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A Roman Street

Excerpt 1:

Sometimes at night there was a sudden, astonishing silence, when for a few seconds the city seemed not to move and only the leaves on the trees by the river stirred, and a cat mewed in the courtyard. Below. Then the bitter racket would start again in the distance—someone would sound his car-horn imperiously, lost in his little world of sensations, there would be the roar of an engine, a shout. Then there might be an invasion of boys, whistling, throwing a ball – sometimes throwing a cart; they used to pick up a stray cat and throw it in each other's faces. You hardly ever see that now. Partly the police tightened up, partly television and more money and more cars softened manners. People stare at each other less. There isn't the old leisurely, southern stare.

The graciousness of certain middle-class people is more apparent. The driving isn't reckless. A certain fever there used to be has died away. You don't hear sudden quarrels in the street below, with a crowd gathering. A certain amount of intimate life has been swept away from the streets. I suppose this happened in London about the beginning of the century. People stopped staring, watching things in groups, talking to each other haphazardly. You read about the old thriving life before then, in the London streets.

Rome was actually bigger in ancient times. But it was a huge town, not a city.

The light of Rome has changed and the buildings are dirtier. You rarely get that old splendid fiery light on the walls in the evening; or the sunlight like blinding water in the early morning. Or rather, you get a suggestion of it, touched with city-dreariness. The town has gone. It used to be a town only a few years ago. But now there is a touch of the sickening reserve of the city: the squalor of an intimacy broken and become furtive; the aching presence of too many strangers. In the summer, on a hot, still day, you used to have the feeling that the whole city lay silent and gleaming among her trees, each of her parts accessible and close to the other. It felt one whole, with the fields outside. But now the different parts seem out of reach to each other – across dense thickets of traffic and

widened roads. Sometimes on a hot Sunday, when everybody has left the city, you have the old feeling: the streets are deserted again and you can walk across them slowly; they are fixed in sunlight.

Last Christmas they closed the centre of Rome to traffic as an experiment for a few days and the effect of suddenly entering that zone was terrific. It was like going into a new – because old and forgotten – experience. Time changed. This was the main thing: time became slower. The nerves, in which time is embedded, were calm. There was the echoing sound of talk, as if indoors under a tall roof. And the footsteps sounded. There was the muffled, exciting murmur of talk: of people alive to each other's presence.

Excerpt 2

The forecourt where everybody sits is especially marvelous in the morning, when the sun rests on the roofs above with clean, fresh sparkling light.

Later on when the spring has finished, the wisteria blossom gives way to thick leaves, and there is a complete shade from the sun. This forecourt is like all the glittering and exciting places one has ever known, all over the world, in Kent and Hampshire and the Ile de France and the Mesopotamian desert and Austria and the Peloponnesus, an amalgam of all the hopeful mornings one has ever known, before the darkness of the day sets in; on journeys, dreaming of new places, with that peculiar giddy hope of youth when the world seems designed towards a certain ecstatic climax.

On one side of the forecourt, near the entrance from the street, there is a dirty advertisement of some kind, from years ago; and it seems to contain all this excitement, with the light shining on it. And the branches of the wisteria, the rough wooden chairs with their wicker seats, the wooden tables and the tall glass windows of the restaurant, the low, arched doorway into the *trattoria*, the swifts that wheel about between the yellow, tumble-down roofs, the sounds of cards being slapped down hard on a felt-covered table, the running of a child across the yard, drowsy laughter from another table, the scrape of a match, the breeze that comes in like a reminder from the sea, then the tinkling of a bell

from a small church near by, make a dream so complete that is reality, and you can hardly tell the difference – the boundary-line of your body and the outside world is nearly gone.

Excerpt 3

We walked through the centre of Rome today and realized we didn't know what sort of city were really living in. It seems the most grotesque madness to hang on. We walked through the narrow side-streets by the Piazza Borghese towards Piazza San Silvestro, then up the wide Tritone. There was one vast mass of hard, shining, stinking cars all the way. Ww were irritable almost at once, with suffocated, dry throats. It was all made and monstrous. We hadn't realized that there was just no town left, not even what little there'd been a few years ago. It was the work of an idiotic and blind epoch, in which we were marking time for better generations to come. The place was a garage – you couldn't call it Rome! The air wasn't Roman any more. There wasn't that stirring Mediterranean light. Not that the cars in this garage were serving any purpose at all. They were going slower than we were. So you had the idiotic spectacle of people sitting inside machines stopping other people walking, in order to go slower than walking pace themselves. This is the absurdity of every city, nowadays; only Rome shows it with an open hand. It isn't horrific any more. Even a feeling as strong as horror has passed. There's nothing to be afraid of in that mass of traffic, or in the fumes, or in the death of intimate life which they have involved, or in the languishing, tired, sunken body that they produce, for that matter. It's just absurd: because it has no relevance any more – it can't go on for much longer; it is stopping itself as hard as it can go. The whole city will get paralysed (one beautiful day – what a marvelous silence that will be!) and cars will have to be drawn out backwards. Again it is the same in every city, though you don't see it so plainly. It is the nineteenth century in its last-idiotic fling, showing us that either we do something – either we move into our own epoch – or we perish.