From above it looks brown, like a desert, but a darker brown that lets you know there is no sand, but dirt and browned grass and centuries of civilization. Hanging like a boot, it protrudes from the nether side of the “Old World,” which is what we Americans are so fond of calling it, as if the continent is a parent whom we have separated from and bettered. We may have improved on their formula for civilization, or we may not have, but we have decidedly segued from their original influence.

Rome is perched on a plateau through which a river, which they call the Tevere, and we call the Tiber, flows in between various hills. The streets can be as narrow as sidewalks, and the pedestrians intersperse much more dangerously with the traffic there than in any section of any American city. Because of the large amount of tourists who are unfamiliar with this traffic system, and the inherent dangers within it, there can be heard more ambulance sirens in one day in this city than in ten in any American city. I suppose this proves that whoever first said, “Better safe than sorry,” was not an Italian. Apart from the streets, one immediately notices that Rome is less of a city than one big restaurant/museum. On every street corner there is a restaurant, sometimes the whole street is a restaurant, and much of the time there is an adjacent piazza with an extraordinary piece of original renaissance artwork, by Bernini, or Michaelangelo, or one of their students. There are no gas guzzling SUVs or Wawa gas stations that take up entire city blocks, or miles upon miles of strip malls which dominate the modern American landscape. Even trucks in Italy are small, gas stations are simply a pump on the side of a road, and a strip mall would look somewhat incongruous next to the Piazza del Popoli. So America is different from the “Old World,” of Europe, I suppose its because we have so much extra land that we don’t know what to do with. We’ve supersized western culture and left its originators in the dust, in this “Old World” that is so small and so behind the times. But in this landscape there is a story to tell, as there is in all landscapes. And as I glided over the rustic Northwestern Italian coast with its dull yellow grass thinly letting the dull brown dirt seep through on United Air flight whatever, I could not help but marvel at the radiance that dozed next to me as the sun came up.

Her face needs no external illumination, its beauty is luminescent enough. The freckles congregate on the bridge of her nose and then as if its slope was a playground sliding board, they slide down and rarify upon her cheeks. I always thought that this was because her skin was far too soft and smooth for any of the freckles to avoid slipping down the slope of her small, well-shaped nose which would more than occasionally turn red at the end from allergies or colds or irritation. Her large green eyes show various degrees of our new brownish landscape in them. They draw you in with their large naked innocence, beckoning you to come forward to take a closer look, where you discover that they have themselves seen suffering too and have more depth than innocence. Her longish medium brown hair is let down covering her one shoulder as her small head rests against the plastic window pane. Her eyes are covered and her mouth is slightly ajar, as it always is when she sleeps. And as much as I am in awe of the beauty of a sunrise over the picturesque Italian coast, I am left breathless by her lithe figure.

She woke up as we neared Rome’s Fumincino airport as we began our descent. Her lashes danced, she yawned, and her svelte body straightened itself to an upright position on her seat. She turned to me noticing my attention was on her and asked that most banal question reserved mostly for children in the backseat of a car on their way to family vacation, “Are we there yet?” She smiled.

“Not quite,” I answered, “Here have some gum so your ears don’t fall off while we’re landing.”

She smirked and said, “Thank you.” while taking the gum.

We arrived at the airport and picked up our bags, I had in addition to my luggage bags also picked up bags under my eyes, I had not slept the entire flight which encompassed an entire night. I believe it was the fact that I cannot sleep upright comfortably; although it could have been the fact that I did not want to take my eyes off of her. We stood outside of the airport and found her mother waiting to greet us. We set off on a train into Rome. The train took us to the outskirts of Rome, from there we took a few different subway trains and arrived at the station Flaminio.

We disembarked and walked with our luggage out of the station and onto the street. It was dry and very hot, the streets reflected the heat as they were built with black stones, which, worn from use, were smooth and reflective. We crossed a very busy convoluted intersection and walked into the Piazza del Popoli. This piazza is a large circle a hundred yards or more in diameter. An obelisk rises out of the middle of it flanked on four sides by fountains where lions spit water into pools. Three main avenues begin at the Southern end of the piazza and on that Southern end two magnificent buildings with Latin inscriptions stand, guarding as it were, the passageway to Rome’s center. I suppose they were churches, although I never found out for sure. Guarding the Northern end of the piazza were giant columns with Latin inscriptions on headstones on top of them. The center of the piazza was lower than the rest of it, which gave it a slight amphitheater like appearance. It was the piazza of the people, and the people enjoyed it, all around it people walked or sat, or rested from the heat in cafes on the side. It was nice to see people outside in the middle of the day enjoying their city.

