TWIN BEDS IN ROME

The Maples had talked and thought about separation so long it seemed it would never come. For their conversations, increasingly intricate and ruthless as accusation, retraction, blow, and caress alternated and cancelled, had the final effect of knitting them ever tighter together in a painful, helpless, degrading intimacy.

And their lovemaking, like a pervasively healthy child whose growth defies every deficiency of nutrition, continued; when their tongues at last fell silent, their bodies collapsed together as two mute armies might gratefully mingle, released from the absurd hostilities decreed by two mad kings. Bleeding, mangled, reverently laid in its tomb a dozen times, their marriage could not die. Burning to leave one another, they left, out of marital habit, together. They took a trip to Rome.

They arrived at night. The plane was late, the airport grand. They had left hastily, without plans; and yet, as if forewarned of their arrival, nimble Italians, speaking perfect English, parted them deftly from their baggage, reserved a hotel room for them by telephone from the airport, and ushered them into a bus. The bus, surprisingly, plunged into a dark rural landscape. A few windows hung lanternlike in the distance; a river abruptly bared its silver breast beneath them; the silhouettes of olive trees and Italian pines flicked past like shadowy illustrations in an old Latin primer. "I could ride this bus forever," Joan said aloud, and Richard was pained, remembering, from the days when they had been content together, how she had once confided to feeling a sexual stir when the young man at the gas station, wiping the windshield with a vigorous, circular motion, had made the body of her car, containing her, rock slightly. Of all the things she had ever told him, this remained in his mind the most revealing, the deepest glimpse she had ever permitted into the secret woman he could never reach and had at last feared of trying to reach.

Yet it pleased him to have her happy. This was his weakness. He wished her to be happy, and the certainty that, away from her, he could not know if she were happy or not formed the final, unexpected door barring his way when all others had been opened. So he dried the very tears he had wiped from her eyes, withdrew each protestation of hopelessness at the very point when she seemed willing to give up hope, and their agony continued. "Nothing lasts forever," he said now.

"You can't let me relax a minute, can you?"

"I'm sorry. Do relax."

She stared through the window awhile, then turned and told him, "It doesn't feel as if we're going to Rome at all."

"Where are we going?" He honestly wanted to know, honestly hoped she could tell him.

"Back to the way things were?"

"No. I don't want to go back to that. I feel we've come very far and have only a little way more to go."

She looked out at the quiet landscape a long while before he realized she was crying. He fought the impulse to comfort her, shouted it down as cowardly and cruel, but his hand, as if robbed of restraint by a force as powerful as lust, crept onto her arm. She rested her head on his shoulder. The shawled woman across the aisle took them for honeymooners and discreetly glanced away.

The bus slipped from the country. Factories and residential rows narrowed the highway. An abrupt monument, a massive white pyramid stricken with light and inscribed with Latin, loomed beside them. Soon they were pressing their faces together to the window to follow the Colosseum itself as, shaped like a shattered wedding cake, it slowly pivoted and silently floated from the harbor of their vision. At the terminal, another lively chain of hands and voices rejoined them to their baggage, settled them in a taxi, and carried them to the hotel. As Richard dropped six hundred-lira pieces into the driver's hand, they seemed the smoothest, roundest, most tactfully weighted coins he had ever given away.

The hotel desk was one flight up. The clerk was young and playful. He pro-
nounced their name several times, and wondered why they had not gone to Naples. The halls of the hotel, which had been described to them at the airport as second-class, were nevertheless of rose marble. The marble floor carried into their room. This, and the amplitude of the bathroom, and the imperial purple of the curtains, blinded Richard to a serious imperfection until the clerk, his heels clicking in satisfaction with the perhaps miscalculated tip he had received, was far down the hall.

"Twin beds," he said. "They had always had a double bed.

Joan asked, "Do you want to call him back?"

"How important is it to you?"

"I don’t think it matters. Can you sleep alone?"

"I guess. But—" It was delicate. He felt they had been insulted. Until they finally parted, it seemed ineptiment for anything, even a gap of space, to come between them. If this trip were to be kill or cure (and this was, for the tenth time, their slogan), then the attempt at a cure should have a certain technical purity, even though—or, rather, all the more because—in his heart he had already doomed it to fail. And also there was the material question of whether he could sleep without a warm proximate body to give his sleep shape.

"But what?" Joan prompted.

"But it seems sort of sad.

"Richard, don’t be sad. You’ve been sad enough. You’re supposed to relax. This isn’t a honeymoon or anything, it’s just a little rest we’re trying to give each other. You can come visit me in my bed if you can’t sleep."

"You’re such a nice woman," he said. "I can’t understand why I’m so miserable with you."

