



Mark Tedesco

Mark Tedesco is a writer and educator residing in California. Having lived in Italy for eight years, he enjoys weaving stories connecting the present to the longings are expressed in relationships, events, culture, and history.

Mark has written in the genres of travel, historical fiction, memoir, self-help and children's fiction. His titles include: *That Undeniable Longing*, *I am John I am Paul*, *Lessons and Beliefs*, *The Dog on the Acropolis* and *Loving Hoping Believing*. Mark's Dixi Books title, *She Seduced Me: A Love Affair with Rome*, brings to life Mark's love for the magic of a city, in which he weaves history, personal stories and interviews into a tale that, little by little, also seduces the reader.

Besides writing, Mark is an educator, and he loves to engage his students in his love of history, literature and each person's unique story. In his off time, Mark likes to travel, but, somehow, he always ends up returning to Rome where, he is convinced, other stories are waiting to be uncovered.

She Seduced Me

A Love Affair with Rome

Mark Tedesco

Dixi Books

Copyright © 2020 by Mark Tedesco

Copyright © 2020 Dixi Books

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced or transmitted to any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information and retrieval system, without written permission from the Publisher.

She Seduced Me: A Love Affair with Rome - Mark Tedesco

Editor: Katherine Boyle

Proofreading: Andrea Bailey

Designer: Pablo Ulyanov

I. Edition: November 2020

Library of Congress Cataloging-in Publication Data

Mark Tedesco

ISBN: 978-1-913680-04-6

1. Travel writing 2. Italian life 3. Ancient Roman history 4. Travel tips

© Dixi Books Publishing

293 Green Lanes, Palmers Green, London, England, N13 4XS

info@dixibooks.com

www.dixibooks.com

She Seduced Me

A Love Affair with Rome

Mark Tedesco



The Voice of the New Age

Chapters

Introduction	9
Chapter 1: Stories, Saints, and Weirdos	11
Chapter 2: Life in the Streets	25
Chapter 3: Artists and Performers on the Streets of Rome	37
Chapter 4: Tasting History	47
Chapter 5: Americans	55
Chapter 6: Eating	61
Chapter 7: Getting Lost	73
Chapter 8: According to Romans	79
Chapter 9: Underground: The Golden House of Nero and the Houses of Livia and Augustus	95
Chapter 10: The Impoverished but Grand Lady	105
Chapter 11: Caravaggio	111
Chapter 12: People Watching	117
Chapter 13: Lesser visited Rome: Palazzo Altemps and Ostia Antica	123
Chapter 14: Is it <i>Dolce Vita</i> After All?	135
Chapter 15: Nocturnal Vatican	145
Conclusion	155
Acknowledgments	159

Introduction

I resisted, but she drew me back. I stayed away, but she beckoned me. I distanced myself, but she haunted me. I even rejected her, but she did not abandon me.

What is it about Rome that seduces the heart, fascinates the mind, and envelops the senses? Once she becomes part of you, there is no turning back, no forgetting, no forsaking. Her fascination deepens with the passing of time and the maturity of life. I cannot stay away for more than a year, and even that is not enough. She is like a jealous lover, a siren, or a genie who casts an enchanting spell from which one does not want to escape.

I was nineteen when I first visited Rome, and, though knowing only bits and pieces of ancient history, I found myself drawn in by the monuments, the energy, and the magic of the place. If I had to come up with one word to describe Rome, it would be “magical.” Churches with miraculous stories, empty roads at night in the Roman Forum filled with the whispers of the spirits of Patricians, slaves and plebeians making their way towards the temples, street performers for thousands of years making visitors laugh, smiling tourists and pilgrims who would not want to be anywhere else, sinners, saints, and weirdos all taking the same strolls down the same roads at the same time. Magnificent. Magical. Fascinating.

