

Carrion Birds

Written by ELI GOTTLIEB in 2003, © 2003 - 2008, All Rights Reserved.

The first impression of Roman traffic, seen from the city's natural epicenter of Piazza Venezia, is of a scene of hand to hand wheeled combat, a laboratory of internal combustion Darwinism where lumbering buses and trucks are under constant evolutionary assault by darting, quicksilver scooters and tiny cars. The roar is apocalyptic. And though a white-gloved traffic policeman on a pedestal gravely waves his hand and blows his whistle as if expecting to be obeyed, there is no immediately obvious reason why dozens of people don't die on a daily basis.

For years I'd been riding a motorbike in Roman traffic, priding myself on having gradually seen through the surface chaos to a deeper order. I'd come to believe that the smallness of cars produced a collective driverly alertness. I'd grown convinced that the cultural homogeneity made for stable traffic rules. Gradually I'd become a confident, aggressive *centauro* or motorcyclist. Riding home to lunch one day, I pulled up to a long line of cars waiting at a light. It was late-morning and the day was already scorching, with the pitiless magnification of radiant heat that takes place in the outlying area around the Colosseum, where the expanse of whitish decayed stone and open air seems somehow to focus and deepen the misery index dramatically. The intersection of *Via Marco Aurelio* and *Via Claudia* is a forking confluence of roads made more dangerous by being traversed, at ten minute intervals, by fast bell-ringing trams. Three months earlier I had seen a vicious pile-up there between motorcycles at the same light. But I had forgotten about it

Scooters in Rome dwell at the very top of the vehicular food chain, enjoying tremendous advantages of access and conducting, for that, to a certain cheerful lawlessness. I was seated at that moment atop a brand new remarkably sleek and powerful version called an Aprilia Leonardo. Revving the engine, I moved out to shoot illegally down the right hand gutter to the head of the line. The streaming superheated air gave the brief sensation of respite from the torrid weather. I was unable to react in time to the sudden movement of a panel truck which jerked rightwards out of the lane to take a sidestreet. I hit it hard.

Approximately two years earlier, the outgoing center left government of Italy had committed an act of rare national consensus and passed a law mandating helmets for motorcycle and scooter drivers. According to long-standing Italian tradition, the law was observed along a curve of diminishing adherence the further one went south. In Naples, for example, it was hardly observed at all. But in Rome, two weeks before the panel truck jerked out in front of me, the city council had instituted one of its periodic showpiece crackdowns, and motivated the loathed *vigili urbani* or traffic police to a rare spate of enforcement of helmet laws. The *casco* was to be in place, or else.

I flew up in the air. Not high, but far. There was a feeling of grotesque indignation, a kind of beetling outrage at the interruption of my trip home. Where I flew, the bike followed. I can imagine the tableau we created for other motorists: a scooter whose curves already seemed to simulate flight actually flying, driven by a man whose mouth seemed open in a furious denial of what was happening to him.

I landed sideways, having revolved partly around in the air. Still attached to the motorbike, my ankle hit first, initiating a whiplike impact of my body as it met the street in a rolling tumble: shin, hip and shoulder whamming individually into the pavement. There was a beat of conscious thanks for the fact that whatever had happened to me was over, when a piston of irresistible downforce slammed my helmeted head into the street. For a moment I lay in the special erotic embrace of the motorcycle accident victim: legs spread to accommodate the lover-like 350 pound weight of the bike as it fucks him, and the asphalt fucks back. Then closing my eyes, I passed out.

By common opinion, Italy is one of the most charitable places on earth. Regularly, Italians lead their European neighbors in donations of blankets, clothing and food for the variously indigent and victimized around the world. In the late 1990's a scandal erupted when the materials solicited by the government outstripped the government's ability to store them and many goods were later found rotting in open containers. This culture-wide generosity is superficially a residue of Catholic *caritas*, but it is deeper than that. Two thousand years of peninsular family life, stamped by Latin and aerated by the high speed fan of rotating governments, have produced a culture of great clannishness and human warmth whose essential provincialism goes hand in hand with the most easily touched benevolence.

