

Paranoia

A Short Story

by

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Sometimes paranoia is just having all the facts.

William S. Burroughs

Bartholomew may be who he said he was. Or he may have been “the finger” portrayed here in this short tome. Either way, he was the beginning of a strange association with events destined to forever change my view of the Eternal City.

Abdullah’s real name perished with him. What he was thinking as his appointment with the eternal arrived was never revealed.

I’ve written this story in the third person to see if I could make more sense of it as an observer. I also prefer to narrate this tale than to live it again.

My thoughts may appear to be confused. But as you will soon learn, it was a confusing and disorienting sequence of events and circumstances.

A group of Muslim extremists had recently blown themselves up on the trains in Berlin on 11/11/11. Italy was holding its collective breath, certain that its own appointment with terror lay in wait.

The Pointer and the Prey

Bartholomew was an ordinary looking young man with dark black skin and curly, closely cropped hair. His teeth were bright ivory, his face clean shaven. From Angola, he

had a round and pleasant countenance. He spoke perfect English, but feigned that he did not speak it well.

He was well dressed for someone who told anyone who would listen that he was poor and had no money. He carried his prize possessions with him wherever he went: a laptop computer given to him, he claimed, by an American friend, and a cell phone that he usually kept hidden lest anyone question his poverty.

Smuggled into Rome, Italy, through France, Bartholomew was given a simple mission: find a certain American diplomat who lived on the Aventine Hill in the city centre. Holding a picture downloaded from the Internet of a pleasant looking, silver-haired man in his fifties, he walked the hill patiently.

The Catholic convent situated on the northwest side of the Aventino across from the Orange Gardens offered lunch during the week and Saturdays to all who claimed a need. Such generosity not only provided Bartholomew a reason to roam the Aventino, but was a very fine way to enjoy a free meal of pasta prepared by nuns.

Bartholomew struck up a friendship with one of the older nuns, and he pleaded poverty. Sympathetic to his plight, on Saturdays she gave him extra cheese and bread to make it through the Sunday. His rotund frame seemed to contradict his claim that he had little to eat, but his sincerity told the listener that certainly it was true.

It did not take long to locate the man in the picture. The man and his wife walked their dog routinely — routine is

the bane of the vulnerable in an unsafe world — and Bartholomew quickly learned the parks on the Aventino the trio favored and the times they frequented them. It was a simple task to find the building in which they lived.

It had also been an easy thing to meet the wife, Gabriella: a friendly smile, a gentle nature, conveying sincere respect. His story of being persecuted in Angola (everyone knew about Mugabe, after all) and fleeing his homeland for safety was a compelling tale and inevitably evoked sympathy, particularly from older women.

It was not a lie that he had recently left France, and Bartholomew mentioned he was not treated well in France because it provoked empathy when speaking with Americans. The wife told him her husband was an American diplomat. He did not have to ask questions. He shared his own story openly, and she willingly shared hers in return.

He reported all this to his handler, but was told there could be no mistake. He had to meet and converse with the husband to confirm his identity.

Bartholomew had watched many times from the shadows while the man walked his dog, but was afraid to approach him. Like many Africans, he was not comfortable with canines, especially large ones. Although he had met the dog in the company of the woman and he was friendly, the dog looked powerful and made it clear he loved his masters.

No, he decided he would meet the man through the wife by letting them come to him. The time it was taking to meet the man had stretched into weeks. But he found that he enjoyed talking to Gabriella, and as he would miss her kindness and sincerity he was in no hurry to confirm what he knew already to be true.

It was late Saturday morning, and Bartholomew went to the park the couple visited with the dog on weekends.

It was chilly, but the sun was rising and warming the air. Rome was never really cold, but neither was it warm like Africa. Bartholomew had bundled up in a cap, sweater, and thick jacket. He began to wonder if he would miss his free meal and Sunday rations when the woman and her husband appeared with their dog from around the corner. He looked their way, pretending surprise and waving a smile in their direction.

"You finally get to meet Bartholomew!" Gabriella said. The man nodded. His wife had talked often of Bartholomew and his plight.

"Hi, Bartholomew. This is my husband, Connor."

After shaking hands, Bartholomew told Connor his story about Angola and how he was working for the independence of his region. The woman's husband was friendly, but Bartholomew could sense his caution.

