

Nicola Lagioia

The City of the Living

On March 1, 2016, a Tuesday with a nearly cloudless sky, the gates of the Colosseum had just been thrown open to the tourists lined up to gaze admiringly at the world's most famous ruins. Thousands of bodies marched toward the ticket offices. Some stumbled over the rocks. Others stood on tiptoe to gauge their distance from the Temple of Venus. The city, above them, simmered its rage in its own traffic, in the buses already suffering mechanical breakdowns at nine in the morning. Angry forearms telegraphed insults out of rolled-down car windows. Along the sides of the road traffic cops were writing out tickets that no one would ever dream of paying.

"Yeah, right... go tell it to the mayor!" The woman at ticket office number four burst into a mocking laugh, triggering a round of hilarity from the other ticket vendors, a line of women sitting beside her.

The elderly Dutch tourist gazed blankly at her through the pane of plate glass. In his fist, he clutched two counterfeit tickets that two counterfeit employees of the archeological site had just sold him a few minutes earlier.

This retort, a suggestion that the other party go and file a complaint with the mayor, was one of the most widely repeated wisecracks of the past few weeks. Coined in the offices of the municipal administration, it had spread to taxi drives and hotel managers and street sweepers and shave ice vendors, even, when tourists—in the utter absence of any clearly identified authorities—turned to them for help in the abyss of Rome's bottomless canyon of dysfunction.

The old Dutchman furrowed his brow. Could it really be that an actual figure of authority, dressed in an official uniform, was now making fun of him? Behind him, the crowd noise increased in volume.

“Next in line!”

The Dutch tourist didn’t budge.

The ticket office attendant looked steadily up at him, observing him as a chilly laugh was painted on her face.

In accented English: “Next one!”

Many of the tourists now in line had spent the night in cheap hotels in the Rione Monti, or in the ramshackle bed-and-breakfasts around Porta Maggiore. Their noses turned skyward to admire an angel, they found themselves sprawling, after a face plant. They’d tripped over a bag of garbage, or the uprooted metal pole of a traffic light. High above, gleaming white marble, but swarming at street level, rats. And seagulls ate the rats. Misinformed, they’d waited fruitlessly at a bus stop, and then they’d set off on foot for the Colosseum. And now, here they were. You’d expect them to show some anger at the slow-creeping line, but long-dead beauty loomed over them: the sky over the travertine arches, two-thousand-year-old columns, the Basilica of Maxentius. In all that magnificence, there reverberated a threat, as if invisible powers had the ability to drag anyone that displeased down into the bowels of the realm of shadows. A risk that left real Romans utterly indifferent.

The women at the ticket window served another tourist. And so did her colleague at the next window over. The crowd stretching before them was massive, but they’d seen worse. The Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy had begun inauspiciously. A flop, opined the newspapers hostile to the Pope. The year of the forgiveness of sins, of reconciliation, of sacramental penance had failed

to attract more pilgrims than came to celebrate any ordinary year of libations, insolent anarchy, or buck-passing and blame-games.

The elderly Dutch tourist trudged away from the line. He headed toward Piazza dei Cinquecento. Next to him was a boy. They climbed up to street level and vanished amidst the oleander bushes.

“Whoa, what’s that smell?” the ticket vendor exclaimed. Her eyes were focused on the computer screen, her hand was guiding her mouse.

A Chinese tourist was waiting for his tickets.

After clicking the “print” button, the ticket vendor gazed down at her hand. That’s when she started in surprise. Next to the mouse pad, two reddish-brown spots had appeared. Before the ticket vendor had a chance to blink, the stains had increased in number to three. And now there were four stains on her desk.

“Oh, Madonna!”

The Chinese tourist stepped away. The ticket vendor leapt to her feet in fright, as she felt the worst sensation surge through her that any inhabitant of this city believes they can feel: the grim awareness of a piece of shitty luck that strikes only you, while sparing everyone else around you. She looked up. The drops were falling from the ceiling. So now the ticket vendor did what anyone in Rome would do—what *everyone* in Rome does—when blood begins to drip from the walls or ceilings of a public facility. She called her direct superior.

