhabitants.

This is a garden that restores your humanity. It's designed to give you—at every instant—both options and the space to choose among them. Take your time and consider: will you turn right along that formal avenue flanked in ceremonial fashion by royal palms, or left and make your way up the little mound with the cunningly placed bushes and shrubs, the young couples among them bright with love and daring?

Which path is likely to surprise you? Once I turned a corner and found myself facing a huge, dreamlike lake with lazy fountains. Another time I went just a few paces down a quiet path and emerged on the top terrace of a charming, green amphitheater, its narrow, grassy steps bordered by ceramic tiles and sloping down to the pool that formed its still center.

A garden that speaks of how life should be: grace and space and options and a view. People, if you want company, but also room to be alone. There are restaurants, but most people choose to spread out picnics on the grass. There are electric buggies, but most people walk. And wherever you are you are always within reach of a bench, of a drinking fountain, made of marble, elegantly and simply carved. Azhar Park refers you to the great gardens of Islamic civilization in Andalusia and Baghdad and Damascus and Isfahan; the gardens that used the rise and fall of topography, the sounds and changing aspects of water, the varied colors and textures and characters of plants to create an aesthetic balance and harmony.

Off the top of my head I can come up with four words for garden in Arabic: *bustan*, which makes me think of a very formal Persian garden complete with nightingales; *rawdah*, with its overtones of sport and vigor; *hadeeqah*, the most common and with the most obscure etymology; and *junaynah* (*geneina* in Egyptian dialect), my favorite. *Junaynah* has its root in “j/n” and from this root that speaks of concealment you get *janeen* (the baby in the womb), *majnoun* (madman, whose mind is concealed), *jannah* (Heaven), and *junaynah*—or *geneina* (little heaven).

The small theater clinging to the edge of this park calls itself the Geneina Theatre. The theater is the dip, the dry moat, between the mound of the park and the Ayyubid wall bordering its western side. The mound forms the natural slope for the auditorium, and the old, illuminated wall the backdrop.

the stage, which on summer evenings sends music into the surrounding air.

~~It's odd to sit in the theater and think that until a few years ago this space was a giant heap of rubbish and rubble, buried under the accumulated detritus of centuries' worth of the continuous life lived here.~~

Walk through the narrow, busy lanes of el-Batneyyah, one of the oldest districts of Cairo. At any time and even deep into the night there are workshops humming, coffee shops flickering with television screens and crackling with the slap of backgammon counters, children playing, women buying from abundant bakeries and brilliant fruit stalls, cars inching past each other, wedding processions, mosques with minarets calling out to prayers. The stuff of life. You make your way through the people and the noise and the bustle and you arrive, just behind the Mosque of Aslam, at the old walls rising above the neighborhood: Salah al-Din's wonderfully uncovered walls and watchtowers rising to embrace the neighborhood. And if you're a resident of el-Batneyyah and willing to pay two pounds, you can step through the iron gate, through Saladin's walls and into the green of the Park.

A broad, widely stepped stone pathway leads you in a gentle, meandering zigzag through trees and lawns. You ascend, and your ascent reveals more and more of the city out of which you've come. Only now there's space, urban noises are hushed, details muted—here a minaret, some intricate dovecote, there the castellation of an ancient mosque, there the solid comforting form you recognize as the mosque of Sultan Hasan. The city falls away from the tenth-century wall below you, falls west toward the river, becoming a great settled, breathing mass. On good days you can see the pyramids. Every day the sun sets behind the lotus silhouette of the Cairo Tower.

And to the east, the creamy, gentle curves of Cairo's great, unique cemetery, the Qarafah, with its splendid mausoleum ruins, its courtyard featuring the eternal resting homes of the bourgeoisie, its inscriptions to poets and statesmen and artists and Sufis. The Qarafah rests in the shadow of the Muqattam, the mountain where the great stones of the pyramids were quarried so long ago. Within and around the Qarafah, the recently constructed apartment buildings tumble upward, heavily inhabited but always appearing unfinished, bare concrete arms forever held up to the sky, waiting for the next bit of money to build another level. And threading their way through it all, the two motorways that you know to be a rush of wind and noise but that from here look peaceful, their bright, moving beads of red and white car lights like silent, gliding musical notes.