We came to the apartment and rested a bit, but decided to investigate the city before dinnertime. Her mother had gone to teach a class and we were left alone in an eternal city, what could we do but explore, although I was almost delirious from having not slept two hours in the past 30.

We began walking South down the Via Ripetta, a stone street like all the streets in Rome, and although it was a main throughway of the city, it was no wider than a Philadelphian side street. This road, as most others in the city, is marked by large apartments with restaurants on the bottom floor. All the buildings look as if they were cast in a plaster mold with irregularities in the siding. They were beautiful and I knew that most, if not all of them had seen history dating back past Napoleon, the unification of Italy, a world war, and the whirlwind changes of twentieth century technology. Most stood about seven stories tall with a large atrium inside, and were furnished, as ours was in the most modern style with solid, bright, contrasting colors. The differences between the outside and the inside struck me as an amusing contrast of past and present.

The via Ripetta is a beautiful street, but so are almost all Roman streets. We walked along the sliver of sidewalk sometimes interrupted by cafes. Sparse traffic from very compact cars rumbled by on the old street made of black inlaid stones. And tiny motor scooters whizzed by carelessly, in no hurry, as if there was all the time in the world. And maybe there is, but where I’m from there isn’t.

We wandered along the street and turned down alleyways based on whether they were shady or not. Although it was a dry heat it was oppressive. We may as well have been carrying the sun on our backs. The series of shaded streets turned from alleyway to alleyway, until our collective sense of direction failed and we stumbled upon the Pantheon.

The Pantheon is one of the most impressive sights I’ve ever seen. It rises unannounced in the middle of apartment buildings and restaurants, a six story solid stone dark grey edifice cracked and worn from the centuries and the wars and the progress that surrounds it. A small piazza sits in front of it with five restaurants on the perimeter and a small fountain in the center, such is the outlay of most piazzas. The magnificence of the Pantheon rises up from its surrounding alleyways and the crowds of people sitting on its steps or dining in the restaurants, in the shadow of a structure that has stood the test of time, not only time, but urban time. Urban time is crowded and changing dynamically, it wants to knock down the old to make room for the new, but this survives. I wondered what it was like when the ancient Romans

Marcus and Claudio met outside the Pantheon quite unexpectedly. They had arrived from different directions, Claudio was walking North from his city abode that stood in between the Circus Maximus and the Coliseum, and Marcus was walking South from his villa North of Rome. They had grown up together on the city’s patrician streets , and were now even more well off than they had been growing up. Claudio becoming a master rhetorician and orator, and Marcus rising to the rank of general in the army.

“Ho, Claudio. How have you been?” Marcus began on seeing Claudio first.

“Ah, Marcus, my friend it is good to see you. I’ve been well, what brings you here to the great temple.”

“I’m paying my respects to Mars, who has given our armies the strength to push back the barbarian hoards attempting to invade from the North. They know nothing of valor or bravery. They also know nothing of military science, and we have pushed them back both through their cowardice and ignorance. They come at us head over foot, tumbling like logs and we slaughter them at our feet!” Marcus completed this little speech with an outburst of pride and hatred for the enemy that Claudio was taken aback.

“Well, the barbarians know nothing of our ways, and I shall be sure to report to the senate what you have told me concerning the state of our affairs in the North.” Claudio said respectfully.

“Ah, Claudio, let it be so. For if we conquer these tribes at once they shall be ours forever, but if we lose our tenacity, they may have time to regroup and gain allies. But even this concerns me little. Tell me, Claudio, why you have come here?”

“My wife has died.” Claudio said and paused, “I am giving offerings to Pluto and Venus.”

“My friend, why did you say that you were well? And why are you giving an offering to Venus for the death of your wife?” asked Marcus concerned and confused.

“I am offering to Venus because I am grateful for the love that I was given even if it is gone. And upon seeing you, my old friend, I am well.”