A few hours later, two of the Colosseum’s four ticket offices had been shut for business.

“The blood of a dead rat,” explained the superintendent of archeological heritage.

“*Un sorcio?*” asked someone from the seats in the back of the room, bursting into Roman dialect to describe a rat in its age-old Roman nomenclature. The crowd laughed along.

Wednesday, March 2nd. The press conference had been announced to celebrate the completion of the reconstruction projects around the Colosseum. But then a journalist had asked, point-blank, why on earth two of the four ticket booths had been shut all day yesterday.

The superintendent was obliged to answer the question in some detail. A large gray rat had managed to get itself trapped in the ticket booth’s drop ceiling. Stabbing itself in an exposed length of metal angle iron, it must have flailed and struggled, making its situation even worse. “The sales professional on duty that day saw blood oozing down from ceiling to ticket counter. The ticket windows were closed for professional rat disinfestation.”

The rat emergency was splashed on the front pages of the next day’s newspapers in banner headlines. Lately, the gray rodents had been pouring out of the city’s sewers in growing numbers. Rats in Rome’s Stazione Termini. Rats on Via Cavour. Rats just a hop, skip, and a jump from Teatro dell’Opera. They scurried across streets, indifferent to the traffic. They boldly entered souvenir shops, frightening the tourists.

The newspapers reminded readers that Rome boasts more than six million rats. New York and London, of course, had their fair share of rodents, but in Rome rats ruled unrivalled as Kings of the Eternal City.

“That’s what happens after years and years of incompetent administration,” declared an urbanist.

“The core of the problem is our waste management system,” a pest control expert told the press. “Let’s not forget that rats dine at the same table as humans, so to speak.”

In Rome, trash management was going through a truly stark and tragic downturn. Garbage was everywhere. The compactor trucks were moving at a crawl. Oversized bags of trash lined streets like some kind of siege wall. The nurse practitioners at Sant’Eugenio Hospital (because rats even had the run of the city’s hospitals) told reporters that this was the final scandalous straw, the insult that would finally force the city to come to its senses. Many Romans agreed. In no time flat, however, they were assailed by the thought that perhaps it was they who had slipped into a trance. The wings of a giant figurative seagull cast a grim shadow over the city. Once again, the Romans found themselves forced to laugh.

“Yeah, right, you bet... go tell it to the mayor!”

The catchphrase had become so popular in part because, in that period, Rome actually had no mayor. The city government had been put into a form of administrative receivership. A judicial investigation dubbed *Mondo di Mezzo* (“in-between world”) had torn the city wide open. Commissioners, consultants, prominent citizens, government executives, public officials, profiteers, entrepreneurs, and common criminals were all facing trial, in sheer staggering numbers. And a freak rarity among all these rarities: there were now two popes in Rome.

At times of dizzying confusion like this, it often happened that the people of Rome, faithful to their age-old customs, looked up and scrutinized the heavens in search of a sign. This, too, however—searching the clouds for a secret code of some kind—ran the risk of sounding like yet another con game, a fraudulent operation, in that year of 2016.

On Friday, March 4th, the murder was committed.

The next day, Rome was inundated by rain.

On Saturday, March 5th, Manuel Foffo left home a little after seven in the morning.

He had an appointment to meet his mother, with his brother Roberto and his maternal grandparents. The day promised to be anything but cheerful. His uncle, Zio Rodolfo, was dead. They were planning to make a stop at the Gemelli Hospital, for the viewing, and then they'd head east, to Bagnoli del Trigno, the village in the Molise region where his uncle had been born, and where the funeral was going to be held.

Rodolfo was Daniela's brother, and Daniela was the mother of both Manuel and Roberto. Zio Rodolfo had died of cancer at age fifty-eight. He had passed away between Wednesday night and Thursday morning. Signora Daniela had stayed in the hospital to sit with Rodolfo until 3:30 in the morning, when Roberto had come by to pick her up and take her home. When she came in, the woman went to the kitchen and just sat there, in silence, surrounded by the solitude that the apartment seemed to evoke so effectively. At last, she'd gone to bed. A few hours later, the telephone started ringing. Once again, it was her son Roberto. Zio Rodolfo's condition, Roberto told her, had suddenly and drastically worsened.

