

ROME OVER THE WEEKEND (2007)

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I had no idea that George W Bush had chosen to accompany me to Rome during the weekend — en-route to Albania from his G-8 conference in Germany. This gentleman seems to excite agitationists all over the world, and Italians are, even without much provocation, a rather excitable lot. Thus the city of St. Peter was now in the hands of protestors and the Italian government felt that the situation was so serious that the normal police would be unable to handle it. Hence, one was treated to a very rare spectacle of witnessing the smart, semi-military crack force, the carabinieri on real time prowl all over Rome — in their dark blue macho uniforms and their threatening rifles and pistols. Girls, both turisti and local drooled over those handsome hunks that were straining to impress them with their crackling walky-talkies. Jet-lag or no, Bruno, my Italian host who had come with me from Delhi and I were determined to make the best of this well-earned weekend before we plunged into serious work and punishing schedules from Monday. My friend was a little apprehensive about the risk appetite of a middle-aged civil servant and I had to assure him that I was a veteran of the tumultuous years of leftwing street wars of Calcutta in the late sixties and early seventies when life was, a la Thomas Hobbes, “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short”.

Bruno had, therefore, little option but to agree to escort me through the city on the boil and hope for the best. We dropped our keys at the hotel reception and walked along the impressive avenue: Via Venti Settembre (via, incidentally, means a road) until we came to the Piazza della Repubblica. We then came face to face with the protesters, hundreds of them, waving familiar red flags and chanting slogans that rose and fell as coordinated rhythm gave way to collective growls. I felt so at home: back to my student days at the height of the Naxalite urban guerrilla movement that was to scorch Bengal for several years □□the cinders of which singe and conflagrate

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2 This is the original unabridged of a smaller article appeared in the Financial Express (Travel) on Feb. 20, 2011

large parts of India even today. The memories of Vietnam and Napalm bombs dropping over hapless peasants, came back, along with deafening shrieks that I never thought I would hear in the west: “Down, Down, US imperialism!” and so on. Most protestors, however, appeared to be having a great time as Italians (like Bengalis) can make a carnival out of every serious occasion, religious or political. When we went very close to those swinging crimson flags most of them smelt somewhat stuffy, as if they had been brought out of storage after several years.

My friend and I decided to move along Via Nazionale, so full of excitement with the carabinieri and the protestors glowering belligerently at each other, eye-ball to eye-ball, fist for fist. Bruno felt it was not at all safe for me to be caught in such a situation as his job and (I forgot) my own were in danger, if something happened to me/us, thanks to our apparent juvenile behaviour. But who cared? I loved every minute of it: as I snaked my way quite adroitly through different formations of confrontationists and hop stepped between groups of fiery agitators and the blue representatives of state power. After more than an hour, with quite a few close shaves and some dangerous brushes, we decided to move on to my favourite Piazza Venezia. During my two earlier visits to this Piazza, I had always chosen a particular roadside café (among many) and had always sat at a particular table (among many). I located my niche rather easily and was relieved to find my spot quite empty though the other tables were almost all full. This rest was welcome, as our feet were tired after this long walk and it was so much better now to sip a well deserved cool drink — a gentle, sweetish golden wine from Piedmont. Over the next week or so, this light fruity moscato and vino santo, another pinkish sweet wine, would be my favourites as I have some problems with their red and white cousins. I ordered a spaghetti alla Vongole — a classic dish that comes with a superb sauce made of baby clams and tomatoes, while hundreds of protestors jostled with the carabinieri and polizia, just a few yards away. Wizenened senior citizens watched the unfolding drama with nonchalance and even a loud, wailing motorcade that screeched past us could hardly turn more than just a few heads. I twirled my fork into the steaming spaghetti and I gazed upon the historic balcony at this piazza from which Mussolini had ranted, exhorting his countrymen to arms. Bruno had settled for a chianti wine (from Tuscany, he explained) and a light Ligurian dish of greenish flat noodles, with a heavenly aroma.

