

## An Ideal City. Kate O'Brien and Rome

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“We come to Rome less to see a real city than to verify an ideal one”  
(Sean O’Faolain 1951, 132)

What was Kate O’Brien’s ideal of Rome and how did the eternal city influence her imagination? In this essay I want to provide a context for the Italian travel writings of the Irish novelist Kate O’Brien, published in the late 1950s and early 1960s in various journals and magazines and reproduced here. I suggest that context by arguing that Rome provided O’Brien with a vital source of inspiration and a new departure as a novelist at a time of some difficulty in her writing life. Born in Limerick in 1897, Kate O’Brien spent most of her writing career in London from the early 1930s onwards, publishing popular novels and working as a reviewer, broadcaster and travel writer. After a brief marriage, she lived the rest of her life in relationships with other women. Her novels, although accessible and widely read, also featured radical and subversive representations of lesbian and gay sexuality at a time of criminalisation and marginality for the sexually other. For this reason, two of her novels, *Mary Lavelle* (1936) and *The Land of Spices* (1941), were banned in Ireland for obscenity. Despite this banning and subsequent negative public discussion of her work, O’Brien left London and returned to live in Ireland in the early 1950s. She settled in Roundstone, Co. Galway where she bought a large house and continued to write her novels and essays. However, by the mid 1950s, her inspiration appeared to be flagging as she struggled to complete what was to be her final novel, *As Music and Splendour* (1958). The expense of maintaining a large house on her free-lance earnings also became a problem for her and a trip to Italy was a solution, as a place to escape her money problems and to try and locate a new source of inspiration for her novel. As a young woman, she had lived in Spain and two of her novels had Spanish settings but, now for the first time, in the late 1950s, Italy became the location for her imaginative and critical writings and with fruitful results. Rome was to aid her in the creation of her most radical and progressive novel.

Kate O’Brien was not alone in her new-found interest in Italy. At this time in the 1950s, a number of other Irish writers had been attracted to Rome as a place to reflect and to create their fictions. They all travelled there and then wrote from this new experience. Rome was the city of the Vatican, the centre of power and

influence for the Catholic, and Ireland was deeply influenced by Catholicism at this time but many of these writers were at a distance from the Catholic faith. Kate O'Brien had been educated in a convent school in Limerick but she was now very far from her faith, calling herself a collapsed Catholic! In fact Rome gave her a permission to undermine Catholic teaching on sexuality and on sexual roles.

I take my title for this essay from the quote above, a line from a travel book called *A Summer in Italy*, published by the Irish short story writer and historian, Sean O'Faolain in 1950. O'Faolain was, like Kate O'Brien, a critic of Irish censorship and a free-thinking and liberal ex-Catholic, and Rome gave him a way back to his faith. Apart from O'Faolain, the dramatist Teresa Deevy wrote a radio play called *Supreme Dominion*, broadcasted in 1957 by Radio Eireann and set in Rome in the seventeenth century, during the lifetime of Luke Wadding, the founder of the Irish College. Another contemporary of Kate O'Brien, the Anglo-Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen was also a frequent visitor to Rome and in the autumn of 1959 Bowen taught a term at the American School. The result of this stay is her only travel book, *A Time in Rome*, published in 1960. Bowen's book is a fascinating one, centred on her vain search for meaning, belonging and solidity in this bewildering, multi-layered and elusive city. Bowen's writings on Rome echo O'Brien's sense of the city itself as a lived experience and throughout *A Time in Rome* Bowen charts her futile but rewarding attempts to know and understand the city. As Bowen remarks at one point, "I was looking for splinters of actuality in the shifting mass of experience other than my own" (11). All of these Irish writers came to Rome to understand it and to reflect on their own creativity and, like O'Faolain, Bowen and Deevy, Kate O'Brien was also to find stimulating inspiration from her own "time in Rome" and a parallel sense of enchanting disorientation.

What did these Irish writers see in the eternal city? Sean O'Faolain quoted this old Irish verse in his travel book which goes as follows "To go to Rome may little profit / the king you seek you will not find, unless you bring him with you" (1951, 143). I would argue that O'Brien herself, a little stifled and isolated in her Irish home, sought a new "King", not a religious or political figure, but instead a new aesthetic liberation. She was looking for a fresh point of imaginative departure for her fictions when she decided to spend some time in Italy in 1954, to research for this final novel *As Music and Splendour*.

This decision to travel was made partly because she could let her house in Ireland to a tenant while she was away. In addition her publishers allowed her an advance of £4000, despite the fact that her previous novel had earned little more than that. She moved to Rome, her first time visiting the Italian capital, at the beginning of March 1954, travelling down from Paris by train and joining her close friend, the academic Lorna Reynolds<sup>1</sup>, who was alrea-

dy there on study leave from her university teaching post. While staying in Rome, Kate lived in an apartment on the Via di Ripetta, an address that she would give to her fictional Irish heroines in *As Music and Splendour*. Much to her delight she discovered that she was living in the house where Pope Pius the twelfth was born. Her Roman friends during this time included the novelist Ignazio Silone and his Irish wife Darina, Jenny Nicholson, Robert Graves' daughter and others, and Kate used this time to gather all necessary background material for her next novel, set around the world of Italian opera.

It is clear from a talk she gave on Rome when she returned to Ireland that Kate read widely in the vast corpus of travel writing on Rome and on Roman church history before she travelled and thus made herself expert in the area<sup>2</sup>. When she settles in, although she writes about how much the city overwhelms her, "Rome engulfs, defeats, overwhelms [...] this immortal, insolent city" (71), at the same time, she is enraptured with the city. She spent a great deal of time wandering around the city alone and fearless, forming opinions and impressions on its churches, gardens and squares and picking up a great deal of knowledge of the everyday workings of the city. All of this experience provided her with materials and texture for her Roman novel.

Soon after her arrival, she set off on a research trip on Italian opera with Lorna Reynolds that took in Naples, Milan and then Ferrara and Ravenna. In Naples, she heard Maria Callas sing and from Ferrara in April, she wrote the first instalment of a travel journal, published in the literary journal *Irish Writing*, part of a series called "Andantino" (1954, 46-50). In it, she recorded her love for Naples, her admiration for Rome and her indifference to Ferrara. "A flat, dull town" (68) where she finds the horned twists of bread served with her breakfast to be inedible and unattractive. Ravenna, despite its being "a reliquary, a chalice, a holy container", is also, yet again, "a dull place" (70), and O'Brien is fearless in her own judgements, and her original and pithy comments and her opinions are well-informed, articulated and merciless.

Her next piece, entitled "Rome:—June" (71) focuses on her sufferings in the middle of the Roman summer: again, "Rome engulfs, defeats, overwhelms" (71) and she tells of her attempts to escape "the heat-maddened tiger" (73) by taking bus journeys outside Rome. Rome is clearly her first love and she finds ways to escape the powerful summer heat and remain happily and comfortably within the city, even at the height of summer. "One can rest and learn and contemplate in any of the Basilicas and with exquisite pleasure, from the high leafy garden of the Palatine" (74). O'Brien presents very little sense of the history or the art of Rome, rather in these pieces, she writes about daily life, moments of contemplation, the shopping, the food and the life at night.