At that point, Signora Daniela had looked around for her shoes, put on her overcoat, and left her apartment a second time. She'd headed across the street to the building where her aged parents lived. She needed to alert them to what was coming. But at the end of that day, just a dozen or so hours later, she would be brought face to face with the fact that—no matter how well a mother might think that she'd prepared for it—there is no end to the bad news you can learn about your own children.

Manuel was waiting downstairs. He was a young man, heavily built. Tall, with a receding hairline, his cheeks covered with a fuzz that bespoke indecision: too heavy for a goatee, but not thick enough for a beard. To look at him, you'd say he was older than the twenty-nine he'd turn at

the end of that month, and even though he seemed overwrought, even wrecked that morning—his face was puffy, there were dark circles under his eyes—the first thing his mother noticed were his trousers. A pair of torn, light-colored jeans. Not exactly the attire for a funeral. But the reasons Italian mothers find for criticizing their children's fashion choices will always catch you off-guard.

"I told him to change, because it was going to be cold in Bagnoli," she later told the Carabinieri.

Manuel nodded, disappeared through the building's front door, and then reappeared a few minutes later wearing a different pair of pants. Still jeans, just not torn this time.

"I don't know if he'd changed at his house or mine. That's where I keep his clean clothes."

Daniela's apartment was on the tenth floor. Manuel's was on the eleventh floor. Signora Pallotto had the keys to her son's apartment, and she went up at regular intervals to clean house. That happened especially when Manuel needed his place "to take a girlfriend." Naturally, Manuel also entertained his male friends in his apartment. And when he did, his mother was always ready to lend a hand. Make the beds, tidy the bedrooms. Wax the floors. All chores that Manuel hated doing. He didn't even own a washing machine: he always relied on his mother to wash his clothing.

Signora Daniela checked her watch. Soon, Roberto would swing by to pick them both up, and they'd leave behind them the trees and flower gardens and church and the imposing Roman-yellow apartment building inside which, to no one's knowledge except Manuel himself, there lay a guarded secret that was going to change all of their lives forever.

Long ago, in the tenth-story apartment, the entire Foffo family lived together: mother, father, and two sons. When Roberto turned eighteen, he'd enjoyed the privilege of using the apartment upstairs. A few years later, the two boys' parents' marriage had hit the rocks. They had

divorced. Their father, Valter, had moved out. Then Roberto, too, had left home. Now he was married and had two children of his own. Manuel had moved upstairs.

Valter owned several restaurants in Rome's Collatino neighborhood. He also owned an agency that handled transfers of automobile ownership and insurance, which was well established in that part of the city. Roberto worked alongside him. It was a lot to keep track of, and they both worked hard. If you're not born rich, being a businessman in Italy means living in a constant state of anxiety and worry. You don't get much sleep. Make one wrong move and the next thing you know you've run into the proverbial ditch. But Valter Foffo wasn't running into any ditches. He and Roberto worked long hours, they faced up to the challenges that came along, no matter how daunting, and where they could afford it, they didn't deny themselves any of life's little pleasures. They dressed nicely. They drove expensive cars.

At 7:30 AM, Roberto Foffo pulled up on Via Igino Giordani. He parked the car. Signora Daniela and the boy's grandparents got in back. Manuel sat in front, next to his brother. The car took off. Half an hour later they crossed the river, over the Ponte Tor di Quinto, beneath which the Tiber's waters ran slow and dark.

Roberto drove steadily, with great focus. Manuel, on the other hand, struggled to keep from nodding off. Brothers. There's always something awkward when you see them side by side. Unless the difference in ages justifies all the other contrasts, there's always the risk of recognizing, all too clearly, in blood of the same blood, flesh of the same flesh, the gap between a winner and a loser in the battle of life.

