

“Rome Diary”

(from *Loneliness*)

by Norman Weeks

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Late September, 1972.

This is the season of my autumnal melancholy.

The plane has just taken off from Iceland, where I felt the foreboding of winter's approach. The next stop is Luxembourg. There will be a train there to take me over the Alps and on to Rome. To Rome and to my exile.

This is a flight from my recent past and from my failures. The two years since I left Brazil have been a labyrinth into dead ends. In returning to the United States, I lost myself. In trying to make an American living, I compromised my values. Frustrated in my ambition and bereft of my love, I now flee into expatriation. Nothing less than an oceanic separation is necessary to distance me from my failures.

There has always been an aimlessness in the far-flung itineraries of my life. This return to Rome, after a seven-year absence, completes another loop in a downward spiral. I am homeless and restless, idle and unproductive, but somewhere there must be a place in which I can tap the deep wellsprings of my potential and find a fulfillment in my art and in my love. Is that place Rome?

I don't know where I am going, or why. So I am going back to Rome.

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I have often lived on little, but I have never been reduced to nothing. There always seems to have been just enough for my adventures in subsistence. Over the past year I have scrimped to finance at least a few months of another Roman sojourn.

I have found a *pensione*, a boardinghouse, out the Via Nomentana near the Villa Torlonia, a neighborhood of Rome distant from the tourist sites and therefore from the inflated cost of living extorted from foreigners.

My lodging is a small single room with a table, an armoire, and a narrow bed. The walls are bare. There is one window. My suitcase is on the floor.

The *pensione* is a family-run enterprise, traditional and homey. There is a communal living room, its hospitality extended to the boarders as to the family. Even though this is the off-season, when their dining room is generally closed, the lady-of-the-house has agreed to serve me an American eggs-roll-and-coffee breakfast to fuel my daily itineraries. She feeds me, as she shelters me. And each morning I am the lone customer in the huge dining room.

My host is an Italian Jew whose family had immigrated to Israel after the Second World War. When she grew up, she fell in love with a Palestinian, her love alienating her from family, religion, tribe, and nation-state. She decided that she would be Italian, not Jew. Forsaking the holy land of tribal animosities, she came here to Rome, the tolerant Cosmopolis. Here there is no censure upon her love and marriage. She and her husband are refugees, as I am. To come to Rome as an expatriate is to be repatriated to our true home, the universal human belonging.

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In every boardinghouse where I have ever stayed there always seems to have been a consumptive, hacking and coughing and rattling his affliction resoundingly through the hollow halls and corridors, disturbing my silence and my sleep.

The cough of consumption, how it unsettles me! A poor wretch lies alone, housed but homeless, on a hired bed in a rented crate. Unattended, uncared for, he coughs himself into exhaustion. Every shoddy rooming house holds the residents quarantined in a tubercular isolation. All boarders are consumptives, pining and wasting away in the futility of nonrelatedness.

As home is health, so homelessness is the most deadly of afflictions. The homeless loner, staggering about in his aimless detachment, finds his liveliness ebbing and waning in a process of consumption.

The morbidity is emotional and spiritual as well as physiological. I remember when my beloved turned me out and I dejectedly sought lodging in a rundown hotel. It was a flophouse for all the unloved castoffs of society, a skeleton of crumbling plaster, peeling paint, and patched windows. I lay alone numb on the bed and listened to the racking of the resident destitute consumptive. His coughing was a dirge for all that I myself had lost.

Calling out her name, "Kathryn!", within myself, I pleaded to be reaccepted, welcomed back to the woman, the family, the home. The echo of my cry was the empty, afflicted coughing of the boarder. Then how I was alone, forsaken, utterly homeless!

Instead of the warmth and animal aroma of our bed there was only the faded, starched white sterility of the rooming-house linen. I myself felt the infiltrating infection of consumption. I lay on my side, closed my eyes, and wept.

Coughing is a corruption and degeneration of natural healthy breathing. Vile mucus and phlegm choke and gag the vital rhythms of respiration. The disease throttles the free flow of the *spiritus*.

As coughing is an affliction of suffocated breathing, so, too, that other consumption, loneliness, is a suffocation, of loving.

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The lonely one, alone in an empty room, hears life outside and peeks longingly through the keyhole at it.

Why don't we open the door and graciously invite him out of his confinement to partake of our shared liveliness?

Let our lives enrich him, and let him enrich our lives. It is self-interest, rather than charity, that should induce us to bring another person into our lives as we offer the gift of our liveliness to another person.

We enliven one another. We live one another.

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Loneliness is the hard school of love. The lonely learn the value of love as no others do. Only those who have been deeply lonely and sensitive to their own humanity plunged into an emotional void are able to love deeply. Are you intensely lonely? So shall you one day love intensely. Out of ashes, new fire!

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Sometimes, when I am sitting very still, I feel the force of my heartbeats rocking my whole body gently forward and back. It is the inner throb of life's self-assertion. My heart thumps **Yes, Yes, Yes, Yes**, dispelling my mind's occasional melancholy *No*. The tireless beat is a lifelong rebuttal to the mind's self-induced morbidity. In times of weakness and gloom, you need only place your hand over your own heart to obtain a therapeutic restoration. There you will feel the mystic music of life affirming itself.

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At last, emergence from the self-obsession of loneliness.

Now selfless, let vitality permeate our being.

Life loves itself in us, when we escape our ego-self and allow the vital current to surge through our body.

Three sources of that vitalization are Nature, love, and music. Imbued with them, an invalid leaps to life as Dionysus. Out of the wellsprings of those three sources flows the transformation of our lives. The soul, as well as the body, is saved.

Nature, love, and music!

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