

Rome, Open City, Part VIII

Director: Roberto Rossellini (1945)

Two Italian soldiers are walking with a police officer. One of them tells the others about a woman who came for help: her fiancé had been taken by the Gestapo. The story ends, “Don’t worry! I’ll take care of it,” I told her. ‘What a pair of legs she had!’” The men laugh, indifferent to the woman or the fiancé: they are with the Germans, now.

Turning the corner, they see a man in a trenchcoat. But the curfew is on. One soldier calls out, “Halt! Hands up!”

It’s Francesco, on his way home from the printing press. “I have a permit,” he says, hands high in the air. “Printer!” He waves the document above his head.

The police officer examines the document. “Ah. Okay. Get home, hurry up!

Francesco hurries off, hands in pockets. At his building, he unlocks the heavy wooden door.

Once inside, he hears a car roar up and stop in front. He waits out of sight against a corner to see who is coming in.

It’s Lauretta, all gussied up. She turns to her escort and shakes his hand: “*Auf wiedersehen*, Captain, and thanks.”

In German, he replies, “Good night. See you tomorrow – don’t forget.”

“Yes!” She closes the door. Hiking her skirt, she adjusts a nylon stocking – not easy to come by in those days.

As she walks towards the stairs, she is startled to see a figure in the shadows. “Francesco, you scared me.” Face hidden in the darkness, he says nothing. “I’m a bit later,” she explains. “They insisted on seeing me home.” Embarrassed that she’s been seen with a German, she asks, “After all there’s nothing wrong with that, right?”

Without a word, he turns and walks up the stairs. She shrugs and follows him.

In Francesco’s apartment, Manfredi is seated at the table, beside a pot of soup. When Francesco enters, the two men shake hands warmly.

“Hi, Francesco.”

“It went well!” Francesco comments, hanging up his hat and coat.

“Yes, the landlady and Nannina were fantastic.”

“Don Pietro told me that it was Pina who let you in?”

“Yes, she was very kind.”

“What do you think about her?”

“You’re right to marry her!” Smiling, he adds, “At first she took me for a cop, she gave me hell.”

“Ha! I can imagine!”

Francesco serves their soup as they discuss their work with the Resistance. Manfredi will have to lie low for a while, as he’s been identified. Francesco gives him the latest issue of *l’Unità*, from the printing press where he works. Then, hearing a knock, Francesco goes to the door, knowing it is Pina.

They greet each other lovingly. But Pina says, “I’m so worried about Marcello. He’s disappeared. I’ve searched the whole building. He’s not here.” Apparently the other boys from the building are missing as well. And the curfew has started...

Suddenly, a huge explosion startles them. The men go to the window, looking out. As suspenseful music begins to play, Pina closes the door and turns off the light.

Outside they see the flaming remnants of the explosion. Pina raises her hands to her face, deeply concerned.

In the darkness, the neighborhood boys come into view, and the music changes to a rousing hopeful theme. The boys run through the night, lit by intermittent bursts of light.

They climb into the building from a passageway, and Romoletto announces, “Good boys! I’m proud of you!” The screenwriter has chosen the boy’s name with care: Romoletto is the namesake of Romulus, the legendary founder of Rome.

Four of them head up the stairs in Marcello’s building. One enters his apartment, and says good-bye to the others.

“Arrivederci!”

“Buonanotte!”

“Ciao!”

They seem strangely subdued.

From inside, we hear an angry welcome: “Still alive, are you? Well, I’ll kill you myself!” The boys turn back a moment, terrified, then run up the stairs.

One boy boasts, “If I had a father like that, I’d show him!” He reaches up to ring his bell. From above, through the open doorway, Marcello and his friend see the boy’s father slapping him and yelling, “You ugly rascal! Coming home at this hour!”

The two boys trudge on, looking dismayed and full of dread. Whatever they faced outside with the Germans is nothing compared to the wrath of their worried parents.

Reaching their own landing, Marcello’s friend says, “We’d better go in one at a time.”

But Pina beats them to it. She throws open the door, grabs Marcello and starts beating him. “You’re here, ugly monsters! Now I’ll beat your faces in!” She pushes them into the apartment in a fury.

Inside, the family that Pina rents from has gathered. The grilling begins: “Where were you?”

“At Romoletto’s!”

“No, you weren’t! No one was up there!”

The questions continue, as the adults argue over who will kill the kids.

Francesco arrives and he tells the boys, “Go to bed, you two.” They run off gratefully.

To Pina, he says, “They’re just kids.” From his bed in the corner, the grandfather, in vest and white shirt, looks on, laughing.

In her bathrobe, Marina bursts in, complaining, “Will you stop? One can’t get a moment’s peace in this house! I work all day!” A shouting match ensues, and Marina declares, exasperated, “I’m fed up with being in this zoo!”

Comes the response: “Then get out! Who’s keeping you here?!”

The grandfather beckons Francesco over to his bedside. “Elide’s baking a cake for your wedding tomorrow.”

In bed, Marcello talks to a little girl who shares the room. “We fixed ‘em good, huh?”

“You never take me along, though!”

“What are you talking about? You’re a woman!”

“Why? Can’t women be heroes?” The camera shows the holes in her stockings.

When Francesco enters, the girl gets into bed with her two younger siblings.

Sitting down, Francesco runs his hand over Marcello’s hair.

“Can’t sleep?”

“I’m not sleepy.”

“Where did you boys go with Romoletto?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Not even me?” He gently touches Marcello’s cheek.

“No, it’s a secret.”

“Ah, then, you’re right. You mustn’t tell anyone.” The boy smiles, reassured.

Francesco tucks the boy in, then turns off the light. Marcello sits up. “Listen!”

“What is it?” Francesco goes back to the bed.

“Is it true that, starting tomorrow, I should call you Papa?”

“If you want to.”

“I do. I love you so much.” Francesco wraps him in a tight embrace.

Pina comes out of the apartment, onto the landing. She sighs and puts a hand on her forehead.

Francesco joins her.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“I had a fight with my sister. She wants to move out. She says she won’t come to the wedding.”

Pina begins to sob. “I’m so tired.”

He puts his arm around her. “Come on!”

“I’m so tired!” She has him sit on the stairs. “Let’s sit here... Like the first time we talked. Remember?”

She continues, “How long ago that seems now, and how things have changed, though the war had already started.”

“Yes,” he agrees. “Everyone was deluding themselves it would be over quickly – and that we’d only see it on newsreels. But instead...”

“But when will it end? There are times that I just can’t go on any longer. This winter feels like it will never end.”

“It will end, Pina... it will end,” He reassures her. “And spring will come again as well – more beautiful than ever. Because we’ll be free. We have to believe it. We mustn’t be afraid now or in the future, because we’re on the right side.”

The road may be long and hard, but... we’ll get there and we’ll see a better world. And our children especially will see it – Marcello and him, the one we’re expecting.”

He goes on, “That’s why you mustn’t ever be afraid. Never, Pina, whatever happens. Right?” Through tears, she answers, “Yes, Francesco. I’m never afraid, ever.”