But what could a teenager understand about the glories of Rome? I was in the seminary, and our father superior was Padre Bonuccelli, which translates as Father Goodbirds. Our

dwelling was outside of Rome near Tivoli. Every school day, forty seminarians and I drove into Rome in our minivans to the Angelicum, where we listened to lectures on historical philosophy, ontology, and the social sciences. Father Goodbirds continually warned us about Pagan Rome (Roma Pagana) and the dangers of exploring the city, but eventually, my curiosity got the better of me. After a few months of attending the Italian lectures, I ditched class, whipped out my map, and headed towards San Pietro in Vincoli, just a twenty-minute walk from the university.

Walking into the church and heading straight towards the massive statue of Moses by Michelangelo, I stopped in awe, fixed in my place, and looked up. I recalled the story of the artist who, upon completion of the Moses, threw his hammer at the sculpture and shouted, "Speak!!!" I whispered under my breath: "Speak..." I don't know how many minutes passed before I became aware of time again; glancing at my watch, I turned to rush back to the university before I would be missed. But before leaving the church I felt that I now carried something within me which wasn't there when I entered. I brought a spark of magic with me.

That day was a new beginning: Rome would be mine, I would be hers, and no one could take that away.

Chapter 1

Stories, Saints, and Weirdos

One's first impression of Rome is often colored by the number of priests and nuns everywhere. In the gelaterias, taking walks, getting on busses, chatting with friends, shopping for underwear (yes, I've seen this), eating at restaurants, riding bicycles, and ordering cappuccinos. They act like they own the place! And yet, in a way, they do.

By the time the Visigoths sacked Rome in 410 CE, Rome had fallen into such decline that the citizens were starving. The population of the city dropped from a million to a low point of 17,000; Rome was almost abandoned, and when the Visigoths arrived, they were welcomed by the remaining Romans in the hope that they would bring them something to eat. The Goths plundered the city, moved on, and Rome became a ghost town. Buildings were dismantled, artifacts carried away, and the coliseum was used as a landfill. The once-great empire was shattered, the unifying Roman government was gone, and the military was in shambles. The greatness of Rome was no more.

In 1447, upon becoming Pope, Nicholas V brought with him a vision of what Rome could be. Monuments, fountains, wide boulevards, libraries, and art collections were ideas that inflamed the Renaissance Pope's imagination. Today, while gazing on the Trevi Fountain, for example, Nicholas's hand can be seen. The waters of the Aqua Virgo, feeding the font, had been cut off and

diverted to other areas. Still, Nicholas envisioned the restoration of the fountain as a celebration of the waters feeding the city. Though the present sculptural group is the product of a long evolution of fountain designs, it was the vision of the first Renaissance Pope, Nicholas V, that brought us a celebration in stone where there was only a dried up aqueduct.

Nicholas was a Renaissance bookworm. His passion led him to lay the foundations for the Vatican Library, for which he employed scholars and humanists to gather and copy ancient and contemporary texts. His vision was to establish Rome as a destination for scholars, and Nicholas saved many Greek works that otherwise would have been lost. His humanistic vision extended beyond theology to all areas of knowledge.

Nicholas V's dreams were bigger than his capacity to realize them, and it would take subsequent Popes, such as Sixtus IV (after whom the Sistine Chapel is named) and Julius II, to bring these dreams to fruition. Under Sixtus, Rome was transformed from a Medieval to a Renaissance city, accomplishing such works as the construction of the Sistine Chapel, founding the Vatican Archives, and expanding the Vatican Library. But it was Julius II (reigning from 1503 to 1513), with his impulsive and aggrandizing character, who transformed Rome into a world center of architecture, art, culture, and learning. Looking up at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, one can almost hear Pope and artists, Julius and Michelangelo, struggling to make their visions a reality, even though Michelangelo insisted that he was no painter while creating the frescoed ceiling. Julius also initiated the new St. Peter's Basilica, and employed Raphael to produce his magnificent frescoes in Vatican City, including his *School of Athens*. The Pope went on to hire Bramante to unite the Vatican with the Belvedere, conceived the Court of St. Damasus with its loggias, and the Via Giulia with its beautiful buildings and commissioned Michelangelo's colossal statue of Moses, from which this story takes its starting point.