However there is one work of art which is an exception to this absence of monuments and churches. Of great interest and insight is O'Brien's reaction to the Bernini statue of Saint Teresa of Avila in Santa Maria della Vittoria. It is, she admits herself, an uneasy response to the erotic frankness of the statue and

the fact that Bernini has captured the moment of the saint's ecstatic experience of the presence of God as a moment of transcendence. Given her great interest in Spain, O'Brien had already published a short biography of Teresa in 1950. In this, she was at pains to stress the political and intellectual qualities of the Spanish saint and downplayed her religious and mystic nature. O'Brien saw her in the light of twentieth-century rational disbelief in religious excess, preferring to reclaim her as a symbol of feminist achievement rather than a woman who experienced visions and ecstasies. "One cannot expect anyone resistant of the mysticism of the great Spaniards to accept this dating sculpture" (75), yet it is worth noting that in her time in Rome, O'Brien comes to love the statue when she goes to visit and to accept that "his sculptured saint in her exaggerated beauty, alike with her alert and exquisite angel, says in all her lines that, as she knew, the vision of God cannot be retold" (*ibidem*).

As she describes it, she spent much of this summer in flight from the heat of the city in the hills outside Rome, in Tivoli, under the cool shades around Hadrian's Villa and from this time comes a short story called "A Bus From Tivoli", published in 1957 (6-11). O'Brien published very few short stories and those she did were of a lesser quality than her novels but this story is some of an exception. In this slightly unsettling story, reminiscent of an E.M. Forster novel, a middle-aged Irish writer called Marian, who is spending the summer in Rome, finds herself in a café near Hadrian's Villa late one evening, waiting for a bus back to Rome. "Marian was in her fifties and a heavy woman, one easily tired and who found life in Rome somewhat a physical ordeal" (78). In this café, a young Italian waiter serves her: "He was a large and powerfully built young man, handsome in the Roman fashion, he looked to be twenty-four or five [...] 'He's curiously like me', she thought. 'He could be my son'. For she had, as she knew with dislike, a heavy Roman look. In youth she had been normally slender and beautiful of face; but middle age had taken the beauty away, and left her fleshy and Roman-looking [...] Marian did not at all admire the Roman physical type, and very much disliked her own undeniable relation to it" (*ibidem*). Marian is clearly a physical representation of Kate herself, who disliked her own looks in middle-age and the loss of her slim good looks in youth. To Marian's horror, the young man takes an instant fancy to her and insists that she stay with him, even inveigling his young sister to plead with Marian. She refuses him and leaves the café in a panic, appalled at the incongruity of this young man paying court to her. On her return to Rome, she is careful not to tell the story to the Italians amongst her acquaintances: "[...] sure that no Italian would believe her, and would gently dismiss her as another dreaming old lady from the queer, northern lands" (80). Later in the summer, Marian returns to Hadrian's Villa with a friend, Elizabeth: "an English painter, a woman much younger than herself" – clearly her partner Mary O'Neill, who did visit Kate in Rome at that time. When Marian and her friend find themselves in the same café, the young man and his sister instantly renew their pleas for Marian to stay and, again, with some difficulty, Marian

escapes. "A Bus From Tivoli" is an unpleasant story, with much detail to suggest that it may have been based on a real incident but with the aura of incongruous sexual attraction and with a hint of incestuous attraction. (At one point Marian even compares the young man to Nero, thus casting herself as Agrippina). She submitted "A Bus From Tivoli" to BBC Radio for possible broadcasting but, not surprisingly, it was turned down because the subject matter was considered to be "depressing and subjective in an embarrassing way"<sup>3</sup>.

All this time in Italy, Kate was gathering material for her novel. A crucial metaphor in this new novel was to be Gluck's opera, *Orfeo et Eurydice*, where two women singers can play the part of devoted husband and wife and O'Brien was interested in deploying this transgressive regendering in her novel. Kate and Lorna Reynolds heard Maria Callas sing the opera in Milan around this time and the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice also provided Lorna Reynolds with her own creative inspiration, a poem called "Euridyce" (1963): "Cowslip-sweet the breath / Blown down the dazzling south-facing shaft, / As we climbed and wound from dusty underground, / Up far on the way, you leading me, / You Orpheus, me Euridyce" (104). In her final piece, "Rome Relaxed"<sup>8</sup> published on her return in 1963 during the second Vatican council, a time of great change in the Catholic church, she portrays herself as a fond and familiar admirer of Rome, devoted and at ease and somewhat indifferent to the momentous decisions that are being made in the Vatican, eagerly watched by the many faithful Catholics in Ireland and in England.

Kate returned to Ireland in September 1954, working slowly on her new novel. In fact, it would take her six years to finish, one of the longest periods of writing of any of her novels and it takes Rome as the central setting, where two young Irish women are training to become opera singers. In the novel, Rose and Clare are taken from their homes in Ireland, trained to become opera singers with a great intensity and then launched into the dizzy, intoxicating world of art and of fame and wealth. This is, by large, a successful transformation for both women and they come to love Rome and the freedom it brings, a freedom unavailable back in Ireland if they had remained there. In fulfilling their artistic destinies, the young woman Rose and Clare also find personal happiness, Rose as the lover of Antonio and Clare as the lover of Luisa. The successful realisation of their sexuality comes about because of the bohemian freedom that life in Rome has given them. This sense of equality between heterosexual and lesbian identity is the most radical element in the novel, ironic, given that Rome is the centre of power for the Catholic Church, still the most conservative and powerful social influence in Ireland, where such sexual independence would have been unknown.

After the book was published, Kate lamented to John Jordan about the bad press that *As Music and Splendour* received, and declared that she had been so wounded and beaten by critics this time. Yet most of the reviews of the novel were respectful, even positive and the book was never banned. *As Music and Splendour* has found interest from modern critics, and admiration for the directness of

her representation of same-sex love. Emma Donoghue writes that the novel is: “more celebratory in its account of a relationship between two women. Instead of playing a supporting role, the lesbian is one of the two heroines, whose stories are presented equally and in parallel. Set at a safe distance in place (Paris and Rome) and time (the 1880s), *As Music and Splendour* nonetheless manages to create a modern Irish lesbian and give her a startling voice” (Donoghue 1993, 50). This voice has found echoes in contemporary Irish writing and another critic, Anne Fogarty, argues that: “for the first time in O’Brien’s oeuvre, lesbian love is moved literally and metaphorically centre stage” (1997, 175).

To conclude, O’Brien’s last novel would not have been possible without the enabling sense of liberation that Rome provided for her characters and these writings give us a sense of what attracted her most to the city, its openness, the hint of pagan freedom, the cosmopolitan life of the artist, the bohemian milieu. Ireland, the novel tells us clearly, would never have allowed these two young singers to blossom quite in the way in which Rome does and they could never have become independent, self-assertive and liberated into the realm of art and of love. *As Music and Splendour*, neglected within her life, has now become one of her most critically acclaimed novels and Rome gave her the inspiration and the breathing space in which to create it. These writings are the clue as to the Rome Kate O’Brien invented for herself, her ideal city.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lorna Reynolds (1987) was later to publish *Kate O’Brien, A Literary Portrait*, Gerrard Cross, Colin Smythe.

<sup>2</sup> “Italy”, unpublished lecture to the Italian Society of Limerick, November 1955, Kate O’Brien papers, Northwestern University, USA.

<sup>3</sup> See letter dated 25th October 1956, Kate O’Brien File, BBC Archives, Reading UK.

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# Andantino

Kate O'Brien

FERRARA. APRIL 14. ON THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW, GOOD FRIDAY, it will have been five weeks since I came to Italy, five weeks since I descended into the wonderful, new Termini Station at Rome. And to Rome I came then for the first time in a too deferring, too off-putting life. A belated discoverer, indeed, of so exacting a city.

