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Marriage in Rome

We leaned in silence against the lower deck railings of the *Otranto*, a one-class passenger ship, my middle-aged father and I. Our gaze followed the people who had just left us and were re-grouping on the wharf below.

Looking back as an old woman with much family experience behind me, I now question why he and I managed to make life so difficult for each other. Remembering that day, I see again on the wharf below us my elegant mother, vexed and sad, in her smart home-sewn cotton dress, high heels and black picture hat. She was flanked by my two brothers. Three young women who had been at school with me also attended her. One of them, Pamela Poynton, placed her arm reassuringly on my mother's shoulder. Behind my family stood a cluster of student acquaintances from University.

By this time my father should have been leaving the boat as well. Why was he still on board? It was usual for him to expect others to obey instructions immediately, and the signal had been given to leave. I wondered whether the wanderlust of his youth had gripped him again.

The two-funnelled *Otranto*, once a steamship, had been converted to diesel. On my first long solo journey away from home, she was on her second-last outward bound voyage. Adventuring students usually booked themselves into the dingy cheapest cabins, well below the waterline.

The voyage would finish for most at Southampton, the access port for London. I was to get off earlier, in Naples. When I arrived in Italy, I would be three months short of twenty-one, the age when parental consent for marriage was no longer legally necessary.

The silence between my father and myself diverted my attention to movements in the crowd. Late-comers struggled up the gangplank with suitcases, rugs, cartons. Behind us people pushed and shoved, clumsily in each others' way. Bouquets of flowers passed by in the hands of strangers, and with them, conspicuously boxed, was what I heard later was a wedding cake. I did not know then that the cake was for me, sent by my future husband's cousin. It would never arrive in my hands. Like so many good intentions, it was lost on the way.

A man's voice urged once more over the loudspeakers: 'All visitors please leave. All visitors leave now. Final call. All visitors leave now!' I felt my father stir at last and then his heavy hand on my shoulder. In an uncharacteristic gesture, because he was not given to either verbal or physical expressions of personal endearment, he leaned towards me and said with barely concealed tenderness: 'Don't hold it against me that I stood in your way.'

Although often voluble, sometimes even boisterous in company, he was reticent about his deeper feelings. After years of mutual stubbornness, we now cut our moorings, as I impetuously hugged him. 'Of course I won't,' I promised.

I could feel his silent struggle not to resist me. Perhaps unable to further soften our obstinate relationship, or afraid of the feelings his one moist eye betrayed, he turned abruptly and disappeared into the crowd.

Because of my astonishment at my father's expression of concern on the *Otranto*, I do not now remember whether any other words followed his departure from my side. I recognised the courage it had taken him to broach the problem between us. Had I lost a crucial opportunity to strengthen a new friendship with him? I wondered about this as I saw his determined face and stocky figure emerge from the throng below as he joined the family group on the wharf.

By now streamers were flying towards the deck. Those that landed formed a colourful canopy which trembled ever so slightly in the breeze that stirred from the sea. Others, failing to unite giver and taker, joined a graveyard of soggy paper between ship and wharf, in water lapping against the pylons.

A group of students from the Newman Society began to sing. There was a cloying smell of engine oil and of musty mussels encrusted on damp wood. With a lump in my throat, I recognised out of the din below the a cappella music my friends and I had shared for the best part of three years. My gallant, handsome friend Jim Provan, and the singers whom he conducted, offered them to me in several parts.

The old music was beginning to link my journey spiritually with other travels, different times, other places. The performers were offering me a blessing for a safe passage. Many of them would dearly have liked to travel abroad as well. But most were bound by responsibilities.

They were still singing when the ship hooted and its loudspeaker began to broadcast a farewell. Passengers joined with the crowd on the wharf in song: *Now is the hour! When we must say goodbye ...* As the singing swelled and streamers flew, the pilot vessels began to pull the Otranto backwards, away from the wharf. She turned laboriously in a huge half-circle until she was pointed to the Port Phillip heads.

I was leaving with a cabin stacked with wedding presents from my friends. A wedding poem in my pocket was dedicated to us by Philip Martin.

As the ship moved out, we travellers moved towards the deck still facing the wharf. Hands and handkerchiefs waved as the gap between ship and land began to widen. It was like the fluttering of hundreds of wings.

It gave me a grand feeling, my floating away like that on board a stately ship in the late afternoon haze of a hot summer's day. I stared at the people on the wharf as if to capture the scene forever. Soon they began to shrink and disappear below the horizon, as the ship gathered speed. I then looked west to the high waters off Williamstown, sheened with early evening light. Later, as we approached the heads, a strong breeze accompanied the sudden cold change so typical, yet unexpected, of a Melbourne high summer. The bonfires Father Golden had said would be lit on the beach at Point Lonsdale to farewell me were foiled by a sudden wind.