This brief overview of papal sponsorship of the arts in Rome

isn't exhaustive nor aims to gloss over the disastrous personal lives, political ambitions, or questionable faith of the persons involved. But with all that Papal sponsorship, I ask myself, what right do I have to object to all the priests and nuns infiltrating every nook and cranny of Roman life?

So let's get back to Rome's history as we explore two aspects: buildings and their stories, and the people who live in and flock to the Eternal City.

"There was an earthquake at the moment of the crucifixion; it produced this crack in the rock, so a chapel was built to commemorate this event," was the story shared with me when I was touring Italy as a seminarian in the 1980s. "This painting was made by St. Luke and was found in a river by a shepherd; he brought it to the bishop. That is why there is a church built on this spot," was another story. "The angels carried this house from Ephesus to Loreto; this is the house where the Virgin Mary lived," was another one. Fifteen of us, mostly Americans, were touring Italy under our Italian priest's guidance, who wanted to expose us to his country's faith experience. After visiting several shrines constructed to commemorate the Virgin Mary's appearances, I couldn't keep silent anymore. "The Virgin Mary must not like heaven very much," I blurted out. All faces in the van turned towards me. "Why?" asked a pious Italian fellow seminarian. "Because she's always in Italy!" I said. Americans chuckled, Italians fumed.

But after becoming more immersed in Italian culture, I realized that it is the story that matters. There is barely a building, a monument, or a crevice that does not have an anecdote attached to it, and the story is what gives meaning. At first, this was difficult for me, coming from a scientific black and white outlook, but my appreciation for the storytelling in Italy grew.

I knew little of the Church of St. Paul at the Three Fountains in Rome, except that it was the site where the apostle was supposedly

martyred. Off the tourist maps, I was intrigued to go there and discover the site for myself. Since there are many churches in that area, I located a sign that indicated the one designated as the "Place of Martyrdom of Saint Paul the Apostle, where three springs miraculously gushed out." Water gushing? I didn't see any, so I went inside and found a pillar where the sign indicated, St. Paul was bound. Picking up a pamphlet, I read that there had been three fountains on this spot, which were currently tapped off due to pollution. These three fountains mark the three places where St. Paul's head bounced three times when he was beheaded, water springing up miraculously. Did it really happen? Does it matter? It is the story that is important.

Not only Christian Rome has its stories.

A stone is just a stone, but not in Rome. Walking through the Forum, there is a sizeable covered rock just off the Via Sacra where, inevitably, one will find flowers laid on that stone, day after day, year after year, century after century. To the unsuspecting tourist, this is just another mound cluttering the once glorious Forum. But the story of that stone reaches back to the time of Julius Caesar, hated by some, revered by others and respected by all. On the Ides of March, Caesar walked into the place where the Senate was meeting where he was stabbed 23 times by his enemies, and those he believed were his friends. The city fell into shock and disintegrated into warring factions, but there had to be a funeral and a reading of his last testament. Mark Anthony obtained Caesar's will from the house of the Vestal Virgins and brought it to that rock, the funeral pyre where Caesar's body was to be cremated. The entire city gathered in front of that spot and brought pieces of furniture, wood scraps, logs, and fuel so that the pyre was several stories tall. As the flames engulfed the body and the flickering light illuminated the onlookers' faces, Mark Anthony eulogized Caesar while many in the crowd wept.

