

CITY OF THE SOUL

A Walk in Rome

William Murray







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For Alice, Natalia, Julia, and Bill, honorary Romans

“O Rome! my country! city of the soul!”

—LORD BYRON

One

THE ENTRANCE INTO the heart of Rome from the north is through a monumental medieval gate the ancient Aurelian Wall that suddenly thrusts the visitor into the spacious magnificence of the Piazza del Popolo, one of the city's most beautiful squares. For about a year I walked under the portico every morning on my way to whatever the day would bring. The year was 1949 and I lived then in a small two-room apartment on the Via Flaminia, a couple of blocks away. It was the period of my life when I was studying singing, still hoping for a career in opera as a lyric tenor, while supporting myself as a part-time journalist, mainly as a stringer for the Rome bureau of Time-Life. I always tried to arrive in the piazza early enough to have a cappuccino at the Café Rosati, on the southwestern side of the square, from where I could sit out in the open, read a morning newspaper, and occasionally look out over the great sweep of space, punctuated at its center by the Egyptian obelisk of Ramses III, to the heights of the Pincio gardens across the way. Rome is nothing if not a feast for the eyes. I lived in the city then as an adopted Roman and thought that I would never leave it.

I had spent most of the first eight years of my life in Rome. My mother, Natalia Danesi Murra, was a native Roman, the oldest of three daughters born to an editor and printer named Giulio Danesi and his wife, Ester Danesi Traversari. Giulio died suddenly of septicemia in 1915, leaving Ester nearly penniless. The young widow went to work as a journalist to support herself and her children, becoming the first Italian female war correspondent by visiting the Austrian front in 1918, and went on to found and edit two leading women's magazines, until forced to flee to the United States in 1936 by her opposition to the Fascist government of Benito Mussolini. My mother had married an American talent agent, after whom I was named, but had soon after separated from him. She was in Italy with me when he went broke in the stock-market crash of 1929 and she went to work in the theater as an actress and singer to support us. When she brought me back to America in the fall of 1934, I spoke only Italian and French. I soon learned English, however, and became a totally American kid, refusing even to speak Italian at home with my mother and grandmother. My love of music brought me back to Italy in 1947, after the Second World War, when I was twenty-one. I could study there far more cheaply than in the States, and most of the great opera singers I admired were Italian. Within a year of my arrival I had again become fluent in the language and comfortably at home among the ancient stones of the city's *centro storico*, its historic heart.

I had also discovered that I had a family connection to the Piazza del Popolo. The square was named after the Church of Santa Maria del Popolo, first erected as a small chapel in 1099, diagonally across from where I sat every morning nursing my cappuccino. The site was chosen to liberate the population from the frightening nocturnal apparitions of the hated Emperor Nero's ghost, whose tomb was reportedly located directly under where the main altar now stands. At the time the chapel was built the piazza didn't exist; it was merely an open space of vineyards and vegetable plots. In 1227, Pope Gregory IX built the original church. It was torn down and replaced by the present one in 1472, under the supervision of Pope Sixtus V, who was also mostly responsible for the shape the piazza eventually assumed. He placed the obelisk, originally imported from Heliopolis by the Emperor Augustus, in its heart, providing a focus around which, over the centuries, the square assumed its present form.

There are now three churches on the piazza; in 1660 Pope Alexander VII commissioned the building of the twin edifices of Santa Maria di Monte Santo and Santa Maria dei Miracoli, at the southern end from which three main avenues lead into the *centro*. But neither is as historically interesting or artistically significant as Santa Maria del Popolo, where, soon after my return to Rome, I was able to look up one of my ancestors, whom my grandmother had once described as an unprincipled thief.

The unprepossessing building nestles up against the Aurelian Wall, to the right of the Porta del Popolo and directly beneath the Pincio. It is a treasure trove of masterpieces, containing works by Raphael, Bramante, Sansovino, and others. Outstanding are the Pinturicchio frescoes in the main chapel behind the altar, and two famously magnificent huge paintings by Caravaggio, *The Conversion of St. Paul* and *The Crucifixion of St. Peter*, in one of the side chapels. When I first walked into the church, however, shortly after my arrival in Rome, I went initially in search of my ancestor, the unprincipled cleric from Ravenna who, according to family legend, had despoiled us of our patrimony by leaving everything at his death to the Church. I found his bust mounted high up with several others in a long, narrow side corridor to the right. Cardinal Carlo Traversario, with his long beard, tall miter, and strong nose, stared coldly back at me out of his sightless, bulging eyes as if to rebuke me for my effrontery. “He stole from the poor and gave to the rich,” I remember my grandmother telling me, but then, like many Romans, she was a *mangiaprete*, a so-called priest-eater, someone who believed that too many of the world’s injustices were due to the meddling in temporal affairs by members of the clergy.

FOR ALL OF my early years back in Rome, the Piazza del Popolo remains a constant, the scene of so many major and minor events. Its vastness and its curiously irregular shape contributed to its fascination. In the middle of the nineteenth century the Romans used to play at “blind cat,” a form of blindman’s buff in which contestants were blindfolded, whirled about a couple of times, and asked to reach the exits from the square into Via del Corso from the base of the obelisk. Few succeeded, testimony to the deceptively irregular layout imposed on the square by a succession of architects and town planners, including Giuseppe Valadier, who later became famous for his designs in Paris.

Martin Luther is supposed to have fallen to his knees here when he first arrived in Rome, and he put up his hands to heaven in thanks, though it did him little good later. The Romans themselves used the square as a promenade, for an evening drive, for carnival and other celebrations. During my time it became the site for the enormous and potentially violent rallies staged by Italy’s Communist Party, then the second largest in Europe. From there, after a series of inflammatory speeches, the crowd would sometimes fan out to march through the city, under defiant revolutionary banners and shouting angry slogans. Occasionally the government’s tough, truncheon-wielding security cops would break up the meetings, sending protesters fleeing into doorways and up side streets. I covered several of these events for *Time*, and once even found myself dragooned into participating in one by a Roman stone-mason who had done some work for me and became a friend. He dragged me from the sidelines into the heart of the crowd to cheer and shout with everyone else.