The shutter of consciousness clicked open. The sun was lying in hot pieces on the exposed parts of my skin. It seemed unnaturally, theatrically bright, as if the product of obviously artificial illumination. Searing pain was rocketing up my leg. The silence

around me meanwhile was thick, directional and jammed with intention. Out of this silence there rose a growing bustle of activity. A glance around me confirmed my hunch: from every angle, streaming from restaurants, dismounting from passing motorcycles, reversing direction while walking on the street to break into a run, Romans were rushing in my direction.

The first person to reach me had zooty sideburns and an abundance of chest hair. His eyes roved over me with the bright, acquisitive stare of a carrion-bird. I could see myself through his eyes: foreigner, probably—my Italian had turned hesitant, groping from the shock—rich, and helpless. Another person arrived, and then another. Did I want something to drink, some water perhaps? A kindly voice then asked if I wanted something to eat. The driver of the panel truck appeared, a balding clerkish type, grown pale with fear. The bike was slid off my body and I was helped to my feet. My left foot wouldn't hold any weight. When I looked down, blood was squelching in my shoe. The crowd pressed closer. There were suddenly shouts, near shoves, gold chains slewing around necks as the original carrion bird became embroiled in a verbal duel with several other local young *bulli* or macho stirrer-uppers. Rome is full of well-dressed, mostly unemployed thirty somethings who live at home with their parents and roam the streets in a state of yearning volatility. These men were duking it out socially for control of the situation. They were trying to draw as close as possible to the shimmering silver plum of a nearly-new Aprilia Leonardo. But although I assumed all this, I couldn't be certain of it, because they weren't speaking Italian but Romanaccio, the local blustering sub-dialectal argot of the city, and I couldn't understand a word they said.

“What do you want to do with the bike?” came the sentence. It was spoken by the original carrion bird, in perfectly correct Italian. But this was not a friendly inquiry. The tone of his voice made it clear he believed he was dealing with an idiot, *uno deficiente*. In the meantime he had evidently routed his competitors. Too distracted by my own pain to notice what had been happening, I now saw that they were slinking away in their pebble loafers, wings folded. “What do I want to do?” I was unable to speak or think clearly. I could feel a racing pulse sending wounded throbs of blood from my ankle. “How do you mean?” The bird looked at me disgustedly. “The ambulance,” he said, as I became aware for the first time of approaching sirens, “will be here before the police. They’ll take you away immediately. What, you think they’ll wait for the cops?” He seemed on the brink of rage at my obvious stupidity. “No,” he shook his head as the ambulance screeched to a halt nearby. “You tell me you want me to put the bike in my store, I’ll do it, sure” he said, leaning down to talk to me, oily with insincerity. Two heavysset nurses meanwhile emerged from the rear of the ambulance, sized me up, and immediately, with a kind of bored velocity, began preparing a gurney. “Which store?” I asked. He pointed vaguely down the street. “I’ve got a housewares store, wholesale, I put it there. I protect it for you, safe as the mayor’s wife.” He was still talking as I was placed on the gurney, and slid into the ambulance and onto a track which finished its travel with a loud, positive click. The doors were shut. Through the frosted porthole windows I could see the crowd assembling around my bike, their features avid, excited. “Can we stop and wait a moment till the police arrive?” I asked the nurse, craning my head around and giving her my best smile. “I have a bad *presentimento* about my bike.” She smiled at me and neatly snipped away the toe of my sock with a pair of angle-nose scissors, “Didn’t you know?” she asked. “The police will come to the hospital to find

you about your bike. It's standard procedure," she said, tapping on the window leading to the front seat as the ambulance, with a start, shot forward, sirens wailing. She peeled off the rest of my sock, looked down at my leg. "Wow," she said.