After some time, however, I could see the street play become more heated and could literally feel the tension in the air, as the long arms of the law moved in their determined tentacles closing in on the protesters from all sides, that appeared to indicate that enough was enough. The forces soon started sealing all the exit points, leaving (as I knew, from my own professional experience having tackled several anti-government protests) just a few innocuous gaps for the weak-hearted and non-serious revolutionaries to sneak out before the going became really dangerous. Bruno was a little nervous, and I could see the aggression build up all around. But before moving away, I decided to pick up my dinner as wild horses would not make me suffer the standard mixed up 'international' fare that hotels are famous for. Bruno had forewarned me that he would not be around for dinner for he had to catch up with his folks in Rome after so many months. I selected my own salad from assorted seafood — mussels and prawns, with bits of small fish, slices of crabmeat, sardines, tuna and squid, along with some marinated anchovies and olives, all drenched in real Mediterranean virgin olive oil. What the Italians insist are merely cichetti and antipasti, snacks and starters, were more than enough for a tired but happy Indian.

Back to the swirling battlefield, I showed my technocrat friend, with experience gathered from both sides of street wars, how to discover and slip through one of those almost-invisible but pretty convenient tiny breaches that exist amidst the most formidable phalanxes of police barricades. But even after coming out of the menacing circle of confrontation, I stopped and looked back and predicted with grave wisdom to my friend that I had a feeling that the final battle could hardly be expected to be fought within such narrow confines of this piazza. It would carry on, most probably, to a more convenient battlefield.

We then strolled past a motley cocktail of modern buildings and well preserved ruins until we reached Piazza Argentina, where the pillars of an ancient Roman temple still stand out in all their heathen glory. I was told that this is the sacred refuge of cats since the time of Julius Caesar and we saw several of the descendents of patrician Roman cats, meowing and purring away lazily, as always. After all, the Romans had learnt, to be respectful of cats from the Mesopotamians and Egyptians. I had, of course, acquired up this gem of a lesson the hard way, when I had picked up an angry cat in my childhood, one that had ten sharp claws and a nasty temper.

From there, we walked through some quaint cobbled lanes to Piazza

Campo de' Fiori, which is indeed quite lovely a place. At the centre stood the statue of Giordano Bruno, who was burnt alive by the Church for his scientific views, and my companion proudly pointed out towards his namesake. Religion and rationality have not been the best of friends and history is replete with numerous clashes and countless deaths that have taken place in this unending battle for control over the minds and hearts of mankind. The fabulous Baroque architecture of the French embassy in this square was really impressive, but then, I was missing the protesters and had almost forgotten about George W. Bush. It was then that we decided to trudge through some of the most beautiful localities in all of Rome, past exquisite statues of many a saint or winged angel of unclear gender.

The streets are a treat for the eyes and my friend pointed out the fact that all buildings in Rome are of an ochre type colour. This was, I discovered, actually a bit of an over-simplification: because even within this restricted range of pastel shades, the variations are really enormous. From the pinkish tinge to the subdued yet glowing yellow, then on to the light brown and the biscuit colour; from the sober buff to the darker beige; from the attractive off-white to the mesmerising reddish Bordeaux; from Spartan khaki or dusty pale olive, to the mild maroon or even the delicious lilac — the houses in this part of Rome, as in most other parts of Italy, ensure their individuality and originality. A fiercely plural nation like the Italians could hardly be expected to be such conformists, as successive regimes in the Vatican had found to their dismay — the apparent piety of a large section of its populace notwithstanding.

Oh, I forgot to mention: the Italians do go to any length to display their genius in design as also their style and taste. From the striking avant garde dresses adorning the beautiful women to the flamboyant and eye-catching clothes worn by their dapper Latino men, it was very, very apparent that Italians are fond of good things. After all, they gave the world leading brands like Gucci, Armani, Versace, D & G, (the devil wears) Prada and so many others. As we strolled along the streets we found that most shops were shut over the weekend — thank god, for despite my limited means I am an impulsive, compulsive shopper. Their windows made efforts to compensate this loss somewhat, revealing the undisputed richness of Italian craftsmanship, innovation, design and flair for detail. We let our minds wander as we stopped before smartly attired mannequins standing behind the glass walls of the locked boutiques, but one did still yearn for the real soft feel and the aroma of superior apparel.