Most of the time, however, the great piazza basked in the silence of history. There were very few cars then, and by nightfall none at all. Not only in the mornings but often in the evenings, after dinner I’d meet friends back at the Café Rosati and we’d sit outdoors, chat, tell stories, and stare contentedly at the scene before us. When the automobile became dominant and pervasive in the early 1950s, overwhelming Italy’s ancient towns under a sludge of vehicles, the Piazza del Popolo became

parking lot, while a honking flow of cars, motor scooters, and tourist buses inched past the cafe, spewing poison fumes toward its luckless outdoor patrons. The square today, however, has again been emptied of traffic and mostly returned to pedestrians, so that it's once more possible to enjoy it. "I was still afraid I might be dreaming," Goethe wrote in 1786, as he entered the city for the first time. "It was not till I had passed through the Porta del Popolo that I was certain it was true, that I really was in Rome."

Two

THE ONLY WAY to really enjoy Rome and to begin to understand the city is to walk about in it. It's not even necessary to follow any particular itinerary. I've always felt sorry for the masses of tourists who are yanked about from one great popular historical site to another in air-conditioned buses, herded through museums and churches in unwieldy groups led by guides spouting endless statistics and nuggets of often unreliable information. What can they get out of such visits but a bewildering kaleidoscopic view of the capital's many wonders, a passing impression of historical time as reflected by such familiar monuments as the Colosseum or the Trevi Fountain?

No one should come to Rome for only a day or two; better to stay home and watch the Travel Channel. This is a city that makes demands upon your attention, that requires a commitment to leisurely exploration. Its ancient ruins, its gleaming Renaissance palaces, its great Baroque basilicas and dozens of treasure-filled churches, its squares and fountains and statues, its maze of narrow cobbled streets, the very stones themselves, which exude an aura of time endlessly indulged, can only be appreciated in the intimacy of personal exploration. And even then you will find that whatever time you may have spent in the city, you will long for more. Like Hawthorne, Goethe, Byron, Keats, Shelley, Twain, and so many other artists and writers and just plain visitors, you will find yourself lured back to it time after time by the fascination it exerts. "For Rome one lifetime is not enough" is the apt title of one Roman author's cheerful reminiscences.

It is necessary, of course, to familiarize yourself with the basic layout of the *centro storico*, as well as the vast expanse of ancient Roman ruins now open to the public. I suggest the striking of a happy balance. When I brought my wife, Alice, to Rome for her initial visit in the spring of 1975, she spent her first five mornings in the city taking the guided tours that whisked her expeditiously to Rome's most celebrated monuments—the Colosseum, the Imperial Forum, the Campidoglio, the Pantheon, St. Peter's and the Sistine Chapel, the Castel Sant'Angelo, the Catacombs, the Trevi Fountain, the Circus Maximus, the Baths of Caracalla, the major churches and museums and the grander piazzas. In the afternoons, however, she struck out on her own, a reliable guidebook and map in hand, to immerse herself in the intimate life of the city's heart.

A walk anywhere in Rome cannot be hurried. I still like to stroll at random through the snarled cobweb of the *centro*, pausing every few yards to look around, then unfailingly up the building walls where, no matter how familiar the area or how many times I've already walked that way, I always spot something I haven't noticed before—a cornice, an inscription, a fragment of a ruin, an arch, a statue. Rome cherishes her past and nothing is ever discarded here, which is one reason why it took an entire generation to build a subway system. Everywhere the engineers dug, they came across some memento of the city's glorious past and all work stopped, often for months, while archaeologists and experts from the Department of Antiquities and Fine Arts evaluated the find and determined how best to preserve it.

The rules, whether enforced or not, never seem to go out of date. Recently on the Via Montoro, a narrow little street near the Campo dei Fiori, I glanced upward and spotted a marble tablet on the

corner of a large seventeenth-century palazzo that read, “By order of the resident Monsignor of the streets, it is forbidden to discard rubbish in this place under penalty of fifteen scudi and other penalties in conformity with the edict promulgated May 22, 1761.” I had never been in the Via Montoro before or noticed such a sign, but since then I’ve become aware that it’s to be found on the corners of many buildings all over the *centro*.

The scudo, a gold or silver coin issued all over Italy from the sixteenth century to the early nineteenth, is now a collector’s item, but I suspect that somewhere, in some hidden nook of one of Rome’s ancient government buildings, the Monsignor of the streets still sits at a desk emanating edicts. In Rome, no bureaucratic entity is ever allowed to die, a fact pointed out some years ago by the well-known journalist Luigi Barzini Jr. Somewhere, he maintained, in some Kafkaesque warren hidden from the prying eyes of inquisitive reporters, someone still administers an office overseeing the veterans’ affairs of Garibaldi’s Redshirts or the welfare of the Vestal Virgins. A walk in Rome is also an insight into the mysteries of survival.

OF THE THREE main arteries leading out of the Piazza del Popolo into the *centro*, the one I favor the least is the Via del Corso, which cuts straight through the heart of the city all the way to Piazza Venezia, with its medieval palace, now a museum, from whose balcony Benito Mussolini used to harangue the Fascist mobs, and the enormous gleaming white bulk of the Vittorio Emanuele Monument, completed in 1911 to commemorate the unification of the country and which now also houses the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Some people refer to the monument as a wedding cake, but to me it looks like an old-fashioned typewriter and I’ve always hoped in vain that someday it would be torn down. Its removal would provide visitors with direct access to the Campidoglio on its hilltop with the Imperial Forum laid out diagonally in splendor behind it all the way to the Colosseum. A selfish pipe dream, because to many Italians the monument is as honored a relic as the Statue of Liberty or Paris’s Arc de Triomphe.