"I've been attacked and wounded by Angolans here in Rome," Bartholomew said, as a way to convince the man that he was a harmless victim of other far more

dangerous men. The man nodded, his expression unchanging other than an occasional smile. Bartholomew grew uncomfortable.

“We don’t want you to miss your lunch at the convent,” said the woman, finally.

Relieved to end the meeting, Bartholomew smiled and nodded.

Pleasantries were exchanged, and Bartholomew departed. He ate at the convent until he was satisfied, took the bread and cheese from the nun who had befriended him, and headed down from the Aventino never to return. He made a simple call on his mobile.

“It is him,” he said in Portuguese. A pause. “Yes, I just spoke with the man. His wife called him by his first name. I am sure.”

The Test (26 January)

Abdullah boarded the 175 bus off the Via del Corso at 6:25pm on the Thursday.

“Always be the last to enter the bus,” he remembered the handler telling him. Although they had never met, the handler’s voice was unmistakable. Abdullah could hear the Godliness in his voice, the wisdom in his words. He boarded behind two women and although alone, inserted two tickets into the machine, one after the other.

Carefully laying the tickets side by side on the empty seat next to where he stood, he pulled the cell phone the handler had given him from his pocket. He pushed the quick dial — he was told that he should not dial or try to memorize the number he was calling — and put the phone to his ear. He waited for the familiar voice.

“Are they the same?” the handler asked.

Abdullah carefully read the times on the two tickets into the phone and said in Italian, “Il tempo è lo stesso” — the time is the same.

After the handler told Abdullah that what he had done proved he could be trusted, Abdullah ended the call and slipped the phone back into his pocket.

“Stand at the front, as far away from the other passengers as you can. Face the back of the bus squarely with your body, but avoid eye contact with anyone. Keep your backpack on the centre of your back lest you do not enter Paradise immediately when you are called to serve justice to the infidels,” were the instructions.

“Will it be soon?” Abdullah had asked his handler.

The answer was always the same. “Only Allah knows the appointed time.”

Hearing the ticket machine stamp two tickets behind her, Gabriella turned to look at who came in with the strange

man she had thought to be alone at the bus stop. There was no one with him.

She found a seat on the right side of the bus and observed the man take two stamped tickets and lay them out on one of the seats. She watched as he took a phone from his pocket and put it to his ear. He waited a moment and said that the times on the two tickets were the same. She then watched him put the phone and tickets into his pocket, and position himself at the front of the bus. Although he was standing by himself and there was no one behind him, he kept nervously pushing his backpack to the centre of his back. He would not make eye contact though Gabriella tried.

The man spoke Italian, but it was hard to tell his nationality. With sharp features and closely cropped hair, he looked Middle Eastern but could have been from any of a hundred places. *Even Italy*, Gabriella supposed.

His agitation made Gabriella begin to wonder if she should get off the bus. *Certainly he'll get off at the Coliseum*, she thought. The Coliseum bus stop was the main transfer station. But he did not. He was still on the bus when she left it on the Aventine Hill to return home.

When Gabriella arrived at her apartment, her husband Connor was waiting to take her to a local restaurant in Testaccio that had been recommended to them at a dinner party earlier in the week.

"Something strange happened on the bus on the way home," Gabriella said. She went on to relate her

experience on the 175 bus. "Do you think it was some kind of fraud?"

Shaking his head, Connor turned the question back on his wife. "Do you?"

"It seemed like a business transaction. The caller hardly said hello, and you know how the Italians yak when they phone each other." She shook her head. "I can't come up with a reason why the two tickets had to be the same or why he would feel compelled to tell someone about it."

"Maybe the other person wanted a ticket to prove they were on the bus together. That's all I can think of."

Gabriella nodded. "Maybe. But he was really nervous, in his own world. If he was just stamping a couple tickets, why was he so agitated? Why would he call? Wouldn't you just check the tickets and put them into your pocket? And his backpack — he kept touching it and pushing on it. That's what scared me."

"I think what happened in Germany has us all on edge. I wish they'd ban backpacks, but of course that will never happen. Half the people in Rome wear them."

Gone Missing (29 January)

Connor and Gabriella walked into Piazza Navona on the Sunday. It was full of tourists, but something was missing.

Connor finally realized what had changed. "Where are all the Carabinieri?" he asked aloud.

Gabriella looked around. "What Carabinieri are you talking about?"

"The Carabinieri has had a huge presence in the piazza ever since 11/11, but they're gone. Where would they go?"

"I don't know," said Gabriella.