Our feet then led us without much planning to Piazza Navona that is said to have been built above an ancient Roman stadium. It is a vast open enclosure surrounded by stately mansions and gorgeous palaces, with dozens of lively pavement cafes. Its full-blown Baroque fountains represent a rare flamboyance of medieval and Renaissance sculpture. Certainly the most magnificent among these is Bernini's Fountain of the Four Rivers, representing the Nile, the Ganges, the Danube and the Plate (don't ask me where this last one is). I posed for a mandatory photograph in front of this fount to show the family back home, but by the time Bruno could adjust his lens on me, a gentleman appeared and offered to take our joint picture. I was a little worried about handing over my camera to a stranger but we could not appear to be so cussed. He turned out to be a very genial sort of person who not only snapped a couple of very professional pictures, but gave us a few valuable tips on photography as also several broad, warm smiles — before returning the camera, to melt into the crowd. It only reinforced my firm view that most Italians are a genuinely friendly, informal lot. It suited me as I have always been an uncompromising and unapologetic extrovert, in love with humanity at large □□minor and major disappointments notwithstanding. Thus, it is no surprise that the gregarious and expressive people of Italy have always been close to my heart. Never mind what other Europeans from colder climes and uppity cultures say about them!

We had been walking for well over an hour and were seriously pondering over the prospect of settling down for a good Cappuccino in one of those inviting open air restaurants in this must see piazza, when my long lost protestors trooped in — now in quite impressive numbers, shouting, chanting, dancing, and threatening the carabinieri. The inevitable patriotic and political sing-a-songs began and had it not been for Bruno's firm grip over my arm, my yearning to join the ranks in protest against any form of imposition would have taken the better of me. The upholders of public order had also taken their battle positions behind fibreglass shields; smoke-makers and teargas shells had been readied and water canons put in position. Tempers were getting frayed and occasional missiles flew over our heads. Before the confrontational temperature crossed the barrier and the long awaited battle began in right earnest, we decided that retreat may not be too bad an option — for we were not fearless TV journalists who are paid and insured to report from battle zones, with sound and fury all around. Our assessment of the combat situation soon proved to be correct, and our timing had been perfect, for no sooner had we managed to distance ourselves just a bit came the sound

of tear gas shells amidst shrieks and warlike yells. The evening news and the next morning papers were full of pictures of pitched battles between protesters and the police in Piazza Navona. But as far as we were concerned, we had settled down at a café that was at some respectable expanse away from yet one more exhibition of universal anger over Uncle Sam's foreign policy. Some ice cold beer helped us wash down our tiredness and calm our nerves. At this point, Bruno reminded me gently that he had his engagement for dinner and I bade him good bye for the evening with his family, thanking him profusely for this very unusual non-touristic experience.

I boarded a taxi back to the hotel, choosing deliberately to take a detour so that I could see once again the familiar sights in and around the Tiber river, the inspiring domes of the Vatican, the Castel Sant' Angelo, the Villa Borghese and so on. Back in my room, I flopped on to the bed and must have simply dozed off until a loud knock on the room opposite mine woke me up with a start. I struggled to rise, fighting several bouts of procrastination. A small portion of the salad that I had carried back was all I could manage to consume for dinner, so tired was I with the fast pace of the hectic day that one had gone through, ever since our plane had touched down in the morning.

The next morning, Sunday, was bright and cheerful. I executed with pleasure my plan to gorge on some delectable Italian cheese (no, not Parma) like the pungent, 'blue' gorgonzola, the chewy, softish fontina as well as some hard grana padano and, of course, the famous white Bel Paese that I rolled in my mouth. Mama mia! Life was worth living, and more so, when I found some pickled anchovies and cured meat to top up my high cholesterol-guaranteed breakfast. Bruno picked me up from the hotel and we moved in a southerly direction through a traffic-free Rome on Sabbath. We drove through the Vatican area without stopping, past the familiar pillars around the perfect circle of Piazza San Pietro, past the Basilica of St. Peter's and the Sistine Chapel, then turned left and stopped on an adjacent road to pick up Bruno's brother-in-law Marco. His apartment overlooked the Vatican and I made a note of it, so that I could halt here and walk across to the Pope in case the Holy Father ever called me. Marco proved to be a veritable gold mine of local information and I started satiating my endless curiosity about the eternal city, even before we had exchanged our formal introductions.