The Corso has always been considered the city’s main thoroughfare, even when it was merely a long, narrow street hemmed in on both sides by palaces, houses, shops, and the open stalls of street vendors. In the Middle Ages the Romans began racing horses down it from the obelisk to Palazzo Venezia, a practice that continued for centuries. Successive generations of popes periodically widened the avenue and banned the humbler merchants from the area. By the late eighteenth century it had become a daily rendezvous for the nobility and the upper middle classes in their horse-drawn carriages, which also attracted to the area the sort of elegant shops that catered to the wealthy. Mussolini, with his grandiose dream of recreating the Roman Empire, disfigured one whole section of the Corso by tearing down centuries-old houses in order to widen it still further, presumably for triumphal processions. One section now consists of several examples of the sort of imperial architecture the dictator fancied: great, gray, soulless monoliths embodying the Fascist dream of conformity and order at all costs. What Mussolini couldn’t control or alter was the chaotic vehicular and pedestrian traffic that swarmed up and down the Corso all day long; it was neither dignified nor respectful. Exasperated, he decreed that people should walk in one direction only, on alternate sides of the street. That effort also failed, which may account for the possibly apocryphal story that the dictator, when asked by a foreign diplomat whether it was difficult to govern the Italians, replied, “No, it is not difficult, but it is useless.”

Today’s Romans are not the severe, self-sacrificing, humorlessly patriotic citizens of the Republic.

during the two centuries before the birth of Christ, nor are they the superbly arrogant conquerors of the world who flourished under the Caesars. What they are—cheerful, energetic, cynical, self-absorbed, shrewd, suspicious, profoundly human—can best be observed daily in the capital's streets and piazzas, especially along the Corso on weekends, when the avenue is closed to traffic, and festive crowds of pedestrians of all ages and backgrounds swarm past and into and out of its shops and cafés. No longer imperial, no longer elegant, the Via del Corso has been largely transformed into a shopping mall, with many of the typical franchises that now disfigure the historic neighborhoods of most great cities. And yet, even today, some remnants of the avenue's celebrated past remain, mostly in the form of commemorative tablets. In October 1786, Goethe settled in among a resident colony of German artists and intellectuals living in rented rooms at number 18, and Percy Bysshe Shelley began writing his poetic tragedy *The Cenci* in the Palazzo Verospi, now a bank directly across the way from the Rinascente department store.

A FAR MORE interesting outlet from the Piazza del Popolo is the Via di Ripetta, which ran down to the banks of the Tiber, where, in 1704, Pope Clement XI used stones stripped from the Colosseum to build a small harbor to receive goods being shipped downstream from Sabina and Umbria. The harbor has long since disappeared, after the construction of an ugly bridge across the river. I used this bridge every day for several months during a brief period of my life when I lived in an artist's studio on a rooftop from where I could look out over a portion of the *centro*. The setting was romantic, but the studio leaked water in torrents whenever it rained, and the toilet was an outhouse to which I had to sprint if I needed to relieve myself. I lasted about three months, until a January freeze forced me to move.

During that time, however, on my way up to the Piazza del Popolo I often passed between two of Rome's most fascinating monuments, the Tomb of Augustus and the Ara Pacis. The former was built by the emperor to contain himself and his relatives, that merry band which included his wife, Livia, who is suspected of having poisoned him, jolly old Tiberius, and assorted nephews, nieces, in-laws, stepsons, stepgrandsons, and finally even the Emperor Nerva, who died in A.D. 98, eighty-four years after Augustus's demise. When Mussolini, who reportedly had plans to have himself entombed in it, ordered its restoration in 1936, the surrounding neighborhood was leveled and entire streets disappeared, leaving the monument exposed and isolated like, according to the Romans, "a rotting tooth." Today the huge mausoleum, surrounded by cypresses, is an awe-inspiring sight but not a particularly attractive one, and it seems to be rarely visited. Perhaps this is because it has been encased in glass, as if to absent itself from any contact with humanity. It had been the site of a bullring, a garden, a concert stadium, and various other public venues. Now it basks in ominous silence, another testimony to the indifference of history.

The Ara Pacis, on the other hand, is a marvel of restoration. It is an altar of white marble surrounded by friezes depicting floral decorations and fauna and, on a side wall, a procession of dignitaries, including Augustus himself, other members of his family, and his retinue. Austerely simple, it was built in 13 B.C. to commemorate the emperor's military triumphs abroad. Unlike the tomb, the Ara Pacis is profoundly human and actually thrilling to contemplate, as if the figures in relief might turn and speak to us. The restoration of this extraordinary piece dates back to the late nineteenth century, when archaeologists began to study a number of fragments that had surfaced several centuries earlier and had been preserved in various private and public collections, including

the Louvre in Paris. The re-creation of the Ara Pacis, finally completed in 1938, is one of the great achievements of archaeology.

During those early days of mine in Rome after the war, I paid little attention to these remnants of the city's proud past. I was too excited by my new life as a full-time voice student and participant in the postwar evolution of Rome, from the capital of a disgraced totalitarian state into a hub of modern democracy, to care about the past. I lived among these great mementos of history without actually seeing them or enjoying them, taking them totally for granted. I had been in Rome for over a year before I took the time to visit the Ara Pacis and the Tomb of Augustus, and then only because my Aunt Lea, who lived in a penthouse apartment on the Corso very near the sites, shamed me into it. She was scandalized by my ignorance. "You cannot live in Rome like a barbarian," she said to me. I didn't tell her that I hadn't yet bothered to go look at St. Peter's and the Sistine Chapel. She might have given up on me altogether.