I have never been a note-taker or a jotter-down. Notes, indeed, one has had to take when seeking facts in libraries, museums, and such places of assembled and catalogued information. But personal notes, of the passing day, of the winged, immediate impression—when, rarely, I have attempted them—have always upon later reference offended me, seemed ridiculous, and have jangled tediously against my memory.

But memory, long-trusted ally, is not equal now to the overwork of ten or twenty years ago; and its retina, the hitherto reliable mind's eye, grows not only dim but positively contrary—not call it, ungratefully, a cheat. So at last, for purposes of work foreshadowed, I become in a some sort a note-taker. Reluctantly. Distrustfully. It was always better to remember, and set nothing down until the under-process of remembering moved to express itself and to be concluded. But the careless days of the long reach and the bright chance are gone. And, for instance, here I sit in Ferrara, somewhat to my surprise, and where, God willing, I shall never sit again; so, it may be that a few years on, trying to remember something or other by my study fire in Roundstone, I shall wonder why I was so much bored in April '54 in the once-glorious Renaissance city of the Este princes. And then, perhaps, perhaps these notes will be at hand—and, perhaps, if I trouble to read them, they will seem, alas, as false to me as have all notes of the immediate which I have ever taken. So let me not be too immediate about this city. Tomorrow I shall be in Ravenna. Let me consider Ferrara from there, or from San Marino—or, more magisterially, from Rome, where I shall be again before the end of the month.

I fled Rome after ten days, not in entire willingness—although indeed that first impact was inexpressibly exhausting to one who came there already tired—but because work in progress made it advisable for me to visit Naples and Milan during this month.

Henry James was in his twenty-fourth year, I think, when he first looked at Rome. He had fallen in love with Venice—as who would not? In Florence he had been uneasy and unwell. But then he came to Rome, and in his first

days there it seemed to him sometimes as if reason might forsake him, under the stress and pressure of its content. Yet he was a young man, well-off, and nourished in leisure; and however immense the combined assault of all the Romes upon his open and nervous imagination, the city which he met in everyday business, in street and café, park and pizza, was of the late 1870's, a city of horse-carriages and gaslight, wherein bells and human voices and the clop of hooves were the loudest parts of the noise. He did not have added to all the Romes his knowledge and his dreaming showed him the Rome of the machine age, the Rome of Mussolini and post-Mussolini, of war, of invasion, of international "spivvery"—in short, of the chaotic 1950's. Eighty years, a short span, has actually been, on the evidence, a very long time in Rome's long history—and this would surprise Henry James, one of whose necessities was always to take the longest and the slowest view.

Myself also favouring the slow view, I consciously sought to take as nearly as possible no view at all of Rome in those first ten days. Yet when they were over and I was in Naples, I knew very quickly, from the effect of that city upon me, that Rome had indeed made some strong impressions.

But I must let precision wait—or rather, precision still asks me to wait. Rome and Naples—how absurd the English word, Naples!—Rome and Napoli have already packed me up with arbitrary, hasty notions—vivid and unexpected. But all of that confusion must whirl a while and then grow cool before it serves me. That Napoli was restful let me say—yes, restful. After the Roman thunder, the sea-blown sweetness of the scrambling town seduced me into an unfair, unbalanced fit of love. I was to demur, heel back, as from all sudden and unnecessary loves. But, Lord, the soft voices of the Napolitani after the uniform Roman shout; the varied physical beauties of people—Greek, Norman, Celtic, Jewish, Arab, Sicilian, American—after the too-strong Roman face and bust; the soft amoral charm of the begging children, the coaxing silliness of the street watch-sellers and the would-be pick-pockets; the naked crumbling beauty of the hilly slum-streets, the gallant *pathétique* of the hung-out washing everywhere; the good manners, the good salt air, the unashamed carelessness, laziness and poverty—ah, I shall write more of Naples when I get further back from my first and already exhausted fit of love.

Easter Saturday, April 17.

I hate this note-taking. All the more, perhaps, because it isn't note-taking, and because I began it dutifully in Ferrara. I'm in Ravenna now.

It's odd about Ferrara.

I came there from Milan. Milan is a more interesting place than those who don't know it know. I left it on the day the International Fair began, because I am not interested in such fairs, and because the big city was going to be overcrowded and extremely expensive for the *Fiera* period. Milan is normally expensive, more expensive than Napoli, about the same as Rome. But is it,



despite its plain face, an interesting and agreeable city. It has no surrounding beauty, no atmosphere of Italian glamour, and a century of solid success and good citizenship had overlaid its long history. It is grey and orderly, and its most easily assessed possession, after *La Scala* and *Il Duomo*, is its uniform and intelligent good manners. I was glad when I was in Milan to reflect that Manzoni was its great man; the Milanese deserve him, and he is, it seems to me, exactly right as their immortal.

Of *La Scala*—another day, much later—much to say, much to remember.

Ferrara was not picked for me out of a box by a trained canary. I wanted a really quiet town after weeks of movement between three large cities; my travelling companion, who knows Italy well and who is at present in pursuit of the High-Renaissance, quoted Yeats who "...might have lived where falls The green shadow of Ferrara walls...". She also quoted from a d'Annunzio sonnet to the town which she had translated. The name Ferrara has always rung musically for me, and, loving my own Shannon at Limerick, I have had a lifelong curiosity about the formidable river Po. So I was well content to depart from Milan for the old, exhausted city of the Princes of Este and of Lucrezia Borgia. Of Ariosto too, and where—I discovered—Savonarola was born and lived his first twenty years. We travelled there, through Bologna, on a lovely day of Spring.

Wherever one travels in Italy one is amazed and edified by the cultivation of the land, and by the quality and skill of that cultivation. Indeed, the uniform aspect of fertility intelligently and industriously forced to man's use and good which the Italian landscape presents leaves one marvelling that there can be any real misery, real poverty in a country at once so passionately blessed by the sun and so gratefully used under that blessing. Yet poverty and misery are here and visible. Napoli is very poor, and so are all its ambient communes of the Campagna; yet the variegated and lovely husbandry of all those lands about Salerno, behind Amalfi, all the cherished fields and orchards fed by Vesuvius and south from there, the roofed-in lemons shelved on crags, the burning oranges, the vines everywhere married to elm and willow and poplar, the apple-trees, the pears, the cherries, the ordered fields of artichokes and onions and *pinocchio*, the sunshine, the flowering varied promise, the resolute industry—all these may puzzle us who find Italy, nevertheless, so poor—but all the way up from the south to Rome, fierce though the contours of the plain and the mountains may be, these carefully won fruits of labour cannot fail to attract and enchant the foreigner's eyes; and from Rome to Florence and Bologna, where Tuscan sweetness and green and blue undulations add to all of this a subtle tenderness, and disarm the foreigner in some measure of his foreignness—then the burgeoning, yielding, multi-coloured and multi-shadowed spring, every inch of it promise and love, holds us in wonder, so that we forget the economic puzzle, and rejoice in the sun's love of Italy, and Italy's fervent and grateful response to that love.

But, coming south from Milan with spring further advanced, and turning eastward after Bologna, with the Apennines disappearing, a blue smudge, to the south; facing ahead the Adrian marshes and the complicated branchings and estuaries of the Po, one finds a plain-faced, dowdy Italy—industrious, still, indeed, and drilled and drained, but definitely home-spun. Excepting only the ubiquitous vine, this middle-eastern plain of Emilia and Romagna cares only for dull-looking cereal crops, and cabbages, onions, mangolds. All useful things, but hardly speaking of the Italian *primavera*, everywhere else on the peninsula now flaunting her short-lived, exquisite and various garlands.