Antony

*Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;
I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.
The evil that men do lives after them;
The good is oft interred with their bones;
So let it be with Caesar. The noble Brutus
Hath told you Caesar was ambitious:
If it were so, it was a grievous fault,
And grievously hath Caesar answer'd it.
Here, under leave of Brutus and the rest--
For Brutus is an honourable man;
So are they all, all honourable men--
Come I to speak in Caesar's funeral.
He was my friend, faithful and just to me:
But Brutus says he was ambitious;
And Brutus is an honourable man.
He hath brought many captives home to Rome
Whose ransoms did the general coffers fill:
Did this in Caesar seem ambitious?
When that the poor have cried, Caesar hath wept:
Ambition should be made of sterner stuff:
Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;
And Brutus is an honourable man.
You all did see that on the Lupercal
I thrice presented him a kingly crown,
Which he did thrice refuse: was this ambition?
Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;
And, sure, he is an honourable man.
I speak not to disprove what Brutus spoke,
But here I am to speak what I do know.
You all did love him once, not without cause:
What cause withholds you then, to mourn for him?
O judgment! thou art fled to brutish beasts,
And men have lost their reason. Bear with me;*

*My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar,
And I must pause till it come back to me.*

(Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, Act III Scene 2).¹

When the crowds dispersed, the fire became embers, and Caesar's bones were gathered up; the rock remained where all this had taken place, that same rock where flowers are laid today.

What do a church and noisy crows have in common? Heading over to the glorious Piazza del Popolo, standing in the middle facing north, there is a church, Santa Maria del Popolo, which marks the spot where a large walnut tree once grew. I tried to imagine the tree in place of the church 1,000 years ago, and the people, residents, and visitors avoiding that area because the crows perched on its branches would swoop down and attack. Not one crow, but a whole flock lived in that walnut tree and fought against human encroachment. Why were these evil crows always up for a fight?

The story had been handed down that Nero, one of the most hated Roman emperors, had been buried in this area. Could the noisy crows and Nero's burial place be connected?

"His body lies under the tree; a landslide covered his tomb," residents whispered. "The crows embody his demonic spirit," visitors swore. "The roots draw up his evil influence and deposit it in any living thing passing by," others warned. As the stories grew, so did the fear; some began to avoid the Porta Flaminia because of these stories. Someone had to do something about this evil influence; the Church had to do something.

In 1099, the populace finally convinced the Pope, Paschal II, to organize a procession down the Via Flaminia, with a crucifix leading the people and an ax in the Pope's hand; Paschal was determined to put an end to Nero's influence forever. Reaching that spot, the Pope took the ax, struck low and hard at the trunk,

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, comp. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 2005).

until the tree fell, and the crows flew off in a panic. The legend continues that Nero's remains were found intertwined in the roots; his bones were removed and thrown into the Tiber. Then, to commemorate the triumph of good over evil, a makeshift church was built on this spot, from which this present church takes its origin.

A huge walnut tree, angry crows, a Roman emperor, and a baroque church; what could these possibly have in common?

Another story begins with Christmas in Bethlehem, continues with bad Roman weather in August, and goes on to the Spanish discovery of the Americas, which results in the church known as St. Mary Major. Less touristy than the Vatican, it has a more devotional atmosphere inside, whereas outside, it looks like a cold stone structure in the middle of a parking lot. The decor is typically baroque without anything unique or exciting until one hears the stories.

The history began in Bethlehem when Christ was born about 4 BCE in a stable because there was no room at the inn (Luke 2:7). Sources say that the baby was laid in a manger, which becomes the focus of our story. The manger is a type of open trough for animals to feed from, consisting of legs or a stand and the trough itself, made from wood or stone. Helena, the mother of Constantine, traveled to the Middle East to secure the places sacred to Christians, including the place of Christ's birth, converting the cave into a chapel and then into a basilica. The history here becomes vaguer, but a reference to Christ's crib appearing in Rome surfaces under the pontificate of Pope Theodore (640-649). Under the high altar of St. Mary Major's can be seen a glass bubble with five wooden boards visible that are said to be part of the manger carried to Rome from Bethlehem at the time of Pope Theodore.

The next phase of the story is a summer snowstorm; it was August 5, 352 CE, when snow purportedly fell on the Esquiline Hill in Rome. Before the snow could melt, the people marked the outline; the snow was interpreted as a sign that a church should be built on that spot in honor of the Virgin Mary. The present basilica

dates back to the fifth century CE with additions and renovations through the centuries. The third part of our story begins with the Spanish colonization of the Americas.