Three

IN ROME THE statues speak. Some of them simply because they are so magnificently lifelike that they look as if they are about to say something; others because the people of Rome over the centuries have used them to give voice to their opinions. One of the most famous of these talking statues is the one the Romans dubbed “the baboon,” which now occupies a space up against the wall of a Greek Orthodox church about halfway between the Piazza del Popolo and the Piazza di Spagna, on the street named Via del Babuino, the “Street of the Baboon.” The statue is actually a representation of Silenus, the drunken satyr who gamboled through mythology in company with his protégé Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility. Here, in ruined state, he is depicted lying in a tub and holding a small bagpipe. The statue once adorned a fountain built by Pope Gregory XIII in 1576, but it was temporarily removed from the Via Flaminia in 1877, when the street was being widened and sewers built, then returned to its present location.

Most Romans have never bothered to learn who the baboon really was. A cardinal who lived in the neighborhood in 1590 mistook the satyr for Saint Jerome and used to kneel and tip his hat to it every time he passed. The people, however, saw in the bearded, reclining figure a reflection of their own cynical outlook regarding the exercise of power during the years when the city was ruled by a succession of mostly corrupt papal governments. They voiced their protestations of injustices by scrawling slogans, slurs, satirical verses, and defamatory remarks on the walls behind and around the statue. Occasionally they would deface the statue itself, as if they held it personally responsible for the wrongs committed.

The tradition continues. Despite every effort made by the municipal governments to clean up and defend the sculpture from these popular depredations, the Romans still use the baboon to voice their feelings, often these days against Americans. It’s nothing personal; the talking statues always speak out against entrenched power, sometimes wittily, often brutally and viciously. Because the Via del Babuino is the most direct route between the Piazza del Popolo and the Piazza di Spagna, the square traditionally most frequented by foreigners, I still pass frequently by the baboon and always pause to find out what’s on its mind. During the terrorist agitations of the 1970s, the so-called Years of Lead, the baboon regularly denounced the government and predicted its violent overthrow. Today, after a generation of prosperity and relative calm in the streets, the baboon rarely becomes incensed about anything except the fortunes of the capital’s two professional soccer teams, though in the spring of 1999, during the period when the United States was dropping bombs on Serbia, I came across one disquieting exhortation: “U.S.A. assassins, we hate you!” There’s nothing like a war to stir up public resentment and prod the statues into speaking out again.

I spent a lot of time in the late 1940s going up and down the Via del Babuino, with its many shops still there today, that sell antiques and art objects. This was a period in my life when many of my friends were artists who lived and worked in studios on the Via Margutta, the shorter street parallel to the Via del Babuino. Every Saturday night for years the Bulgarian sculptor Amerigo Tot held an open house in his apartment on the Margutta where everyone was welcome and where, sipping wine and

munching on cheese and salami, we'd argue and joke the night away. Tot, a gentle, civilized man with a forbidding appearance who sculpted enormous, heavy-breasted statues of naked women, enjoyed late in life a brief movie career when he appeared in *The Godfather, Part II*, in the silent role of a hit man. I hadn't seen him in many years and he looked much the same.

The Via Margutta is still a pleasant street to stroll along, with its many small art galleries and curiosity shops. It began to take shape around the middle of the sixteenth century and from the beginning became a center of art and culture, with an active Circolo Artistico, an artists' association that promoted the work of its members and threw lavish carnival celebrations that attracted artists, intellectuals, and potential patrons and buyers from all over the country. As time is measured in Rome, the Via Margutta can lay no claim to ancient glories, but I still enjoy it for its cheerful, unpretentious atmosphere. "Can it be called a main street, this old Via Margutta," the Roman dialect poet Augusto Jandolo wrote of it in 1887, "which is prettier than uglier, even though there's nothing special about it? It's a quiet street, anything but solemn, made to work and to make love in." It probably derives its very name from a humble antecedent, the presence in the neighborhood in the 1580s of a popular barber named Giovanni Margutti.

LIKE MOST AMERICANS either living in the city or passing through it, I've always spent a lot of time in the Piazza di Spagna. For one thing, the American Express office is located there, and I used to convert my dollars into lire at a small exchange office on the Via Propaganda Fide, just off the square. This office was run by pale monks from some Vatican order who offered a better rate than even the black market. I remember them vanishing with my dollars into the dim recesses of their quarters inside the vast bulk of their gloomy palazzo, before shuffling back toward me and unsmilingly thrusting wads of ten-thousand-lire notes at me. The building housed a religious institution founded by Pope Gregory XV in 1622 to instruct the young and propagate the faith throughout the world—evidently a profitable enterprise, to judge by the generosity of my money-changing monks.

The area was first called Piazza di Francia, after the church built on the hill overlooking it by the French monarchy in 1494, but took its present name from the embassy to the Vatican that the Spaniards constructed in the early seventeenth century. Until then the area had been largely neglected, but by the end of the century it had become the hub for all foreign visitors to Rome. An early Italian guidebook described it as "much frequented by foreigners, also in summer by citizens, who flock to it toward evening to enjoy the cool air," and also the hotels, shops, cafés, and restaurants that flourished there. The list of famous names who have graced the piazza with their presence—from Stendhal, Goethe, and Balzac to Liszt, Wagner, Rubens, and many more—is nearly endless. Every Englishman of note passed through or lingered awhile, to such an extent that the Romans began to refer to it as "the English ghetto." The poet John Keats died there of consumption on February 23, 1821, in a small house at the foot of the Spanish Steps facing the piazza. He was twenty-six years old. The house is now a museum containing the poet's death mask (showing him smiling peacefully), a collection of his works, and a library that includes the works of his contemporaries, most notably Byron and Shelley, and many relics of the period.