During my journey to Naples I received mail from Jim at each port and at each I posted letters to him. At Aden I followed a large bearded man in flowing robes through a sinister-looking part of town to post my last letter at the office to which he had directed me. I felt uneasy. Was I being sensible? How safe was this town for foreign visitors? Did the white slave trade still exist? Imagine if I never arrived in Naples!

Already at dawn the temperature had risen to almost forty degrees Celcius. This desert township beneath its looming rock seemed eerie and sinister. All the other passengers who had disembarked had gone to tour an oasis.

But I got back on board safely. There I could read the air-letters from home and from Jim. He ardently outlined his latest wedding plans. He promised to be on the wharf at Naples when the *Otranto* pulled into port. I was to be welcomed with flowers, an unusual gesture for an Australian man.

After a brisk passage through the grey and choppy Mediterranean Sea, still throwing off the squalls of winter, we arrived in Naples on 23 March. Groups of companions from the ship left on tours to Pompeii. But some were so excited about my wedding that they stayed with me to catch a glimpse of the groom. But Jim was not there. I had done without breakfast to be sure not to miss his arrival. Time went ticking by, and still no one! What could have gone wrong? Had there been an Australian bucks' party, and Jim too unwell to come? What should I do?

He could hardly have changed his mind! My nervousness was catching. The three people still with me told me to forget about the wedding and come with them to London. At 9.30—which seemed like hours later—Jim appeared on the wharf in a state of agitation. A quick embrace and then we had hurriedly to lug my two cases off the boat to catch the train to Rome. There were formalities still to be completed before our marriage the very next day.

Jim spoke rapidly to me as we moved. Someone was trying to push him out of his job with the Australian Legation on which we would both now depend for a living. He was agitated, restless, shy. We were both reticent after eleven months of separation. I depended on his new knowledge of the Italian language and the force of his personality. He would lead the way and make all the arrangements.

He was feeling the weight of his responsibilities. What is expressed in letters and in the visible, tangible reality of a relationship are not the same. We had to become re-acquainted. Practical action made it easier. Whatever doubts he may have had about becoming responsible for me, he nevertheless shouldered his new burdens quickly and with aplomb.

He told me that he had stayed up all night so as not to miss the fast train to Naples at 4 in the morning. On the early morning platform he then found four trains listed for Naples, each one apparently 'quick':

accelerando, diretto, direttissimo and rapido. He chose what he thought was the fastest but, some way into the journey, when the ticket inspector made his rounds, discovered that this route took far too long to reach Naples. He would miss my arrival. He was told he would get there more quickly if he left the train at the next stop, returned to Rome and there boarded the true rapido. There was nothing else to do. My promised bunch of flowers could not compete with this new program. In a man of such febrile energy, a long journey does not bring a calm state of mind.

His disappointment in not getting the reunion 'right' was unsettling. I now became the calm one. As we both waited to board the train from Naples to Rome, he informed me that, if possible, we would marry in St Peter's Basilica. To marry in Italy, I would need several weeks' residence, whereas none was required for marriage in the Vatican.

I was dismayed by the prospect of such ostentation. He reassured me gently that we would not be married at the main altar but in one of the minor chapels.

I heard all this from him as the train raced through the smooth, well-cultivated Italian countryside. Crops grew everywhere. There were grapevines on trellises between gnarled, bent olive trees. Fortified hill-top villages seemed to be part of a theatre set. They had the exotic quality I learned to love in Italy.

We lunched beside a large window in the dining carriage while Jim outlined what we had still to accomplish together that day. There was as yet no wedding ring. He had only just managed to get the tailor to complete his suit. I needed to buy a pair of white court shoes with heels, to match my white lace dress. We both needed permission to marry from the parish priest of the Aventine district where Jim was renting a bed-sitter for us from a widowed Hungarian potter.

In Rome Jim took me to the Corso to buy a plain gold ring and a smart pair of white shoes. Father Bill Smith, a Melbourne Jesuit studying in Rome, who was arranging our marriage, accompanied us to the *parocco*, the parish priest. He wanted to know if there were any pressures on me to marry, either from other people or through an unwanted pregnancy.

I laughed inwardly as I thought of all the people who had tried to prevent this marriage from taking place. The old priest laughed out loud when I told him that I had travelled across the world to be with my future husband. He signalled his lack of doubts by moving his hands sideways, as if to confirm 'that does it!'