As we wound through the crooking streets of *zona Celio*, a gentle slope above the Colosseum, I grew aware of having crashed out of the frame of my own life and into a world set at a distance from the wall of typical perceptions which normally insulate American residents from the darker machinations of Rome. Americans, even those of longstanding residency in the city, often live slung in cocoons of entitlement with their own doctors, their own schools, their own anglophone social lives, and until the currency's crash, their own dreamy, invulnerable cushions of dollars . It had always been my pride to have avoided that insularity and lived as Roman a life as possible. But I was about to be spilled into a brusque state of correction about just how real the "real" Roman could get.

The ambulance swerved left off the main street, throwing me up against the edge of the stretcher and we pulled suddenly into a high arched gate in the middle of an endless collection of institutional iterations, most of them of rusticated brick. My stretcher was lifted and set down, slammed through the crash doors at high speed and then yanked down long corridors filled with trademark sour-sweet hospital smells, before being snugged by the ambulance nurse close to the wall. The woman patted me once on the shoulder and then vanished into the milling crowd.

As it turns out, I'd had the misfortune to fall near San Giovanni, the city's largest, most indifferently run hospital. For hours I lay warehoused in the hallway, untended, while blood, leaking through the butterfly closures the nurse had applied in the ambulance, surrounded me with a spicy organic odor, equal parts sepsis and roses. Meanwhile elderly volunteers from the local church parish circulated through the crowd with cold water in pointy paper cups. Sullen Nigerians with immigration worries on their minds sat stolidly, arms in slings, feet in pegged casts. A boy was brought in with his eyes fluttering uncontrollably after being hit in the head with a stone. Under the democratizing lurid glow of the fluorescent lights, everyone seemed to look at each other with a certain glum recognition: *we're in the worst hospital in town*. I watched the police as they circulated through the crowd on official business, my thoughts regularly returning to my girlfriend, whom I'd been unable to call and who was doubtless in a panic by now, and my motorbike, whose beautifully fluted silver body was about to be swallowed up somehow in the urban moil and vanish forever. I knew the predatory habits of Roman carrion-birds. And the *vigili urbani*, despite the promises of the nurse in the ambulance, were nowhere to be seen.

Finally it was my turn to be x-rayed. *La radiologa* was a small dark-complected woman with vaguely Indian features. When I asked her somehow to help speed up the process which was keeping me stranded on my stretcher in the hallway in a state of deepening discomfort, she turned on me indignantly. "Help you?" She asked. "Tell the doctors to help *us*. To them, we nurses and technicians are disposable, like chewing gum." She leaned closer, adjusting the reticulated arm of the x-ray machine. "I'm from Ecuador," she said, "and even in Quito they wouldn't treat people the way they treat us." She stood

up, and went behind a kind of shield with a window in it from where she could throw the switch and activate the blast of x-rays. “This is not the third world,” she said, as the machine barked with a loud noise of impedance, “it’s the eighth world.”

Fully seven hours after arriving at the hospital, I finally tottered to the front door, seriously dehydrated, dressed still in the bloody rags of my clothes, and clutching a thick pile of incomprehensible medical documents. In the intervening period I’d been stitched up by an indifferent surgeon, had the stitches open again while I was back on my stretcher, summoned an orderly with a shout who’d swabbed the fresh blood off my leg with a punitively heavy hand, and seen an orthopedist who’d studied my x-rays while doodling a series of flowing, serif-rich signatures on a dozen of my documents and explaining that it was a miracle I wasn’t broken into little parts, or dead. Lurching now through the front door of the hospital and out into the street, I caught a cab. It was dusk and the fierce Roman sun was drowning in the Tiber. We drove to the spot where the carrion-bird had indicated he’d be holding my bike, but all I could see when we arrived was a storefront whose metal grille had been lowered over dusty windows. I rattled the grille a moment to no avail. But ringing the bell of the furniture-restoring shop next door brought forth an elderly man in a blue apron holding a wooden mallet in his hand. He explained that his neighbor was normally open at this hour, but that the man had unexpectedly closed up shop and rushed out for the day. This confirmation of my worst suspicions went through me like a stroke. Suddenly dizzy and dehydrated-feeling, I sat back down on the curb for the second time that day. I could feel the bike receding down the long avenues of possibility that I would ever get it back. I put my face in my hands

and slowly shut my eyes. There was only one recourse left: to call the police. But which police was the question.