The presence around the piazza of so many wealthy tourists inevitably attracted some unsavory elements—thieves, pickpockets, con artists, and women of the sort the Romans sometimes referred to as "gallant little ladies." The last became a problem because for years there wasn't much the papal governments could do about them. Embassies enjoyed diplomatic immunity not only on the

premises but in the surrounding area; Spain's diplomatic dominion extended to the adjacent streets as well as the square, and the working girls took advantage of it to move into the neighborhood. By August 1801, three years after this law was revoked, Pope Pius VII had received enough complaints to compel him to order a general roundup, not only of the gallant little ladies but of known criminals. One hundred and two women were condemned to five years in prison and thirty-three men to thirty lashes each. The grander courtesans, alerted in time by their protectors, fled. From then on they were forbidden to drive about the city in fancy carriages and, curiously, to bathe in the Tiber, which apparently had become another popular way of displaying their charms.

One of Rome's least attractive monuments is a massive column originally dug up elsewhere in 1778, then pretty much forgotten until Pope Pius IX decided in 1857 to erect it in the piazza to commemorate his promulgation three years earlier of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. The statue of the Virgin, sculpted for the occasion and mounted on top of the column, was considered so ugly by the German historian Ferdinand Gregorovius that he described it as a champagne cork mounted upside down. Pasquino, the most eloquent and coruscatingly witty of the city's talking statues, chose to report an exchange between himself and Michelangelo's famous sculpture of Moses. "Speak!" Pasquino demands, much as the artist himself reportedly cried on completing the work. "I can't! My mouth is too small!" the Moses replies. "Then whistle!" Pasquino continues. "Yes, I'll whistle at the sculpture of the Virgin!" Moses responds. (In Italy, a loud whistle is the equivalent of a Bronx cheer, and a chorus of them is the same as a good round of booing.)

The outstanding feature of the Piazza di Spagna is the Spanish Steps, the great stairway leading up to the heights of Trinità dei Monti, with its French church and small obelisk, a Roman imitation of an Egyptian model. Approved under the reign of Pope Innocent XIII (1721–1724), the steps, 137 in all, were divided by three broad landings and designed by their creator, Francesco de Sanctis, so that they would be appreciated from as far away as the Corso. In fact, one of the best views in Rome is to be enjoyed by walking away from the steps along the Via Condotti, then turning back to look at them. Around Easter, when it is banked in flowers, the stairway is particularly alluring, but it never fails to move me at any time of the year. It has always been a rendezvous for visitors and, beginning in the nineteenth century, a place where artists' models gathered, hoping to be employed by the painters and sculptors on their way to and from their studios on the Via Margutta. I used to hang out there a lot because, sooner or later, I could always count on bumping into someone I knew. There was a period when the stairs became almost impassable because they were suddenly taken over by street vendors peddling their cheap wares on cloths laid out on the stones, but eventually they were forced to move and it's now once more possible to sit there in peace and enjoy the spectacle of the streets. On weekends, all of Rome seems to be passing through Piazza di Spagna.

At the very foot of the steps is one of my favorite Roman fountains, the Barcaccia, or "old boat." Built in 1623 by one of the famous Berninis, probably Pietro, the father of Gian Lorenzo, it was designed to recall the flooding of the piazza in 1621, when the Tiber spectacularly overflowed its banks all the way to the base of the Pincio, leaving in its wake the wreck of an old boat. The event provided Bernini with the inspiration he needed, and also helped him find a practical way to cope with the low pressure of the water in this part of the city, still supplied by one of Rome's most ancient aqueducts. The water spouting from the Barcaccia used to be the sweetest in Rome, but now drinking water from any public fountain anywhere has become a bit risky.

Four

THE LONG CLIMB up the 137 steps from the Piazza di Spagna, then right onto the Via Sistina, then left up the Via Francesco Crispi to the Ludovico quarter was an ascent I made often when I first came to live in Rome after the war. This was because my mother lived in an apartment on the Via Piemonte four blocks beyond the Via Veneto, with its luxury hotels and fashionable sidewalk cafés. It was a largely residential neighborhood that had begun to attract wealthy visitors and residents after the creation of the Via Veneto in 1870. I liked the area as a sometimes welcome change from the crowding and confusion of the *centro*, even though it had none of the latter's charm. In 1952 I took over my mother's flat after her return to New York, and twenty years later I lived for another year on a block off the Via Veneto in a tiny place on the Via di Porta Pinciana, directly across from the Aurelian Wall. I grew to love the wall as a symbol of Roman power and also because people lived in it, in small artists' studios carved out of its towers and thick bastions. It was named after its builder, Lucius Domitius Aurelianus, a warlike emperor elected to the supreme power by his soldiers in A.D. 270 and then slaughtered by them five years later. One of the recurring delights of Rome is that every section of the city, even in the newer quarters, has its own historical landmarks and stories to tell.

Just beyond the confines of the Aurelian Wall is the vast public park of the Villa Borghese, with its groves of umbrella pines, its open meadows and flower gardens, still reflecting in its general layout the landscaping taste of Cardinal Scipione Borghese (1605–1621), who wanted to re-create the effect achieved fourteen centuries earlier by the Emperor Hadrian at his estate in Tivoli. In scale alone the cardinal succeeded, while also building himself a villa designed in the classical style, not to be lived in but to show off his personal art collection, mostly of ancient Greek and Roman statues. Since then the villa as a museum had a history of ups and downs, even after it was bought by the nation in 1907. When I first wandered into it, it was gloomy and badly lit, with too many paintings crowded together on the walls. No one was ever quite sure what was to be displayed in it or how, and for three decades it was closed to the public for restorations, until finally it reopened in 1999 with a splendid exhibition of the sculpture of Gian Lorenzo Bernini, whom Cardinal Borghese knew well. Included in the collection are his *David* and *Apollo and Daphne*. Thirty years to restore a building is not very long, the way time is measured in Rome, and it was well worth the wait. The Borghese now happens to be one of my favorite museums, not only because of the beauty of the building itself, but because it's compact enough to be enjoyed in a single day, no minor virtue in a city that is itself a museum and where only a small fraction of what the past has yielded up can be put on display.