We then asked Father Smith to join us in a meal to get to know me. He came back with us to Jim's room, took out of my hands an electric iron, and proceeded to iron my wedding dress. Jim later told me how relieved he had been on meeting this Austro-Australian girl. I was not the sophisticated 'slinky Viennese' he had assumed Jim might have chosen.

The obstacles on our way to the altar were by no means cleared. Father Smith instructed me to wear my black coat over my wedding dress and also the white knitted shawl Jim's mother had made me, rather than the veil under the tulip-shaped cap the sentimental Russian dress-maker had persuaded my mother to allow her to make. Until the ecclesiastical authorities had spoken, we were not to presume we had permission to marry in St Peter's before it had been granted. We agreed to everything.

That night we slept chastely in the hotel. Since it was Lent, and we would not be able to have a nuptial Mass, we were up at 6 in the morning to attend Mass and Communion at the great basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, I in my disguised wedding dress. A fortnight later, at Easter-tide, Father Smith, most ceremoniously, was able to organise a private nuptial Mass for us in the catacomb of St Priscilla.

We picked up Father Smith at the Collegio di San Roberto Bellarmino, where we left my suitcase with my honeymoon clothes under the bed of one of his Australian Jesuit colleagues. This was a cause of much hilarity among his celibate colleagues for months to come. (What if Very Reverend Father Superior had discovered it?) Then the three of us walked to the ancient Pantheon nearby, where Jim hailed a horse-drawn *carozza*. He directed the coachman to drive us on a tour taking in the Colosseum, the Roman Forum, the Piazza Navona and other landmarks.

Father Smith still had to go to the Vatican Vicariato to get the bureaucracy's permission to marry us. Because it was Lent, consent was not assumed to be automatic. An Australian Jesuit did not cut much mustard in the Vatican. Jim and I waited apprehensively until our resourceful Father Smith emerged, triumphant.

Inside St Peter's he approached the Warden, a plump, pompous Italian monsignore in flowing robes, and showed him the necessary documents. 'What?' he gesticulated. 'You want to get married here. When?' 'Adesso (now),' said Smith meekly. '*Impossibile!*' thundered the *monsignore*. 'Well, when can they get married?' Bill Smith pleaded gently in Italian. Would we have to come back in two weeks? we wondered. 'Come back in half an hour!' was the abrupt reply, with a patronising smile. There was no need for a tip.

Our small wedding party of Jim and myself, Father Smith and six others, walked across the piazza to a corner coffee shop. We ordered hot chocolate and yeast buns. Our companions were sincerely happy for us. There was the best man, Des O'Grady, the expatriate Australian writer, and his Roman *fidanzata*, Giuseppina (Gegi) Culotta; the bridesmaid, a pedigree Roman friend of Jim's, Adelaide Pettine-Zampi, who worked with him at the Australian Legation; a comical Australian bohemian, John Fitchett; and two former Dominican seminarians, Brian Dargaville and Bernard Delfendahl, who, anti-clerical and full of progressive ideas, nonetheless lived at the Dominican Angelicum. Father Smith was rather suspicious of them.

Ever-resourceful, Bill was the only one to bring a camera, to give us a small record of the day.

Within half an hour we had returned to the architectural wonder of St Peter's. We passed the modest marble Stuart memorial to exiled Bonnie Prince Charlie of Scotland and his father, the Old Pretender. We headed towards Bernini's ornate *baldachino* below Michelangelo's great baroque dome. I noted on the other side of the basilica the almost black statue of Saint Peter, Christ's 'rock', his foot nearly worn away by centuries of devout kisses.

We were led into the *Tesoreria*, a gilded chapel beyond the end of the side aisle. There Father Smith led us through the officially designated words that bound us to each other. Jim gave me the gold ring to wear as the visible sign of my pledge. Being an Australian male, he did not have to receive one from me.

Then Father Smith delivered a sermon about our duties to one another and to the Church, with no less eloquence than if he had been in front of a cathedral assembly. It was an imaginative and caring talk. Our promises were then sealed in writing and registered in the basilica's records. Jim was

given a little book, *La Famiglia Christiana*, lest he forget to procreate, and I received a mother-of-pearl rosary. These were gifts from Pope Pius XII to all those who married in St Peter's.

As we walked down the steps of the basilica, Jim turned to me. 'Helga,' he asked, 'do you want to spend the next few days in Naples, Capri, Florence or Siena?' 'Somewhere charming, quiet and not well-known,' I replied, 'the home of my friend, St Catherine.' 'Siena it is,' he smiled, and led the party in the direction of the Piazza Navona where Olimpia's pleasant *trattoria* had been chosen for our wedding meal. And there we were all merry.

This text is taken from *At Home in Exile: A Memoir*, by Helga M. Griffin,
published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National University,
Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/AHE.2021.20