The park is in counterpoint and in conversation with Cairo. It's an invitation to take a break from the city, to rise above it, into cooler, cleaner air. But it's also an invitation to contemplate the city, an invitation for the eye to wander between the parallel lines of the tall palm at the top of this hill and the mobile tower rising in opposition, among those houses across the two motorways and the cars streaming along them. What could tempt contemplation more than this position? Whether you're caught in the traffic of the motorway or struggling in the heart of the old city, the park is an invitation, a gift, an oasis, a green lung to help you breathe, to help you reorient.

Temporal and eternal life, grass and rock, motion and stillness. A lasting geography.







Boboli, Florence; Villa Borghese, Rome | ZADIE SMITH

TWO ITALIAN GARDENS

Boboli, Florence

WHEN MY FATHER WAS OLD and I was still young, I came into some money. Though it was money “earned” for work done, it seemed, both to my father and me, no different than a win on the lottery. We looked at the contract more than once, checking and rechecking it, just like a lottery ticket, to ensure no mistake had been made. No mistake had been made. I was to be paid for writing a book. For a long time, neither of us could quite work out what to do about this new reality. My father kept on with his habit of tucking a ten- or twenty-pound note inside his letters to me. I took the rest of my family (my parents having separated long before) to a “resort” back in the “old country” (the Caribbean) where we rode around bored in golf carts, argued violently, and lined up in grim silence to receive a preposterous amount of glistening fruit, the only black folk in line for the buffet. It took a period of reflection before I realized that the money—though it may have arrived somewhat prematurely for me—had come at precisely the right time for my father. A working life launched when he was thirteen, which had ended in penury, old age, and divorce, might now, finally, find a soft landing. To this end, I moved Harvey from his shabby London flat to a cottage by the sea, and when the late spring came we thought not of Cornwall or Devon or the Lake District but of Europe. Outrageous thought! Though not without precedence. The summer before I went to college, my father, in his scrupulous way, had worked out a budget that would allow the two of us to spend four days in Paris. Off we went. But it is not easy for a white man of almost seventy and a black girl of seventeen to go on a mini-break to Europe together; the smirks of strangers follow you from pillar to post. We did not like to linger in restaurants or in the breakfast room of our tiny hotel. Instead, on that first exploratory trip, we found our pleasure in walking. Through the streets, through museums—but more than anywhere else, through gardens. No money has to be spent in a garden, and no awkward foreign conversation need be made, and no one thinks you odd or provincial if you consult your guidebook in front of a statue or a lake. In public parks it is a little easier to feel you belong. I felt this instinctively as a teenager (and, thinking back, as a child on Hampstead Heath). Over the next few years, in college I found myself attracted once more to gardens, this time intellectually. I wrote my final thesis on “English Garden Poetry 1600–1900,” putting special emphasis on the many ways in which “work” and “workers” are obscured in an English garden. Look at how the ha-ha replaces the fence or wall. See that solitary poetic hermit in his grotto, symbolic replacement for all those unpoetic men who dug the hole that created the artificial lake in the first place. The English lord looks out on his creation and sees just that—“creation”—unspoiled by workers’ cottages or beasts of burden. With a great deal of art he has made his garden imitate nature. The window from his Surrey bedroom reveals a view straight out of a classical pastoral, apparently untouched and yet exquisite, not unlike the hills of Tuscany he spied while on his Grand Tour.

Writing that essay, I became very interested in this notion of “The Grand Tour.” I read the diaries

English men of means, accounts of their travels in Italy or Germany, and followed them as they looked at and acquired paintings and statues, walked through elaborate gardens, marveled at all the marble, and stood at the base of great ruins mulling the sublime futility of existence, and so on. No work if you can get it. During the Michaelmas break, I visited Harvey in his one-bedroom Kilburn block and thought: why shouldn't my old man get a Grand Tour too?