Our first stop was the Porta Pia gate of the old city, where Garibaldi, the unifier of modern Italy, had entered the city of Rome in triumph to liberate it from (believe me) the autocratic exercise of Papal power. The ghosts of Garibaldi, Mazzini and Cavour floated before me and all the history

lessons on the great Italian unification that were droned into our adolescent ears on hot, lazy Indian afternoons came back to me quite unexpectedly. We moved on towards my main target: the world-famous Sunday ‘flea market’ at Porta Portese that I had pined to visit for years, but could never make it during my earlier official visits. None of the officials of the Indian Embassy had been able to guide me to it — though they rattle off the names of every Indian restaurant and their location in Rome □ however obscure they be. As we entered the area I could not believe it: the bustling, colourful market seemed to stretch for miles on end. The quaint artefacts, the small sculptures in stone and metal, the paintings (mostly fake or stolen), the glassware, the old vases and candle stands, the wizened clocks, the porcelain and quaint china pieces and the colourful rugs that were displayed all over flushed me with excitement. My two companions watched with some surprise and indulgence as I bent down at every stall, rummaged through and tinkered with the goods, fondling a few and haggled about prices, without knowing more than a handful of Italian words. These few I flaunted with pride, like ‘quant’è per favore?’ (how much does this cost?), ‘questo’ (this one) and ‘quello’ (that), until I gathered from the queer facial expressions of the shopkeepers that I had got the accents all wrong. Never mind! Marco then came to my rescue and also revealed his expertise in flea market bargaining. He whispered into my ears his instruction: I was not to show my excitement or desperation at all, however much I craved for any item. Bruno took up the task of keeping a watch over me for pickpockets, and he was distracted only when his eyes fell on an occasional piece of exquisite furniture. Marco took over my first buy and brought down the price of three small bronze busts of Roman emperors to a reasonable twenty Euros. I caressed them again and again, before I slipped them into Marco’s kit bag for safe keeping.

We strolled for hours, without tiredness, as I counted my Euros on the sly at frequent intervals and looked at many an object with an apparent lust in my eyes. There were several copper-tanned salesmen in many a shop, who had to be from some part of the vast Indian sub- continent. I soon found, to my amazement, that all of them were Bangladeshis. Conversation became easy and tips flooded me, especially about pickpockets. Rome is also notorious for thieves and snatchers most of whom, I learnt, are gypsies and vagabonds from poorer countries of Europe and other continents. But then, who are we to pontificate: India also has its share of people who pester tourists on the streets, and where possible, try other tricks!

I picked up quite a few bargains, despite the stern warning not to bring

home any more junk. I bought a few trinkets and also pored over several hundred CDs to pick up a few that I knew I would never get anywhere else, at least not at these prices. But the best bargain that I managed were a pair of binoculars that I had always wanted to possess since I was a child. It was brand new (incidentally, many items sold in flea markets are absolutely fresh) and I could smell its newness. It was just out of world and I played with it, focusing here and there until my eyes rested on a winsome lass combing her hair on a balcony, who appeared within a touching distance. My friends tapped my shoulder and we then moved on, until we came to the ‘thieves corner’ that sold fancy mobile sets and electronic items laptops at throw-away prices. It was indeed tempting, but my conscience and (perhaps) my better sense prevailed over instant avarice.

It was getting to be hot as we carried on till noon and I had to bid a painful farewell to the market □□promising to come back with more time and money. Marco took us to the Church of Santa Maria in Trastevere, the oldest edifice of Christian worship in the world. The interiors were not only beautiful, but cool and soothing as well. The sombre and holy atmosphere was so overpowering that I actually went down on my knees and prayed to God, in a fit of piety. From there, we walked past the attractive cafés in the Piazza full of crowds for lunch till we could locate an empty table in one of the many restaurants that were lined along the walls of the church in small cobbled bye lanes. I was introduced to my first proper Italian lunch, with thin slices of prosciutto (specially seasoned Italian pork) served with melon and figs. They were a bit salty, but excellent in every respect. Marco had macaroni, the Italians call it maccheroncini, with sardines, raisins and nuts, and I tasted a bit of that as well. My friends took a dark red vino nobile, but I avoided wine because my ulcers were acting up with so much gluttony, and settled for a chilled sorbet, some lovely Parmesan and fresh Pecorino cheese — watching lazily tourists of all sizes and shapes go past us in all types of attire □ incidentally, some had precious little on.

