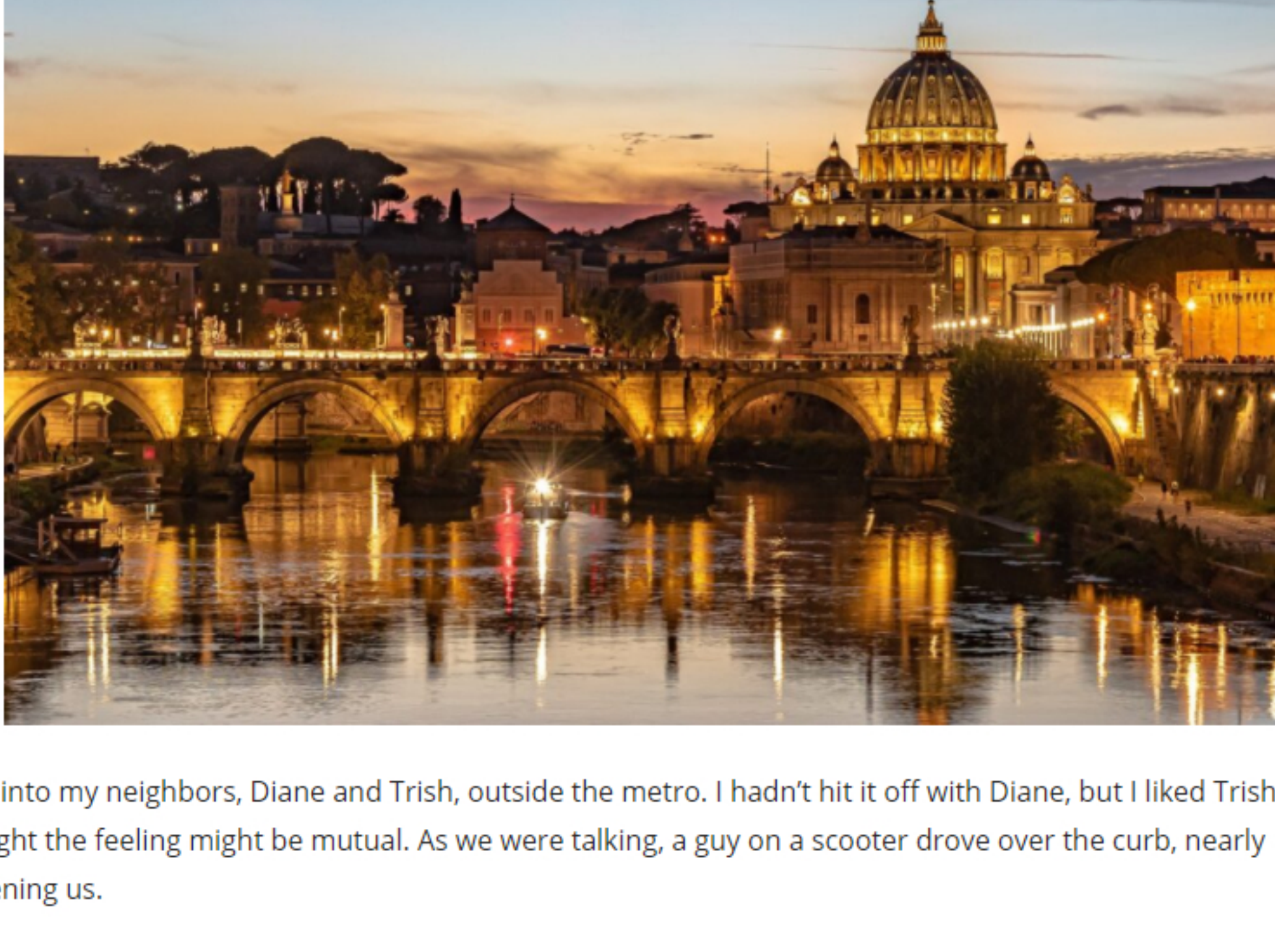


Romance in Rome by Dan Morey



I ran into my neighbors, Diane and Trish, outside the metro. I hadn't hit it off with Diane, but I liked Trish, and thought the feeling might be mutual. As we were talking, a guy on a scooter drove over the curb, nearly flattening us.

"Permesso," he said, revving his engine and inching closer.

"What's he want?" said Trish.

"I think this is his way of telling us he'd like to park here," I said.

The guy took off his helmet, flashed Trish a dentally impeccable smile, and said, "Grazie, dolcezza."

