



Danger On The Steps

By Matthias Krug

Sitting on the steps the wind seemed a soft blanket, caressing my upturned face. Perhaps I was lost, and my pride was most certainly hurt, but I was also in Rome for the first time.

For those who have never been in Rome for the first time, there is an astonishing immediacy about the city which manifests itself quite suddenly in your point of view. Even now, remembering the unusual occurrences of that unusually cool Roman summer in these melancholy-tinged pages of my autobiography, I relapse into modes of present tense, as if I had never left that balmy, magical city. Indeed it is a city unlike any other. It is difficult even to describe it aptly in words, without seeming pretentious. But I shall attempt to do so for my good friend Jorge Luis Borges, the great Argentine writer. Indeed, he has been my life-long friend and continuous companion in book form, although we never had the misfortune of meeting. Meetings can often turn sour, so I have found that unmet friendships are often that little bit more enchanting and charitable.

Only Rome, you have to meet Rome at least once, I thought, looking luxuriously over that great delight of a city, the sun setting slowly and lending it all a soft, deadly earnest hue. Without any apparent urgency, two men came by and sat very close to me...

They look like they know of Rome. I know of Rome too, even having been here just a few days. I have covered the entire city countless times with my own two blistering feet, and yet I am lost. They look over at me. I look back at them without giving them anything. Of course I am alone. I am a lonely and – as yet – unsuccessful young actress in a magnificently sprawling city filled with creamy ice-creams, softly nuanced pizzas, and dreamy cappuccinos drunken by ancient flower markets. Yes, I am alone. I have no one as such to talk to. My pride

is hurt – they didn't choose me for that silly movie with the girl splashing through the Trevi fountain. But I do have Borges there sitting next to me.

He sits there next to me in the form of small black letters on crispy white pages. So I am quite undaunted by anything other than the violent beauty of this sensual city. Apparently they have taken a liking to my very real nonchalance, which otherwise manifests itself in a somewhat rude lifting of my eyes when they looked over once more. My eyes lift as if to say: what is it that you want, two strangers?

I never did quite figure out who they were. But they intrigued me sufficiently to forget about the Borges book. It all began with the small sturdy one asking me for a lighter. There is a completely and idiotically stereotypical thing about a man asking a woman for a lighter. But something about him intrigued me enough to start a conversation with them, even though I detest lighters and everything they stand for. To this day I don't ever carry one with me. It was a good conversation, light and airy, but far from meaningful, until it actually began...

"C-hello," says the fish-faced man, with a heavy Italian accent. His face is pointed at the front as that of a sharp-beaked fish that my father pulls out of the sea when he goes fishing every Monday in the South of France. They say in my village that I got my watery beauty from my father's fishing habits.

"Hello," I reply, without the 'C' at the start. My French accent is as soft as the slowly descending night which is switching on the street lights stretching out below me like a network of electrical stars.

"A night nice, nice, night," says the fish man in broken English, stuttering with some style. His hair is long and steeply black, flowing backwards like the scales of a deep black fish.

"He means that the night is very nice," says the tall man who looks thin and long like a pencil.

"Indeed, I like it," I reply.

Often I feel reluctant to make meaningless conversation. There is enough of it in the movies. Around 70 percent of all movie conversations are meaningless in nature. Have you noticed that? And 100 percent of the script of the silly movie which just rejected me is meaningless. But in a city so full of meaning it is somehow acceptable to take the back seat. I suppose they are some kind of street people. There are many of those in Rome. I wonder how Rome must be for them. Is the brimming beauty of this city lost in routine? I suppose so, but I cannot know; I have never tried living in Rome.

The tall thin pencil of a man speaks better English. His friend looks at me deeply. His expression is serious and thoughtful, but far from romantic, as if analysing my weight in money. Robbery is what they could be into. For all I know they could be drug dealers, petty thieves, or even large-scale smugglers. Would that necessarily be a bad thing? I am after all sitting on the Spanish steps, one of Rome's most renowned tourist spots, with hundreds of people flittering about me nervously, happily, strutting, awfully – beautifully.