As a child I used to romp through the Villa Borghese, sometimes to watch the horse shows put on at the public riding rings or to visit the zoo, but my favorite trip was always down the slope of the great park to the terraced gardens of the Pincio, overlooking the Piazza del Popolo. Here there was always the Punch and Judy show that apparently had been there for hundreds of years, with its loudly sarcastic puppets violently belaboring one another while we children screamed in delight. It was a place for nannies and mothers pushing prams and for respectable ladies to have tea on the open terrace of the Casino Valadier. Later, I found out, it also served as a convenient rendezvous for lovers, who liked to stroll among the busts of celebrated citizens and heroes of the Risorgimento, sculpted and placed there

at the urgings of the fiery Republican patriot Giuseppe Mazzini, Italy's Tom Paine. Unfortunately the Romans, with their cynical outlook on politics in general and their deep distrust of all public figures soon got into the habit of knocking off the noses of the more than two hundred heroes on view, with the result that the city government has had to keep an expert restorer of noses on the public payroll.

THE CAFÉS LINING both sides of the Via Veneto between the huge bulk of the American Embassy and Consulate and the Aurelian Wall have always been heavily patronized by well-to-do Italians as well as the tourists staying in the fancy hotels, such as the Excelsior and the Flora. One of the great pleasures of Rome is being able to sit outdoors at the café tables to watch the world pass by. Along the Via Veneto, that world consists partly of the rich, the reckless, the naughty, and the beautiful. The street really came into its own beginning in the early 1950s, when Italy began to enjoy what the media called *il benessere*, or well-being, the term that defined the postwar economic boom that created a whole new middle class of citizens who for the first time in their lives could afford an automobile, a refrigerator, a summer villa by the sea, and other appurtenances of prosperity.

This headlong rush to the good life left in its wake a large segment of the population, the underprivileged and poorly educated citizens mostly living in the outlying slums of the large cities left behind in their hilltop villages and abandoned countrysides. Nobody then, however, worried very much about them; the country had wholeheartedly embraced the values of an American-style capitalism, and the winners in the game hadn't the inclination or the time to pay much attention to the fate of the losers. Along the Via Veneto, especially after dusk, the winners celebrated, putting on a great, glamorous parade of entrenched wealth, instant celebrity, and desirable flesh that gripped the imagination not only of the Romans who participated in it but of people everywhere. Nothing caught that mood and time better than the director Federico Fellini's great movie *La Dolce Vita*, whose protagonist was the freelance photographer Paparazzo, a name that has passed into the language to define a type, the unscrupulous invader of privacy and hustler of dreams with a flash camera in his hands. Today, two generations later, the Via Veneto has reverted to a less frenzied atmosphere, but still attracts to its outdoor gatherings more than a smattering of the rich and temporarily famous. Rome, as always, accepts them all as part of a passing scene. "In this country," the actress Anna Magnani, herself a quintessential Roman, once said, "only the monuments survive."

In Rome, not only the monuments, but all the relics of the city's past as well. At the foot of the Via Veneto sits the Capuchin Church of Santa Maria della Consegione, which has become a tourist mecca because of its underground chapel. The succession of six small rooms is crowded with the bones of more than four thousand monks who have been buried here. Subsequently dug up and put on display, the bones have been arranged into decorative patterns— arches of thigh bones, pyramids of skulls, frescoes of vertebrae, individual skeletons attired in their hooded robes and mounted in niches to greet visitors. "Picturesque horrors" is how Mark Twain described the scene, while expressing admiration for the way the monks themselves had structured the exhibit, designs he deemed worthy of Michelangelo.

Even the Marquis de Sade was impressed. "I've seen nothing that has made such a vivid impression on me," he wrote, while going on to observe that the cemetery ought to be seen at its best, at night, by lamplight. He also noted that the living monks seemed to be a merry crew. "In Rome, they tell many stories about them which demonstrate that the present pleasures of life cause them to forget the dismaying image of the imminent destruction that awaits them."

One of these monks, Brother Pacifico, was so adept at forecasting the future that he attracted to the church great crowds of the faithful, who came not to attend Mass but to pick up a tip on the lottery. Pope Gregory XVI (1831–1846) was forced to intervene and banish the good friar from Rome. He was ushered as far as the Porta del Popolo by a mob of punters to whom he made a famous speech that included one last tip on the next drawing. Brother Pacifico was a Via Veneto kind of monk.

Five

THE HANDFUL OF streets that lead out of Piazza di Spagna toward the oldest quarters of the city were the ones I frequented the most during my postwar years in Rome, and I still find myself strolling on one or two of them daily every time I come back. This is because each of them has attractions for the visitor and offers enticements few can resist, especially shoppers. Like most Roman streets, they are all named after some celebrity who happened to live there, an occupation, or a landmark. The Via Frattina recalls one of the first houses built in the seventeenth century in what was then still open country by the bishop of Amelia, Bartolomeo Ferratino; Via Borgognona was settled originally by a colony of Burgundians; Via della Croce, where Rubens and a group of Flemish painters once lived, recalls a giant cross mounted at the end of the street toward Piazza di Spagna; Via delle Carrozze because it was where people went to buy or lease horse-drawn carriages and where the vehicles were built, repaired, and cleaned; the Bocca di Leone, a cross street, either after the statue of a lion's head with an open mouth said to have been located there or because there was an opening that looked like a lion's mouth leading into a main sewer line; and the Via Condotti because under it flowed the water from the aqueduct that supplied the lower part of the city as far as the Tiber. That aqueduct, bringing water from the Alban Hills, south of the city, was named the Aqua Vergine (Virgin Water) and was built by Agrippa, Augustus's son-in-law, in 19 B.C. Legend has it that the source of the stream was indicated to a group of thirsty Roman soldiers by a young local girl, hence the name. It was such a popular discovery that the Romans, the world's greatest partygoers, celebrated the event for fifty-nine days, sacrificing who knows how many animals and gladiators in the process.