Her annoyance quickly faded, and she returned his smile, somewhat dreamily. That's the problem with trying to meet women in Rome—there's always an Italian guy right around the corner.

We walked back to our building under the glaring sun, moving faster than the clogged traffic beside us. It was rush hour and buses were jammed with standing passengers heading home from work. Diane gathered up her curly hair and scrunched it into a ponytail. "We're going to the Vatican Museum tomorrow," she said. "Do you want to come?"

I'd had some unpleasant experiences at the Vatican in the past, mostly involving Swiss Guards. I was about to decline, when Trish shot me a hopeful look. It wasn't as good as the look the Italian guy got, but it was enough.

"Absolutely," I said. "I love the Vatican."

**

In the morning, we boarded the metro together. Ours was the last stop on the line, so there were plenty of seats. I sat next to Trish, who'd done her hair in cute bangs.

"Cool sneakers," I said.

"Thanks," said Trish. "I'm going for the Punky Brewster look."

Common TV viewing habits—a good start. "Punky's awesome," I said. "You know who else had great footwear in the eighties?"

"Who?"

"Spicoli in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. I have a pair of checkered Vans in my closet at home."

"No way!"

"Way."

"You should've worn them!"

"I was told not to wear sneakers in Europe. I was told that if I wore sneakers in Europe all of the sophisticated Europeans would point at my feet and laugh. Then I arrived in Italy to find everyone under the age of fifty in sneakers."

"And jeans."

"Yes, and jeans, which I also left at home. Now I look like a professor of medieval literature on sabbatical."

"No," said Trish. "The shoes are right, but the jacket is wrong. It should be corduroy, with elbow patches."

"And you should quote Boccaccio more," said Diane.

"What do you really do?" Trish asked. She seemed genuinely interested, though she was staring at an Italian guy in the opposite seat, not me. He looked up from his phone and grinned. With dimples.

"I'm a writer," I said, attempting to regain her attention. "Sporting articles, mostly. Freshwater angling, ice hockey, tennis. A bit of pornography now and then." Diane's brow crinkled. "Just standard erotica. Some dwarf-in-latex stuff, but nothing too shocking."

Trish snickered. Diane said, "I despise pornography."

"Be careful in the museum," I said. "You might run into a naked statue or two."

"I thought the popes stuck fig leaves over the naughty parts," said Trish.

"Not all of them. There should still be a bit of full frontal for Diane to protest."

We got off the train, rode up an escalator, and melded into the steady pedestrian traffic moving toward the Vatican Museums. I was telling Trish about some piazza or other and how it was surprisingly devoid of life at night.

"Tourist traps are always dead after dark," said Diane, doing her best to make me look like an untraveled hick. "If you're looking for hot nightclubs you have to talk to the locals."

I tried to picture Diane at a "hot nightclub" grinding on the neighborhood disco king. Apparently my jabs on the metro had rankled her; she was out for revenge.

We went into the museum and got on the lengthy ticket line, where I attempted a more inclusive approach, asking Trish and Diane if they'd been to E.U.R. yet.

"What's E.U.R.?" said Trish.

"Exposition Universal Rome," said Diane. "Mussolini was building a World's Fair site there before the war broke out. He never finished it."

"No, but there are a number of completed buildings," I said.

"Yeah, I read about those," said Diane. "They seem minor to me. Very missable. I don't plan on going."

This aesthetic judgment was handed down smugly, as if from the heights of Parnassus.

"On the contrary," I said. "The buildings are very major. I felt like a speck walking amongst them, like a flea about to be crushed under a boot heel, which is exactly the effect the architects intended."

"Sounds like a fun place," said Trish.

The ticket line moved slowly, like an engorged anaconda.

"Why would we go miles out of town to see something built by Mussolini?" said Diane. "He was a fascist. That stuff should've been torn down after the war."

"Italians take a philosophic view," I said. "Their history is very long. If they'd destroyed everything built by dictators or emperors there would be no Coliseum, no Pantheon. Systems of government come and go, but art and architecture endure."

"Well," said Diane, "I don't know if these Italian men are philosophers, but they're certainly good-looking."

Trish laughed, bobbing her head in agreement. "Try totally hot!"

Ouch. It was our turn at the ticket counter. I paid the entrance fee and went through security. Trish and Diane stopped at the tour desk before joining me.

"You should've purchased the audio tour," said Diane. "It helps you understand what you're looking at."

