

Night Scene

By Roger Ebert

Funny, he thought, that when you stand in front of St. Peter's you can't even see the dome. He looked high up to the top edge of the basilica, to the weather-worn saints looking back down to him, and laughed silently. Can't even see the dome, because the church is too damn big.

Standing halfway up St. Peter's steps, he listened to a scooter enter the Piazza St. Pietro through the columns to the west. It was quiet, this late at night; all he could hear was the purr of the scooter on the close-set bricks and the murmur of the two fountains in the piazza.

The scooter passed behind him, circled away, came close again, and slid to a stop. Its motor coughed dead.

A voice said "hi" in a half-apologetic tone.

He turned on the steps and looked down on the driver, a Negro dressed in a Cornell sweat shirt, khakis, and dirty tennis shoes. No socks, just tennis shoes. You didn't wear socks in Europe this summer, he remembered.

"Hi," he said.

"You're an American?"

"Yeah. So are you."

"You . . . you just standing here?"

"Got anything better to do?" He walked down the steps toward the scooter, watching as the Negro hooked his heel around the kick-stand and pulled it forward.

"No . . . Oh, my name is Ed. Ed Sainsbury, from Albany."

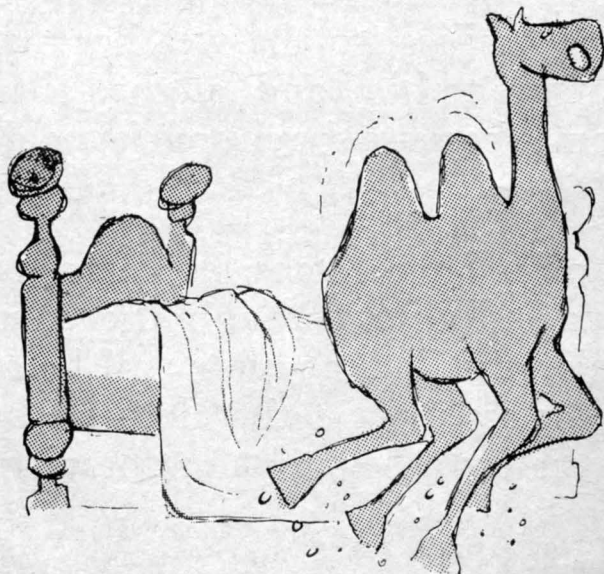
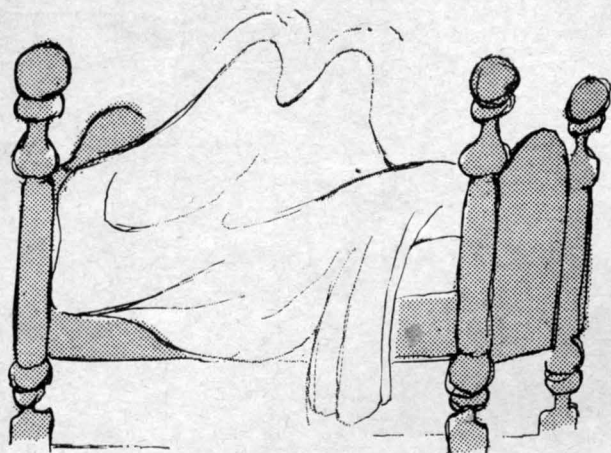
"Hello, Ed," he said. "Cornell?"

"Well, yeah. You can see from the sweat shirt, I guess."

"Far above Cayuga's waters, all that?"

"Yeah. I'm just over here for the summer."

"Rent the scooter?"



Yule Record

"Five bucks a day . . . that's American money."

"So it is," he said. "That's scale for a Vespa. Run OK?"

"Yeah, sure. It runs pretty good. It's easy to get the knack of . . . I ran into a wall, though, learning . . . it's easy now."

"You've got to have a scooter in Rome," he said.

"Yeah, I know. I saw the sign outside American Express. A bunch of the guys . . . well, I didn't know them but . . . well, we were all sitting around the fountain by the Spanish Steps, talking . . . there were a lot of people with scooters . . . I take it back Tuesday."

"Leaving then?" he said.

"Late Tuesday night, on the BEA Economy. For Athens."

"Where all you been?" he asked.

"Oh, you know . . . the usual, I guess . . . London, Paris, the Roman-Paris Express here. I'm staying at a hostel. A dollar fifty a night. I decided to stay out tonight, though. Soak up Rome at night, you know."

"Yeah, I know," he said.

"How long *you* over here?"

"Who knows, who cares?"

"Just askin' . . ."

"Yeah. Well, for awhile anyway. There any better place to go?"

The Negro flexed the hand brake on the scooter. "Oh . . . maybe. You been to Florence, Milan?"

"No. Just here in Rome. Not up north."

"Oh."

"No," he said, "I never got up north."

At the side of the piazza, the Swiss Guards changed. A door in the ancient wall opened, throwing light out upon the bricks. The door closed.

"Ho-hum. What time is it anyway?"

"Must be two," he said. "They change the guard at two."

"Hell. I don't know what I'm doing out this late anyway. It's too damn late to be out, don't you think?"

"Maybe. It's quiet. Not too hot."

"Well, yeah. It's all in what you like. I've got to get up tomorrow at noon, go see Moses. This fellow at the American Express, he told me I had to see Moses before I left Rome."

"Moses?" he said.

"Michelangelo."

"Oh, yeah. Moses. I haven't seen it yet."

"No? Well, I gotta see it tomorrow. Get up at noon."

The Negro released the kick-stand on his scooter and stepped hard on the starter.

"You need a ride somewhere?"

"Uh . . . yeah, just up to the river," he said. He swung on behind, finding the footrests. The scooter circled past the Swiss Guard station, straightened out down the Via Della Conciliazione.

"This OK?" the Negro shouted back over his shoulder.

"Yeah, fine." The wind was in his mouth.

The scooter slowed against the curb, stopped. Below them, tied to the bank, was a barge circled with colored lights.

The Negro pointed down the bank.

"That barge . . . that's where Audrey Hepburn danced in *Roman Holiday* . . ." he said.

"That right? I didn't know that."

"Yeah. I read it in Frommer. The same barge."

"What do you know?"

"Yeah. Well. So long, man . . ."

"So long. Thanks."

"You sure you don't need a ride somewhere?"

"No, this is as far as I want to go."

"OK. So long."

The scooter bounced away past the Castel St. Angelo, down the street along the Tiber. After awhile, the rear light winked out.

He turned around.

You could see St. Peter's dome from here. But not the saints anymore. For what it was worth.