Of the streets in this part of town, my wife's favorite is the Via Frattina, because of its many specialty shops, boutiques, and a couple of cafés with outdoor tables from which one can survey the passing squadrons of determined shoppers while resting one's feet. It also provides easy access to Via Bocca di Leone, with its famous Hotel Inghilterra, lone survivor of all the fancy establishments catering to foreigners that once flourished in the quarter. The hostelry is now a luxury inn with rooms priced at hundreds of dollars a night, but when I stayed there in 1947, during my first few days back in the city, I rented a small single room on an upper floor for six dollars a night. An open terrace connected all of the rooms on my floor, which was mostly occupied by single young people, and adventure beckoned. My wife and I love the Inghilterra, she because it has the cleanest, most modern ladies' room in the area, and I because its small, elegant little bar serves the driest, coldest martini in town.

Other streets in the area offer inducements, the Via della Croce its food shops and *trattorie*, the Via Borgognona several luxury stores and Nino's, long one of the city's best restaurants, specializing in Tuscan dishes. But for sheer elegance and history the Via Condotti has always been the place to stroll to buy, to linger in envy and admiration, and just for the sheer pleasure of watching the Japanese hordes battle their way into Gucci. The Condotti is a street not to seek a bargain in, but to admire the toys and the trappings the wealthy accumulate for themselves. And then, at the point when you're ready to drop from the sheer excitement and fatigue the spectacle induces, there is the Caffè Greco, the ultimate refuge from life's daily struggles and obligations.

At the bar of the Greco, customers are engaged in an active pursuit of coffee, drinks, and hot d'oeuvres to be imbibed standing up, while cell phones ring and calls are dialed, a frenetic scene that reflects during shopping hours the activity of the street outside. But inside, in the quiet procession of dimly lit rooms furnished with small, marble-topped tables, banquettes, antiques, walls displaying paintings, etchings, lithographs, and framed mementos, the Greco remains what it has always been, a refuge for conversationalists, artists, thinkers, and now, inevitably, exhausted shoppers and tourists.

The Caffè Greco was named after Nicola di Maddalena, the Levantine Greek who founded it in 1760 at a time when the area was full of hotels and *pensionari*. From the first day it became the favorite gathering place for the city's colony of eminent visitors, then a haven as well for local artists and writers. Tennyson and Thackeray used to pop in from the rooms they were staying in across the street. Stendhal, Gounod, Wagner, Byron, Liszt, Keats, and Shelley were habitués. The great Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi used to drop in, as did the sculptor Antonio Canova and the playwright Carlo Goldoni, who reportedly wrote several of his 150 plays on the premises. In the 1780s, when Goethe was in town, the rooms became the headquarters for the often noisily rambunctious German artist colony. Gogol wrote much of *Dead Souls* in here. And from its creation the Greco was an obligatory oasis for the aristocratic English on their grand tours of the Continent.

The historical popularity of the Greco with its distinguished clientele has undoubtedly protected it from being demolished or modernized. To judge by early illustrations and photographs, it looks pretty much the same as it did in its first heyday two centuries ago. The aging waiters in their black tails look as if they've just stepped out of a movie set. What is different is that few artists or writers now spend much time in it, probably because it has become a little too popular and too full of tourists. Nevertheless, here and there, at some corner table or other an artist or writer can occasionally be spotted, either sketching or scribbling, seated advertisements for the locale's past. Among the illuminati, of course, is a sprinkling of poseurs and the obsessed, none more typical than the splendidly bearded Sicilian professor Illuminato Dispenza, who spent twenty years of his life at the same corner table trying to solve the mathematical problem of squaring the circle. "On the sudden," wrote Shakespeare, "a Roman thought hath struck him."

Six

ROME HAS NEVER been considered a musical city, in the sense of Milan, with its great opera house La Scala, or Naples, with its centuries-old tradition of popular song. The city's Teatro dell'Opera has only rarely in its history achieved a standard of performance comparable to that of half a dozen other Italian opera houses, mainly because its management has always been influenced by shifting political forces at city hall. And then, too, the Romans themselves have never been either great opera fans or willing even to pay full price for a ticket, in a city in which many households include a relative or two employed in some ministerial office with access to free passes. The deficits have been enormous, and inevitably have to be made up out of public funds, a situation that tends to inhibit innovation and artistic excellence. I never minded. As a voice student in Rome during the early postwar years, I went as often as I could to the opera house, standing at the back of the orchestra with other young singers and debating with them in the intervals the merits, or lack thereof, of this or that diva. It was a heady time, and for me the city was full of music.

I had grown up with the sounds of Rome in my ears. My mother, who had an untrained but beautiful dark voice and accompanied herself on a guitar, taught me a number of *stornelli*, the Roman street songs, largely improvised, that sounded faintly Arabic, full of melodic twists and turns in hauntingly plaintive minor keys. Then there were the popular songs, not as famous as those of Naples, but well known all over the country, especially when sung by such pop artists as Renato Rascel, Gabriel Ferri, Giorgio Innovato, and others largely forgotten now but celebrities in their own time.

For me as a music student, Rome was a festival of song. Every weekday I walked down the Via Condotti or the Corso and turned into Via Fontanella Borghese, where on the fifth floor of an ancient palazzo I attended the vocal academy run by the Count and Countess Calcagni, an elderly couple who taught or tried to teach several dozen of us how to sing. The hour-long lessons cost the equivalent of fifty cents each, and one could also sit in on everybody else's lessons and participate in duets, trios, and *concertati*. I ate, breathed, and lived opera, and I don't think I've ever been happier in my life.

This part of Rome, surprisingly enough, has a rich theatrical and musical history. The enormous Palazzo Borghese itself, which dominates this medieval quarter, was nicknamed "the harpsichord" by the Romans because it was shaped like one. Finished in 1609, it was bought by Cardinal Camillo Borghese before he was elected Pope Paul V. The Borgheses were the richest family in Rome, perhaps in all of Italy, and the palace still belongs to them, even though a financial crash in 1887 wiped them out and forced them to sell almost everything, including their priceless library. Cardinal Scipione Borghese put together his art treasures there before transferring them to his villa in the park.

