

At the Foro Romano

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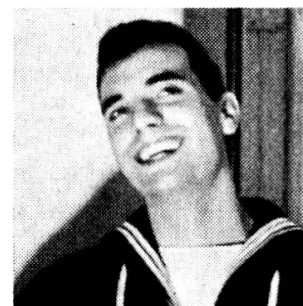
At the Foro Romano

There is no better place in Rome to idle away an early spring afternoon than the Foro Romano. The tourists have not yet arrived in full force. The wide expanse of the Foro lies peacefully in the golden sunshine, and the traffic roar of the big city ruffles the silence around me only a little. I am drowsing in the sun, I have taken off my jacket and rolled up my sleeves, and my eyes wander happily from the lovely ruin of the Mars Temple across the street to the equally beautiful three columns of the Temple of Castor and Pollux on my other side. Nothing is more bewitching than the beauty of Greek or Roman columns: you look through them to the past. I am plunged so deeply into their beauty that I give a slight start when a deep voice, close to my shoulder, asks me for a light. Another column, but come alive! The Italian sailor asking me for a match must be at least six feet eight — tall as a tree, handsome with full lips and glinting black hair under his hat, and with a friendly grin on his dark mobile face. I give him a light for his cigarette and say a few words in my rather poor Italian. The sailor looks at me and asks me whether I'm an *Inglese*. When I say yes, he starts to talk in equally poor English. We manage to have a sort of conversation. His name is Sesto, and I learn from what he is telling me in his friendly Italian fashion that he has just come back from his native Nemi where he spent his yearly leave. And this is his last day in Rome before returning tomorrow to his base near Naples.

We sit in the sunshine, and smoke, and talk haltingly, slowly to each other. Sesto, like so many Italian boys, looks older than he is. I would take him for twenty-five at least, but he is only twenty-one. While I look at his face with the heavy dark drawn eyebrows, the deep green eyes and the full mouth I cannot help thinking that this chance meeting is exactly what was needed to fill the cup of my well-being to the brim.

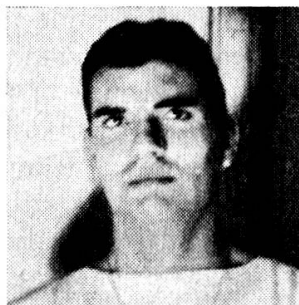
Sesto has no plans for his last evening in Rome, and neither have I. So we stroll slowly all over the Foro Romano, taking a couple of snapshots here and there. We leave the Foro at the end opposite that hideous Vittorio Emmanuele monument, the most incongruous building in a city which otherwise fits together. And since the Colosseum is just across the way we walk into it, climb the stairs to its upper galleries, and lean contentedly on the railing overlooking the wide view of broken walls, and pits, and arches. Then we stroll slowly back, having one of those spicy Italian ice creams on the way. In a square I ask Sesto if he'd like to be my guest for dinner tonight. He accepts with clean young pleasure.

We have dinner in a small place in the Via Vittoria, it's one of these places little known to tourists where they serve you excellent food at reasonable prices. Afterwards we go to the movies. — While we're watching the horse-opera Sesto's hand comes tentatively over my own. It's a very slight gesture, more of a question, really. Well, he gets his answer. I close my other hand over his own and so we sit through the remaining part of the movie. It is not the worst way to see a movie in Rome.



By the time we come out of the cinema I think we both feel that we have known each other for some time. Sesto hasn't booked a room for the night, so I take him along to my own. At my hotel they know me well, for I always stay there on my frequent trips to Rome. I am a quiet guest, and I think I can risk taking Sesto with me. We fetch his duffle bag from the station and take a taxi back. The night porter on duty is an old friend of mine, so when I ask him whether I can have a guest for the night, he raises no objections.

While Sesto is taking his things out of his bag I undress quickly, have a wash, and get into my pyjamas. Then I lie peacefully in bed watching Sesto take off his handsome uniform. When he is also ready he comes to my side of the bed, and sits down on its edge, takes two cigarettes from the package on my bedside table, and lights them both before putting one into my mouth. While we smoke we speak very little but my eyes take in all his handsomness. The white underwear he is wearing makes a startling contrast to the brown colour of his arms and legs.

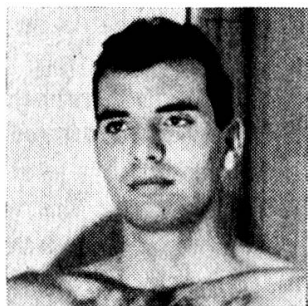


our cigarettes into the ash-tray on my bedside table. He bends slightly over while putting them out. Instead of straightening up again, he leans over me. We look at each other — there is a silent question in his eyes. My answer is to draw him lightly down un-

til our cheeks touch. With a quick movement of his hand Sesto switches off the bedside lamp, and the very next instant he is lying next to me while the heat from his strong young body creeps slowly towards me.

Much later — it is as though hours must have passed in the darkened room — his arms circle vise-like around my shoulders. Only a deep sigh breaks the stillness of the room. Afterwards I free myself slowly from his embrace. He is sleeping peacefully, not aware of my hands caressing his silken skin before I'm off to sleep myself.

When we are called by room service next morning we look at each other with a smile. I order breakfast to be sent up to my room and we have it in bed. Why not give the boy as much pleasure as possible before he has to return to service? Then it's high time to get up, dress and take a taxi to see Sesto off at the station.



... A «one night stand»? You might call it that and yet you'd be wrong. For, you see, this happened nearly two years ago and since then I have seen Sesto a good deal. We have become friends, such good friends in fact that in his last letter he asked me to come to Nemi to attend his wedding.

Richard Arlen

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