Roberto was four years older than Manuel, and he'd taken his degree at Rome's leading business school, LUISS Guido Carli, with a thesis on statistics and insurance science. He worked hard. He had a family of his own. Manuel, on the other hand, was lagging behind the rest of his class

at Rome's law school, his love life was a mess, and it was hard to tell just how he spent his days. Roberto was taking them all to bid a fond and final farewell to a family member who had just died, and even this very basic pursuit—keeping both hands on the steering wheel of his car—was not one where you'd be likely to see the two brothers in any other configuration. Roberto was the driver, Manuel, the passenger. In fact, Manuel's license had been revoked for drunk driving. Not only had his blood alcohol level been well beyond the legal limit, they'd also found traces of Xanax and Klonopin in his bloodstream. But then, who doesn't make use of anti-anxiety drugs like benzodiazepine these days?

But the really sensitive terrain was the question of work.

"So, what do you do for a living?"

Rome is a city that tolerates vague replies on certain topics. Past a certain limit, however, benevolence turns into open mockery. Faced with that danger, therefore, when questioned about his professional life, Manuel could occasionally be tempted to speak of himself in adventuresome, if not outright fanciful terms.

"I own certain dining premises that I manage with the rest of my family. What's more, I'm pursuing several digital projects. I'm putting the final touches on a new tech startup."

When his older brother was asked the same thing about Manuel, he had a very different answer: "Manuel drops by the restaurant for meals. He's got a passionate interest in marketing, he's a voracious reader, and now and then he'll suggest an idea or two, but in point of actual fact, he doesn't actually work for a living."

When Valter talked about his younger son, he focused on his personality. "He's a well-behaved boy, with good manners, an even temper, and a reserved approach. He never quarreled with anyone at school." Again, according to his father, Manuel was "very intelligent," led an

“orderly” life, was an avid consumer of culture (“he’s capable of purchasing two books and reading them both in a single night”), but he’d never shown much interest in the auto insurance and title agency that could have provided him with a future and a livelihood (“I tried to get him involved the same way I did Roberto. But to no avail”). The young man was passionately involved in the marketing and computer science courses he took (“I give him the money for those courses”), and in recent months he actually had worked intensely on a startup. It was a project for CONI, the Italian National Olympic Committee, which—again, according to Valter—“really could have been a turning point in his career.” The project, however, Valter conceded, “hadn’t turned out successfully.”

It could have been a turning point. But it hadn’t turned out successfully.

When fathers talk about their sons in these terms, it’s never clear whether what they’re trying to do is to praise them, or denigrate them, or else just subject them to that hallowed and incontestable exercise of humiliation that is also known as unwarranted praise.

But the strangest declaration concerning Manuel came from his mother: “Manuel won’t tell me whether he goes to the restaurant to eat or help out. I don’t even know, actually, what interactions he has with his father.”

After driving the length of Via della Pineta Sacchetti, the massive silhouette of the Gemelli Polyclinic rose up before them.

Roberto parked. The five of them got out of the car and walked into the immense hospital complex.

Now Manuel was shuffling his feet as he walked along. He could feel his older brother’s eyes sizing him up. Two days earlier, at an hour that to Roberto might have been seven in the morning

but to Manuel might have matched any point on a crazed and jagged chronological line, Roberto had looked at his phone to read a text that was absurd, to say the least. In that message, Manuel was inviting Roberto to come join him. As an incentive, Manuel offered a transsexual and some cocaine.

“Ciao Roberto, wanna come join us? I met a trans woman. Also, we have a bag of *bamba*.”

Leaving aside the content, the really strange thing about this text was the word choice. Roberto couldn't rule out the possibility that now and then Manuel liked to snort a line or two, but he found it unlikely that his little brother frequented transsexuals, and he was positive that he would never have used the underworld slang term of “bamba” to refer to cocaine. Had the text really been written by him? Maybe Manuel had spent the night with some good-for-nothing and the two of them had decided to play a little prank on the kind of people who had to wake up early to go to work. Were they mocking him? Irritated now, Roberto had called Manuel, shouted into the phone at him for a few seconds, and then told him to go to hell without even giving him a chance to explain.