No garlands on the straight line to Ferrara. And Ferrara, forgetful of Isabella d'Este, forgetful of Lucrezia Borgia and of Ariosto, has no taste for such, it seems. A flat, dull town—if ever, disappointedly, I trudged about one. And inhabited now, one is compelled to think, by a flat, dull people.

It is among Italy's happy gifts to her visitors that we *look* at Italians, because beauty has been more generously lavished on them than on most races. In childhood and youth, the foreigner judges, Italians are more likely than not to be beautiful. Middle-age and the rough and tumble of maturity seem to be as hard on them as on the rest of us; but very many of them advance into life as if, like Botticelli's 'Primavera', asserting the innocent principle of physical beauty. So—for good cause—we look at them, in Venice, in proud Rome, in crazy, tattered, elegant Napoli.

But in Ferrara, no.

The first night there, disappointed already by the size, noise, and commonplace aspect of the town as we drove from the station, we set out in search of dinner, and halted indeed, awestruck, under the moated towers or the Castello—huge fortress of the Este princes, which still, as it is suitably still seat of all kinds of civic authority, dominates and bullies in silence from its stony, central position. At first, made to pause by it when hungry and uncertain of one's way, and when the night is cold and starry, one takes the Castello seriously; but after a day or two of strolling round and past it one sees it for the huge expression of dull arrogance that it was and is. It was austere and cleanly built and the colour of its brick is lovely—but it is, nevertheless, a tedious expression of Ferrara's former power, and one which the Renaissance artists and humanists—however the house of Este patronised them—can only have deplored.

Leaving it, we went down a noisy street, seeking a *ristorante* or a *trattoria*. And suddenly in a little square we found the Cathedral, the facade of the Cathedral. Ferrara's jewel, Ferrara's manifest, lonely proof that she once exacted beauty and achieved it. The exquisite exterior of this church suffered injury, especially on the lovely south cloister, during the war; but the great campanile went unharmed, and so did the front, this western facade that we came on, so little expecting it that we both cried out, astounded. Broad, flat, quite *romanico*, pink and grey, set easy to the wide base, and gently, peaceably, deeply embellished; this melting upward into the subtler and more holy early Gothic, dove-grey,

gentle, yet packed with eternally-fixed expressions of faith; faith still tender, still almost deprecating for all its strength; and Our Lady, exquisite, at the centre; bending in grace, sheltered by Gothic skill and device. Ferrara's jewel still indeed.

But do not trust poets. Yeats, after all, never set foot in Ferrara, where there is no "green shadow", and where the "walls" are only, here and there, a bit of grassy dyke—on which relievedly indeed one can walk at evening, and breathe some thin refreshment from a few plantations of poplar trees; looking eastward to Dante's Ravenna, and promising oneself that one will be there to-morrow. And so homeward, through long, plain streets of the most exemplary sixteenth and seventeenth century domestic architecture, let it be said; but also through exemplary groups of short, plain citizens, to a plain dinner, difficult to find. Our hotel had no restaurant, and that can be a very fatiguing lack, even though it is in general economical and satisfactory to eat elsewhere than in one's hotel. But in a place like Ferrara, where the ordinary life of the town is almost curiously empty of charm, and where the few restaurants are dull, it would be a relief to be able to stay where one was, after the long, exemplary streets, and eat never mind what without having to traipse past the Castello and over and back.

The bread in Ferrara is a curiosity. There is no getting, in that city, an eatable piece of bread. I tried every way and everywhere, and studied the bakeries with attention. No good. All the bread, all white, the whiteness of numbed fingers, is kneaded and twisted to the consistency of thin serge. This cheap serge is then whirled into "amusing" tight shapes; the favourite design being a pair of horns. A pair of small serge horns baked hard and brought to a fine polish is not easy to tackle with morning tea. I have eaten many kinds of bad bread—during the war; and in France after the war, I was in Avignon when a decent woman there committed suicide because she could no longer face the fearful yellow, dusty bread of that fearful year. But the bread which contents the Ferrarese—well, more of this bread business in Ravenna. But a prosperous city which has no music, no theatre, no trees worth talking about, no pictures, no scenery, no air, no gardens, deserves to eat serge horns.

Ravenna. April 24.

Now, this morning, having business in the telegraph office, we spoke with the friendly fat man there who knows that "O" means that one is Irish and who has a brother in Glasgow and he thrust at us his copy of the local morning paper, *Il Resto de Carlino*, which contained a long and rapturously proud account of the opening in *Dublino* of an exhibition of mosaics of Ravenna. This was indeed surprising and sweet news from home, and we bought the paper and read the article with full attention in the nearest *caffè*. P. J. Little, Mr. Aiken, Tom McGreevy, The College of Surgeons, the *bellissimo palazzo* of the eighteenth century—how delicious to read of all these homely symbols here in a little small-town paper, and on the lost edge of the Adriatic!

One can only wonder what they *are* exhibiting in Stephen's Green. The article told us that a lady of Ravenna is giving demonstrations in the craft of producing copies of the old mosaics, and that a professor explains the processes necessary to such work. Excellent. And if the exhibited reproductions are good they may well suggest something of the treasure deposited here by young Christianity, by Arian Christianity. But that, forever with the dew of morning on it, as pure and narrative of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, that is fixed here forever on the walls of a few basilicas. Only here, in Sant Apollinare Nuovo, can we see the procession of the Virgin Martyrs, led by the Magi, to Our Lady and the angel-guarded child; only here, in San Vitali, where fabric and light visible form and essential ideas, are one in Christian expression—only here, in one small, pure temple which is in its entirety a just and right tribute to the God of all the Testaments—only here can we see the Lamb of God protected by the four angels; only here can we see Abraham entertaining angels, and Abel and Melchisedech offering their sacrifices—here and elsewhere in Ravenna are forever fixed, in detail and in large, the first, fresh, lovely, formal visions of the Testament stories, set down with care and skill and with every decoration of symbolic love, in generations when the story was radiantly new, and a resounding answer to the creative and the passionate heart.

Ravenna contains, immovably, save by destructive modern war, an unparalleled exposition of what the Gospels meant to their first readers and believers. These glorious, formal and innocent illustrations of the great news of the first new century are immured in temples mostly in structure faithful to them, though some indeed, have suffered overhaul across the centuries. They are Ravenna's splendour—and studying them over many days one keeps on understanding more and more that no town could hold in charge a greater treasure. There was no need of Dante's bones. Yet he must have understood these exquisite mosaics, and even smiled at them, while he worked out *Il Paradiso* and prepared to die.

Ravenna is a reliquary, a chalice, a holy container. Not for anything could one regret being in the place where San Vitali is, or the Duomo Baptistery, or either of the Sant'Appolinarie. Nevertheless, the present-day town is itself a bore. The Adriatic receded from it long ago, and it is many a long day since its harbour, Classe, was vitally important to Rome's imperial plans; it is a long time since the Flaminian Way, which begins at the Piazza del Popolo in Rome, ended—having dodged the Apennines south of Rimini—at Ravenna, leaving the Cisalpine Plain open to the legions. It is a long time indeed since Caesar crossed the Rubicon a few kilometres south of where I at this moment sit.