The last time I'd taken an audio tour was at Graceland in Memphis, Tennessee. I remember standing in the Jungle Room beside a woman in headphones and hot pants who was yelling at her husband: "I CANT BELIEVE ELVIS ACTUALLY SAT IN THIS ACTUAL CHAIR! CAN YOU BELIEVE THAT, HONEY? ELVIS PRESLEY'S BUTT! RIGHT THERE! HOLY CRAP!"

"I don't need an audio tour," I told Diane. "I brought my Baedeker."

I pulled the little red book from my pocket and held it up for all to admire.

"A Baedeker?" she said. "How adorable. You're just like Lucy in *A Room with a View*."

Trish laughed.

"Baedeker has been a premier guidebook publisher for almost two centuries," I said. "I'll put it up against your cheap audio tour any day!"

"Don't have a cow, man," said Diane, leading Trish away.

"Where are you going?" I said.

"Our cheap audio tour starts on the second floor. See you later!"

She bounded up the stairs, and Trish waved goodbye. This was too much. "Your *Simpsons* reference is terribly, terribly dated!" I said.

Going to a museum with Diane as chaperone was obviously not the way to get to know Trish, so I set off on my own, plunging into the fast-moving current of tourists. They'd come to the museum for one reason—to see the Sistine Chapel—and were intent on reaching it as quickly as possible.

I encountered only three people in the Egyptian rooms. Two were children playing tag amongst the sarcophagi, and the other was a confused old man, probably abandoned there by his family.

Picture an American and his wife, conferring at the museum entrance. The American says: "I want to be at the Sistine Chapel in exactly fifteen minutes. That will give us five hours to stare at the ceiling before the museum closes."

Wife answers: "What about Dad? He'll never make it in fifteen minutes."

"Leave him in the Egyptian room with the other mummies."

The Vatican does little to discourage this sort of thinking. The museum is set up along the lines of an abattoir, with signs and narrow passages corralling visitors toward the chapel. Had it not been for my Baedeker, I would've missed many magnificent works of art. Even when found, they were difficult to enjoy with hordes of Sistine-bound sightseers breathing, malodorously, down my neck.

When I reached the chapel, it was a relief. The people around me finally relaxed and stopped plowing forward. Most of them stood there in awe, twisting their necks at the ceiling. As more and more people squeezed into the chapel, I was slowly pushed to the perimeter.

I found a seat on the bench that runs along the wall, leaned back, and gazed up at the ceiling. It was breathtaking, in an overdone sort of way. Focusing on individual scenes proved difficult, but the total impression was one of writhing vitality. In the center is the famous *Creation of Adam*, which shows a bearded God touching fingers with earth's first man, who happens to be naked and ripped like a bodybuilder. Despite the muscular bulk of Adam's physique, his genitalia are laughably miniscule. It's an amazingly prescient observation on Michelangelo's part, considering the fresco predates widespread anabolic steroid use by half a millennium.

Because the Sistine is a functioning chapel (the pope's own), guests are supposed to remain quiet. Whenever anyone dared speak, they were met with a chastising chorus of hisses. This self-righteous shushing provided the soundtrack to my visit and was louder and more distracting than any of the thwarted conversations would've been.

I noticed Trish and Diane studying Botticelli's *Temptations of Christ* fresco on the north wall. A woman standing next to them said something to her children, and Diane released an angry sibilation. As the family moved away, she continued to hiss air like a punctured tire.

Trish was leaving soon, flying back to New York. If I was going to act, it had to be now. But what about Diane? If she was that adept at stifling conversations, imagine what she could do to a budding romance. As I hesitated, an Italian guy in tight jeans and sneakers approached Trish, apparently offering his services as an art interpreter. She looked into his dark eyes, and there it was—that dreamy smile again. I took a final look at Michelangelo's hunky Italian *Adam* and slipped out the back.

Dan Morey is a freelance writer in Pennsylvania. He's worked as a book critic, nightlife columnist, travel correspondent and outdoor journalist. His writing has appeared in Hobart, Harpur Palate, McSweeney's Quarterly, decomp and elsewhere, and he's been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Find him at danmorey.weebly.com.

f t p in +

Story Archives

- September 2020
- August 2020
- July 2020
- June 2020
- May 2020
- April 2020
- March 2020
- February 2020
- January 2020
- December 2019
- November 2019
- October 2019
- September 2019
- August 2019
- July 2019
- June 2019
- May 2019
- April 2019
- March 2019
- February 2019
- January 2019
- December 2018

Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Comment

Name *

Email *

Website

Post Comment