Signora Daniela, too, reported a somewhat bizarre episode that unfolded the day before. Around 9:30 PM, Manuel had called her.

“Listen, Mamma, in about fifteen minutes I'm going to swing by to pick up the car keys, with a friend.”

The fact that Manuel wanted to make her an accomplice in breaking the law had greatly annoyed Signora Daniela. And just who was this friend of his? “I'm not giving you a thing,” the woman had replied. Zio Rodolfo had just died, she had other things to worry about. “In any case,” Daniela told the Carabinieri, “my son's request struck me as so weird and absurd that, in the end, the whole conversation unfolded as if it were some basically harmless prank.” Signora Daniela had made it clear she had no intention of yielding to his request. And Manuel hadn't insisted.

Manuel entered the viewing chamber under Roberto's stern gaze, as well as his mother's milder, more indulgent eye. A mother might absolve her son, but to absolve is nevertheless to judge. His bowed shoulders testified to the struggle that in certain periods of our lives we are forced to sustain lest our identities—or what we think are our identities—be swept away by the false image that others have formed of us.

Manuel squeezed in among his relatives, pushed closer to his uncle's casket. As he stood there, gazing at the corpse, he resolved to make a decision by that evening. He knew. He knew while the others all remained in the dark. This was a new sensation. Manuel had known when his mother told him to change into another pair of trousers, he had known in the car, seated next to his brother, and he knew now, in the viewing chamber. He knew something that the others couldn't possibly imagine. Accustomed to complying with other people's decisions, now he was the one who could decide. No two ways about it. He could turn all of their lives upside down by just saying a few words.

But then, as they left the hospital, Manuel discovered he hadn't said a word at all. He was weary and confused, and he followed Roberto to the car. They waited for their mother and grandparents, and the car pulled away.

The funeral was scheduled for the early afternoon. The car pulled onto the Via Flaminia. In a hundred kilometers—about sixty miles—they were going to make a stop. They had an appointment to meet Valter at the San Vittore exit. Things were tense between Daniela and her ex-husband. There was a legal battle underway. Nonetheless, Valter had decided to pay his respects at his ex-brother-in-law's funeral.

Huge dark clouds heavy with rain were gathering on the horizon. They sped past Torre Spaccata, Cinecittà, and, on either side of the highway, the pastures of the *agro romano*, the vast farmlands surrounding the city. Manuel fell asleep.

“Let your grandfather have your seat, that way there’ll be more room for everyone.”

Manuel was awakened by his brother an hour later. He could hear the chirping of birds. They’d stopped at a service station. Straight head, Manuel saw a snack bar. A few minutes later, there he was. They watched his car make a wide loop before pulling to a stop, then the man swung his feet out onto the asphalt. Valter Foffo had only to make an appearance and his whole family’s attention was instantly riveted upon his person. Manuel got out of Roberto’s car, let his grandfather take his seat next to his brother, and then headed over to his father’s vehicle.

As soon as he got in the car, the young man could feel the electric shock. Between certain fathers and certain sons, storm clouds can gather even when nothing has happened, so you can just imagine when one of them believes that the other one has failed to show the respect that is due him. In this case, it was Valter who felt he’d been wronged. Manuel thought he knew why. Valter said nothing and started the car.

A few minutes later, the car was rolling down the road. Every so often, Valter would look over at his son, then up at his own head of hair in the rear view mirror. He really was a good looking sixty-year-old man. White hair, a fleshy mouth, a nose that in ancient times could easily have belonged to a Roman consul. That day, he was wearing a black jacket over his white shirt, a striped tie, and dark trousers. Looking at him, so well-groomed and elegantly attired, it was hard to guess just how stressed out he was. His work was never giving him a break, and neither was his family. At last he spoke.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?”

Valter talked to everyone else about his son as a young man who was reserved and incapable of lying. But when he was face to face with the boy, the qualities that he was determined to pass off to the eyes of strangers as estimable moral qualities quickly took on a different meaning. Manuel's sincerity might be an indicator of weakness, and his discretion, a sign of recalcitrance.