In 1532, the Spaniards made contact with the mighty Inca empire, and in about twenty years, Pizarro and the Spanish conquistadors had conquered the Incas and took possession of their wealth. Peru then became an essential Spanish colony, providing gold and silver for another 300 years. Pizarro and his brothers destroyed the Inca empire. These original conquistadors became extraordinarily wealthy. From these events, the myth of El Dorado was born, which referred to a lost land filled with riches that waited to be discovered. This myth inspired Europeans, especially the poor and uneducated, to move to South America in search of wealth. The consequences of these events were tragic but also gave rise to the Latin American people and culture.

Amid the destruction of the Inca empire, our story finds its place. Sitting inside St. Mary Major, looking up at the coffered ceiling, the gold in that ceiling is said to have been brought back to Spain from the Inca invasion and donated to the Church by Isabell and Ferdinand of Spain.

Snow in August, invasions in South America, and a voyage to Bethlehem are some of the stories that are as important to the structure of this church as are its stones, mortar, and glass of which it is made.

I analyzed, scoffed at, criticized, or attempted to reinterpret these stories to suit my taste in the past. But then I realized that it doesn't matter if they are fact, legend or fantasy for the Romans who are surrounded by these stories. They don't get hung up on this. The stories are like an oral history, which gives meaning to the black and whiteness of life.

The soul of Rome lies not only in its buildings and stories but especially in its people. As we explore the city's religiosity, the people in Rome fall mostly into four categories: saints, sinners, weirdos, and the indifferent.

While a student in Rome, I decided to volunteer at a homeless shelter run by Mother Theresa's nuns at St. Gregorio, behind the coliseum. Once a week, after my studies, I would make my way to the shelter and help out with dinner, chat with the men, and support the sisters any way I could. The nuns started this shelter a few years previous, utilizing an available residence next to the large church. The word was that the sisters slept in a converted chicken coop in back.

The sisters seemed bright and cheerful, and the residents seemed grateful. One evening I was asked to do an intake. "He has been living on the streets and has to be bathed and given new clothes. We burn their old clothes, so leave them in the bathroom. These men are scared of water, so they will need two of you to help bathe him," the sister said to me and my companion. I had never bathed someone before, but I reluctantly agreed. My companion Robert had done this type of work and was more confident.

We ran the water in the tub, put some soap in, and this homeless man we will call Stefano entered. "We are going to help you get cleaned up; go ahead and remove your clothes," Robert said. Stefano hesitated, so we turned away as he removed his clothing. "Go ahead and get into the tub," Robert encouraged him. When I turned to bag his used clothing, I noticed that he had been defecating in his pants for some time; I left them where they were on the chair.

"Here is a sponge; go ahead and wash, and we can help wash your back," Robert encouraged Stefano. Within two or three minutes, the water in the bathtub was jet black. "We will drain this and draw another bath," Robert continued.

I had let Robert take the lead; at a certain point, between the black water and the odor, I felt nauseous and dizzy. "Be back in a minute," I said to Robert, as I stepped out the door. Some minutes later, I stepped back in, and Robert was finishing up the second bath. He was good-spirited, whereas I was extra baggage. Once Stefano got out of the tub, I stepped forward to do something useful. "Let me clean the tub," I said and began scrubbing it with

a brush and running water. "Let's do it together," Robert added, and we both bent down to sanitize the tub for the next bather. Once finished, we turned around and discovered that Stefano had put on his old crap filled clothes again. Robert and I looked at each other, sighing. "Take those off and put on these new clothes," he said. He then turned to me and added, "Let's just wipe him down rather than doing another bath," and I nodded.

Once finished for that evening, we took the bus back to the seminary and I got in the shower and stood there for about thirty minutes, scrubbing intensely. Once clean, I felt good that I had accomplished another week of volunteer work for the homeless and now could return to my routine.