But when the opportunity arrived, I discovered that my father's interests lay more in France than Italy. He liked the food and the cities and the look of the women. We wrangled a little, and I won: like all twenty-three-year-olds I was skilled at aligning any good deeds with my own pleasures. We booked for Florence. The hotel was called Porto Rosso. I understand it has recently undergone a transformation and now looks much like any other chic "boutique" hotel on the continent, but when I went with Harvey it was a true *pensione*, unchanged since the nineteenth century. Air came through the windows—which we were under strict instructions to open only at night—and keys were heavy, keys shaped, and attached to giant velvet tassels. The rooms themselves were wondrously large though almost entirely empty, featuring one uncomfortable bed with scratchy sheets, one creaking wardrobe, one wicker chair, and a floor of dark red tile. No television, no minibar, no food. But you had only to look up at the ceiling, at the casually preserved remnant of some anonymous fresco, to feel what a stain it would be upon your person and nation to even think of walking down to the bellhop (no phone) to complain. True, we did not have a room with a view—unless a patch of twelfth-century wall is your view—but I was at that point in life at which even sharing a situation, albeit a poor one, with a fictional character was pleasure enough for me.

In the morning, we set out. We had the idea of reaching the Boboli Gardens. But many people set out from a Florence hotel with the hope of getting to a particular place—few ever get there. You step onto a narrow alleyway, *carta di citta* in hand, walk confidently past the gelato place, struggle through the crowd at the mouth of the Ponte Vecchio, take a left, and find yourself in some godforsaken shadowy *vicolo* near a children's hospital, where the temperature is in the forties and someone keeps trying to sell you a rip-off Prada handbag. You look up pleadingly at the little putty babies. You take a right, a left, another right—here is the Duomo again. But you have already seen the Duomo. In Florence wherever you try to get to, you end up at the Duomo, which seems to be constantly changing its location. The heat builds and the walls of the alleys feel very high; the thought of a green oasis is no less tantalizing as a cold bottle of water, though far more difficult to attain. The last time you remember seeing grass was that little strip in front of the train station. Will you ever see it again?

En route, we tried to amuse ourselves. Harvey, a talented photographer, snapped pictures of beautiful women as they dashed from shade to shade; I, far less able, took a poor shot of a piece of ironic graffiti: *Welcome to Disneyland, Florence*. It got hotter. "Where are we?" I asked my father. "The Piazza of Fish," he muttered, but then he was struck with fresh vision: "I've a feeling we should have crossed that bridge." I remember this small geographical insight coming over us both as a revelation: there was, after all, a way out of this oppressively beautiful warren of streets, and it led to higher ground. Height being the essential sensation of Boboli. Climbing toward it, we felt ourselves be no longer British rats running round a medieval Italian maze—no, now we were heading up into the clear, entitled air of the Renaissance, to triumph over the ever-moving Duomo, once and for all. Through formal gardens we passed, each one more manicured and overdesigned than the next, our cameras hanging dumbly from our necks, for Boboli is a place that defeats framing. As an aesthetic experience it arrives pre-framed, and there's little joy to be had taking a picture of a series of diametric hedges. "It's not much like an English garden, is it?" ventured Harvey, confronted by Bacchus sitting fatly on a turtle, his chubby penis pointed directly at our foreheads. In one lark

Poseidon stood naked about to stab a trident into a rock; in another, a fellow unknown to us reared up on his horse, as if a sea that had once parted for him now intended to swallow him whole. I remember no ducks or wandering fowl, not a leaf or pebble out of place. In Boboli you don't really escape the city for the country, nor are you allowed to forget for a moment the hours of labor required to shape a hedge into a shape that in no way resembles a hedge. Boboli is Florence, echoed in nature. It is a piece of public oratory, spoken by the Medici clan and still perfectly audible through the centuries. *Not only can we bend popes and painters to our will—we can also bend bark!* No, not like an English garden at all . . . though perhaps more honest in its intentions. It speaks of wealth and power without disguise. As a consequence of this, it is the only garden of which I can remember feeling a little shy. I would not have thought it possible to feel underdressed in a garden, but I did—we both did. Clumsy tourists dragging ourselves round a private fantasia. For though Boboli may be open to the public, it is still somehow the Medicis' park, and the feeling of trespassing never quite leaves you. Not that the garden isn't magnificent—of course it is. But in the humble opinion of the Smiths, it lacks "hidden gems." Everything is laid out for your awe and admiration. It was a relief to find ourselves for a moment on an avenue of curved yew trees, shaded and discreet, where we were offered the possibility of respite not only from the awful sun, but from the gleaming of monuments and the turrets of villas. I think we were too English for Boboli. The English feel a garden should have a little privacy in it, a few bowers as well as bravado. Sometimes the bark should bend in quietude, not just in vulgar display.

