

***THE HEART OF ROME***

**By Mark Cornell**

We've been on the road for three weeks, instead of walking everywhere, this afternoon we've decided to catch a red double decker bus tour around Roma. Towards the end of the trip, the guide pointed to what appeared at a distance a non-descript square called Largo di Torre Argentina, and told us that this was where Caesar was assassinated. It was on the way home to our flat, so we decided to make it our last visit for the day. My wife Kath reads out from the guide book to my teenage son Tim and I, that Largo di Torre Argentina contains the remains of four temples dating back to the republic, and are some of the oldest ruins in Rome. As we step down into the square we notice a large platform of blocks; Kath reads out that they were part of the Curia of Pompey, a rectangular building where the Senate met, and where Caesar was cut down by Brutus, Cassius and their followers on 15<sup>th</sup> March 44 BC.

I'll never forget the story that once Caesar realized he was about to die he threw his toga over his head so his murderers wouldn't witness the shock and agony on his face. This man who'd completed the conquest of the known world, with a disciplined army vastly outnumbered by the so called barbarians. Rome's first emperor, thought himself descended from the gods, ended up a bloodied carcass on the very ancient blocks in front of me. This man...then I heard a meow.

I turn around to see a grey tabby cat sunning himself on single rock surrounded by grass. Tim's blue eyes light up as he and I race up to the pussy to say hello. We have two tortoise shell cats back home in Melbourne, Zoe and Evie, and were missing them chronically. We nicknamed this fella, "Il Grumpo," because every time we got close to him he'd growl and hiss, the silly bugger. We saw another tortoise shell cat resting on a stone fence and tried our luck with him; he ended up being a big lug, purring and loving our strokes. Kath came up to both of us with a big smile on her face and took photos. As I stared over the fence back towards di Terra Argentina I discover there were cats everywhere; on steps, behind temple columns, courtyards, in a clump of grass, behind a tree, through a crack, or inside a hole, there'd be a moggie, sunning, licking, snoozing, dreaming or pondering over the day's events.

We follow some stairs going further downhill to discover an underground Cat Sanctuary. It was operated by about a dozen female volunteers of all ages. We began chatting with Katrina, who introduced herself with a warm open pink face and huge smile. She offered us a tour. There were scores of cats eating chicken or looking around for a pat. Some were kept in cages until they became better, older or more socialized, if they'd been brought in as strays. With some caged cats Katrina pointed to her temple and said the cats had "cerebral problems," which I interpreted as perhaps psychological problems. I'd never heard so much meowing and caterwauling in all my life. It sounded like an accident scene. Yet none of the pussycats looked in pain or badly stressed. All had been vet checked and were up for adoption. I patted blind cats, deaf cats, one eyed cats, three legged cats, crippled cats, every ailment known to pussy kind, was cared for in this sanctuary. I'll never forget one moggie was in a cage and kept bumping against the wire. Katrina let him out; he seemed to have a balance problem and kept falling over. Kath whispered to me he'd probably be better off euthanized. I disagreed, despite his tumbling; the grey cat loved the exercise and the company. Katrina told me there was roughly two hundred stray cats that they looked after. And looked after they lovingly did; patting, nursing, cuddling and chatting to each cat that all had individual names. Katrina told me one cat's name was, George Clooney. She laughed when I said he did look like George Clooney, (the pussycat had a rather distinguished looking face.)

I bought cat souvenirs for my cat lover friends back home. Kath, Tim and I gave donations, hugged Katrina good bye, waved to the others then went back to the streets of Rome. On our way back, there were street kiosks full of Caesar souvenirs, but I kept walking. I was happy with the tiny, brass cat in my pocket; I'd bought from the Cat Sanctuary. I see him stomping on my kitchen windowsill these days, every time I put the kettle on.

### **Bio**

**Mark** is of Irish ancestry. As a child he grew up listening to stories; either in the form of tall tales told by his extended family or the lyrics of his favorite songs on the radio. He started writing poetry when he was seventeen. He has traveled to Ireland twice and during one of these visits was married to Kimberly in a Registry Office in Dublin. Mark has been writing

Short Stories and Novels for a number of years. He took family leave for three years to look after his son Thomas. He now works as a Conciliator with Consumer Affairs.

EPISTEME