Later that evening in my room, I thought of Mother Theresa's sisters at San Gregorio's. They did this work all day every day, not only a few hours a week like I did; they did not distance themselves from the homeless like I did; they were not disgusted by the smells and sights like I was. They didn't seek attention or acclaim for their work; they seemed happy and joyful, as they joked with residents and volunteers. What was it that gave them this spark?

When I think of the saints in Rome, I think of Mother Theresa's sisters at San Gregorio.

Another phenomenon found in Rome more than anywhere else is the presence of communities and movements which focus on living the charism or particular aspect of faith that brings it alive for its members. Stumbling into Santa Maria in Trastevere just about any evening of the week at 8:30 p.m., one encounters the community of Sant' Egidio, chanting psalms and reflecting on the implications of a faith experience.

What I find fascinating about the community of Sant' Egidio is its spontaneous origins and universal outlook. It started when a group of young people decided to meet together to pray the psalms and to understand the implications of their faith. These beginnings led the community to support refugees fleeing

violence, feed the homeless, find work for immigrants, support addicts on their way to recovery, nurse the terminally ill, work for a solution to the AIDS crisis and even negotiate peace between countries and peoples (Albania, Mozambique, Algeria, Congo, and others). Yet its message is simple: the basis of their communal life is their evening prayer, and their social work can be summed up as “friendship with the poor.”

It is the simplicity and effectiveness of St. Egidio’s community life that struck me because it is not based on an ideology.

One evening, after attending their evening prayer service in Trastevere and listening to the community pray for the all-but-forgotten Syrian refugees, I found myself saying to my friend Jerry: “This is what Christianity is supposed to be!”

But Rome has its share of sinners, as I realized one day when I brought a pair of my shoes to a cobbler’s shop near the Vatican. “Pig God!” he shouted as he struck his thumb rather than the sole of the shoe he was pounding. “Pig Virgin!” he cried out again, blaming the residents of heaven for his lousy aim. Blasphemy. It is a language little used in the English speaking world, in which a sacred name is coupled with the lowest life form that the speaker can imagine. It was odd to gaze at this unhappy man, working day after day in his cobbler shop, crying out to blame others and filling the space with anger. I resolved not to return.

Scamming is another pastime in Rome that is not in the sacred realm. Whether it be pickpocketing a tourist, shortchanging a foreigner, overcharging an American, or the perpetually broken credit card machine (“Mi dispiace, non funziona; solo cash²”). Whether it falls into the category of “sin” is another debate, but some Romans feel justified in taking advantage of naive foreigners to make ends meet. For decades the 64 bus line, from the train station to the Vatican, has been notorious for pickpockets and thieves. It is also known for the too-close-for-comfort stance that some men take when the bus is crowded. But if caught in the act,

2 “I am sorry, the credit card machine doesn’t work; only cash.”

the perpetrator will inevitably be outraged that one could accuse him of such a thing. Best to keep all belongings in one pocket or bag, keep one's hand or arm snugly over it, and avoid the situation altogether. Or, better yet, walk.

Shortchanging, overcharging, and the broken credit card machine are all symptoms of the same mentality: the system is rigged against the shop owners who have to find ways to get on equal footing. Visiting Rome means the foreigner has enough money to part with to help the owners make a living and support a family under an oppressive bureaucratic system, making it challenging to run a business in Rome. The end justifies the means, and if the visitors return home with a few dollars less because he/she was shortchanged, nobody got hurt. After all, rules are for humans, not humans for rules, right?

But what about sex in Rome? Sexual norms in the city are not as black and white as in the United States or the United Kingdom. Sometimes the lines between hetero and homosexual orientation are blurred; fidelity in marriage is an ideal that one aims at but doesn't attain, and church moral teachings are praised but not practiced. All of this is exemplified in the notorious 64 bus, known not only for pickpocketing but also for sex.

For decades this specific bus has been known as the place where one could lose not only one's wallet but also one's virginity. Foreigners who live in Rome see this, if not by experience, then by witnessing it play out.