I was jostled from my vision by a finger poking me in the ribs. She stood next to me smiling, but attempting to pretend as if nothing had happened looking straight ahead at the giant metal doors of the Pantheon.

“You think you can just poke me anytime you’d like, don’t you?” I asked feigning anger.

She smiled and nodded emphatically. I tried to poke her in the stomach but she blocked me. I tried to poke her in the shoulder with the same hand but she blocked that and I quickly used my other hand to poke her quickly in the stomach under the ribs. I smiled victoriously and said, “Ha, there you see I win.”

She laughed and straightened herself. Smiling she said, “You’re not supposed to win.” She attacked with a barrage of index fingers pointed at my chest. I grabbed her hands and said, “See you can’t win.” I pulled both hands out to my sides which brought her beautiful body closer and closer to mine. I wanted to let her poke me as much as she’d like and just hold her close, the way I used to do. I let my guard down and her hand escaped, jabbing me right below the ribs.

“Ha,” she exclaimed mockingly, “there you see I win. I always win, you should have learned that by now.” I doubled over in feigned pain from the mock-violent jab in the ribs.

“Of course you win, you just wait until I’m too tired of playing your games and then you sweep in to collect your victory, oh queen of queens.” I said sarcastically. “Let’s go explore some more.”

We wandered out of the Pantheon’s area, not knowing where we were going. Until we saw a sign pointing the way to the Piazza Navona, among other landmarks.

“Oh the Piazza Navona, that’s where the fountain of the four rivers is. It’s on my list of things to see, lets go there.” She said excitedly.

“Sure lets go.” We began walking in it’s direction.

“The fountain was made by Bernini in the eighteenth century. It’s a great piece of renaissance sculpture.” She added.

“Ah, terrific, well here you go, you get to reap the benefits of all those hellish art history classes here don’t you.”

“Oh, they weren’t so bad except for the hundreds of note cards I had to memorize. It’s a very interesting subject, its just that it can’t be learnt any other way. If only they had a way to assimilate all the knowledge into your brain instantly, that’d be cool.”

“Yeah, and then they’d come up with a pill to make your shit smell like roses fresh from the garden.” I added sarcastically.

“Hey, it could happen. When they make me unquestioned ruler of the universe it will.” She added with a self-satisfied smile.

“Yes of course my liege.” I said, once more with evident sarcasm.

“Shut up. It’ll happen.” She said laughing.

“Of course it will.” I said. Then I stopped short and made a deep bow. She laughed, and grabbed me by the elbow pulling me up and next to her. She held on to my elbow more than she needed to, and I smiled, a large smile from ear to ear. Her warm, soft hand was just as I remembered it, perfect.

She let go when we arrived in the Piazza Navona. It is a long elliptical piazza, with a large magnificent fountain in the middle and two smaller fountains on either side. It is surrounded totally by café’s, gelaterias, restaurants, and churches. People are everywhere, sitting by the fountains, selling wares in little kiosks strewn around the piazza, in café’s, and restaurants everywhere there is activity, but it is leisurely. There are no cars just people everywhere, hanging out and enjoying themselves.

We approached the main fountain through the crowd. There were four sculptures of men, most likely Roman gods I thought, at each corner of the magnificent obelisk in the middle. Each of them had a fountain under them and a pool of water under them.

She explained it to me, “Each of the four men represent a major river, I know one is the Danube, and one is the Nile, but I forget the other two. You see how lifelike they are. Its because Bernini was one of the greatest sculptors of all time, he was incredible. I mean, don’t the features just grab you and look real, like there’s blood underneath the marble.” She paused, I nodded. “Anyway, if you look at the guy over on this side.” She paused and pointed. “This one right here. Do you see how he’s looking the other way in disgust, holding his hand up to block his view or something.” I nodded. I hadn’t noticed it, but the statue was turning away as if in disgust, his face looked like he was about to throw up, and he was holding out his hand as if to say, “Ughhhhh, how horrible.” She continued, “He’s doing that because of that church in front of him, right here.” She paused, pointed, and I looked. “Do you see how that church has a concave front?” I nodded and said, “Yeah, so?” She continued, “So, a church done with a front like that was highly unorthodox at this time, and was a major no-no in Bernini’s school especially. The man who designed this church was a student of Bernini’s and was one of his favorites, until he built that church, which Bernini thought was horrible, and an affront to God. He was highly offended and sculpted this guy on the fountain here to show what he thought of the church and his ex-student. That’s why he is turned away as if he is disgusted by the church to the point of physical sickness.”