"Do you mind telling me what became of you?"

His father had tried to get in touch with him all day long the previous day. He'd called him time after time, without ever receiving the slightest reply. As always, he'd been forced to chase after his son in order to do him a favor: he needed to pay an instalment on one of the many classes that Manuel was taking, and he needed the details for a wire transfer.

Manuel sat in the passenger seat, saying nothing. His eyes were puffy. His father hadn't missed that detail, as soon as he'd laid eyes on him at the service station, he'd understood that something wasn't right. The boy was *strange*. The person who, to hear Manuel tell it, was capable of misunderstanding him more thoroughly than anyone else on earth, was also the only one who had realized that his son, on that particular day, might be able to cause him much bigger problems than Manuel's uncle's death.

"Well? I called you a bunch of times. Why didn't you answer?"

Manuel had resolved to make a decision by that evening, but once his father started in with his interrogations, it was as if Valter could pry the word's right out of his mouth.

"Well, what were you doing? Were you drinking? Did you get drunk? Manuel!"

"Papà, I was high on cocaine."

They drove past a cheese plant, then a factory that made sunshades and awnings. A small stand of poplars reared up, solitary, amidst the fields, caressed by the afternoon sunlight. Valter emerged from the state of torpor into which his son's words had driven him.

"What are you saying: cocaine!" he said in an angry voice. "How could you stoop so low?"

Pat phrases, in certain cases, are actually helpful.

“Papà, actually, I stooped a lot lower than that.”

Now Valter was really caught on the back foot. He found himself asking a question that was truly naïve: “What could be worse than cocaine?”

“We killed someone.”

The car kept rolling down the state highway. They went past a gas station, and then a viaduct, after which a sign appeared inviting local businessmen to purchase advertising spaces.

“What do you mean, *we killed* someone?”

Valter was stunned, stupefied, and incredulous—he felt something fiery spread in his belly, but the blow he’d just received did nothing to prevent him from instinctively seeking ways out of this situation. The use of the first person plural. The presence of another person could reduce, if not exclude entirely, his son’s guilt in this matter. Valter felt his heartbeat accelerate. Seeking handholds in his confusion, in the welter of new factors, in the absurdity into which he realized that he’d been hurtled, instant after instant, he found himself focusing on the idea of a fatal crash. Manuel had been drinking. He’d done it again. Despite the fact that he’d been stripped of his driver’s license, he’d gotten behind the wheel half drunk. That’s what must have happened. Manuel had done something idiotic. That is, *if* he’d been the one driving.

“Papà, there was no car crash.”

“Then how are you saying this person was killed?”

“I think stabbed to death. And bludgeoned with a hammer.”

Valter stared closely at the road ahead of him to be sure that he was still there, lucid, driving across the face of the same planet he’d awakened on that morning. He heard his own voice ask Manuel the name of his accomplice.

“A guy named Marco. I might have seen him a couple of times in my life.”

“And when is this killing supposed to have happened?”

“I don’t remember,” Manuel replied. “Two, four, maybe five days ago.”

Two, four, maybe five days ago?

How could he simply *not* know? Was there still a possibility that all this was just an idiotic prank? In the endless scale of misunderstandings that bind fathers to sons, and which lead certain sons to believe that they’ve been offended if not irremediably damaged by behaviors that fathers engage in with the simple objective of turning them into men, could this be an absurd vendetta? Was this a story that Manuel had come up with, fabricating it out of whole cloth in order to punish Valter for crimes—crimes that even the psychologist whom Valter had once sent his son to talk to would have had a hard time considering valid?

Valter asked his son the victim’s name.

Manuel replied: “I don’t know.” There were tears in his eyes.

Finally, Valter asked *where* the corpse was, the body of person that his son claimed to have killed.

Manuel knew the answer to that question. “At home,” he said. The body was in his apartment on Via Igino Giordani.

—translated by Antony Shugaar