Over the past two centuries the palazzo has accommodated a number of wealthy and influential characters, none more eccentric than Pauline Bonaparte, the emperor's favorite sister, who married Camillo Borghese in 1803. Then only twenty-three years old and very beautiful, she lived in a fourth-floor apartment above the main entrance, where she entertained a series of lovers, reportedly used her ladies-in-waiting as footstools, and had herself carried to her bath by a large black attendant. Today the palazzo houses the Circolo della Caccia (the Hunt Club), the most exclusive private club in Italy.

as well as private apartments and offices. Unfortunately, it's not open to the public except for one or two special days a year, but through its open portal can be glimpsed the vast gardens, the marble statues, and the colonnade of ninety-six Ionic and Doric columns, ranged in pairs, that support the upper stories.

In the piazza just beyond the palace is a large open-air market where for years I bought old opera scores, records, and prints, mainly from an old Roman named Morosi, whose family has had a pushcart in the square for generations. Every time I came back to the city over the years I would stop by to say hello and to make an occasional small purchase of a print, an old book, a fragment of a manuscript, a medal, an ancient coin. As he aged, Morosi seemed to blend into his merchandise, sinking back into the inner recesses of his pushcart, sitting quietly inside it on cold days, bundled up against the weather in a heavy overcoat, scarf, and hat. He's gone now, but his son Paolo has taken over, having added a second pushcart to the original one and training his own children to take over from him.

The square was also the site of a popular supper club patronized by artists and musicians, including Francesco Paolo Tosti and the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, who in 1895 rented rooms on the premises above the restaurant. He was then thirty-two years old and recalled the period as one of "splendid poverty . . . but with the joy of being able to breathe grandly." Tosti lived nearby on the Via Prefetti in what D'Annunzio recalled as a large gloomy apartment "full of dark hallways and hiding places." When the composer was in form, "he would make music for hours and hours without tiring, forgetting himself at the piano, occasionally improvising."

Carlo Goldoni lived in the neighborhood, in the square that would be named after him, between November 1758 and August 1759, during which time he wrote *Gl'Innamorati* (*The Lovers*). So did Pauline Bonaparte's lawyer, Giuseppe Vannotelli, who had twelve children, all but two of whom became musicians. They created a family musical salon that attracted Liszt, Bizet, and Gounod to their premises, where they put on concerts and staged performances of oratorios and operas. The music pouring forth from those rooms attracted passersby, who would linger under the windows to listen, just as in my own time the vocal outpourings from the Calcagnis' apartment not only never brought complaints from their neighbors, but only observations on the quality of the singers. I can remember one complaint, on a summer afternoon when, planted by an open window, I cracked a high note at the end of an aria. "Aah-ooh," I heard a voice call out from the courtyard below, "change your profession!"

Eventually I did.

Seven

EVERY YEAR NOW, when my wife and I return to Rome in the spring, we follow a daily routine. From our small hotel a few blocks away, we stroll to the Piazza Rotonda and settle at an outdoor cafe table facing the central fountain of the square and the great portico of the Pantheon, architectural and aesthetically one of the most beautiful buildings in Rome. Nothing could be more pleasant and rewarding, even on a rainy day, than to sit out there in the comforting shade of an umbrella while sipping a caffè latte, munching on a croissant, and contemplating this astonishing relic of ancient Rome's grandeur. Not even the obnoxious presence in the piazza of a McDonald's can spoil the time spent there.

The walk from our hotel, a block or so from the Piazza Borghese, is in itself an education in the drama of daily life as it has been lived in this part of the city for centuries. All of these little streets—the Via Metastasio, Via della Stelletta, Via Pozzo di Cornacchie, Via Giustiniani, and others—look much as they did in the Middle Ages, and are lived in by working citizens plying some of the same trades as their ancestors. The whole quarter bustles with life, and every building has a story to tell. We are now in the very heart of the *centro*, where myth, fancy, rumor, and tradition blend indistinguishably into history. In the Church of the Maddalena, for instance, on the street named after it that leads directly to the Pantheon, is the tomb of Teresa Benicelli, who died at the age of twenty-three in July 1843. She was beautiful, from a newly rich and ennobled family who dreamed she would marry worthily and well. Instead she fell in love with a lowly dragoon of the papal regiments named Pio Pratesi. The family arranged to have Pratesi transferred to Viterbo, after which the girl sank into deep depression. Her doctor informed the family that she was beyond hope. In desperation, Pratesi was summoned to her bedside, where he cradled her in his arms, but all she could do was whisper, "It's too late." Three days later she died. The whole city went into mourning, and a tremendous crowd attended the funeral. Pratesi went home and tried twice to shoot himself, but each time the gun misfired. Inspired by what he considered divine intervention, the twentyfive-year-old cadet became a monk and two years later, as Father Pacifico, celebrated his first Mass over the tomb of his beloved Teresa. Shakespeare would have loved this story, which, if nothing else, proves that the Romans, for all their vaunted cynicism and indifference to history's misadventures and injustices, are as subject as anyone else to true romance.

Traditionally the Romans have never been sentimental about their great heritage, and it's a miracle that so much has survived from the past since the collapse of the empire fifteen hundred years ago. Buildings and streets have been constructed out of the marble and stones stripped from monumental gold, brass, and silver have been appropriated to decorate the palaces and villas of popes and noble statues, paintings, and relics have been vandalized or carted off to be sold to private collectors. There have been the periodic foreign invasions that have contributed to these depredations. Only the sheer amount and size of what remains have prevented the city from becoming a wasteland, though I suspect that if the *centro* had been turned over to American engineers, nothing would have remained and freeways and shopping malls would have replaced the forums, the temples, and the Colosseum.

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