“Wow, that’s really interesting. Its kind of like an art vendetta or something. Man you art students know everything.”

“Yes, yes we do,” she said and smiled. “Just look at the fountains and the people and the rock, its so beautiful, I can’t understand how anyone

The old master strode into the piazza, with the aid of a cane. Two students flanked him as he walked and shared his knowledge. He may have been in his mid-seventies. His life of meticulous chiseling and painting, attention to detail, and painstaking artistic development, has left his myopic eyes drooping, and his once, steady and solid back, hunched. His skin is withered and his legs quake under the weight of his frail body, but his mind is sharp. It is all he has left.

“This fountain is possibly my best work.” He commented to his two disciples.

“It is certainly magnificent, teacher, but what about your work at the Vatican, or our great churches. Surely they give more glory to God, so that you’re great art reflects his greatness.” A pupil chimed in.

“I suppose so,” he answered, “however, I have always thought of what Our Savior had said, ’Give to God what is God’s, and give to Caesar what is Caesar’s.’ He is talking to the people. I have always believed that he meant what he left unsaid, which is that you must give to the people, what is theirs. Here I have done that, more than in any other work that I have done.”

“This is certainly true, teacher.” The other pupil responded with a reproachful look at his classmate.

“When I created this fountain, I did it out of a sense of righteousness. And not for the people, to whom I owe so much. I have always been bothered by this.”

“Certainly, teacher, we understand the meaning of the fountain, and we believe your motives to be righteous. Such an affront to God, and in the architecture of his very church, should not go unreproached. Your act is noble, and shall serve a reminder to anyone who would go about blaspheming in the way that this man has done. It’s an abomination!” The pupil became animated and indignant at the end of his speech until the master lifted a hand from his cane to silence him.

“No my student, I was wrong.”

“How could you be wrong, teacher, the church is an abomination?”

“The man who built this church that I so insulted was once a student of mine, but he came under influences other than me, from Firenze, Bologna, Napoli, and his own imagination. He threw all that I had taught him back at me in this church, and I was angry. But one should not act out of anger, much less create art out of it. And I did.”

“But he was wrong to have foregone your teaching for the teachings of inferiors.”

“No, my student, he created a new school, and I was angry at him for abandoning mine. He will one day have students to whom he will tell how his old teacher, shunned his work and insulted him at the expense of the public, and he will be correct in his reproach. The church is beautiful, as all art is in all its schools. We improved upon the ancient schools, and new schools shall improve upon us. Art changes, I have learned this in my old age, and one day my school shall be ancient and all that will be left of it will be my sculptures and paintings, including this fountain. I only wish that he would turn his head and smile at the church.”

“Teacher, your talk disturbs me. Your school shall live on as long as there is art. People will recognize your greatness and create art in accordance with your school until the Savior comes again.” The pupil persisted.

“No, my student, you will one day realize that he who fights against the future will find himself as I find myself, a crippled old man.”

She put her head on my shoulder, the way she used to, where her long neck contours to my bony shoulder, and her head rests on the soft sinewy tendons and muscles of my lower neck. It came without warning, roused me from my daydream, and reduced me to a puddle. My knees went limp, my head spun, and my mind wandered in its spinning haze to the way it was when we were together, and I did not feel compelled to mask my heart. I put my hand around her waist, that beautiful thin waist, where my hand fit, like a tailored glove, and I was in ecstasy. The epitome of bittersweet, was that moment in time, so much that I could not endure its torturous rapture for more than a moment,. So I broke it.

I straightened myself bringing my shoulder up, which pushed her head back into its upright position. “I think the church is beautiful, I understand how it was a break from orthodoxy, but I can’t imagine that an artistic master would fail to recognize the aesthetic where it lies.” I really just rambled that out, because I needed to say something to give myself space and time to recover. She saw right through it, she always knew when I was being disingenuous.

