



F L Y L E A F

# *Ghosts of the Villa Borghese*

*by Frank Scozzari*



They stood on the Pincio Terrace, that place above the Piazza del Popolo with the commanding view of Rome. Beneath them, a thousand red-tiled rooftops stretched out across the ancient city, from the distant columns of the Coliseum to the glistening dome of St. Peters' Basilica. To the west was the long, winding curve of the Tiber River where it came around past the Castel Sant'Angelo.

"It's like we're back on the Terrace of Infinity," the young woman said.

"Yeah, but that was a little higher," Garrett replied.

"Do you think Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck stood here?" she asked.

"Probably."

"And Sophia Loren."

"Most likely."

"And Marcello Mastroianni and Roberto Rossellini?"

"Them too."

"Such a romantic place!"

"It is."

A warm breeze swept up from the city below and blew against their faces. In the distance they could see tiny black dots walking across plazas and sunlight flashing off the windshields of moving vehicles.

"Just think of how long this city has been here," the woman said, "...of all the many people who have come and passed."

"Probably thousands, hundreds of thousands, standing here like we are now, enjoying the same view and feeling the same warm sun."

The woman gazed thoughtfully at the horizon. "The Bernini was like a ghost, I mean it was very life-like but without color."

"Which one?"

"All of them, but especially the Apollo and Daphne. I can't get over the way the wind blew through her hair and the fabric of his robe flowed freely behind him, so alive; carved out of stone but as if they were breathing. It's like at any moment they'd break out of the marble and dance their way out of the museum. Did you read the story?"

"No."

"He pursued her relentlessly, you know. It's what Bernini portrays in the sculpture; Apollo chasing her, pleading and promising her everything. She begs with her father to make her ugly so that he'd stop hunting her, so her father transforms her skin into bark, her hair into leaves, and her arms to branches.

"That'll do it."

"Well, it didn't. Even in this form Apollo still loved her."

"Those who pursue fleeting forms of pleasure, in the end, find only bitter berries in their hands."

"You did read it!"

"Only the engraving."

She pushed at him playfully. Then she leaned over the rail and took in the fantastic view.

"If only it could last forever."

"Nothing does."

"Don't be so fatalistic."

Suddenly the woman looked down at her purse. She opened it and looked through it. "I left my perfume on the counter!" she cried out.

"What?"

"My perfume! I left it on the counter in the bathroom at the hotel. We have to go back!"

"What?"

"It's *Chanel*, they'll take it."

"I don't think so."

“Yes, its expensive stuff.”

“It will be fine.”

“You think?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“But I’m worried about it.”

“Don’t be.” He turned and leaned forward. “Let’s enjoy the view.”

There were many other tourists on the terrace, indulging in the view and taking photographs. Garrett looked at them, and as he did he thought about what the woman had said, about all the many people who had come and gone from this city. They are all ghosts, he thought, like the Bernini. Like the thousands of people who had roamed the streets of Rome in the past, these tourists will also be gone. Their time too will pass. So now he thought about it like he’d never thought of it before. It made him realize the fragility of the moment, and he suddenly felt overwhelmed by a sense of urgency. He looked around and saw an empty space at the balcony.

“Let’s take a picture!” he said.

“What?”

“If you don’t write it or photograph it, with time it never happened.”

“What?” the woman asked.

Nearby a young German couple was standing at the balcony taking pictures. Garrett took the young woman’s hand and led her over to them.

“Could you snap a picture for us?” he asked.

“Yes, of course,” the young German man replied. “And maybe afterward you could do the same for us?”

“Sure.”

Garrett pointed to the empty spot at the rail. “There?”

“Yes, of course,” the German said.

Garrett handed the German his camera and led the

woman over to the balcony.

"We have to go!" the woman said.

"This will only take a minute."

"I'm worried about my perfume."

"It will be okay."

They positioned themselves with their backs against the rail and the panorama of Rome behind them. The woman stood quietly as the German framed them in the shot.

"We are here together here in Rome," Garrett whispered softly. "Smile for the camera."

"Ready?" the German man asked.

Garrett pulled the woman close to him and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. The young woman forced out a smile, but she was still thinking about the bottle of *Chanel* sitting precariously on the bathroom counter.

The German centered the small digital screen and clicked the 'photo' button.

"Another?" the German man asked.

"Okay."

They repositioned themselves and the German snapped another picture. Then they swapped positions and Garrett took a few pictures of the German couple. Afterward, Garrett and the woman resumed their position at the edge of the terrace, leaning outwardly against the ancient marble balcony.

"Let's go," the young woman said.

"There's the Campo de Fiori," Garrett said, pointing off into the distance.

"Where?"

"There!" he pointed again, more precisely. "That's the place we had dinner last night."

"That's it?"

"Yeah."

“Do you think your mother would like to return to Rome?” he asked.

“Of course she would. If only she could make the trip.”

“It’s possible, I think. Of course she’d need some assistance.”

“Too bad there’s not a cure for arthritis.”

“Everything’s curable except death.”

The *Chanel* again weighed heavily in the young woman’s mind and a mortified expression returned to her face. “Let’s go!”

“Wait,” Garrett replied, holding her arm back gently. “Look at it.”

“What?”

“Look at it!”

Garrett could smell the aroma of cypress coming from the tall, narrow trees growing along the side of the terrace. The dark green needles, warmed by the sun, gave off a scent of fresh cut pine. He breathed it in deeply through his nostrils and let the sun soak into his face.

“Let’s go,” she said.

He took her hand and together they rushed down the steps back to the Piazza del Popolo.





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

FRANK SCOZZARI's fiction has previously appeared in various literary magazines, including *The Kenyon Review*, *Tampa Review*, *Pacific Review*, *The Nassau Review*, *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *Ellipsis Magazine*, *Minetta Review*, *Eleven Eleven*, *South Dakota Review*, *Roanoke Review*, *Reed Magazine*, *Hawai'i Pacific Review*, and *The MacGuffin*. Writing awards include Winner of the National Writer's Association Short Story Contest and three Pushcart Prize nominations.

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

GABHOR UTOMO was born in Indonesia. Since graduating from the Academy of Art College in 2003, he's worked as a freelance illustrator and has illustrated numerous books including several of the popular *Choose Your Own Adventure* books. His painting of Senator Milton Marks is on permanent display at the California State Building in downtown San Francisco. He lives with his wife, Dina, and his twin girls in Portland.