Well, to look about, to walk about this flat and noisy town, you would need no stressing of all that. Ravenna, save on the great walls of a few churches, has lost its history as it has lost its washing sea. Like Ferrara, it possesses, unaware, some lovely streets. But like Ferrara and with less excuse it is a dull place, inhabited by dull and plainfaced people. And like Ferrara, it bakes

appalling bread, the same cheap serge, tailored into the same fearful horns. Nevertheless, leaving it to-morrow, turning for sweet Tuscany and for the fierce exactions of Rome. I shall not remember the dull, modern features of Ravenna and its citizens. I shall think of walking into San Vitali for the first time, when the light was thinning. The surprise of that first entry and of the architectural vision of grace—let alone what came afterwards on the walls—that would be memory enough. So I shall not catalogue boringly. Ravenna is not Moscow—it is get-at-able. It is indeed at this very moment crazy-packed with earnest tourists, all speaking German so far. So, it occurs to me, to go on about San Vitali, or the Mausoleum of Calla Placidia, may by now be as silly as to describe the Eiffel Tower for the folks at home. And also I remind myself that *Dublino* is at present under instruction! So—goodbye to the processing Virgin Martyrs, goodbye to Dante's *ossa gloriosa*, and to the now dreary, slummy Marina di Ravenna where Byron rode in fury by the waves. Could he see those sands and pinewoods now! Ah—if there was ever piety, in the Latin sense, the twentieth century either denies or has not felt it!

I turn back to a great city, where against and also in consort with forces, history has enforced its piety. I return to Rome, forgetting the boring shabbiness and dullness of modern Ravenna, and secure in memory of true life shining on the walls of her basilicas.



Rome:—June

Only trivialities can I record. I have too much to learn and carry round. Rome engulfs, defeats, overwhelms. To be bright, to make passing witticisms or chancy comments in the face of the immeasurable is not possible. I cannot even attempt reflection yet, at its crudest. I walk, and talk, and stare about, and read good books and bad. But I know that this immortal, insolent city cannot suffer jottings. Nor can I even imagine how to jot. (Is there a verb “to jot?”).

Last evening as I waited for a bus in the Corso Vittorio Emmanuele a young priest passed me, and I said to my companion: ‘Funny thing, that is the fourth time today that I have seen that young priest’. He smiled; he has lived six years in Rome, and knows many people. ‘I know him,’ he said, ‘this is his beat. Funny you should notice him.’ ‘I notice him,’ I said, ‘because the first time I saw him was early this morning when without ruth or grace he snatched a seat from me in a crowded bus.’ My companion smiled. ‘He is an important member of the Vatican Secretariat,’ he said. ‘He’ll be a Cardinal some day.’ ‘When I am dead,’ I said, ‘so he might have let me have that seat.’

But the Romans rarely consider ‘letting’ one have anything. The citizens here are marked forever—distinctively from all other Italians—by what once made them great, cold, reasonable ruthlessness. And that attribute is apparent

still in this violent city. Its life roars too loudly indeed; many of its people live in conditions which disgrace the State; the *borgate*, 'shanty-towns,' are appalling; the new workers' flats are ghastly pieces of jobbery; the Civil Service outflows in badly-paid idleness; and waiting one's turn in the markets and the shops (I have been housekeeping in Roma now for some months) one learns how pitifully, how exaggeratedly carefully one's Roman neighbours manage. Little crusts of cheese are weighed out and bought, of a kind and size that one would not put down at home to catch a mouse; a sliver of fat bacon will be weighed and neatly wrapped; one tomato; half a pound of the soggiest kind of household bread. The Roman people are very poor—indeed one marvels, realizing that, at how the young men and women buy (I suppose on long-term purchase?) the thousands of diabolical *Vespe*, which make life for them, clearly—but which so painfully insult it for the rest of us.

However, the Roman mania for everything on wheels or dependant on the combustion engine is a fact against which only a fool would argue. Allied to that is their mania for football; also they are going mad, difficultly, about Television, and they like noise, simply because it is noise, I think. One goes up into any village of the Alban hills any evening. The air is exquisite; far off one sees the shining sea, and nearer, nearer than the gentle grouping cloud of Rome, lie all the vine-wrapped undulations, blue and fragrant, shadowed by ancient olive-trees and singing ilexes. The lungs are filled, delighted, all senses answer to the sweet gifts of the fields, and to the sunken, shabby grace of the villages. But silence? Ah God, could there but be silence in these lovely places! Over Lake Nemi—Nemi, whence came lately all the exquisite wood strawberries we all devoured—Nemi, cold, dark green, wide water, or above Albano, the lake which reflects the Pope's summer villa—one might hope for silence. But the Romans are pursuers of the beauties that lie about them; they are out-door people. So in the evening all Rome will be with you in any Alban village that you chase to; and all engines will be at the roar, and all the children will be screaming; and no matter how simple and romantically flung the *trattoria* you choose, no matter how gentle—and gentle they are—your waiters, some other party will require to have Radio Roma on at full blast. So you will sip your beautiful, dry Frascati and eat your trout brought as you waited from the lake; you will watch the lights of Rome come pricking up in the valley, and above you the high lights of Rocca di Papa; you will see still the mirror-flat, sinister lake below you, and you will toast your companions and observe and savour and enjoy. But you will be maddened nevertheless by noise—the noise in which the Romans live.

I write this, yet at this hour, three a.m., the great city lies as quiet as a homely cat about me. I am lucky in Rome, and in this large, old palazzo have a lovely, bare and cool apartment. Indeed, I feel superstitious about my luck in this lodging, for in this house was born in 1876 Eugenio Pacelli, Pius XII. I hope that he was born on this third floor, in this apartment. But anyhow

I feel proud and lucky to be in the house where he ran in and out as a little boy; and whenever our eccentric lift doesn't work—and it certainly wasn't there in the 1870's and '80—I say to myself, as I climb the worn, stone staircase: 'Pius XII ran up and down here like a feather once.' Certainly, even if it is accidental, it is a vast honour to live in the palazzo which proudly in the courtyard proclaims in cut marble its happy distinction.

Over to me at this desk, in through the great drawing-room windows, blow, morning, evening and night, sweet winds from Ostia and the sea. They come to me across the Janiculum—from here I can see the *Faro*, and, *almost*, the peak of Garibaldi's marble cap. Certainly I can see the pediment of the Fontana Paola, though not quite into the windows of the Villa Spada, where lives our Irish Ambassador to the Holy See. Still, I flatter myself that on an especially sweet-scented evening I benefit here of the jasmine, and the roses that flourish up there, a stone's throw away, for His Excellency Joseph Walsh.

The nearer you live to the Tiber, in Rome, the better the air you breathe. This is odd, because it is impossible to be impressed by the Tiber—that is, if you are native of a country of clean, fast rivers and crystalline lakes, as I am. The Tiber is an ugly streak of yellow-brown water, never clear, always indeed as dense as pea-soup. Yet it flows vigorously, to my surprise—and there is no sweeter pleasure in the Roman evenings than to walk beside it, past its bridges, down from ancient Ripetta along by the Acquasparta to the Aventino—under the plane-trees, observant of the shadows, and aware of the piled-up history, conflicting, emphatic, re-inforcing, on both sides, as you stroll in relative peace.

Peace can be always no more than relative in Rome. One learns to be grateful then for the hours of one and two and three a.m., when for the most part the *Vespe* have reached home and been switched off. Those little roaring demon bikes attack one's spirit (and one's poor body) all day. They are atrocious. Yet they are an unanswerable expression of Rome, and of youth. One feels old and even a bit silly protesting one's loathing for them. Such vigour as their riders assert is indeed Roman and the boys and girls astride them are demonstrating a Roman thing which all Roman history expresses. And we who are old enough to be unnerved by their pace in the streets, or by the noise they make, have only to make ourselves understand that this—with its nonstop noises—is not our day. Presumably we have had and enjoyed our own young time which was a *taedium* to our elders. Now young Rome seems to an old one like me too much. But old Rome, Rome itself, let us say remains. And in and about and through it I weave let the motor-cyclists chug and roar as they choose.

