



MADISON GOFFNEY

THE FELINES OF MARCH

*Visiting Ceasar's Assassination Site
Two Millennia Later*

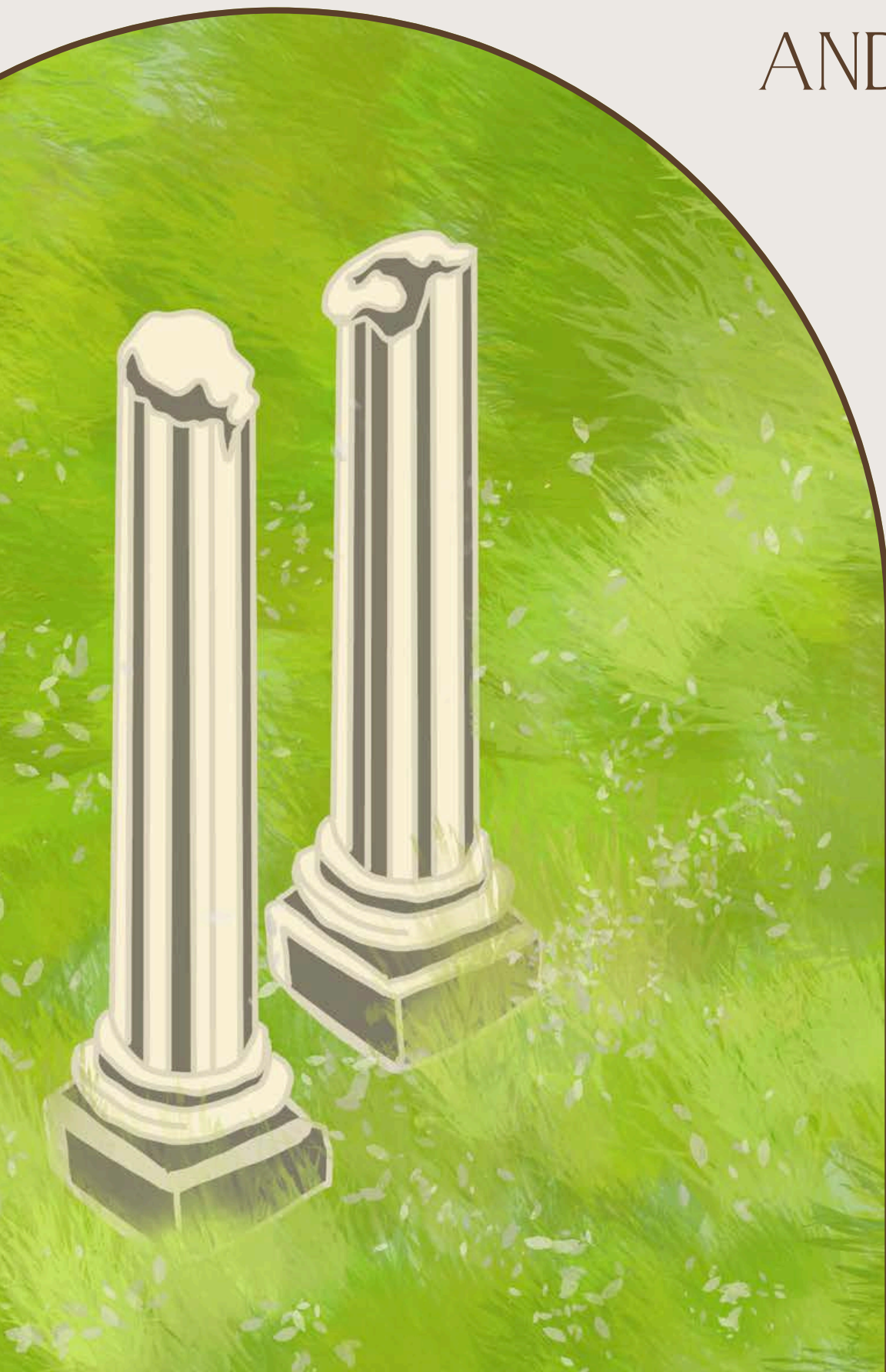
SPRING HAS SPRUNG IN ROME.
FLOWERS ARE BLOOMING. BIRDS ARE CHIRPING.
AND CATS ARE KEEPING THE CITY'S GHOSTS PLACATED.

A few months living in this city has taught me a small percentage of its enormous history. I can tell you a little about a lot, like where the gladiators fought, who our Pope is, and where to grab a good slice of pizza. As a part of this, I now know the significance of the Ides of March.