At the very peak we rested, and took far more photos of the red roofs of Florence than we had taken of the gardens themselves. "Very grand, that was," said my father, a little later, when we had descended into a not-grand-at-all café to happily eat a baby cow covered in tuna sauce. Seeing her relief I thought sadly of E. M. Forster's Charlotte Bartlett, and heard her grating voice echoing in my own mind: *I feel that our tour together is hardly the success I had hoped. I might have known it would not do.*

VILLA BORGHESE, ROME

A LITTLE WHILE AFTER MY FATHER DIED, I moved to Rome. I was in mourning and it was winter, and the city was all stone and diagonal rain to me. I had no sense at all of it being a green place. I walked past the Spanish Steps into the wind without wondering where they led. With the spring, small patches of green revealed themselves: the ring of grass around the Castel Sant'Angelo; or the little walled garden off Via Nazionale, dotted with defunct fountains, one deep, waterless well, and covered in the scrawls of teenage lovers. RAFAELLA—TI AMO! We would never have found these spots if not for the dog, who sniffed them out. One day in April, under a hedge in this walled garden, my husband led our pug to something more melancholy and curious than a pine cone: an empty Statue of Liberty costume, a t-shirt of green spray paint, an empty bucket, an Indian immigrant's identity card.

It took us a while to discover the Villa Borghese. We lived on the other side of town, which is to say, less than fifteen minutes away, but of all the parochial spots in the world, Rome is one of the worst. Each *rione* is so charming and self-sufficient, you rarely feel the need to adventure beyond it. I should think we were in Monti a year before we crossed the river to explore the relative wilds of Trastevere. Once again, the dog provided impetus. By the summer she had helped pull us anxious

toward the Italian language, where we did our best to keep up with the chatter of the other dog owners we met in the walled garden, exchanging veterinary tips or boasting about bloodlines. (I never saw a mongrel dog in Rome. They all looked like they'd come straight out of the "Breeds; Canine" section of the encyclopedia.) "E dove possiamo corriere con il nostro cane senza guinzaglio?" I tried and was rewarded, despite my grammar, with an avalanche of friendly yet almost totally incomprehensible information—verbs running into adjectives at high speed—yet from which we were, in the end, able to pluck a few nouns. The best place to run a dog off the lead was in a bourgeois villa. And where was this middle-class villa? Why, up the Spanish Steps! We'd see a villa and then a park. There would be museums and bicycles and lakes and a zoo, which is not called a zoo but a *bioparco*. *Che assurdo!* And yes, dogs, everywhere dogs. There is a special place for dogs!

THE BORGHESE GARDENS ARE SHAPED like a cartoon heart, though only a map reveals this: when inside you walk its winding arterial paths without any sense of a formal plan, surprised here by a café, there by a lake, here by a museum or a film festival, by the head of Savonarola or a carousel or a wild splash of lavender. It is a lovely example of a truly public park. Wrestled from the fists of a sixteenth-century cardinal and his descendants (who opened it to the public on Sundays and public holidays), it was delivered, in the twentieth century, into the hands of the people. Like Hampstead Heath, like Central Park, it has wide avenues on which to promenade, and high grass in which to read and kiss and children and dogs are welcome to run wild—though in both cases they are better dressed than their London and New York counterparts. Once we saw a borzoi in a yellow raincoat, yellow rain hat and four yellow booties. On Sundays you get little girls with a lot of froufrou curls and bows and underskirts, and boys in blazers and ties, like the tiny CEOs of Fortune 500 companies. At the spot we had been told about—where dogs may run without leads—things were more casual, though the Roman fetish for that British sartorial horror the Barbour jacket was everywhere in evidence. ("We are out in the open air, like an Englishman," these jackets seem to say, each to the other, "exercising our dogs as the English do.") Towering Italian stone pines create a luxurious canine obstacle course; classic hounds chase each other in figures of eight while their owners laze about on a natural slope, and settle in to watch people conduct their private lives in public. *It Happened in the Park* is the English title of Vittorio de Sica's lovely 1953 movie (in Italian it was simply *Villa Borghese*) and that's how it is: if the doors of everybody's apartments have fallen off and left a clear view for any passing stranger to take in. In the six separate vignettes that make up that film, de Sica trumpets the glories of voyeurism while celebrating the power of the segue: his vision of a public park is of a journey without maps. In life, as in the film, one arrives with a very particular plan—a picnic in a precise spot, or a visit to the gallery—but the park is so full of random temptations and opportunities it will always thwart your ambition to get from A to B. In one vignette, a couple of Roman prostitutes on the run from the law stumble across, and enter into, a Miss Cinema beauty contest taking place in the park. The message is that anyone can make it in the gardens of the Borghese. And it is this easy transition between high and low that is central to the charm of the place. It does not exclude. That all those stone busts of famous men should have their names clearly printed beneath, for example—well, it may be only a small matter of nineteenth-century taste, but what a difference it makes. One does not wander around nervously ashamed of a lack of knowledge. Any housewife can walk right up to da Vinci and think: what girl's cheekbones! How weird they look with that great beard! Any working stiff can eat gelato in front of Archimedes, peer into his stone eyes, and consider how much he looks like old Giancarlo from the post office. Harvey would have loved all that.