"Suicide bombers avoid heavy security. They go for soft targets." Connor looked where the Carabinieri used to congregate. "This is not good."

Coincidence? (30 January)

After having a cappuccino at the mess, Connor walked into his office

His secretary had been reading the Italian news on the Internet. "Did you see the Italian authorities have announced that a terrorist attack is imminent? They say it's most likely to happen in Rome or Milan."

"Do they say why?" Connor asked.

"They said it's likely because they're large cities."

"I mean did they give a reason?"

“It’s probably fatalism. Suicide bombings happened in Germany, so why not Italy? Did you see the guards this morning? They’re wearing a helmet and flak jacket.”

“No. I have to confess I didn’t notice.”

Danger (31 January)

Connor completed his usual routine before taking the dog out for their morning sojourn: shower, shave, slip on some jeans and tennis shoes, and brush the dog on the way out the door. It had become the habit since Gabriella brought the dog to Rome in late October.

Like most diplomats, Connor and his wife lived in a compound with multiple layers of security: a heavy, 10-foot high steel gate, a watch dog, an alarm on the building and a separate alarm on each apartment. Advised not to occupy a ground-level apartment, they lived on the second floor. Connor typically checked the road outside their apartment from the balcony before heading down for the first time. This morning he glanced at the road that ran by the compound, but did not check the large piazza.

Closing the gate behind him, Connor looked right. The piazza sat empty except for a rusty Fina fuel truck, which sat squarely in the path of his walk to the park. *What the hell is a fuel truck doing in the middle of the Aventine Hill?* Connor had never seen a Fina gas station in Rome much less a Fina truck, and he asked himself the question again. He blinked and was reminded that a

terrorist plot in Jordan had planned to use fuel trucks to massacre its intended victims.

Having lived in Rome twice before when the Red Brigade was still active and the Jubilee attracted unprecedented crowds, Connor was aware of simple security precautions and generally followed them. But never had he reason to believe that he was in any personal danger.

Despite being a diplomat, Connor was low profile. The U.S. Ambassadors to Rome and to the Vatican were State Department employees and very visible — and hence well protected and always under escort outside their compounds — but Connor was a limited term political appointee serving in an international job. His position was not supposed to be high risk.

Reacting without thinking, Connor called his dog who was already heading to the park on the other side of the truck.

“Caesar, we’re going this way,” he called. He headed off to the left away from the piazza with the dog now following close behind.

As he walked to the Via Santa Prisca, he could hear the engine of the old truck start up, the diesel clanking loudly. He turned to look back, and the fuel truck lurched in his direction. Picking up his pace, Connor walked to the corner and turned right where he would be shielded from the truck’s view. He could hear the truck’s engine whine as it switched to a higher gear.

"Come on!" Connor called to his dog, which was unhappy about this detour. Connor broke into a run, aiming for the next corner where the wall broke right and would hide him from view when the truck reached the intersection. That street also had heavy metal posts at its end, preventing vehicles from entering. Halfway down the block Connor slowed to a walk and turned to look back.

The fuel truck drove into the large parking lot off the Via Santa Prisca and slowed as if the driver were looking for something. *Is he looking for me?*

Not waiting to find out, Connor turned the corner at the next intersection where he was no longer visible. He walked to the end and let Caesar go into the nearby park while he watched the road at the far end to see if the truck would follow. It did not.

Returning home from his walk, Connor told Gabriella what happened.

"Am I being paranoid?" he asked.

"I'm a little paranoid, too," she replied.

"I'm glad you're flying to the states tomorrow. Something is changing here."

As he pulled his car out of the driveway after opening the gate, a very unhappy looking scoundrel of Middle Eastern descent was heading his way. Behind him was a man wearing a blue ski mask and a large backpack. Connor had stepped out of his car to close the gate, and he

stepped well back into the driveway and off to the side, waiting for the two men to pass.

Gabriella, who was leaning out of their bedroom window to wave goodbye, watched the two men. Connor looked up.

"Did you see those two characters?" she asked.

"I think I'm getting paranoid for sure," Connor said in response.

"Someone should arrest the second guy just for looking like a terrorist."

Connor laughed. "Have a good day," he called to Gabriella. "I love you!"

"Be safe." She blew him a kiss. Her robe partially open, her hair unkempt from the night's sleep, this was Connor's favorite scene of every day.

"I'll be as safe as I can."