He had said this, or something like it, so often before that she, sickened by simultaneous doses of honey and gall, ignored the entire remark, and unpacked with a deliberate serenity. On her suggestion, they walked into the city, though it was ten o’clock. Their hotel was on a shopping street that at this hour was lined with lowered steel shutters. At the far end, an illuminated fountain played. His feet, which had never given him trouble, began to hurt. In the soft, damp air of the Roman winter, his shoes seemed to have developed hot inward convolutions that gnashed his flesh at every stride. He could not imagine why this should be, unless he was sensitive to marble. For the sake of his feet, they found an American bar, entered, and ordered coffee. Off in a corner, a drunken American voice droned on and on through the grooves of a curiously unintelligible and distinctly female circuit of complaints; the voice, indeed, was not so much like a man’s as like a woman’s deepened by being played at a slower speed on the phonograph. Hoping to cure the almost dizzy emptiness within him, Richard ordered a “hamburger” that proved to be more tomato sauce than meat. Outside, on the street, he bought a paper cone of hot chestnuts from a sidewalk vendor. This man, whose thumbs and fingers were charred black, agitated his hand until Richard had placed three hundred lire into it. In a way, he welcomed being cheated; it made him an American in Rome. The Maples returned to the hotel, and side by side on their twin beds easily fell into a solid sleep.

THAT is, Richard assumed, in the cavernous accounting rooms of his subconscious, that Joan also slept well. But when they awoke in the morning, she told him, “You were terribly funny last night. I couldn’t go to sleep, and every time I reached over to give you a little pat, to make you think you were in a double bed, you’d say ‘Go away’ and shake me off.”

He laughed in delight. “Did I really? In my sleep?”

“It must have been. Once you shouted ‘Leave me alone!’ so loud I thought you must be awake, but when I tried to talk to you, you were snoring.”

“No. It was refreshing not to have you contradict yourself.”

He brushed his teeth and ate a few of the cold chestnuts left over from the night before. They breakfasted on hard rolls and bitter coffee in the hotel and walked again into Rome. His shoes resumed their inexplicable torture. With its strange, almost mocking attentiveness to their unseen needs, the city thrust a shoe store under their eyes; they entered, and Richard bought, from a gracefully reptilian young salesman, a pair of black alligator loafers. They were too tight, being smartly shaped, but they were dead—they did not pinch with the vital, outraged vehemence of the others. Then the Maples, carrying the Hachette guidebook and his American shoes in a box, walked down the Via Nazionale to the Victor Emmanuel Monument, a titanic flight
of stairs leading nowhere. “What was so great about him?” Richard asked. “Did he unify Italy? Or was that Cavour?”

“Is he the funny little king in ‘A Farewell to Arms’?”

“I don’t know. But nobody could be that great.”

“You can see now why the Italians don’t have an inferiority complex. Everything is so huge.”

They stood looking at the Palazzo Venezia until they imagined Mussolini rowing a window, climbed the many steps to the Piazza del Campidoglio, and came to the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius on the pedestal by Michelangelo. Joan remarked how like a Marino Marini it was, and it was; her instinct had leaped eighteen centuries. She was so intelligent. Perhaps this was what made leaving her, as a gesture, so exquisite in conception and so difficult in execution. They circled the square.

The portals and doors all around them seemed closed forever, like the doors in a drawing. They entered, because it was open, the side door of the church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli. They discovered themselves to be walking on sleeping people, life-size tomb-reliefs worn nearly featureless by footsteps. The fingers of the hands folded on the stone breasts had been smoothed to finger-shaped shadows. One face, sheltered from wear behind a pillar, seemed a void from which to rise from the all but erased body. Only the Maples examined these reliefs, cut into a floor that once must have been a glittering lake of mosaic; the other tourists clustered around the chapel containing, in slippers and behind glass, the child-sized, greenish remains of a pope. They left by the same side door and descended steps and paid admission to the ruins of the Roman Forum. The Renaissance had used it as a quarry; broken columns lay everywhere, loaded with perspective, like a de Chirico. Joan was charmed by the way birds and weeds lived in the crevices of this exploded civic dream. A delicate rain began to fall. At the end of one path, they pecked in glass doors, and a small uniformed man with a broom limped forward and admitted them, as if to a speakeasy, to the abandoned church of Santa Maria Antiqua.