July:

About three weeks ago the Roman summer leapt upon us like a heat-maddened tiger. Very frightening her scorching breath, her merciless, powerful, airless heat. An antagonist indeed, and one could only lie still and hope to escape her final blow, and somehow, when an air stirred again, crawl home.

But the air stirred, and instead of crawling home one moved in joy to his airy and vast old apartment. Thereafter, encouraged, the cautious examination of Rome began again and goes forward, 95 in the shade or not. I am hardened to it now. Besides, I have discovered how easy it is to get out by bus to the shores of Albano or Nemi. Also, one can rest and learn and contemplate in any of the Basilicas—and, with exquisite pleasure, from the high, leafy garden of the Palatine. There indeed, sweetly grounded above the great house of Augustus, and with a map spread upon the cool, stone parapet, one can look down and get the major edifices of the Forum clearly identified, with a minimum of error and only a modest expenditure of energy—in conditions which in the early summer evening are truly exquisite. All round the smell of sweet bay, of myrtle, of carnation; overhead the blessed shadow of ilex and acacia; the past in grave salute from every piece of stone—and below us history laid out quiet, touching peace. The Via Sacra, the fountain where Castor and Pollux watered their horses after the battle of Lake Regillus, the resurrected Vestal Virgins, the Arch of Titus, Constantine's Basilica; left and northward Saturn's lovely fragment; Vespasian's too, and the Arch of Septimus Severus. Further East Caesar's Forum; quite near, near the Vestal Virgins, the great portico of Antoninus and Faustina. But crowded it was in its days, that Forum, that clustering of Fori; badly planned, I dare to say all those dead, efficient Romans. Wise were the great and rich who could buy building sites up here on the Palatine. And I wish I could find here Cicero's house, which he cherished so much. Wiser still I think would have been the man who, in the Forum's busy days, chose to live on the Aventine Hill (risking the chance of being called a Pleb), or if not there, on the Quirinale. The Janiculum, best place of all for a Roman villa, was perhaps, too far out of town for those distinguished Forum gossips. Anyhow, looking down from the Palatine and over to the Capitol, one is amused to notice that, granted the crowding for place and the importance of place in the close area of the Via Sacra, the Vestal Virgins did very well indeed. Assuredly they got themselves established in a valuable site.

One could linger all night on the fragrant Palatine. But they ring a bell to clear and lock the Forum, and although I am confident one could scramble out somehow on the other side, towards the Tiber and the Aventine: in Rome it seems necessary still—all the Caesars gone—to obey the bells, etc., in fact, to do as Rome does. And Rome, for all its wild noisiness, is a curiously conventional city. Its temperament is coldly impatient—you either do what it does, or take a lot of nonsensical consequences.

Yesterday I went to Santa Maria della Vittoria, to see Bernini's famed Teresa of Avila. It was a pilgrimage of devotion, yet I went anxiously. In Rome I have become fond of Bernini—who would not, among his generously flung, lovely fountains? But I have always demurred from his ecstatic Teresa, in reproduction. It seemed theatrical to me, over-sympathetic, to the point where emotional sympathy misleads itself. However, the sculpture arrested and impressed me.



Allowed the baroque and temperamental approach, allowed the exclusive conception of the *illuminata* (I know that word is heretical, but I used it because I am not sure that Bernini's Teresa is a mystic in Teresa's pure and purely stated terms)—I found the work much more touching, much more tender and expressive of sheer holiness than I had expected it to be. I grant, regretfully, the theatrical background, the sunrays, the too slick cunning of the composition; but the living, tender, vulnerable, willing quality in every feature and muscle of the saint, and the alert sweetness of the angel; withal, the surprising, modest life-sizeness of the pair won me. One cannot expect anyone resistant of the mysticism of the great Spaniards to accept this dating sculpture; but I was touched by the passion and penetrative truth which the gay Bernini brought to it—also by the humanness, the tenderness of treatment. Bernini's work is all over Rome, his eternal glory—and mostly—except for the immeasurable nobility of his colonnades in the Piazza of St. Peter's, what he has given Rome is pure 17th century gaiety. But before Teresa of Avila he paused; he was moved and puzzled, did his best to express what she, great purist, could not express. And if he has failed, as she failed, in capture of the ineffable, it is clear that he failed generously, gracefully, and that his sculptured saint in her exaggerated beauty, alike with her alert and exquisite angel, says in all her lines that, as she knew, the vision of God cannot be retold. For all its set flamboyance, this group of two figures does say this. And so I think Teresa, though regarding the whole set-up as unnecessary, would have forgiven the great and gay Bernini.

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# A bus from Tivoli<sup>1</sup>

Kate O'Brien

IN the hot weather Miriam liked to take, at random, one or other of the many buses that left the Piazza Termini for the villages called Castelli, in the Alban hills; or sometimes she would choose to go to Tivoli in the Sabines. Eventually she grew to like best to go to Hadrian's Villa, and to loaf about in that extraordinary estate through silent evenings. It was a place of sweet smells and lovely shades; she did not trouble overmuch to trace Hadrian's grandiose plans, under the grass; she felt sufficiently aware of the place and sufficiently aware of Rome in general to be content to walk about in peace, and to accept what the map at the gate said, and what the occasional signposts said. What she went to Hadrian's Villa for was profound silence, and the surprising richness of green and leaf. Rome, so near, was also far in summer evenings from this sad, grassed-over place of pride and sorrow.

They locked the entrance gate at seven o'clock; the man in charge got to know her, and gave her a few minutes grace as she hurried down under the acacia trees and past the little Greek Theatre. And when she was turned out she always crossed the lane to the *trattoria* opposite.

This was a pleasant restaurant. She sat in the garden, under vines that trailed from elm-tree to apple-tree; fireflies dashed about and late birds fussed and fluttered; strong light from indoors threw shadows about the grass, and also allowed her to read at ease. Cats, Roman and self-confident, sat at her feet, and shared her supper. By Roman standards, food was cheap in this place, and it was good. Trout, omelettes, strawberries, and peaches, and sharp wine of the Castelli. She sat in the silent dark as long as she liked. The bus descending from Tivoli for Rome passed the crossroads—a kilometer away, up the lane, every half-hour until eleven o'clock—and she was never in hurry. About half-past nine or so she would walk up the lane to catch say, the ten o'clock bus. One night she fell in, on this walk, with an elderly gardener who mistook her for Spanish—he said her Italian had a Spanish inflection. He knew Spain and had lived in a town of Northern Spain that she knew well. So they found much to talk about, and as he was old and rheumatic, by the time she parted from him at his house near the crossroads, she saw the ten o'clock bus dash past for Rome.

It was no matter; there would be ten-thirty. The only disadvantage was that in the evening as at all hours the high road from Tivoli to Rome is noisy and dusty, and there is nothing to sit on by the bus-stops.

Marian was in her fifties, and a heavy woman, one easily tired and who found life in Rome somewhat a physical ordeal. So, although she disliked the appearance of the little, brand-new café on the corner, disliked its shape, its white neon lights and its juke-box noises, she went into it, and to her surprise found a seat and a table vacant, crammed though the small interior was with lively, shouting Romans, crowded about the terrible music in the box.

"Could I have a glass of dry vermouth?" she said, in anxious, bad Italian.

A young man in spotless white coat beamed, bowed and went to get her a glass of dry vermouth. She looked around her, feeling sad. Always she left Hadrian's Villa and the embowered, quiet *trattoria* feeling sad. But the high road, the noise, the scooters, and the public lavatory style of this as of all cheap places of refreshment set up by the Romans—saddened her unreasonably.

