

FOR ELLIE

by Jeff Devens

I met Ellie in Rome.

Not in Rome, Italy, but in the park that my friends and I called Rome.

It really wasn't a park, either. Actually it was a semi-private estate called Untermeyer Gardens in Yonkers. We didn't know who Untermeyer was at the time, and we cared less. We had on several occasions, however, set forth various theories concerning the place we called Rome.

The popular opinion was that the land belonged to a rich city merchant who used to stroll along the serene garden paths which overlooked the Hudson River. Untermeyer had probably been a lover of ancient Italian architecture and sculpture, for there were several busts of famous Romans placed artistically about the grounds. In addition, there was a miniature Pantheon located at the north end of the gardens. At the south end was a splendid marble fountain. The fountain's sparkling pool was drained by a subterranean aqueduct which extended to the park's edge where it gushed cascades into the river below.

It was by this man-made waterfall that I met Ellie on a Saturday morning in the spring of my seventeenth year.

I had come to Rome to smoke some marijuana and to read my literature assignment for the following Monday.

Ellie was sitting passively beneath the rising sun, legs crossed, and seemed to be in a meditative trance. She was wearing a modest white shift with a silver brocade collar. Her hands were folded in her lap.

I sat beside her and assumed her position in the warm grass. I was about to introduce myself when she turned to me and smiled.

It was a gentle, radiant smile that seemed to say, "It's a beautiful morning." I hadn't expected the smile, but I accepted it willingly.

Her hair was the color of midnight on the ocean, drawn back and fixed with a yellow ribbon at the neck. Silver, crescent-shaped earrings dangled from her fully-exposed ears. The crystalline quality of her dark eyes complemented the appeal of her slender, aquiline nose.

"My name is Richard," I began. "I live in Forest Hills. You have a lovely smile."

"Do you come here often?" she asked, still smiling.

"Yes. My friends and I drive up once in a while and get high. We call this place Rome. Doesn't it remind you a little of Rome?"

"A little," she replied.

"What's your name?" I continued.

"Ellie. Actually it's Eleanor, but I prefer Ellie. What's that book?"

"Oh, it's just my World Lit. Came up to do some reading."

"Do you like to read?" she asked.

"Sometimes. I have to be in the mood though."

"What kind of a mood, Richard?" She had stopped smiling and had placed her right hand upon my arm. I hadn't even noticed her doing it. She did it so quietly, so spiritually, as if she had always been touching me.

"A relaxed mood," I explained. "I retain more if I'm relaxed. I think you can appreciate literature more if you're relaxed. You're more receptive then."

"How do you get into a relaxed mood?"

It was the way she said "relaxed" that struck me. She had said it so softly, so strangely, as if she were but a voice from the fountain. She was priming me, trying to find out what I was like. It was all part of a game I imagined had begun when I first sat down next to her. I began to play along.

"Smoking relaxes me. You know—pot." I was taking a chance, a risk. If she didn't smoke, the game would be over. I would have lost.

"Do you have some with you now?" she asked.

"Yeah. Would you like some?"

"Please. How long have you been smoking?"

Her tone reassured me. I could continue now. In my mind I had already envisioned the outcome of the game. We would smoke, talk about poetry or music, and then I'd kiss her. I'd make a date with her and maybe go to bed with her. I'd never been in bed with a girl before, but felt that my "moment of truth" was fast approaching.

"My best friend turned me on at a party in the Village last year. I really liked it. I enjoy music when I'm stoned. Laughing is a groove too. You know, 'contact high'?"

"Have you ever made love while you were high?" she asked matter-of-factly.

I had expected her to ask me something like, "Isn't food unbelievable when you're stoned?" or "Have you ever tried writing poetry when you were stoned?", but "Have you ever made love while you were high?" really shook me. Every 17-year old male likes to think of himself as a future great lover. I had often dreamed of how I would lose my virginity. I'd meet some lonely girl in the Village or at a party, talk to her and take her to bed. Of course, I wouldn't reveal my inexperience. I had read too much Mailer and Southern not to know how to make love.

"Not exactly. I hear it's great though," I said as convincingly as possible.

"It's heaven," Ellie whispered as she leaned forward and kissed my ear. At the same time, she began rubbing my back.

I took her in my arms and began kissing her neck as passionately as I could without being too suggestive.

With her tongue she outlined my ear and returned my offering at the neck.

"Would you like to get high and make love to me?" she purred.

