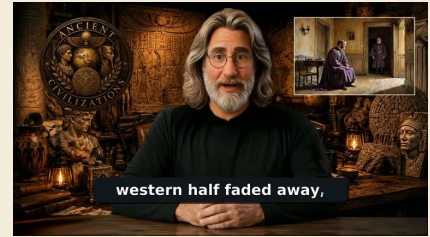
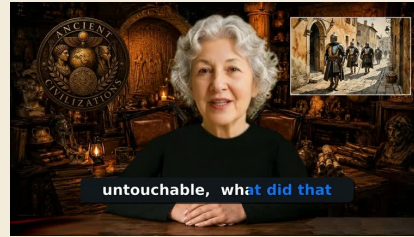




ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS ♦

The Fall of Rome

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Draw close to the fire, friends, for tonight we tell of the fall of the greatest empire the western world had ever known, an empire so vast and so lasting that people came to believe it simply was the world, and could no more end than the sky could fall. And yet it ended. This is the fall of Rome, Carol, and the surprising truth of it is that it did not fall the way we imagine at all.



CAROL

The fall of Rome. Marty, that phrase alone feels like the ground giving way. I picture barbarians pouring over the walls in a single terrible night, the city in flames, the end of everything. Is that how it was?



MARTY

That is exactly the picture in most minds, Carol, and it is almost entirely wrong, and untangling why is the whole richness of the tale. There was no single night, no one catastrophe, no clean ending. Rome did not so much fall as fade, and transform, over centuries, so slowly that many of the people living through it did not know an empire was dying around them at all. But let us begin with the glory, so we feel the height of the drop. At its peak, Carol, Rome ruled from Britain to the deserts of the Middle East, from the Rhine to the sands of Africa, tens of millions of people under one law, one great network of roads and cities and aqueducts, a peace and an order that lasted for centuries. It seemed eternal. They called it the Eternal City for good reason.



CAROL

An empire so grand and so long-lasting that eternity seemed a fair word for it. Marty, so how does eternity end? What began to go wrong?



MARTY

Many things at once, Carol, slowly, over generations, and no single one of them was the killer. The empire had grown so enormous it was desperately hard to govern and defend, its borders stretched thin against the pressures beyond. The economy strained under the cost of it all, the coinage was debased, trade faltered. And the government itself grew dangerously unstable, with emperors rising and falling by the sword, murdered by their own guards, whole years lost to civil war as generals fought each other for the throne. An empire that spends its strength fighting itself, Carol, has little left over for the enemies at the gate.



CAROL

Too big to hold, too poor to pay for, and tearing itself apart from the top. Marty, that is a body already weak before any blow lands. And I imagine the enemies at the gate did not wait politely.



MARTY

They did not, Carol, though even here the truth is more tangled than the legend. Beyond Rome's borders lived many peoples the Romans lumped together as barbarians, and in these centuries great waves of them were on the move, pushed by pressures of their own far to the east, migrating and pressing into Roman lands seeking safety and a share of the wealth. Sometimes Rome fought them, sometimes it settled them, sometimes it hired them into its own armies, until in time much of the Roman army defending Rome was made up of these very peoples. And then came the shocks that echo through history. In the year four hundred and ten, Carol, a Gothic king named Alaric led his people into Italy and did the unthinkable. He sacked the city of Rome itself.



CAROL

They sacked Rome itself. Marty, after all those centuries of it being untouchable, what did that do to people?



MARTY

It shattered something in the soul of the world, Carol, more than in its walls. Rome had not fallen to an enemy in some eight hundred years. To hear that the Eternal City had been plundered was, to the people of that age, as if the sun had gone dark. Great thinkers wrestled with what it meant, how such a thing could be permitted, whether it was the end of all things. And yet, Carol, mark this, the empire did not end that day. It staggered on. Rome was sacked again decades later by another people, the Vandals, whose very name we still use for wanton destroyers. The western empire grew ever weaker, its territory shrinking, its power draining to the local strongmen and the barbarian kings who now held the real might.



CAROL

So even the sacking of Rome was not the end, only another wound in a long dying. Marty, when do the history books finally say, there, that is the fall?

MARTY

They fix it, by convention, on a strangely quiet moment, Carol, in the year four hundred and seventy-six. In that year the last man to hold the title of emperor in the west, a boy, Carol, with the almost unbelievable name of Romulus Augustulus, echoing both Rome's founder and its first emperor, was simply deposed by a barbarian commander named Odoacer. And here is the telling thing. Odoacer did not even bother to claim the title of emperor for himself. He just set it aside, sent the imperial robes off to the east, and ruled Italy as a king. The office of western emperor was not overthrown in fire and blood, Carol. It was quietly retired, because it had come to mean nothing at all. That whimper, that shrug, is what we call the fall of Rome.

CAROL

A boy emperor set aside, and the crown just quietly put away because it no longer mattered. Marty, that is so much sadder and stranger than flames on the walls. But you keep saying the western empire. Was there another half?

MARTY

There was, Carol, and this is the fact that undoes the whole idea of a fall most completely. Rome had split into two halves, west and east, and while the western half faded away, the eastern half, centered on the great city of Constantinople, did not fall at all. It lived on, rich and powerful, calling itself Roman still, for nearly another thousand years. So at the very moment the schoolbooks tell us Rome fell, half of the Roman empire was carrying on, and would carry on for ten more centuries. Rome, Carol, did not so much die as move, and shrink, and slowly change into the medieval world that grew up out of its soil, the languages and laws and roads and faith of Rome living on inside the very peoples who had supposedly destroyed it.

CAROL

So it never truly fell at all, only transformed and continued, even as we mourn it. Marty, that changes everything about the phrase. What is the meaning you take from the fall of Rome?

MARTY

This, Carol, and it is the quiet wisdom of the whole tale. We love to imagine that great things end in a single dramatic catastrophe, a night of fire, a barbarian at the gate, because it is a clean story and it gives us someone to blame. But the mightiest empire the west ever built did not end that way. It ended by a thousand small subtractions over centuries, by growing too big and too poor and too divided, by slowly becoming something else while everyone was busy living their ordinary days, until one year a barbarian shrugged and put the crown in a drawer and hardly anyone noticed. Great things rarely fall, Carol. They erode, and they transform, and the people inside them almost never feel the ground moving. That is the true and unsettling lesson of Rome. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am thinking of the boy emperor with the grand name, quietly set aside, and an empire that did not die but simply became the world we live in. Watch for the slow erosions, friends, not just the sudden fires. Come back to the fire.