Paranoia Confirmed (1 February)

Connor dropped Gabriella off at the airport and returned home to walk the dog. Taking the route through the Santa Prisca parking lot and past the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See that sits on the Aventino and overlooks Circus Maximus, he crossed the boulevard to the Circus and headed for the far left side that abutted the Boca de la Verità. He walked his dog around the track, throwing

the ball repeatedly. Caesar, a golden retriever, chased and returned the ball over and over with great enthusiasm. The dog knew his physics, and Connor enjoyed throwing the ball and watching Caesar time his stride to catch it on a full-out run. They returned home by the convent that served the free meals.

He thought of Bartholomew.

The next morning Connor grabbed Caesar and was out the door at 7 o'clock as usual. He wondered if he should vary the time given the strange events of the past week, but he let the thought slip away.

That is, until he saw the rusty Fina fuel truck again. This time it sat squarely in his path through the parking lot off the via Santa Prisca — the same route he had taken on the way to Circus Maximus the day before.

"Could this be for real?" he wondered out loud.

Connor remembered the diplomat who was assassinated on the way to work the last time he and Gabriella lived in Rome. Men in hardhats had been working on the roadside since the previous day, and no one took special notice. When the diplomat's car went through the work area the next morning, he and his chauffeur were shot dead. The diplomat took the same route every day — a well-established routine — and was an easy target.

The review of the incident showed that the road work was never scheduled, but the most damning evidence was the well-established routine of the diplomat's drive

to work. He not only drove the same route every day. He was punctual, too.

But I can't vary my schedule. There's only one way out of my compound. I am walking a dog, and dogs like routine. There aren't that many routes off the Hill.

Debating whether to walk by the fuel truck, Connor rejected the idea. He turned back the other way and marched quickly through the piazza toward the Orange Gardens. He considered going through the park where he was introduced to Bartholomew by his wife, but sitting in the driveway of an apartment closest to the Piazza was an empty white panel truck parked such that its side pointed directly out into the street where one might walk. Having just been in the park the night before, Connor knew the truck had not been there the previous day. Another detour was necessary.

Connor walked to the Orange Gardens and cut right down the road between the pair of Japanese Rose Gardens. From there he crossed over to the Circus Maximus. Agitated by events of the past several days, he went round the Circus Maximus only once and then to the Aventino toward Piazza Albania to get a bead on the fuel truck before heading back to the apartment.

It was now after 7:30am, and the streets were getting crowded. The parking areas became paid zones after 8 o'clock, and the many people who parked on the hill would take notice of a fuel truck. It was no surprise that it was no longer there.

Always Watching

A former American ambassador lived off the Appia Antica in the most expensive area of Rome. His residence had once been owned by the Italian Director Roberto Rossellini, the house next door by the actor Tyrone Power. Whenever the ambassador and his wife left for an extended period, they made sure the house was occupied by a sitter.

Just before they moved back to the U.S., the ambassador and his wife decided to take a two-week vacation. They hired a young man doing his studies in Rome to housesit for them.

At the end of the two weeks, and just two days before the ambassador's return, the student felt particularly restless. His friends called that evening and invited him to the local disco. He could not resist. It would only be for a few hours, it was dark, and who would know? He hopped on his moped and took off for the city.

When he returned four hours later, the back door to the ambassador's residence was open, and everything of value was gone. Jewelry. Heirlooms. The family silver.

All was lost.

The ambassador's home was constantly occupied for three years, and for the four hours no one was present it was struck.

"They" are always watching.

What to Do?

Connor wondered whether to contact the security office at the U.S. Embassy again. No, they would probably think he was crazy. Both he and Gabriella had spoken to them after the incident on the bus, but it appeared they did not think there was a reason to be concerned.

Why would they target me? Connor asked himself. *I am the senior Department of Defense civilian official in Rome,* Connor reminded himself once more. *I also just wrote that piece on the German bombers, and it is widely available on the Internet.*

But perhaps that's the problem. Maybe because I wrote that paper I'm imagining all this. Maybe it has predisposed me to turn ordinary events into something unusual. Connor thought of the movie "Beautiful Mind". *Is that happening to me?*

It would be easier for Muslim terrorists to shoot him, but a shooting death would not have the intended effect on the minds and emotions of the public.