So am I, in this fragile moment in my life, in danger? I don't know. In this moment I simply don't know, nor do I want to make myself worry about it. I have just been rejected for the role in that silly, wonderfully degenerate movie. But life seems vividly alive to me. I am in Rome. What more can you want than that?

"What do you want to do here?" the small fish-faced man asks through translation from his tall thin friend. I take a sudden liking to them both. They are wonderfully out of place; they have nothing to do with these astonishing tourist attractions. They are attractions in themselves.

"I am a writer, doing some research here," I lie. I don't bother to ask them what they are doing here. It would not mean much to me to hear them lie. Men always lie. Have you noticed that?

"Have you brought any hunger to this beautiful city?" the pencil man asks.

"Sure, I haven't eaten in hours. Five hours, or even more than that."

"How much do you want to spend?" the man asks.

"Not much, not much at all," I say.

The two men suddenly regard me with different eyes. They no longer seem suspicious. Suddenly I am one of them.

At this point two things happen. One, we get up off the steps and begin to move away from them. The other, we remain sitting there and I begin to talk to a great writer called Ernest Hemingway, who has emerged without my noticing from my handbag. There are now five people sitting next to each other on those ancient steps, although three have just risen to their feet and are walking away to find a cheap place to eat. Hemingway sits to one side of me and Borges sits to the other on the long beige step in between myself and the two strangers.

But really there is no one sitting on the steps any longer, though I have left both of my loyal companions on the Spanish steps in Rome. Hemingway and Borges remain sitting there, shouting after me to pick them up, warning me of some imminent danger. But I walk on into a night which is suddenly full of the excitement of life. I am already walking away there down those warm steps, looking for a cheap dinner in an expensive pearl of a city.

Without the weight of my books the walk is easier. It is a lighter type of walking, like sleeping in complete happiness and without an afterthought. But I do not stop to think why my handbag is light. We walk on. We walk past the fountain that trickles continuously in light and increasingly darker tones of blue; hopes and dreams trickling into and out of the night, every night.

"Don't throw up," the fish-man says to me.

"Throw up?"

"He means don't throw a coin into the fountain, like all those tourists are doing," says his friend.

"Why not? I gather it is a tradition that if you throw a coin into the fountain backwards you will come back to Rome one day."

"It is a tourist scam. There are people who empty the coins into their pockets every night. Just because you throw a coin into the fountain doesn't mean you will come back."

With that settled and the coins firmly remaining in the leather pouch slung around my neck, we walk on. We walk on and out into the daringly balmy night. It is not in many cities that nights become daringly balmy. But here it has; you can take the night or leave the city. I choose to take it.

As I float along beside these two potential crooks, I notice that they know the city perfectly well. They float through it as jelly-fish float through their part of the ocean: without any apparent effort. We pass through the beautiful parts of the city; that is every street you come across. Every street holds some delightful discovery here or there. You don't even have to look. It just jumps upon you like a soft kitten. We walk past the historical buildings and the people eating in good restaurants. We walk past gently fading ruins, fondly reminding us of ancient megalomaniacs. We walk on and past two rose-sellers sitting side by side after an exhausting day of continuously carrying their beautiful workload. We walk past two lovers sitting side by side. We walk on still. In the last gasps of daylight, a couple is getting married. We walk past them too. They are all delighted to be in Rome. So am I. But something about the two men I'm walking with makes me uneasy. Maybe it is my disappointment that drives me on, that makes me follow their mossy



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footsteps.

We come now to a broad, mellow river. It flows past without harming anyone. On little islands in the river big parties are happening. A handbag seller sits in the now emerging darkness on one of the bridge shoulders.

"Can we rest here?" I ask my friends. "I am tired, my feet hurt."

"Sure, sure", the tall friend says, and we stop and I sit on the shoulder of the bridge. Sitting here, drinking some water, I wonder suddenly if it is alright to follow these men through the city at night. After all, I hardly know them. Who are they? What plans do they have for me? A cheap dinner, they say. But can I be so sure? After a moment restlessness takes hold of me again. It is the hunger in my stomach, incessant hunger which bites at my ribs and which has gone unnoticed until now.

"Let's go," I say. "My stomach says let's go."

"We go," says the small fish-man. "Go we now to food find." He mixes up his words in English, but I understand what he means.