We strolled down to the Piazza of the Church to cap off this hearty meal with some divine gelati — ice cream in real fruity, chocolate and other heavenly flavours that God had gifted the Italians, for looking after him so well since the days of St. Peter. Like countless others, the Italian family that ran this little place had transformed ice cream into an art form and one looked longingly at the colourful spread before me. I opened my pocket notebook in which I note the names of many nice things that I would like to remember as this rather attractive girl of the gelati family tapped the glass of the cold

showcase at different spots and fished out broken English words for her ware, ever so sweetly. Crema and frutta, I reassured her, required no translation □□as she tossed her lovely head up and stared at the ceiling, rolling her bright eyes in amusing circles, struggling to retrieve some appropriate terms. I tried scoop after scoop of many a divine flavour and could actually feel the rich fruits melt in my mouth. I topped it all up with a couple of sinful slices of torta di ricotta, a cheese tart baked, I was told, in sugar, lemon, cinnamon and brandy

— while my friends looked on indulgently. Still on cloud nine, we strolled around in the lanes and bye lanes around the piazzia, until Marco brought us to the house on Via Trastevere where Dante had lived for several years.

At this point, I decided to surrender to that pleasing drowsiness that was overpowering me, from a combination of the midday Italian sun, the long walks, a great lunch and, of course, the mischievous beer. I shook hands with Bruno and Marco and boarded a taxi for the hotel, cruising past some of the awesome sights of two millennia of Roman architecture — for some real, good Indian siesta.

A couple of hours later, Bruno gave me a call from the hotel lounge and I freshened up to join him for the evening. We decided to make the best of it while the sun was still bright over Roma. We hailed the nearest taxi for a ride somewhere past the Piazza di Spagna that is famous for its ‘Spanish Steps’ and the Trevi Fontana. We drove up the steep road, till we reached the Church of San Pietro in Vincoli, literally, ‘St. Peter in chains’. These chains with which St. Peter had perhaps been shackled in his prison were displayed inside, quite unobtrusively. But the star attraction of San Pietro was the world-famous statue of Moses by Michelangelo, so familiar to millions, who have even a casual interest in the wonders that man has produced. I stood before it, transfixed as if in a dream, straining to feast on every minor detail. We looked around and discovered the switch-box for the floodlights and started popping coins into it to light up, for a minute at a time, this amazing sculpture. It was very clear from the scorching, imperious rays that shot out of the eyes of a Zeus-like Moses that the great master had little respect for Christian traditions of humility. Every detail of the well-built prophet, his taut muscles and strained veins, had all been chiselled on cold stone so realistically! It is said that Michelangelo used his students to dig up fresh graves to have human limbs as still models for capturing the most intricate detail of each part of the human anatomy in his works. Before leaving, we

managed to squeeze into the tiny bookstore within the church just as it was downing its shutters and picked up an affordable edition on this Moses, to consume at leisure.

From there, Bruno and I sauntered down the hill to the Colosseum, the icon that symbolized Rome — the mammoth stone stadium one part of which had been torn down in rage. I remembered how a knowledgeable Roman friend had explained to us more than a decade ago, as we had stood near the imperial gallery inside this stadium, that some twenty thousand slaves had been forced to toil for years to build this gory edifice for the entertainment of Roman patricians and heartless mobs. One shuddered to think of how countless starving men, women and children must have had their flesh and bones ripped off their living bodies by hungry lions — for their courage to defy the Roman emperor and the pagan gods of the locals. We moved along this heart of the ancient city where historic monuments, buildings and ruins lay strewn around, like exhibits in an open air museum. Here stood the Palatine Hill, the Forum, the Arch of Titus and also the Temple of Vesta, where the most beautiful virgins of ancient Rome had inspired so many salacious tongues to wag.