They could try kidnapping and decapitating him for all the world to witness. But Connor was always walking his dog when outside the compound, and Muslims considered the saliva of dogs unclean. A bite would contaminate its victim. Dogs were also unpredictable. The best laid plan could unravel if an animal interfered with the operation. There was no quick getaway in Rome traffic, either, so a kidnapping had no room for error. And hence, he concluded, unlikely.

Am I really important enough to be the object of a terrorist plot? Weren't terrorists interested in doing something spectacular and deadly on the transportation system? Casualties were the number one consideration for extremists. The Propaganda of the Deed. Wasn't that why the 9/11 attackers hit the World Trade Center?

Finally deciding he was not that important, Connor still could not convince himself he was not a target.

Who is that Man? (4 February)

Connor was coming down the sidewalk off the piazza near his apartment after walking Caesar and turned to insert his key for the gate leading to his compound. Out of the corner of his left eye, Connor caught sight of the man with the ski mask and backpack that had walked by the morning before Gabriella left for the states. He wore a loose jacket, and his hands were jammed into his pockets. *It's an hour later than the other morning,* Connor noted to himself almost nonchalantly. As he did not notice the man when he crossed the large piazza — and Connor was now taking notice of everything — it seemed the man had materialized out of nowhere.

Moving steadily without increasing the speed of his motion, Connor opened the heavy steel gate, ushered in the dog, and closed it while the man was still a good ten yards away. The man had made eye contact with Connor the last time he walked by, and he made eye contact again as Connor disappeared.

Now what was that? Connor asked himself. It was particularly disconcerting because it was only the second time he had seen the man in the now almost twelve months they had lived on the Hill. And both times it was near the gate leading to his compound.

Connor had no fear of the man, but he did not like the matchup if the guy was clothed in a vest packed with plastic explosive.

As he walked into his apartment, his palms sweating, Connor told himself that he was overreacting again. *I have to be. Don't I?*

Later that evening as he reflected on the events of the morning, he remembered in that brief moment when he glanced at the man that his jacket and clothes were new. Just like Bartholomew's new jacket, new shoes, new pants. A coincidence?

Connor tried hard to remember what the man looked like the first time he saw him. Ski mask. Backpack. That is all he could recall.

As he continued to ponder what happened, Connor realized that the dog had been between him and the man who in retrospect looked as if he was rapidly closing in. Had that saved his life? Was the killer considering moving in, but the dog made him hesitate? Did he worry that moving too quickly toward Connor might cause the dog to react and thwart an attack?

Maybe. Maybe Connor owed his life to Caesar. Caesar had been named after the famous Roman emperor when they got him in the United States as a puppy almost five years earlier, not knowing that Caesar would eventually live in the city that birthed his namesake.

Unexpected Help (5 February)

Stepping out his gate late in the morning with Caesar, Connor saw the guy who had been the "self-appointed parking attendant" in their piazza. Connor had not seen him for awhile. Ever since they turned the piazza into paid parking, drivers were less generous and less willing to toss a Euro the man's way for helping them find a parking space. This morning he wore a red baseball cap.

Connor had purchased a red cap while he and Gabriella were in the Alta Adige over Christmas, and he decided that he would begin wearing his red cap, too. Although the man had a long beard, he had silver hair like Connor. And if someone decided to look for a man wearing a red cap, then this guy might add confusion every time he was on the Aventino.

It also occurred to Connor that Luigi, one of the owners of an apartment in their compound, had silver hair like his and wore a long black wool coat to work every morning. Connor also decided to begin wearing his long black wool coat to work, even though it was rarely cold enough for an American to justify its use.

As he and Luigi often left at the same time, or within 15 minutes or so of each other, Connor thought this might

also add confusion for anyone who was serious about trying to follow his routine.

Conferring with the Authorities (6 February)

Connor had to go to the American Embassy for business and decided to check in with the security officer that spoke with Gabriella.

He was not in.

"Did you want to speak with the deputy security officer?" she asked.

"If he has time."

Following her to a corner office at the back of the hall, Connor waited as a young man spun in his seat to face him.

Connor introduced himself. The young man stayed seated and said nothing as they shook hands. Connor thought the man must have recognized his name, and his expression made Connor think that he and the office had had a good laugh at his expense. But Connor was undeterred. Too many weird things were happening all at once.

"My wife came by to report an incident she witnessed on the 175 bus the other night. Did your office decide there was anything to it?"

"A lot of things are happening right now, and it's one more thing we're looking at."

"Did you decide if what she reported could be important?"

"Like I said, it's just one more thing we're looking at."