Now we pass into the darkly vinegar that is the other part of the river. Here Rome is rough and un-shined and the people wear themselves on the inside out. I shudder a few times at the sight of these people, but cannot help to think that this must be the real Rome, the beautifully dishevelled, unwashed hair of the city underneath the spectacular wig of it all. We pass onto another array of steps, only this one is quite different; dark and hardly at all so light and balmy as the one where I met these suspiciously interesting characters. Here there are characters of all sorts, unsavoury characters with dark clothes and tattoos and piercings, characters who look wild and afraid and unfazed all at once. I ask nothing because I know that this must be the very inside of the city, when it is allowed to show its intestines apart from all the beauty and the tragedy and the historical clamour that holds all those many visitors in magical hysteria for a while afterwards. It is like the finely beautiful lady in the movie finally taking off her make-up after filming, and you still love her. Perhaps you love her even more without the make-up, because she is suddenly real, and not a masked clown.

The tall skinny friend tells me to wait at the bottom of the darkly lighted steps and they climb towards the top, greeting all kinds of terrifying characters along the way. Many of them eye me with suspicion, and some with opportunism.

I think they must be criminals, although I really have no way of knowing. Perhaps they are just trying to make a living. Perhaps I have just got stereotypical views, being young and beautiful and French. Who

knows, really? Certainly I do not. I do not even know what my two stranger friends do for a living. Let alone their names. But it looks as though they know everyone there on those darkly steps, and I wish for a moment that I was sitting on the clean, balmy soft steps with those five interesting characters again. But that was not really life. That was floating above life in a balmy bubble.

I can see the small fishy one handing a small booklet of some sort to another man. He opens it for a few moments and reads a few lines. Then he gives it back to my small friend. He takes it back and puts it back in his blood-coloured vest, where it emerged from in the first place. Then a girl shouts something in his ear from close range. He laughs heartily. They are having a good time.

After a while more my potentially criminal friends come back and proceed to act normal, as if nothing just happened. We try to find something cheap to eat. The small one tells the big one to tell me that they know a place where homemade food is served, and very cheap at that. But it turns out to be closed already because of the hour which it is, past midnight now. So we end up looking for any place which might serve us some food.

I am deadly hungry at this point, and have long forgotten about my two long-lost books on the steps which are now a world away, even though they are in the same city. I have really forgotten them. But Rome never forgets. Nor does it ever let you forget its soft decadency, its hushed whispers deep at night, its forlorn days and those ships which cruise through its streets all night in the guise of small motorcycles, or so it seems, for in Rome nothing can remain real for very long, too obscured is everything by history and by the beautiful madness which surrounds it all.

Finally we find a place to serve us some food. It is a small bar, but quite expensive. I order a sandwich with French fries. It is all they have left at this hour. "Have this or the street," says the grumpy chef. He is tired. His food tastes tired too. The French fries are oily and hard. My two friends finish them off greedily. While they do so I take out my note-book, where I write down the emotions of people which I later want to eternalise in my acting. To be the best actress in the world, I realise that I have to produce very real emotions. Only real people produce real emotions. These are very real people.

"Have an ice-cream by the fountain late at night. Then lie down and die a thousand soft deaths before awakening a new person in this old city," I write in my notebook, then close it in a rush before my new friends can read what I have written.

We leave the place in a rush, and not just because the chef and the waiter throw us out. There is much night to get through. My potentially criminal friends and I have now reached the book market. It is past midnight and a book market flourishes as ever. We mill through it. My friends seem to like books. We move on finally to where a fire-eater is having fun with his crowd. We are enchanted for a while and then move on again. Ever moving. Next to another fountain and we stop, sit around it. Finally we have come to a stop. This must be the time they rob me of the money which is slung in a leather pouch around my neck. That is why they took me for dinner. They wanted to see where I keep my money, I realise with a sudden pang of nervous fright in the inner flaps of my pumping heart.

But alas, no, they don't proceed to rob me, and the people around the fountains are not their accomplices. This is Rome, and the night has only just begun to crackle into fiery life. The threatening presence of the smaller man is unravelled as he takes out a book of poetry from his blood-coloured vest. He opens it and begins reading to the night.