So she took a step away from me and gave me the space I needed, to recover my heart’s lost beats. “He considered it an affront to God. I suppose he thought that because no Christian architecture had ever had such a design, and possibly pagan ones had, I’m not sure, but that’s what I’d think.”

“I suppose that’s reasonable, I suppose that if he considered the architecture to be an attempt to bring a pagan influence upon sacred Christianity, that could make sense. Either way the fountain is magnificent.”

“It certainly is, but this piazza isn’t too far away, we’ll probably be here a lot, let’s go walk some more.” So we made our way out of the piazza, not knowing exactly where we were, but knowing that we were most likely no great distance from the apartment.

“Your hair is getting long again.” she commented matter-of-factly.

“I suppose it is, it’s apt to do such things as grow.” I paused, “I know you always liked it short, but I’m too lazy for the barber.”

“And too poor, way to get a job this summer.” She cut in quickly.

“I tried to get one, I really did. Plus they have room for me back at the collection agency.”

“Ughhhhh, what a horrible job. You shouldn’t do it, it’s mean.”

“I guess, but its better than nothing. This way I’ll be able to get my hair cut this summer.”

“Will you?” She asked with surprising expectancy.

“No.”

“Well you should, it looks better on you.”

“I don’t think so, I’ve never gotten your thing with crew cuts.”

“They feel cool, they look clean and neat, what more can you want.”

“I can’t believe you’re telling me that you appreciate neat looking things, you can’t even see your bedroom floor.”

She giggled. “But there’s an order to that mess.”

“And there’s an order to the mess on my head.” I concluded triumphantly.

“Psssht.” She turned her head mock-indignantly.

“I’d like to see you with your hair buzzed.”

“Oh, I plan on it, and I may let you see it.”

“Oh, I’d be honored if I could milady.”

“Oh shut up.”

I laughed. We had crossed a large, very busy street and found ourselves on a bridge over the river Tiber. It wasn’t a wide river, and had long since been kidnapped from its mother nature and come under the dominance of our human race. The banks were sidewalks, on which very few people walked, and after the unused sidewalks a levee stood some thirty foot high leading onto the very busy road or the bridge which stood some forty to fifty feet above the deep green water at its apex.

“Fancy a dip?” I asked her

“You first.”

“Wanna go down and sit there anyway, its gotta be cooler than up here?”

“Yeah, sure.” She nodded and we walked down the steps.

It was cooler down there. The water, obviously polluted from centuries of advanced civilization, and human development was crusted in some parts with algae because the river was very slow moving, as if it had been mellowed by the monotonous rise and fall of the empires it has seen. Mostly though, the river just looked very polluted, and worn out.

“Hey, did you see that?” She asked me suddenly.

“What?”

“A fish just jumped out of the water, it was huge in the middle of the river.” We paused watching, “Oh, there’s another one.” She exclaimed after a few seconds. I saw that one. It looked like a large pikefish, if there are pikefish in Italy, which I doubt. It was about a shoulders breadth long.

“I can’t believe that the pollution could have mutated a goldfish into that.” I said.

She laughed at my corny joke, she always did that. “That’s why you don’t flush them down the toilet in Italy, they mutate.”

She turned around toward the river and looked at it after she said that. I was standing about two paces behind her. So I suddenly ran up from behind and grabbed her by the arms as if to throw her in the water, I even lifted her off the ground. She shrieked. But I set her back down on dry land. I turned around laughing raucously. She was inflamed and came at me with both fingers flicking at my ears. For some reason she had always associated ear flicking with some kind of disgrace or punishment. The memory of this only made me laugh harder.

“Don’t you scare me like that.” She chided me and began to laugh herself. I grabbed her hands and immobilized them not allowing her to flick me anymore. She never liked feeling weaker than anyone else, and began fighting me relentlessly for the use of her hands. I gave them up when I tired from the game, and she flicked me again, after I had given her hands back to her. I laughed. She turned away and walked back toward the river with her back to me with another air of mock-indignation. She took three steps and then faltered on the fourth, as if unsure of where to put her foot. She put it down and turned to me, but her look had a wholly different quality than what I had expected. It was not indignant in the least, nor malicious, nor teasing, nor playful. I had only seen a look one other time in my life and she was the one who gave it to me then too.