Often a phrase prefaced by “beware”, the Ides of March (or the 15th) was the date Julius Caesar was assassinated. But I’m not so superstitious. So on March 15th, 2,067 years later, I made the short walk from my Roman apartment to the very scene of the crime.

What I found was the ruins of the Theatre of Pompey, and it seems to have quite a few new occupants. Among the dozen or so columns still upright are several dozen of the city’s stray cats – so many that it raised my alarm bells. Upon further inspection, it would seem that the historical site has been repurposed – it’s a cat sanctuary, going by the name of Torre Argentina.

Let me tell you about it.



SO WHAT HAPPENED TO CAESAR?

First things first, a history lesson.

Julius Caesar was a renowned military general at the time of his death. He'd risen to immense power, self identifying as a "dictator for life" (yikes). While many Romans admired him for his reforms/ military victories, others, especially senators, feared he was dismantling the Republic to become something of a monarch.

Around 60 conspirators believed killing him was necessary to restore the Republic's traditional values and prevent tyranny. The conspirators lured Caesar to a Senate meeting at the Theatre of Pompey on March 15th, 44 BCE.

Plutarch, born 90 years after, was one of the most prolific biographers of Ceasar. In *Life of Ceasar*, he writes: Slumped against the pedestal of Pompey's statue, Caesar died, having been stabbed twenty-three times. The pedestal was drenched with blood."

All this for naught – his death did not bring the peace and freedom the conspirators hoped for. Instead, it catapulted Rome into a new era of civil war. The public, many of whom loved Caesar, were outraged. His death paved the way for the rise of his adopted heir, Octavian (aka Augustus), and the fall of the Roman Republic.

After the murder, the site was seen as cursed. The Roman people, who, as I stated, were largely outraged by Caesar's death, began to view the location with a mix of fear and reverence. Out of superstition, the Senate quickly shut down the theatre, and it was walled off. Excavations wouldn't start until the early 1900s.



MY VISIT

But back to March 15th. I visited the assassination site on that famous day, greeted as I headed over with a situationally idyllic drizzle. The gloom that stumbled upon Ancient Rome at Caesar's untimely demise roamed over twenty centuries to both the skies above and the mood that it curated in me.

“Beware the Ides of March” – a bone chilling catchline as I stared across the street upon the quickly wettening stones of a sunken Largo Argentina. Columns of ancient temples, the ones that were left, were bruised by age. *A black and white cat rolled around in a patch of slick grass.* The buildings were essentially flattened – the remaining structure wasn't more than two bricks tall at any point. *An orange cat nuzzled its face into a bit of stone.* I thought about Caesar – how dreary had become his legacy, how the tragedy and its fallout seemed to seep into the present day, stained just as his blood had done the marble. *A kitten tip tapped down some steps to a covered area, where four more cats had already gathered.*

Alright, enough about Caesar. I love cats, and this was more than I'd seen in my whole time living in Rome. I headed towards the entrance to see if I could pet one, or several. Walking down into the rubble, it quickly became clear that an institution was fully established, unbeknownst to me. A cat sanctuary, host to over 150 felines, had taken residence here. I sought out volunteers, my head ran dizzy with questions. Why here? How did they operate? Could I pet them?