"Did you report it to the Italian authorities?" Connor asked.

"No, we didn't think it merited being reported. There are presently no serious threats here in Rome or imminent threats to Americans in Italy."

Connor pressed. "There are a lot of strange characters on the Aventine Hill lately."

"Like I said, there are no threats to Americans in Italy at this time."

"OK." Connor relented.

He was glad he was going out of town the next week. A few days away would do him good.

He called Gabriella one last time. He would be unable to speak with her until his return. "I talked to the security officer at the embassy again. I asked him if he reported your story to the Italian authorities, and he said 'no'."

"Did he say anything else?"

"He said they were not aware of any threats to Americans in Italy."

"So there's nothing to be worried about. You are just being paranoid."

"I guess," Connor laughed, "I am the victim of an overly creative imagination."

"That's a relief," Gabriella replied.

Returning Home (11 February)

Connor and the dog arrived back in the centro about half past twelve from the kennel. Connor parked the car on the Via Santa Prisca and took the dog to the park alongside the Aventino that led from Piazza Albania to the Marmorata. He threw the ball a half hour for Caesar before driving home.

Deciding to take the dog out once more before it got dark, Connor and Caesar walked to the same park they had stopped at earlier in the day on the way back from the kennel.

Connor threw the ball for a while again and then began the walk up the hill. As he neared the Santa Prisca parking lot he noticed a handsome young man with a dark complexion walking toward him on the Via del Tempio di Diana. It took only a moment for Connor to realize that he was the man in the ski mask — unmasked and sans backpack.

Connor stared, taking in all the visual cues he could. Closely trimmed beard. Thick, neatly cut black hair. Large mustache. All new outer garments. New tan corduroy pants, loose leather jacket, new thick walking shoes. Most telling, he slowed when he saw Connor and avoided eye contact.

Was he following me to see where I've been walking the dog? Connor continued to walk up the left side of the parking lot and stopped at the top corner. He watched the man, who did not seem to know which road he should take. He finally chose the road to the metro and disappeared. Without his mask, he did not look the part of a terrorist.

Birthday (14 February)

It was Caesar's birthday, Valentine's Day.

Connor had taken him to the park off Piazza Albania that morning before work and thrown the ball for a half hour while chatting with a man he had met before. The man's dog was part Labrador Retriever and part Pit Bull, his body like a lanky yellow lab, his head with that distinctly Pit Bull shape and big jaws. The dog could run like the wind, even faster than Caesar. But he was still a pup, and Caesar quickly asserted himself as the ball's owner.

Saying goodbye to Caesar for the day, Connor locked the door. It was right at eight o'clock. He opened the garage as usual, unlocked the car that would be accompanied by two loud beeps, and loaded his computer into the back

seat. Removing his suit jacket and laying it over the computer, he slipped on his wool overcoat.

No sooner did Connor open the gate when the young man he saw the previous day walked by, hands stuffed in his pockets. It was perfect timing.

The gate had been open barely a foot, and Connor was just pulling it open when the man was in his face, giving Connor no time to react. Connor's heart stopped, and he prepared himself to react should the man turn in his direction. But this time the man ignored him and walked deliberately past the gate. Connor watched him continue strolling toward the Santa Prisca parking lot.

Was he practicing? This was the second time the man seemed to be timing his approach, and both times he had used the element of surprise effectively. Did this mean the end would come soon? Connor watched the man he now considered his adversary disappear down the sidewalk.

It was impossible to leave the apartment using another route. One way in, one way out. The gate had to be opened manually. Connor was an easy target, and there was nothing he could do about it. He could vary his departure time, but not by much. He would go in at a different time tomorrow and see if it made a difference.

Connor drove to work using a back route, varying his speed erratically, sometimes flying down the road while other times driving patiently in the center of traffic. He used a combination of roads he had not driven since his

arrival, the route including a street he had learned about when they lived in Rome previously.

Keenly aware of his surroundings, he drove wondering whether an appointment with destiny had been made for him without his agreement or knowledge.

It rained that night, breaking the long string of sunny days. Connor welcomed it because it made being outside messy. He did not like what it meant when walking the dog, but the rain in Rome tended to keep people off the streets. Crowd control, he called it.

When the Pope died and two million Poles came to Rome to honor his memory, the city had set up a tent city in Circus Maximus. There was great concern about the potential for problems, particularly if the crowd spent the weekend. But it rained incessantly, keeping movement to a minimum and encouraging the visitors to depart right after the funeral.