Fittingly for a country which theatricalizes all forms of authority the better to ignore them, Italy has fractioned law enforcement into a bewildering array of subsets, each with its own nomenclature, cars, and smartly martial fashion accessories. There are the health police, the traffic police, the aviation police and the tax police. There are the prison police, the military police, the county police and the State police, among many, many others. With no other options open to me—the store, heartbreakingly, was closed for the next few days—I began a dispiriting marathon of phonecalling to try to track down my bike. For hours, within the dread immensities of *La Statale*, the state offices, I was bounced from one department to another, as the bored voices of functionaries grew happy with relief that they couldn't help me. Finally, after two days of fruitless calling, I ran the correct agency to earth, and though they couldn't promise me anything, an hour later I was in a cab heading towards the tony Aventino district, my heart lifting. The address turned out to be promisingly ugly, a huge steel structure perfect for warehousing impounded cars and bikes. Into the tiny entrance to the building I went, spearing and poling myself along with my crutches like a gondolier, and was soon limping up the steps of the sonorously named *ufficio infortunistica*.

The common wisdom for foreigners in Italy runs: *if you ever fall into the clutches of the police, immediately claim you're a journalist*. This is reputed to be the only sure-fire thing that will protect you—along, of course, with the old-fashioned expedient of fulsomely kissing ass. Limping down the endless halls of the facility, I prepared my

story. The truth—that I was a novelist who’d won a Rome Prize to come to Italy five years before and had stayed on, in love with the city, working as a ghost-writer tarting up the public image of rich American ex-pats for hire—was besides the point. In this version I was a correspondent for an international news agency whose specific mandate was to “draw up travel and leisure profiles of your *bel paese*.” The reason I was without even the minimum papers wasn’t that I’d mistakenly put my faith in an earlier, pre 9/11 conception of Italy as a place of maximum bureaucratic porousness, but that I “lived in a revolving door and am never in one place for more than a week.” Ducking into the office whose number I’d been given, I watched as from behind a desk an elderly woman lifted indifferent eyes in my direction. Her pendulous lip and nose and large glasses gave her the look of a kindly ruminant. When I gave her the license plate of my bike, she ran it down a list and then called out “Sergio” in a surprisingly loud voice. A second later a man with large, bizarrely declarative handlebar moustaches entered the room, and beckoned me to his office just down the hall. When I entered, he indicated that I sit down with an abrupt jut of the chin, and closed the door behind me. He stared at me knowingly a moment over his impaling moustaches. Unmistakably, he transmitted to me the feeling that it was a going to be a long interrogation.

First he took down from a rack a file the approximate width of a brick, and began paging through it rapidly. An anonymous policeman, he explained, had already taken verbal depositions from all the eyewitnesses, and had handwritten their responses on long pages of special legal forms the better to recreate *la dinamica del’ incidente*, i.e, a description of the physical circumstances of my accident. I was already aware of the Italian propensity for turning routine tasks into studies in the art of document-inflation. Banks

and post-offices in Italy are temples of triplicate forms and multiple signatures, and the rhetorical throat-clearing of an Italian business letter can go on for several paragraphs. But still I was unprepared for page after page covered with arrowed vectors, minutely notated, along with graphic representations of trajectories and skid-marks. . . . When Sergio was satisfied that I was sufficiently impressed, he sat back and drew the tip of his index finger along the curves of his incredible moustache. The problem, he said with evident satisfaction, was that I hadn't yet explained who Davide Berona was. "Davide Berona?" I asked him. "Who is Davide Berona? I've never heard of such a person." Davide Berona, he said, was the driver of the bike, and then he showed me a form in which Davide Berona claimed to be precisely that. I had precious little time to dwell on the fact that I finally had the name of the chain-wearing *bullo* in hand, and that I was entirely right to have entertained worst-case suspicions about the fate of my bike, because Sergio was now asking me for my "document" and staring at me. The moment, it was clear, had arrived.

