



ROME IS...

by André Aciman

Rome is color. Ochre by day, by noon blinding white marble, followed by the inevitable decline to saffron and dirty blond and, finally, auburn tones that hint of a fourth cup of coffee, and then Campari red. By twilight, everything turns dark plum and bruised aubergine, and slate gray cobblestones called *sampietrini* start gleaming in the dark, where by midnight the libido scurries about the narrow lanes. Not one Roman is not beautiful.

Rome is sound. The rattle of scooters threading their way through old Rome, the clang of a hammer going about its business while everyone naps undisturbed—because naps need noise to spell the silence more. The tinnitus of workers hammering down the *sampietrini*, one by one, dousing their thirst from plastic water bottles which they empty and like to crush in brawny hands. The clatter of dishes and silverware as you walk about Campo Marzio and hear everyone gathered for lunch upstairs. The splash of a fountain at two. The silence on Via dei Coronari at two. The shutdown of time at two. Until the clamor of rolling shutters being raised and the catcalls of friends having a smoke on tiny Vicolo Savelli.

Rome is scent. Narrow hallways where musty dank

clay hasn't been aired in ages, the hint of gathering heat on a late October pavement, that whiff of pine cologne on the man sweating next to me on the bus, the musty feel of shops that won't have air conditioning, the listless exhalation of chamomile up and down our stairwell telling me that sleep doesn't come easy here, the sly intrusions of cigarette smoke just about everywhere, and that hint of damp wool after it rains reminding me of my mother.

Rome is touch. An old wall, still warm after centuries of just standing there, leaves a film of sunburnt dust on your hand to tell you it can still feel things. Everything feels things here. You want to touch—the hood of a car, the trickle from an ice cream cone, the girl whose hand rests so close to yours you're sure she knows, she knows...

Rome is taste. The shutters drawn slightly in to keep the sun out, a glass of red wine, pasta with sauce that's been stewed for hours, grated parmesan, fizzy water from anywhere, and if you're with someone dear, stop looking, you've come home.

Rome is memory. Like love, it never dies; it finds others to love. Rome is love.

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