There is a sentimental season, early on in the process of mourning, in which you believe the

everything you happen to be doing or seeing or eating, the departed person would also have loved to do or see or eat, were they still here on earth. Harvey would have loved this fried ball of rice. I would have loved the Pantheon. He would have loved that Rossetti of a girl with her thick black brows. In the first season of mourning there is a tendency to overstate. But still I feel certain that this was the garden that would have made us both happy. It was a bittersweet thing to walk through it without him, thinking of our last trip together, to crowded, expensive Venice, which had not been much more successful than Florence. Why had I never thought of Rome? Like me, he would have loved the glimpses of the new arrivals: African families, Indian couples, Roma girls hand in hand. Sitting for a picnic, unpacking foods that smelled wonderfully of coriander—a herb most Roma grocers wouldn't know from a weed. Harvey and I knew from experience that it takes a while for an immigrant to believe a park is truly public and open to them: my mother always used to complain, exaggerating somewhat (and not without a little pride) that she was the only black woman to be seen pushing a stroller through St. James Park in 1975. Sometimes a generation of habitation is needed to create the necessary confidence; to believe that this gate will open for you too. In Italy, where so many kinds of gates are closed to so many people, there is something especially beautiful in the freedom of a garden.

FOR OUR TWO YEARS IN ROME, the Borghese Gardens became a semi-regular haunt, the place most likely to drag us from our Monti stupor. And I always left the park reluctantly; it was not an easy transition to move from its pleasant chaos to the sometimes pedantic conventionality of the city. No, you can have cheese on your *vongole*; no, this isn't the time for a cappuccino; yes, you can eat pizza on the steps but not near that fountain; in December we all go to India; in February we all ski in France; in September of course we go to New York. Everything Romans do is perfect and delightful, but it is sometimes annoying that they should insist on all doing the same things at exactly the same time. I think their argument is: given that all our habits are perfect and delightful, why would anyone stray from them? I suppose they have a point, but it is still a relief to escape into their gardens and eat food in any order while sitting in the grass and drinking a British amount of alcohol without anyone looking at you piteously. In a public Italian garden a Briton has all the things she loves about Italy—the sun, the food, the sky, the art, the sound of the language—without any of the inconvenient rules that attend their proper enjoyment. She is free to delight in that incredible country on her own slovenly terms. To think about her father and how he would have loved these oily *arancini* that she bought near the Pantheon (which he would also have loved). To watch the people come and go. And then perhaps go boating. And then perhaps fall asleep, a little drunk, in the grass.

When my father died I dashed to Rome leaving a lot undone. I'd packed what little I found in his room in a box and abandoned it in my basement. Two years later, when I returned, I had to go through his things properly. There was not much, but there were some photos of these final trips we'd taken together in France and Italy. I think he got some pleasure from those holidays, but the photos have a sort of dutiful air to them, as if he's taking them to please me. He liked to get them blown up and sent to me in a large padded envelope, perfect as postcards and equally uninteresting. The only sublime shot was taken in France, in Carcassonne (his choice), where he quite uncharacteristically demanded a car stop so he could walk back a few yards to the edge of a sheer drop that gave on to a view of the valley. Here he took a magnificent panorama, of hills and dales and forests and fields, and a little thread of blue running through it all. He never sent me that one, but I found several copies of it among his things after he died, as if he didn't want me to know that the gardens he liked best were the winter ones.





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