



A Roman Holiday & A Prayer of Gratitude...

O Q. Raúf, Pause for Thought

Back-to-school week has officially landed!

And although I don't have children of my own as yet – much to the horror of many a relative, being a children's author means it's the busiest of weeks for me too, as school assemblies and literary festivals kick back into gear.

Thankfully however, my back-to-school adventures no longer include the old school uniform dramas of my childhood – usually revolving around my poor mum leaving the uniform shop right until the last minute, and leaving me with the wrong sized jumpers and trousers to wear for the rest of the year.

Or worries about whether my packed lunch goods were going to be swappable for anything more chocolatey.

But still, in a last ditch attempt to have some semblance of an actual holiday before the old school bell began ringing, I decided to take a longed-for trip to Rome.

From the moment I first watched *Roman Holiday* as a twelve-year old and heard Audrey say, "Rome... By all means, Rome. I will cherish my visit here in memory as long as I live", the Eternal City has held an eternal fascination for me.

One that deepened in my later teens when I found out that the tragic figure of English poet John Keats, who authored such immortal words as, 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty', had also died in that great city.

As I finally got to meander through Rome's cobbled streets, stick my hand in the Mouth of Truth – happy to report all limbs are still in tact! – and sit on the balcony Keats may have taken a last breakfast on, I found the word 'Alhamdulillah' rising to my lips again and again.

Simply meaning 'Thanks be to God,' I couldn't help but feel that word coursing through me.

For what a blessing it was, to traverse so ancient a city, preserved, in tact, and bustling with life and gelato on every corner.

In a world where so many irreplaceable, historical monuments to God and poets alike are being demolished in ways unthinkable, my prayer of gratitude was also a certainty.

A certainty that, as Keats once wrote, 'The poetry of the earth is never dead.'

Just so long as we go on travelling, listening and reaching for it.

And with that much-needed reminder and my gratitude for it, to hand, I'm ready to finally head back to school...