"Here? Now?" I stammered.

"Yes. Right here in the grass. Now is a perfect time, the sun is just right."

"What's the sun got to do with it?" I asked lamely.

"It's in the right house, the perfect time for love."

I didn't want to seem ignorant of the sun's significance regarding sexual relations so I withdrew from her for a moment, rolled two joints and lit them. I placed one in her mouth, which I thought was quite amorous. I was proud of myself, yet worried about making love in the open air.

"Someone will see us, won't they? You know how it is on Saturday."

"No one will be watching us. Don't worry. Today is different—special. Trust me."

It was the way she said "trust me" that convinced me that she knew something that I didn't. But I believed her. I mean, if the girl wants to do it in the grass in Rome, it must be all right.

She took the final drag from her cigarette and tossed it ceremoniously into the waterfall.

"An offering to Venus, the Roman goddess of Love and Beauty. She was born in the foam of the sea," she chanted.

We smoked two more joints, took off our shoes and stretched out in the grass. After a half-hour of French kissing and fondling each other, we removed ourselves to a far corner of the gardens.

"This rose bush is my favorite," she said. "It's a very good strain. It will be in full bloom by the end of the month."

"You know a lot about this place, don't you?" I asked.

"I come here often," she replied.

COME! Oh, Christ, I haven't got a rubber, I thought. Now what do I do, I wondered. I decided to cross that bridge when I got to it.

I removed my pants as gracefully as I could. I tugged at her lace panties and succeeded in getting them as far as her ankles. She took them and placed them carefully next to the rose bush. She unbuttoned my shirt and began to kiss half-moons on my chest. She was quite experienced, I mused.

"Have you ever read Kama Sutra?" she whispered.

"Of course!" I blurted. By then I would have admitted anything to establish my virility and worldliness.

"It's my favorite book," Ellie said.

The time had arrived. "Ellie, I don't have any . . . uh . . . I don't have a thing to make it . . . uh . . . safe."

"That's all right," she sighed. "I take the pill."

Oh, my God, she takes the pill! I was becoming rather unnerved. What would Dustin Hoffman do now, I wondered.

My question was answered all too soon. It was over almost as soon as it began. I hadn't expected it to be so fleeting a moment. I was sure that I hadn't satisfied her. She would know it was my first time. I wanted to dive into the river.

"Kinda' happened all at once, didn't it?" I said innocently.

"It was wonderful," Ellie assured me. "We were together. You were very nice. We touched the heart of eternity and lifted the veil of love . . . 'Kahlil Gibran'."

I didn't understand, but I dared not contradict her. I was too proud for that.

"How old are you, Ellie?" It was the only thing I could think to ask.

"Nineteen," she replied dryly.

"That's good. You know, I'm only seventeen," I boasted.

"Of course." She smiled again. It was the first time that she had smiled since we had moved away from the waterfall.

We dressed quickly in silence. So that's what it's like, I thought. Now I'm a man, I suppose.

"Will I see you again?" I asked sincerely.

"No. I'm leaving today and I won't be back here again."

I *had* failed her! I was stunned and depressed. Why couldn't I have been a man?

"But you said it was wonderful," I protested.

"It was. But I'll never come back here again. I can't. My father won't allow me to."

"But I don't understand. Why won't your father allow you to come back here?"

"Today was the last time I can come here," she repeated coldly.

"But *I* can come back here anytime. I want you to come back too. You must! Don't you understand?" I shouted.

"I do. But *you* may never understand. It really doesn't matter though. There'll be other times and other places. The sun will be right again. Dream to the sky, and it will bring you happiness."

"God damn it! To hell with the sun and the sky. I want to see you again," I roared.

"You *are* only seventeen," she said sadly while staring directly into the noonday sun.

I stood there watching her go, refusing to believe that she was actually walking out of the gardens. She stopped near the fountain and turned toward me. She smiled and pointed at the sun.

"At least tell me your last name," I pleaded. "What is it?"

She stood there in front of the fountain for an eternal instant. The fountain's mid-day mist cast a rainbow around her. And she stood there smiling.

I became a boy again. Tears stung my swollen eyes and streaked my burning cheeks. I was at the ocean again and the taste of the sea was in my mouth.

Standing in front of the fountain, Ellie appeared now as one of the statues, Venue bathed in sunlight and smiling forever.

I heard her say "Untermeyer," as she turned and left me standing alone with my tears in the garden I called Rome.

THE END.