

Caroline Arness
29 September 2009
Rome, Italy
Fall 2008

La Prima Notte

My first walk in Rome was at night. We had arrived in the Eternal City at sunset, and I quickly “settled in” or described more appropriately: I lugged two giant suitcases full of my life for the next three months up four flights of stairs of the four star hotel that was to be my home for the next three months. After this “settling in,” I decided I *needed* some fresh air. I found two other girls who I had become acquainted with in Assisi over the last few days and asked if they would care to join me. With enthusiasm that seemed a little too enthusiastic to be genuine, they agreed. Honestly, I wanted to go out on my own but I had promised my mom at least three hundred times that I would not go anywhere alone at night—and that was just on the ride to the airport. Plus, it was my first night in a legitimate big city and it was a mere inconvenience that this city happened to speak a different language than myself. I just wanted some time alone because in the last four days I had had on average five minutes to myself a day—when I went to the restroom. I swallowed my wishes for solitude as the girls threw on their shoes and fashionable scarves, and we trotted down the marble staircase—the same marble staircase that just hours before I had cursed to hell while sweat dripped from my hands holding my oversized luggage. In our rusty Italian, we awkwardly greeted the desk man, and then I pulled the slender, golden handles of the front double doors open. We stepped out into the barely cool night air, the weather for early fall was peculiarly warm in Rome this year—or at least that’s what we kept hearing. The Vespas flew down our street, Vittorio Emmanuele II, one of the main arteries of Rome, and their speed’s wake swept over my skin. Goose bumps

popped over my arms, but not from the chill. I was in Rome. The eternal city. The heart of the most powerful empire in the world. Whoa, I was a little out of my league.

I was not insecure. No, I had always had a demure confidence that seemed to go unnoticed, but as I started to walk down the sidewalk of Vittorio Emmanuele, I knew I was out of my comfort zone. Indianapolis, Indiana, my home town, was about as wild and city slicker as I got. So, the charge of the city busses hurtling toward me, the whiz of the Vespas and smart cars, the combination of lights, shadows, and noise crawled inside me and put me on my toes. I was alert. I was in the moment. We walked down the busy street and admired the old buildings, architectural beauties that would eventually become the familiar friends of my neighborhood. However, that night, the yellow street lights poured an untouchable persona on those buildings and I felt as though I was a pauper before a prince. My confidence faded and my insecurities spurted just like the water from the gravy bowl fountain we were passing. How could I ever make this magnificent city my own?

We “OOOed” and “AHHHed” as we passed the heavy doors that surely had been built hundreds of years ago, and we kept our eyes forward as the middle aged Italian men, out smoking before closing up a café, whistled and said something to us in Italian. “Watch out for those Italian men,” my mother had warned. I took heed and ignored their laughter, but I could not suppress the flitter in my chest as their deep accented voices filled my ears. I had no clue what they were saying, guessed it was inappropriate, but was dying to go over, flirt, and find out. The Italians were already using their beauty, both architectural and human, and breaking down my confidences and luring me in—and this was only my first night.

We continued down Vittorio Emmanuele, past the cathedrals, which in the darkness

exuded a confidence that only the old and wise possess. As we walked, I made mental notes of the closed shops that I would have to go back and investigate. We waited at a cross walk for the green man to light up and signal our safe passage across the busy road. I was a patient person, almost too patient, but as we waited, I thought about how tired I had been of waiting: I waited a year to come to Rome, I was still waiting to figure out what I wanted to study in college, I was tired of waiting for my heart to heal from my self-induced heart ache, and I was tired of waiting to make friends in college. As, the green man signaled go, I brushed off my impatience and reminded myself that all things would work out with time, and I hoped three months in Rome would be enough of it.