The pale vaulted air seemed innocent of worship; the seventh-century frescoes seemed recently, nervously executed. As they left, Richard read the question in the broom man’s smile and pressed a tactful coin into his hand. The gentle rain continued. Joan took Richard’s arm, as if for shelter. His stomach began to hurt—a light, chafing ache at first, scarcely enough to distract him from the pain in his feet. They walked along the Via Sacra, through roofless pagan temples carpeted in grass. The ache in his stomach intensified. Uniformed guards, old men standing this way and that in the rain like hungry gulls, beckoned them toward further ruins, further churches, but the pain now had blinded Richard to everything but the extremity of his distance from anything that might give him support. He refused admittance to the Basilica of Constantine, and asked instead for the suinea. He did not feel capable of retracing his steps. The guard, seeing a source of tips escaping, dourly pointed toward a small gate in a nearby wire fence. The Maples lifted the latch, stepped through, and stood on the paved rise overlooking the Colosseum. Richard walked a little distance and leaned on a low wall.

“Is it so bad?” Joan asked.

“Oddly bad,” he said. “I’m sorry. It’s funny.”

“Do you want to throw up?”

“No. It’s not like that.” His sentences came jerkily. “It’s just a . . . sort of gripe.”

“High or low?”

“In the middle.”

“What could have caused it? The chestnuts?”

“No. It’s just, I think, being here, so far from anywhere, with you, and not knowing . . . why.”

“Shall we go back to the hotel?”

“Yes. I think if I could lie down.”

“Shall we get a taxi?”

“They’ll cheat me.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“I don’t know . . . our address.”

“We know sort of. It’s near that big fountain. I’ll look up the Italian for ‘fountain.’”

“Roma is . . . full of . . . fountains.”

“Richard. You aren’t doing this just for my benefit?”

He had to laugh, she was so intelligent. “Not consciously. It has something to do . . . with having to hand out tips . . . all the time. It’s really an ache. It’s incredible.”

“Can you walk?”

“Sure. Hold my arm.”

“Shall I carry your shoebox?”

“No. Don’t worry, sweetie. It’s just a nervous ache. I used to get them . . . when I was little. But not so bad.”

They descended steps to a thoroughfare thick with speeding traffic. The taxis hailed carried heads in the rear and did not stop. They crossed the Via dei Fori Imperiali and tried to work their way back, against the sidewalks tug of interweaving streets, to the territory containing the fountain, the American Bar, the shoe store, and the hotel. They passed through a market of bright food. Garlands of sausages hung from striped canopies. Heaps of lettuce lay in the street; red garlands of onions hung from the windows. He walked stiffly, as if the pain he carried were precious and fragile. Holding one arm across his abdomen seemed to ease it slightly. The rain and Joan, having been in some way the pressures that had caused it, now became the pressures that enabled him to bear it. Joan kept him walking. The rain masked him, made his figure less distinct to passersby, and
WHEN he awoke an hour later, everything was different. The pain was gone. Joan was lying in her bed reading the Hachette guide. He saw her, as he rolled over, as if freshly, in the kind of cool library light in which he had first seen her; only he knew, calmly, that since then she had come to share his room. "It's gone," he told her.

"You're kidding. I was all set to call up a doctor and have you taken to a hospital."

"No, it wasn't anything like that. I knew it wasn't. It was nervous."

"You were dead white."

"It was too many different things focusing on the same spot. I think the Forum must have depressed me. The past here is so heavy. Also my shoes hurting bothered me."

"Darley, it's Rome. You're supposed to be happy."

"I am now. Come on. You must be starving. Let's get some lunch."

"Really? You feel up to it?"

"Quite. It's gone." And, except for a comfortable reminiscence of nausea that the first swallow of Milanese salami healed, it was. The Maples embarked again upon Rome, and, in this city of steps, of sliding, unfolding perspectives, of many-windowed surfaces of sepia and rose ochre, of buildings so vast it seemed to be outdoors in them, the couple parted. Not physically—they rarely left each other's sight. But they had at last been parted. Both knew it. They became with each other, as in the days of courtship, courteous, gay, and quiet. Their marriage let go like an overgrown vine whose half-hidden stem has been slashed in the dawn by an ancient gardener. They walked arm in arm through seemingly solid blocks of buildings that parted, under examination, into widely separated slices of style and time. At one point she turned to him and said, "Darley, I know what was wrong with us. I'm classic, and you're baroque." They stopped, and saw, and slept, and ate. Sitting across from her in the last of the restaurants that like cases of linen and wine had sustained these level elegiac days, Richard saw that Joan was happy. Her face, released from the terrible tension of hope, had grown smooth; her gestures had taken on the fliting irony of the young; she was almost ecstatically attentive to everything about her; and her voice, as she bent forward to whisper a remark about a woman and a handsome man at another table, was rapid, as if the very air of her breathing had turned thin and free. She was happy, and, jealous of her happiness, he again grew reluctant to leave her.

—JOHN updike