Sanity Returns (16 February)

Connor took the Columbo to work that morning because it was still early and the traffic would be thin. He had walked Caesar earlier than usual so he could leave ahead of his normal schedule.

As he paused at a light, he looked to his right and saw what could have been the Fina truck he had seen a couple weeks earlier, driving in the far right lane heading south. Connor had done some research on the Internet and learned that Fina and Total were part of a joint

effort. Was it a coincidence that in the next few minutes he would notice a Total gas station, one that he had never taken notice of before, sitting on the right side of the Cristoforo Columbo halfway to the ring road that encircled the city?

Perhaps it made sense for the driver to have waited on the Aventino for the station to open, given the dearth of parking in the city. Did this confirm an overactive imagination? An overreaction to otherwise innocent, everyday events?

Quiet in the City (20 February)

Connor spent the weekend visiting with a college classmate and his girlfriend who were in Rome for a few days. It took his mind off the recent incidents, although Connor was still looking for signs of the man he had seen regularly of late.

Helicopters flew around the Aventino all weekend, usually the sign of police action and something he had not seen for many months. But Connor had not heard about anything out of the ordinary.

It rained all day again, and Connor once more welcomed the precipitation. He noticed that foot traffic on the hill had diminished dramatically from the previous few weeks, and he had not seen anyone suspicious since Caesar's birthday — a welcome development.

Connor wondered again if his paranoia had been justified. *Probably not*, he concluded. *Probably not*.

The President of Italy was visiting his agency the next day. "It will be a special," said Connor's boss.

A Strange Remark (21 February)

As he waited with a senior Italian naval officer at the door through which the Italian president would depart, Connor confided to him that he had been skeptical it would go so smoothly.

"And why not?" he responded. "What were you expecting, a terrorist attack?"

More Quiet (23 February)

It was unmistakable. The many characters Connor had seen on the Aventino were gone. Did the Italians round them up? Did they give up? Had they been tourists?

When he walked Caesar to the park closest to his apartment, Connor noticed a white panel truck in the driveway of the apartment similar to the one he had noticed previously. Its doors were open, and inside were rows of dry cleaning neatly hanging on long metal poles.

On his way to work, Connor noticed that a second Total gas station had opened along the Via Aventino.

The Porta Portese (26 February)

Connor had avoided crowds after his paranoia began. The Porta Portese, Rome's largest outdoor market, was a

casualty of that decision. So this morning he headed to the market for the first time in weeks.

The crowd of merchants from sub-Saharan Africa who usually occupied the majority of the center aisle of the already crowded Porta Portese selling purses, were gone.

It was actually quite pleasant to walk through the market. Some of the Africans — probably those who had successfully applied for asylum — had been given space in the market stalls to set up their wares like the other merchants. Those who were disenfranchised and not given a similar opportunity stood in groups and looked to be complaining bitterly.

The Italians had passed a law making it illegal to purchase knockoffs of famous Italian designers. Copies of designer purses that Gucci and Versace and Prada sold for hundreds of Euros could be picked up for a dozen Euros from the African merchants. The law fined the buyer 10,000 Euros if he possessed a knockoff, and the illegal purse selling business mostly died a quick death.

It had taken the Italians more than a year to respond to the growing presence of the purse sellers and the unsafe crowding. True to form, the Italians eventually prevailed.

Connor returned to his apartment. The sun was out, the Aventino quiet, and no one seemed to pay him attention.

Gabriella would return to Italy the next Thursday. It seemed her arrival would be as timely as her departure.

Normalcy had returned to Rome.

Gabriella's Homecoming (3 March)

Luigi, the gentleman whose family lived in the apartment building with Connor and Gabriella, walked to the gate. Connor waited at the garage. He would follow Luigi out of the compound, close the gate, and drive to the airport to pick up Gabriella

No sooner did Luigi open the gate when a man wearing a backpack and ski mask walked up and grabbed him in a bear hug.

A small explosion slammed the heavy steel gate into the retaining wall, and Luigi and the bomber were strewn across the cement. When the smoke cleared, blood was everywhere. The gate balanced precariously on its hinges for a moment before crashing to the ground.

Connor struggled to his feet. The concussion of the blast made his ears ring and bloodied his nose. The watch dog was howling.

The bells of the San Anselmo church began ringing, beckoning worshippers to the morning service.