I was on the crowded 64, trying to make it across town to make a meeting near the Vatican when the bus took a sharp turn, and we all grabbed tight as the bus shifted, and we struggled to maintain our places. The man in front of me changed stance as we took the turn and backed into me; rather than taking his original place, he remained pressed against me. Since I had another person right behind me, I could not shift positions. Frozen in place, I wondered what was happening; as his body pressed more tightly against mine, it soon became apparent. At the next bus stop, I squeezed through the crowd and hopped off. Afterward, I wondered how it

would have played out if I had stayed on that bus.

Another time on this same bus line, I was standing towards the back and had a clear view of the crowded bus center. An elderly well-dressed Italian woman sat in the aisle seat, looking out the window. Next to her was a scraggly looking Italian man, perhaps in his forties, carrying a small briefcase. I noticed that he held the briefcase above the older woman's leg and slowly lowered it. Fascinated, I watched the scene, moving positions to get a more unobstructed view. He briefly touched her leg with the suitcase, then lifted it. The woman kept looking out the window, perhaps assuming that someone had jostled the passengers. The man lowered the briefcase onto her leg once more, this time keeping it there. After a few seconds, what was happening seemed to dawn on the woman, who shifted her leg, looked up in annoyance and fear, and scooted further away from her love interest. Discovered and exposed, the man slinked to the back of the bus.

Everyone who lives in Rome and takes the 64 bus line regularly has similar stories. Is such flirting dangerous? Not in my experience. But one may find that not only has he/she left his wallet on that bus but also one's innocence.

We have covered saints and sinners in Rome, but we cannot forget the most prolific group: the weirdos.

You see them in the churches, you see them on the streets and in the piazzas. There is the barefoot Franciscan who believes he is the reincarnation of St. Francis of Assisi. A priest dressed in a spotless black cassock with a collar so high that he cannot nod. A man who stays in churches all day and goes from Mass to Mass, consuming communion as if he did not need other nourishment. Laypeople and clergy who believe they see divine visions and are destined to do great things as they strive to gather followers. Every type of person whose religiosity and humanity are either out of sync or whose religiosity has completely suppressed their humanity seems to end up in this city.

I lived with one of these weirdos during my first year in the

seminary in Rome, a certain Brother Gino, who was later ordained as a priest. He claimed to have visions of the Virgin Mary, bore the wounds of Christ (the stigmata), and that God used him to communicate with pilgrims. We, seminarians, lived with him at a shrine outside of Rome, and hundreds of people came every week to pray in the sanctuary and see “il santo.” Gino founded an order of nuns and believed he was called to bring renewal to the whole Church. It all sounded good to me, nineteen years old at the time, as I began my studies in Rome. Could this be an extraordinary man of God, who smelled like flowers whenever he walked by, a scent his followers called the “odor of sanctity”?

I seemed invisible to this Gino until he invited me to his private meeting room, where he spent time with visitors who requested his counsel. He looked at me with his big black eyes and asked me to sit next to him. I opened up to him about my struggles at home and in the seminary, and he encouraged me to move forward without fear. “If God hadn’t meant you to be here, He would have put obstacles in your way to prevent you from coming,” was his advice. Then he rose from his chair and opened his arms to embrace me. I accepted the embrace of “il santo” as he kissed my cheek. He then pushed me out a little and made the sign of the cross on my chest. “This heart belongs to me,” he said. He then tugged at my shirt to lift it and pressed my bare chest against him. I felt confused and became aroused, having been embraced so few times in my life; I stood still and stiff as a board, hoping the saint would not perceive my arousal. After a while, seeing no overtures on my part, he concluded our encounter, asked me to tuck in my shirt, and thanked me for coming. During the months after this encounter, he (and I) behaved as if nothing had happened, and I became invisible to Gino again.

At nineteen, I didn’t know how to interpret this episode but, years later, when Gino got suspended by the Vatican for molesting seminarians, it all made sense.

Stories, monuments, saints, sinners, and weirdos all make up the beautiful complexity of Rome.