An American dorm room, 12’ x 12’, white cynder block walls, which do little to keep out the winter chill, a bed with a cover and a tangle of naked arms and legs and two bodies held close underneath it, this is beautiful. We look each other in the eyes and kiss, softly closed mouth, on the lips.

“I love you.” I said.

“I love you, too.” she said.

The mid-February wind blew outside the inadequately insulated room, and we heard its high-pitched whine.

I squeezed her against me, and she squeezed me tight too. I loosed my arms but she kept hers taut for another ten or so seconds. She leant back, my arms cradling her, and gave me a funny look like futility mixed with resignation and a sense of indignation at an injustice.

“I’m sorry, I love you, but this isn’t right, and I don’t know why.” She said with a choke.

“I know you’ve been feeling like that lately, but we’ll get through it together I mean I know something hasn’t been quite right for a little while, but we’ve only been together a few months, and we’ll get through it.” I said this quickly to placate her doubts with my blind optimism, but towards the end I realized that it wasn’t working this time.

“This hasn’t been working, I think I need time. I rushed into this and I wasn’t ready for anything serious yet and I don’t know what I want and I don’t know how to love you the way you love me and I need to find things out about myself, because I don’t know why this doesn’t work. You’re everything I want.”

“And you’re everything I want too,” I put in quickly, I was almost panicking, “I don’t need anything but you, and I’ll do anything to make this right, I’ll sail the Pacific with a canoe, I’ll walk on hot coals, I’ll swim in the East River, I’ll go on a mythical quest.” All the time I was saying this, and I was saying it frantically, she was shaking her head sorrowfully. “I’ll lasso the moon, I’ll bring it down just for you.” I added with a hopeless smile.

“You know better than all this.” She deadpanned while her eyes were welling up.

“I feel so helpless.”

“I’m sorry, I love you, I don’t want to hurt you, I really wish I wasn’t hurting you.” A tear escaped. She sniffled and brushed it aside.

“Don’t be sorry, you’re the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“No, I’m not. I only hurt you.”

“You could stab me in the chest and you’d still be the best thing.”

She laughed pathetically, and smiled at me. “I wish I could love you the way you love me, but its not fair to you that I can’t, at least not right now.”

“Yes, yes, we’ll be together and happy when you figure things out.” I said with blind optimism.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what I’ll find, or if that will make things right, or when I’ll find any of this.”

“I’ll wait for you.”

“Don’t wait for me.”

“I’ll wait for you.”

“Don’t wait for me.” She said emphatically. “You’ve got so much else to see and do, you’re going to give the world something great, you must do that. I won’t keep you from it.”

“Fuck the world, fuck great things I don’t care. I don’t want to see them I don’t want to do them, I want you.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I will.”

“Well then just don’t believe it, ok. Please, just… just don’t wait for me, you’re an incredible person and you need to do incredible things.”

“How can I do incredible things when I’m miserable.”

“Why would you be miserable?”

“Cause I’m not with you.”

“You’ll snap out of that quickly. You’ll meet another girl, and you’ll have kids and you’ll travel and see the world like I know you want to do. You’ll be happy.”

I looked away, now my eyes were glazed over with tears. I chokingly said, “I really don’t ever want to hear you say that ok.” I swallowed hard after it.

“Ok, I won’t.” She paused, “I love you, you’re everything I want, but its not right and I don’t know why.”

“I feel helpless.”

“I know.”

“I feel sick.”

“I know.”

“I’m scared shitless of losing you.”

“I know.”

“I don’t know what’s going to happen I guess we‘re going to have to be apart for awhile.” I said defeatedly.

“Yes, I suppose we are. I don’t either, I don’t know where we’re going, but I guess we’re gonna find out.”

I found myself sitting next to her on the bank of the river. Its polluted green water slowly, lazily flowing out to the sea like a slug across a leaf. We just sat and watched the river flow until she asked, “Who said, ‘You can’t step into the same river twice.”

“Heraclitus.” I answered.

“Oh right.”

“Yeah, all that overly rational bullshit comes from the Greeks.”

She sounded surprised, “What, you don’t believe its true?” She asked.

“No, its not true.” I paused and looked toward the retreating sun. “No, if you wait long enough, even rivers repeat themselves.”