Unreasonable indeed she told herself she was, and looked about and lighted a cigarette. The young man came and placed a glass of vermouth before her. Also he brought olives and potato crisps. He stood and smiled on her. She thanked him, and as he did not move she thought she should pay at once. She opened her purse. He waved the money aside.

"No, no," he said. "Merely I wonder where you are going?"

"I'm going to Rome. I missed the ten o'clock bus."

"You are foreign, lady. But you are not English?"

"I am Irish."

"Ah! Irish! And why do you go to Rome?"

"Because I'm living there."

"I see," he said. "You are living there. Rome is quite near us, here."

He was large and powerfully-built young man. Very clean; scrubbed and square and fresh-skinned; handsome in the Roman fashion, heavily muscular, with firmly, marked features. His eyes were intelligently bright—small and green-grey. He looked to be twenty-four or five.

As he stood and stared upon her, smiling kindly, Marian considered him with amusement.

"He's curiously like me," she thought. "He could be my son."

For she had, as she knew with dislike, a heavy Roman look. In youth she had been normally slender, and beautiful of face; but middle age had taken the beauty away, and left her fleshy and Roman looking—Roman emperors she suggested to herself, when she contemplated her ageing head in the mirror; but Nero or Heliogabaus rather than Marcus Aurelius or Hadrian.

"And this boy is like Nero, I'd say," she thought. "Indeed—I'm sorry too think it—but this strong young Roman could easily be my son—in looks."

This reflection, though amusing, did not please her, because Marian did not at all admire the Roman physical type, and very much disliked her own undeniable relation to it.

She ran her hands through her untidy hair.

"You feel too warm?"

"Yes; it's hot here. But it's always hot in Rome."

"We have a beautiful bathroom here—with a beautiful shower."

"Oh yes—we have all those beautiful things in my flat in Rome—your plumbing is very good—"

"Very good here. You must meet my sister. A moment, please!"

The young man bowed.

Relieved that he had left her, Marian shut her eyes and sipped vermouth. But within a minute a hand touched her gently. A young, small, pretty girl was sitting beside her.

"My brother says that you are going to Rome. Why are you going to Rome?"

Amazed, Marian answered.

"I live in Rome."

"But why do you live there?"

"I come often to Tivoli and to Hadrian's Villa."

"Of course. Many people come to Hadrian's Villa. You love it?"

"I like to walk there."

"Then why don't you stay here?"

"But—I don't want to. I live in Rome."

"My brother wants you to stay here. Will you not?"

"Stay here? But how—what do you mean?"

"My brother—he has begged me to ask you. We have every comfort here—bath, all conveniences. We will be good to you. My brother is good. He entreats that you stay with us."

"But—what on earth do you mean?"

"I mean what I say. My brother wants you. Could you not stay with him? He is kind."

Marian stood up.

"Please, I beg you—let me pay now—I must go—"

The young man came forward and took her two hands.

"Will you not stay? Please, lady—my sister has told you, surely? I entreat you—"

"I am old! I'm an old woman!" He smiled and touched her shoulder. "I know. I see that. It doesn't matter. Stay!"

Marian put some *lire* on the table. He gathered them up and put them into her hand.

"Please, please—stay here a little while—"

"Oh heavens, goodnight! You're a crazy child! Why, you could both be my children!"

She ran down the steps, and in a minute the bus for Rome drew up. As it swept her away they stood and waved to her under their neon lights.

The curious, comic episode slid out of mind. Amused and puzzled by it for a day or so, she did narrate it to some friends, writers, painters, film actors—English and American—with whom she, a writer, associated in Rome.

But she told the ridiculous little story to no Italian acquaintance, because she felt that it would be impolite to do so. Also, she was sure that no Italian would believe her, and would gently dismiss her as another dreaming old lady from the queer, northern lands. Her English, Irish and American friends, however, knew her well enough to know that odd little story was true; they theorised gaily over the eccentric young Roman café-keeper; and one or two of them went so far in affection for her as to say that they saw his point—that definitely they saw his point.

Marian, however, did not see his point; and accepting that any youth who could rush such improbable fences within five minutes was in some unfixable way insane, she still wondered how he was empowered in the same five minutes of his lunatic appeal, to engage his young and sensitive-faced sister as his procuress. Nevertheless, she was a novelist and had been on earth for fifty-five years; she had encountered knottier questions than this accidental one of the café-keeper at the Tivoli bus stop. She let it slide. But she did not go to Hadrian's Villa again; and this was a deprivation.

In August, however, she had staying with her in Rome an English painter, a woman much younger than herself, to whom the Roman scene was new. She decided that she must take this friend to Tivoli and Hadrian's Villa. So they went. As they were late in leaving Tivoli after luncheon they took a taxi thence to Hadrian's Villa. In the *trattoria* they ate at leisure and fed the cats, and Marian amused Elizabeth with the story of the young café-keeper at the crossroads.

Politely, affectionately, Elizabeth said that she saw the young man's point. Marian laughed.

"Diana and Robert said that too," she said. "But it was a madman's point. He's only a big, fat boy. And all in five minutes! And dragging his little sister into it!"

They stayed a long time in the *trattoria* garden, aromatic and quiet. And when at last they reached the cross-roads they had barely missed the ten-thirty bus to Rome and had twenty-nine minutes to wait for the next, the last one. It was a *fiesta* night, dusty, and intolerably noisy by the roadside.

"We'll sit in the café," said Elizabeth. "What harm if the poor boy sees you again?"

"What harm indeed? He'll have forgotten the whole thing anyway—it's more than two months ago."

The café had grown smarter with summer expansion, and had tin tables set now in a narrow little terrace, above the shops under the neon lights. One of these tables, in a corner, was vacant, and Marian and Elizabeth went and sat there.

Like a shot from a gun the young café-keeper was with them. His face shone with joy.

"You have come back at last! I knew you would! Dry Vermouth—I remember! or would you not have a brandy?"

Marian asked Elizabeth what she would like to drink—Vermouth—dry Italian. He was enchanted. He must tell his sister. He would be with them

in a moment. He had wished always for her to come back. She must believe him, excuse him—he would return in a moment.

And in a moment he did return—with his sister, and with bottle and glasses. Radiant, happy, sketchily asking permission, he and his sister sat down and he filled the glasses with Asti Spumante. Marian smiled. She detested the wine.

“Lady—you have come again. I have watched for you—I and my sister. Where do you live in Rome? We have searched and asked—oh, we drink now! You have returned! You will stay here now—please? Yes? You, her friend—you too? You will stay here now, as I desire—in this fine, clean house I have—?”

“It is good and clean; my brother is a good boy—and he desires this lady,” said her sister to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth had no Italian, but she understood what the girl said, and she smiled.

“I have watched, I have waited. I have not for a day forgotten you, Irish lady—is that true?” he turned to his sister.

“It is true. He loves you, signora—signorina? There is no peace. Stay with him a little, please. He is a good boy—he his kind.”

“We have all modern comforts. We will consider you and be careful. Oh, you are near Rome here; you can do as you please! Only stay with us, a little time, lady! I knew I must see you again!”

The young man’s strong, clean hands was laid, hard and flat on Marian’s. His bright eyes blazed on her.

“Answer him. Speak to him,” said Elizabeth.

Marian knew she must do so. Grotesque as the comedy made her feel, it also quite absurdly honoured her. And ludicrous insane as it might be, it was—take it or leave it, an actuality. This cracked young man was as he was and taken and held to this impossible and grotesque idea.

