

The Hammer in the Mouth Henry Latourette Miller

After the last drink was through, we began pushing ourselves out of the bar. Some of us stumbled into other people and other tables, some of us got caught up in the frenzy of a football match on the television, and some of us fell towards the bathroom. I felt a downward turn as I ran into the back of a sweaty Swede. There was a group of them visiting the school, and they all managed to find this hotspot in the city. They all had amusing accents and blonde hair and they towered over the locals. I skip the apology and hustle by to get the outside air.

Soft and clear, I was always amazed at the few stars hanging over this city in the night. There were just enough to make each one special. I stood at the corner of the square, the field of flowers by day, the swarming drinking grounds at night. People from every imaginable background came here to get wasted and hopefully laid, from across the city, from around the world. Gwen came up behind me and scratched my scruffy head. I didn't look at her, but I told her that we should get moving. It was already 3:15 and I didn't want everybody running out of energy before we got to the playing field. She smiled and shouted out for Justin, Joe and the rest of the gang. Turning around to face the door I saw everybody slip through the crowd and out to meet us.

I counted heads, all nine of them, and we started to march through the ancient square. Slick Italians hitting on American blondes, some Brits shouting and singing, a few Romanian gypsies, a drunk kid covered in vomit trying to sleep on the edge of a fountain. It was pretty easy to fit in here; there wasn't much of a standard.

Sliding out the corner of the square onto a thin street, we laughed and giggled at a friend we saw pushed up against a wall by thirty-something year old local trying to get

her top off. Her name was Tracy and she was from Capo Verde, fluent in a dialect of Portuguese that Gwen couldn't understand.

We saw our hash dealer, Brandon, up ahead talking to my half-Columbian half-Belgian roommate about a techno show later. Brandon was the most unreliable dealer I had ever met, not that it was really his fault. He had two jobs, one as an assistant director for this German guy, and another as a writer for a local children's cartoon about a time-traveling burglar. He had a bulldog and gorgeous girlfriend named Kansas who shared his one-bedroom apartment with him. I said hi to Sino, my roommate, and asked Brandon if he had anything pre-rolled that I could buy off him. He just so happened to have a hash-joint, and charged me seven euros for it. It was a rip off, but I could either buy from him, or the gypsies that hung out underneath the city bridges and looked like river-trolls.

Moving on we bought two bottles of tequila and some Guarana, this Brazilian soda that Gwen had been brought up with, from a late-night place on the corner of an empty street. The city was complicated; I had been living there for almost a year and I still got lost, so I stuck to the streets I knew. We wended around monuments and hookah bars and crypts, taking the safest route whenever we could. The city was gorgeous at night. Instead of bright streetlights they used rose-tinted lamps that were hung across the roads and alleys. They lit up the entire city in a glow of orange, as if it were a fiery coal.

We walked by some vents that steamed from the subway below. The vents were always covered with homeless people, big fat iron beds for those who had nowhere warm to sleep. They sprawled out over the hot filthy steam that came up between the cracks and slept without being interrupted by the Caribinieri.

Stumbling on we opened one of the bottles of tequila and passed it around while I pointed out historically significant buildings and bullshitted about their history. *This palace is well known for being Anne Frank's summer home... This was the first mosque ever built with a dome... John Dillinger went down behind this theatre in a hail of F.B.I. gunfire... It was fun, and I had such a great audience. Really? How did you know that?... This looks old; do you know anything about that one?* It gave me such joy to see how good I was at convincing people. I didn't even notice passing the giant white façade of a monument dedicated to the founder of the modern government. The locals dubbed it the *Great Birthday Cake* or the *Giant Typewriter*, it is well known as one of the most concieted structures in the world. A twenty-meter high statue of the founder riding a horse posing as if he were Marcus Aurelius stood in front, surrounded by marble angels worshipping him. We walked alongside the marvel down a wide boulevard with statues of famous emperors on either side. And then our destination immersed.

It was black compared to the *Birthday Cake*, a great crumbling cylinder rising above the city. It was not well lit, it was ancient, it was menacing. The Coliseum rose above us like a frightening wench beckoning children inside to taste her fresh-baked cookies.

We strode around to the backside of the building; our heads tilted back as we studied the cracks and holes of the masterpiece, embracing the awe. I never thought it was all that impressive, during the day it is surrounded by people and cars and street vendors and pickpockets. At night it felt like a greater object, shrouded with the Roman haze of dust and smoke. We reached the backside, where we were hidden from the street by bushes and a wall. Justin, Joe, Rennato, Tuna, Elizabeth, Raffi, Nathan, Gwen, and I

stood against the stone behemoth. Each archway has had twenty feet high metal bar fences stuck within it to keep out trespassers, but it is not too terribly difficult to climb. I went first, knowing that if there were any cameras, they would be either off or broken. Rome was incredibly disorganized and the city government pretty much just pretended that they had a control over things.