As dusk crept slowly over the city, we took a taxi to a lonely place called Coliseum Testaccio, the gates of which could match any museum — but had actually housed, till quite recently, a massive slaughter-house. I had been craving for the genuine local delicacies and Bruno had decided to try one among the handful of cafes that still served cucina Romana, authentic Roman cuisine. We were soon joined by my old friend, Sergio (Scapagnini), whom I had met at Gautam Ghose's house in Kolkata nearly two decades ago. We had a mutual love for films — he as a maker and critic and me as a lazy viewer. Sergio visited India, especially Calcutta or Kolkata, quite frequently and had mastered several aspects of Indian films. He told me that he had even published a book on Kolkata and films in Italian, that had appeared later in English and Bengali.

I yearned for the famous saltimbocca but was told to hold on, for Roman meals called for patience, discipline and culture. It began with antipasto, the starters, which consisted of fried vegetables or sea-food tit-bits. Sometimes this itself was good enough as a meal, as it came along with some good local brushchatta, lightly burnt bread with accompaniments. We went straight to primo, the main course, mainly pasta dishes. I was coached by the attendant and my two companions on the differences in looks and taste

between the twisted fusilli and the flat tagliatelle tapes. I was shown the round spaghettini noodles on the next table or fluffy lumaconi that I had never seen before. I was introduced to the small squarish ravioli noodles, served with spicy tomato and bacon sauce with grated tangy cheese from the milk of ewes. I looked up my notes on ‘must-haves’ and wanted to try out some cotoletas (cutlets), but I was again advised to wait until I had met their queen at Milan, the Cololeta Milanese. Then came my long-awaited saltimbocca alla Romana, veal slices rolled with prosciutto ham and sage, with a toothpick piercing them right through. Sergio told me that saltimbocca means ‘jump in the mouth’ and I reminded him of a similar dish served in Calcutta Club — slices of bacon rolled over pieces of liver, with the same tooth-pick running through, which passes by the name “Angel on Horseback”. My companions had other dishes, delicacies from the world of veal, lamb, offal and anchovies, but I was too engrossed in my food to remember their names.

Though I avoid wines, the white and red ones that is, I am always on the lookout for the sweet golden nectar that the heather gods had loved so much. My Italian friends consulted each other, and then the waiters, and finally decided I should try some sweet golden wine, the Moscato Molise. It was just exquisite and someone said it is made from grapes that are bitten by insects and have fermented naturally. Sergio and Bruno looked at the pleasure on my face and remarked that I must have had something to do with the ancient Romans, who incidentally had reached India all the way up to Bengal many centuries ago, in search of spices and perfumeries. It is they, who loved such sweet wines, said Sergio. The ‘sour’ red and white versions actually took over the universe in later centuries, after Pax Romana had totally collapsed. As the food settled in with satisfaction and the wine seduced my senses ever so gently, I heard tantalising stories of even better sweet wines, like the vino santo of Perugia, the passito from Sicily and so on. We wrapped up the delightful evening with empty bottles and pleasant memories of a whirlwind weekend, the best I have had in Rome in all these years.

As Sergio drove us back, I was reminded of the early morning appointment that we had at the Italian Ministry of External Affairs the next day, Monday, which would surely be packed with a lot of work and so on. In the afternoon, we had to board the Eurostar train, after packing in a meeting with Ambassador Dogra of India, and head for Ancona, Pesaro and the eastern Marche region — on the other end of Italy, overlooking the Adriatic

Sea and Greece.

We drove through the streets of the undisputed capital of the ancient world and I could almost hear the marching steps of the imperial cohorts on cobblestones and I could visualise the terrible Goths and the Vandals plundering it with fire and sword centuries later. I could almost see hazily the formations of Mussolini's dreaded Blackshirts clicking their metalled heels to attention and raising hollow salutes, as a charadic reminiscence of the past glory of the eternal city.

Sergio's car took us past the primitive battlements and through historic gates that stood for centuries as sentinels, but my reverie was soon interrupted as we neared the familiar sight of my modern hotel. My Roman 'holiday' was drawing to an end, but I would treasure every hour of an unforgettable weekend that I had not planned for — one that had just happened. Amen.