On the other side of the street, we decided to veer off Vittorio Emanuele and head down a side alley—we were feeling adventurous. Lining the ally were cars parallel parked so close that I wondered how they even escaped their parking spots. Then, I noticed the scraped bumpers and my question was answered. Our feet clomped on the cobblestones and the sound echoed off the close walls. Within days I would learn to love that sound, but at the moment I felt as if a serial killer was only steps away from taking my life. I am guessing the girls felt the same because we scurried out of the ally, thankfully meeting no one along the way, and found ourselves at Castel San' Angelo, one of Rome's most famous attractions. Smiles spread across our faces as we realized what we discovered with the help of no map, and no plan. Oh Baby! We were livin' big. Walking a little bit taller than before, we made our way to the bridge. Lights illuminated the bridge, making a very appealing path towards the Castel almost like a carpet stretched before a king. From the tan stones of Castel San' Angelo, I could almost see the history of the structure oozing its gloriously scandalous past. As I mentally traced the

structure in my brain, the history buff inside me was bursting with nerdiness. My eyes lingered on the Arch Angel Michael who stood forever with his sword drawn on top of the building. In the night, under the watchful hand of Michael, I knew that his arm would never tire and his guard would never fail; he would protect me while in Rome.

Besides another couple or two, we were the only ones on the bridge and as we paused and looked at the reflections on the Tiber river, my goose bumps returned. I saw it first reflected in the water—my first glimpse of St. Peter’s Basilica was the dome swirling faintly in the current of the river. Thinking I was mistaken, I glanced up and Voila! There it was—the most famous dome in the world! I literally grabbed the girls and started speed walking down the closed cobblestone street towards Vatican City. Beaming with pride that I had just found St. Peter’s Basilica unintentionally, I crossed the deserted night street and entered into the Holy City.

The street lights lining the road to St. Peters sat atop columns and gave a low gleam that washed over the wide, empty street. We made our way closer and closer to St. Peter’s. It was like I was being drawn to the piazza. When we reached the clearing, we found Piazza San Pietro completely vacant, glowing in the darkness which surrounded it. With the colonnade stretching out, the scene enveloped me: I was in Rome on a random Monday night at 11:30, standing in the heart of Catholicism, with St Peter’s looming before me and hundreds of saint statues standing guard around me. I did not feel moved to tears with a sense of holiness; on the contrary, I felt the place emanated scandal. I was overwhelmed with a sense of secrecy. I felt as though each statue withheld some secret, some bit of history about who and what happened in this “holy” place, and at any moment, out of the chilly air those intimacies would spill from

their stone cold lips. But alas, no cigar; I did not receive any divine revelations. Instead, we stood in the middle of the piazza for ages, just soaking the feeling in.

This was Rome at night for me: She beckoned me out on the streets and casted her shadows about me. Her antiquity, amplified by the darkness, intimidated me. My confidence fled when I stepped onto her streets; I felt timid in her eternality, aware of my own mortality, aware of my own insecurities. She turned me from passive to assertive with the sun's setting. She made me wait, made me find my way with no map to her greatest treasures. However, along the way, she sent her guards to sway my unease, and just as my impatience was getting the better of me, I managed to find them, unplanned, and nothing like I ever imagined. On my first night in Rome, she showed me a preview of what nightlife in the eternal city would provide for me: taking me out of my comfort zone, onto the streets, and finding security in my own skin even when surrounded by darkness.

Because of my first night walk in Rome, I spent much of the next three months wandering Rome's streets. Many other nights passed, and mornings and days were filled with lessons of their own. I fell in love with Rome on night one. Somewhere on that first walk I fell head over heels; yet, it was in her mornings and long days that I loved her most. I didn't think I'd ever get over Rome—or ever will. I fell in the kind of love that is scaring, startling, pushy, yet ever encouraging. The kind of love that sweeps you off your feet and you pray to God to land with only bruises and maybe one or two broken bones. I fell in love with Rome's beauty; I could see past her imperfections and appreciate her marvels. I was mystified with her charm. She could call me out in the nights and claim me as her own until I stumbled home. In the day, she could convince me that I was one of her own by simply dressing and talking like her inhabitants.

Then, cruelly remind me that despite my façade, I was American at heart. She could build my confidences with a single look from the lingering, smoldering, brown eyes of an Italian man, yet snatch them away a moment later when I tripped on a cobblestone. She reminded me that confidence was something to continually work on, something that came from coming to terms with your past and the courage to take on the future. Everything about her exuded a confidence that merited her name as the Eternal City, and with my walking stride, I would strive for that same confidence—the confidence that was void of vanity yet infinitely beautiful.