I struggled and relied mostly on my drunken ambition to get to the top of the fence. I knew it would be easier to get back over because on the other side you could climb the rubble up to the top. I made it over, and slide down the bars like a fire pole, landed on my ass and let out a low howl of excitement. The boys were quick to follow and Tuna was the only one that really struggled because he was wearing a backpack. We had to be quick in case the Foro Romani Polizei started looking around. Gwen made it up and over in no time, she hadn't been drinking much, and landed solid on her feet like a professional. Elizabeth took some coaxing, but we all made it.

Once in we walked around the empty Vomitoria, reading some of the information boards and studying the scale wooden models. We strolled through to the lower level that led to the arena. We passed through the gate that led to the modern wooden platform and then the stone world opened up.

It was surreal, a massive mouth gaping towards the night sky and filled with rotting jagged teeth. The wooden platform covered only about a quarter of what used to be the gladiators arena. I ran across it, wanting to peek over the wooden fence at the edge to stare down into the black holes and caverns of the ancient beast. I looked down and smiled with a mixture of vertigo and fear. I turned and saw Elizabeth reaching into Tuna's backpack, removing a soccer ball. We started to play.

Running around in the greatest monument ever dedicated to death and murder, a place where tens of thousands of human beings have died in the last two thousand years. It was quite a trip. We smoked the rip-off hash and played four on five games on what was left of the arena floor. I couldn't wait to tell everybody the next day at school. I ran around the wall of the arena, looking inside the dark doors that led to somewhere. Joe passed me the ball as I made my way around the edge towards the wooden fence. It was a little too far ahead of me though, and I had to dive for it, not seeing that part of the wooden guardrail was being repaired, that part of it was missing.

The ball went down first, bouncing off the ledge and disappearing into the depths of the monsters mouth without a sound. The first thing I felt was the sudden absence of the sanded ground beneath me, and then like a cartoon character, I just dropped.

Bouncing off the top of a wall, I slid down the side of the Coliseum interior. Then I dropped again and seconds passed, until I slammed hard onto a dusty floor made of stone. I must have fallen at least twenty feet; the only thing that had saved me was a rotten wall that broke the impact.

Laying here I feel wrecked.

I can feel the dust under my cheek being sucked into my nose with every breath. I feel chilled; there was a breeze down here that didn't exist on the arena floor. It flew down the curved hallway that I was now immersed in, and it made a small whistling sound that I could just barely hear.

I try to get up; I want to find the ball that went down with me. I would feel bad if I had lost it. I move my arms across the floor, my chest still numb from the impact; I just want to stand up. Attempting to lift my legs, I nearly scream as I feel something tugging

on them, scratching them like fingers. My body freezes, terror pushing my heartbeat faster, it is just a bush; I must have landed on it after the fall.

I pull my legs forward and crawl over to the opposing wall, still searching for the ball. I hear some clanking noises. They are probably my friends trying to come down and get me. I can't see very far in either direction, it is too dark and I only have a few bright stars in the sky and a sliver of the moon to light my way. I feel around the cold stones that litter the hallway, and I realize the clanking noises have a rhythm, a steady beat of one... two... three... four seconds and then a bang. It sounds like a blacksmith with a hammer beating on a piece of steel.

I feel the wind whistling by me and I picture the teeth that I saw peering down from the wooden fence. I try to trace the sound; it is coming from underneath the arena, where the darkness is complete. I am at the very edge of the black part of the tunnel, and I feel my insides churning. I figure I must be hearing things; I must be too high or drunk from the tequila. It is just a creepy Italian who likes to play with a hammer at night. The noise could be coming from the street outside; it could be construction work. It could be animals hiding in the Coliseum; it doesn't have to be a blacksmithing gladiator ghost who was murdered two thousand years ago.

I keep hearing the noise, and I realize something. I stop looking for the ball, I don't care anymore, my mind is going white. It was most definitely not an animal, not a construction worker, and it was not coming from outside. I dart through the hallway, tripping over stones and bushes. I imagine myself screaming, but I must wait until the last moment, just before it is too late. It was not a hammer, not a blacksmith, and fear was screeching in my brain. I must get out.

Crashing through walls, obliterating obstacles, I find myself running with my eyes closed, I will not make it. I don't want to see anything; I want to scratch out my eyeballs so that I won't be able to see whatever it is that I am sprinting from. I hit another wall, one that will not yield. I look up and see that I have reached the outer wall, the edge of the mouth of hell filled with rotten teeth. I bolt up it, grabbing anything I can to lift me, I will not stay down here any longer.

It was not a blacksmith; it was the sound of an iron gate trying to be opened. I could hear it clearly. It's chains clinking, as if a lever was being twisted, it would be raised one... two... three... four... and then crash back down into the stone floor. Something wanted out, out of a dungeon deep within the Coliseum underground. It was only strong enough to lift the gate a few inches, before it collapsed back down into the dust, but it kept trying. It wanted out, it was the cause of the wind, it was the whistle in my ear. It was an unimaginable fear.