“I don’t know your name, or your sister’s,” she said. “I am fifty-five years old: I take you to be about twenty-five, your sister not yet. I’d say, twenty-one. It is impossible for me to thank you or be gracious about your insane idea. I have to speak in English—I have no Italian to say what I mean—but in English I will tell you to stop talking nonsense, and that I’ll be gone on the bus in a minute”

Marian stood up. The young man rose with her, holding her two hands.

“Do not go! Oh, do not go—now you have returned! We have here every kindness, every comfort—”

“I am going! Oh please be sane!”

“I am not concerned to be sane! Where are you—in Rome? I will visit you! I will behave well, I have a beautiful summer suit, of light grey—let me come! Where are you?”

“He is good, lady. He will bring you flowers, he will bring you wine. Tell him where to find you in Rome! He is good. He loves you—he talks about you always.”

“I will come. I will visit—in my good new suit. I insist I will visit. You have returned—and you must tell me who you are—I have searched—”

“Good-bye, good-bye.”

The last bus from Tivoli came roaring down and Marian and Elizabeth fought their way on to it.

They dismounted in the Piazza Termini.

"I think you should have let him visit you," said Elizabeth. "His good, new suit."

They found their bus to the *Chiesa Nuova*.

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# Rome Relaxed

Kate O'Brien

The word "Rome" will never imaginably disappear from travel dreams or tourists' schedules. There will always be first-timers to stand on the Capitol and gasp; there are infatuates who would give their lives to the place; and cooler old hands who can return there again and again in constant anticipation. The city is perhaps a special taste, but for those who have cultivated it it is not possible to enter it without a particular sense of excitement. First, second, third, tenth time—the excitements may differ, but in my experience only to grow sharper.

I last arrived there on All Saints' Day, 1962, into brilliant summer noon—not Roman, but what we up here would call perfect summer—and, excited as I was, was not altogether surprised, therefore, upon arrival at my hotel to find that my overcoat had been stolen in the Termini Station. What *had* surprised me, having gone through the usual pleasure of wondering at the aged little Minerva temple in the middle of the railway tracks, was to find the marble platform so remarkably quiet in the sunshine. My train had indeed been far less than full, but still, bemused by the very novel peace of arrival, the almost silence, I had strolled in contented wonder the long stretch to the taxis. I had a charming porter—but somehow, between train and taxi, he or another got away with my perfectly good topcoat. And when I noticed the loss, I hardly troubled—so irrelevant had all coats suddenly become in this November radiance and sweet warmth.

It was a great feast day and the citizens were pouring out of church as I crossed town; children running and shouting, as always for Sunday magnificently dressed; balloon-sellers and their high-blown wares obstructing one's view of Rome ubiquitous and glorious flower-stalls; ladies were gloved and veiled, stepping out to call on each other with bouquets of carnations or little golden boxes of confectionery. No sign anywhere of the everyday rough roar of the city, or at all of *Dolce Vita* characters. Hardly a fluttering cleric to be seen, moreover—Ecumenical Council or not. It was a Rome come as near as ever I shall see it to provincial Sunday peace.

I was there to attend, for Ireland, a Council meeting of the *Comunità Europea Degli Scrittori*—and that for the next few days I happily did. But I had my hours of flight back into ordinary Rome. (Silly adjective, perhaps, to use for an always extraordinary city. Yet I know what I mean, and Rome has its ways of being ordinary.) I was this time, I admit, under the impression of being in the city at a time that would have to be a part of Church History, and upon which the world had fixed an alerted eye. Three thousand bishops may seem

just three thousand bishops, three thousand anybodies; but massed together under one impressive roof a one anciently impressive place, massed together to speak for, say, five hundred million fellow-creatures of one faith and some two hundred million more uncertain sympathizers—such a three thousand, of all tongues and colours, is surely isolated in history, and must raise something like three thousand questions in any imagination, sympathetic or averse?

I desired to overhear some of the other murmurs from this curious event, to get into the margins at least of its overflow, in a Rome which I knew to be resonantly responsive to the dramatic and the exceptional. And so Rome was to this vast occasion, I have no doubt. But certainly in my few days, among my friends, and in the general talk of the streets and of the newspapers, what I found was a peaceful, benevolent hush. So uncharacteristic as to be in itself dramatic, or at least mysterious. But the citizens were quite simple and open in their calm.

“We understand that they are discussing the language of the liturgy. That will take a very long time.” But this report was contradicted. “They have begun with the source of revelation—they need never come to agreement about that. This will be a long Council.”

Press reports were sketchy and filled in with surmise. It seem that the directors of the Council, permitting of course, no journalists into hearing of the debates, were exasperated in the first week by the too-near-the-knuckle reportings of *Il Messaggero*, so Rome said that now, when after the celebration of Mass which opened every session the ushers cleared St. Peter's of all save members of Council with loud cries of “*Exeunt Omnes...*”, they added: “*Exeat* especially the correspondent of *Il Messaggero*!”

The mood in Rome towards the Council was almost totally affectionate, interested and of good will. Intellectuals and anti-Vaticans were perhaps surprised by their own concern and attention.

Nina Ruffini, of *Il Mondo*, told me that she and other editors talking together in the rooms of that distinguished anti-clerical and liberal organ one day were amused when one of their most impressive elder-directors, a proud witness to everything *Il Mondo* stands for, having strolled in, said suddenly: “That I should live to hear all this! Tolerant words for the Vatican! All-but-admiration for a Pope! Under the roof of *Il Mondo*!” Then he got up to leave and, turning at the door, said: “The devil of it is that I agree with every word!”

But in the streets, the lovely, cobbled, sunlit streets, the mode of Rome was quieter than I have ever known it. The traffic, indeed, as fierce as ever, and they said that between clerics, journalists and tourists there was not a spare bed ever—but my impression was of a curious peacefulness. Uncharacteristic and magical.

I went by myself one evening on a pilgrimage of revisitation. And I began this in the Piazza of St. Peter. The great church was closed, as I had known it would be—and anyhow I had no especial wish to go inside. Simply I wanted to see the Piazza as they light it, and when it was all but empty. And there it was—its expression of power and glory rendered touching and apprehensible

under the gentle night sky and through the exquisite tact of the lighting—the two fountains playing lazily against the quietest possible illumination, the steps and portico pale and shadowed—not diminished, but made to seem indeed the work of man, as were the dream-touched colonnades. There were some boys twirling about on bicycles, a lonely American with his burden of cameras, a pair of chattering nuns, and I. The lights were on in two windows of the Pope's apartment; the quiet was profound. Indeed, for Rome it puzzled me—yet it seemed natural, too, almost homely.

I walked back through the Borgo di San Spirito to the bridge beside Sant'Angelo. There I crossed back into Vecchia Roma, through the winding, crumbling streets I used to know when I lived in Piazza del Orologio behind Chiesa Nuova. I made my slow way to the Piazza Navona, and on a November night, unusually indeed for Rome, I ate supper at ten o'clock on the outside terrace of Maestro Stefano's. They did not remember me there, to my chagrin, but I remembered them. And I ate such grapes from the Castelli as I have never eaten, wild and almost too large and of burning colours, black and gold.

But colours—colour in Rome! That is what memory takes safest away, I think—not just colours of fruit and wine and flowers, but the majestic, streaked rose and gold and honey and saffron and grey of all the ancient and the newer walls, and the encircling white of outflung suburbs. Colours—I bore them off with me in a vast, clear confusion, to remember until the next time. Yet never a Cardinal's red did I glimpse or a bishop's purple, or even the proud flash of a Monsignor's *biretta*. The Council was very quiet, and seemed even to have quieted Rome.

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