MY QUESTIONS ANSWERED

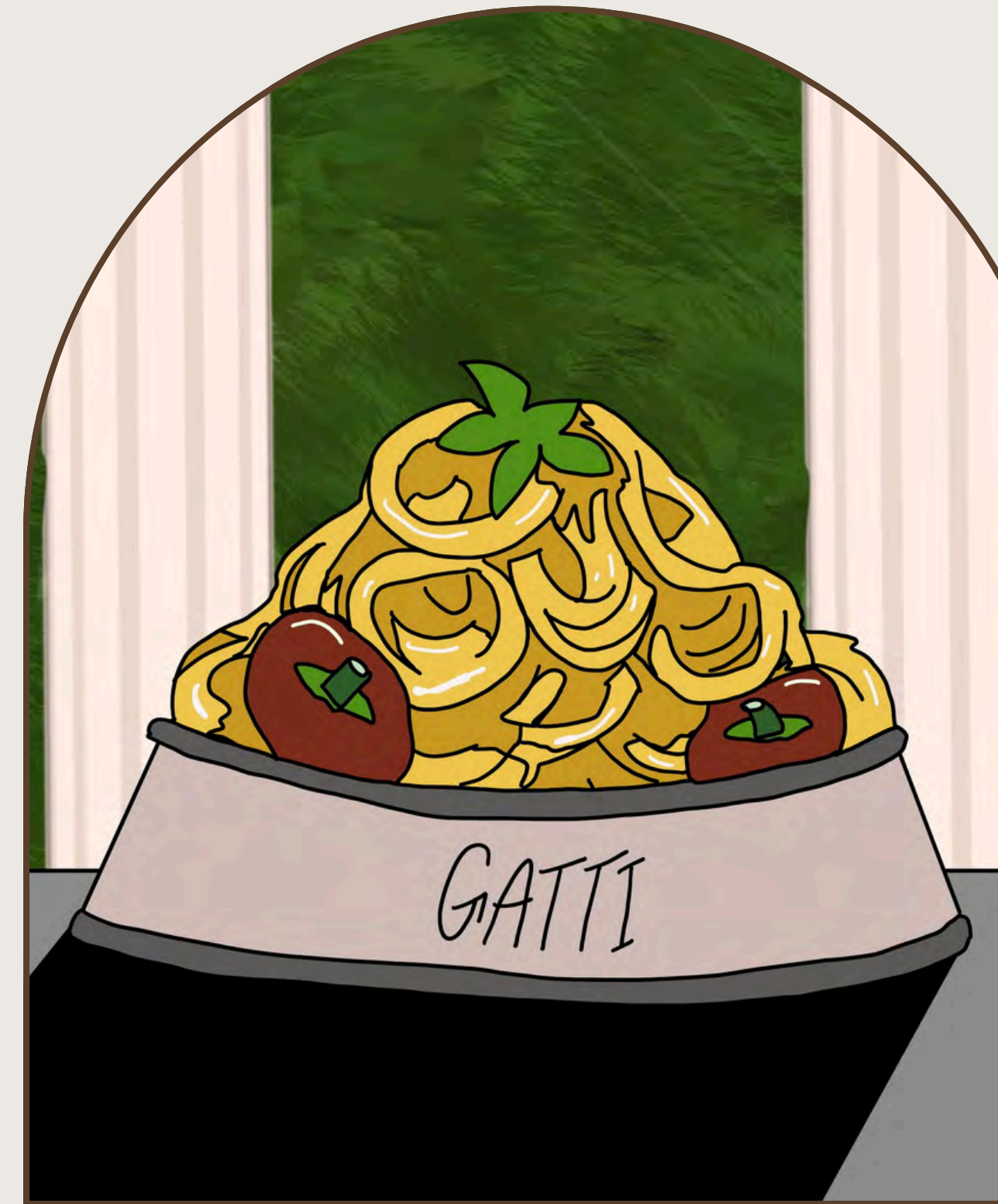
A volunteer named Mari told me: “The cats were here first, and we were here second”.

True – In the early 1900s, stray cats had begun to make the ruins their home following the site’s excavation. According to Mari, integral to Roman culture are “gattare” – translating to cat ladies – which are women who give their time to feed/care for strays in the city. This specific site was frequented by actress and ‘gattara’ Anna Magnani in the 50s, where she would feed the felines pots upon pots of homemade pasta.

Soon after, a nearby archeologist’s storehouse was repurposed as a cat food and supply storage center for cats in the area, and the keys were passed through several gattare for decades to come.

It wasn’t until 1993, when the keys fell in the hands of Lia Dequel and Silvia Vivian, that the decision was made to form an official cat sanctuary atop the excavated ruins. The group worked to provide food, medical care, and sterilization for the hundreds of cats living among the ruins.

I asked another volunteer, Guilia, if the cats had disturbed the excavation site at all. She said: “There’s been arguments with preservationists, but the community fights back. Right now, the community is winning”.





THE MAGIC OF ROME

Before I had even noticed the collection of strays, my eyes first wandered around the piazza. Cornering the site on all four sides was as urban an atmosphere as you can find in Rome. Newer apartments, restaurants with patrons that spilled onto the sidewalk, buses and cars fighting for the same small patch of road.

And like many other spots around the city, ruins nuzzle themselves seamlessly in the mix. Just as quickly as one can lose themselves in the complicated history of a single square meter, one can become entranced by what lies atop and around it, by how Rome seems to build up and repurpose seamlessly as it evolves over hundreds of years.



THAT'S ALL :)