I began the process by bringing out passport and a tattered identity card from the American Academy. I brought out my Italian tax card and even what's called a "delega", a fancy notarized letter which allowed me, while not an Italian citizen, to have the bike bought for me by someone else. Sergio nodded at each document as if checking off a mental list. Then he calmly asked for my *permesso di soggiorno*. He was presuming I had one, of course. I spoke Italian. I obviously lived here. It was clear that I would have the basic document granting me legal sanction to do so. As I launched into my prepared speech, explaining of my longstanding attachment to the country, and attendant folderol, he watched me patiently. And then, suddenly, I saw him sit up straight. I had just told

him I was from New Jersey. You are from there? He asked. I had momentary pang of confusion, nodding yes. The hit American show about Jersey Mafia called *The Sopranos* had just debarked on Italian television—was that what he was excited about? But no. His stern expression grow soft with reminiscence. A light of tenderness flared in his eyes. “Cleefton,” he said. “Oboken” he added. “The Jersey shore,” he went on as I listened, thunderstruck. “Yes, we have been there on the ocean for several summers, at Deal,” he said. He pronounced it “Dee-All”. I knew the town, vaguely. “New Jersey is so big and clean and beautiful!”

Not once in my entire life have I ever heard New Jersey called big or clean or beautiful, but I smiled encouragingly. “Oh yes,” he said, “I have so many relatives in New Jersey. And Feel-a-Delphia, of course, which is near New Jersey—full of Italians! And then New York,” he said, and leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head, in the full flood of reminiscence, “that is not a city, it is a what, state of mind?”

I had found the lock and turned the key. Not my high-flown rhetoric about Italian journalism but rather my origins in that state once memorably described as looking “like the back of an old radio” had saved me. The *permesso di soggiorno* was never mentioned again, and was replaced by a smooth-running, highly detailed travelogue of his every trip to America. After fifteen minutes, his momentum slowed, and nearly apologetically, he said that he had to return to the bureacratic matter at hand. He explained that having taken the depositions about my accident from eyewitnesses, it was important to get one from the “interested party.” He grabbed his pen, drew out a fresh sheet of white paper, had me recount the accident from the very beginning, and when I

got to the part about zooming down the right hand lane past the cars parked at the light, Sergio held up his pen-holding hand. “No,” he said simply. “NO?” I asked. “Passing on the right is illegal, even if everyone does it,” he said, and looked at me for a long measuring moment. He tapped the pencil against his teeth a moment with the faintest clicking. Then he pushed his lips outwards, as if having come to a decision. “We can’t have that,” he said, “because with it come the expensive tickets, and the court trial, and the bureaucratic difficulties that never end. Instead, my New Jerseyan friend, why don’t we have you say,” he began to write, smiling slightly to himself as if at his own creativity, “I hit my head on the asphalt and I don’t remember a thing.”

I shook his hand on the way out. I never saw him again. I still have the scars on my shin. When people ask me about them, I say they were a gift from a Roman policeman named Sergio, and though they commonly assume this means that I was beaten while demonstrating or marching in a political rally, I just smile and in the best Roman way, instead of telling what actually happened, allow them to draw their own cockeyed, far more interesting conclusions. Storytelling is an art form after all, and among the many things I learned from Sergio and the other denizens of the fertile, lawless, endlessly livable city of Rome, is that a good story always trumps the truth. .