

Marry Me

by Anna Sequoia

It was the year I finally lost 60 pounds and began to realize I was beautiful. I was 21 years old. I had a plane ticket and tuition for one term, a summer session, provided by an aunt who had lived in Europe and thought it was important for one's development as a human being to spend time there. I had some cash, not much, from the year I worked at Bloomingdale's after dropping out of college the first time; my parents contributed the cost of my *pensione*, the *Locanda Beccatini*.

I'd studied Italian for two years. Despite having devoted at least two hours a day to the language in class and during interminable subway trips to and from Washington Square College, my accent was horrible and I could barely sustain a conversation. That did not stop me. Two other students from Professore Benno Weiss' class had signed up for the *Facoltà per gli Stranieri* at the *Università di Firenze*, and so did I.

I prepared for the trip by buying, on sale, a red bikini with a shelf bra and hand-painted parrot on the bottom that had tail feathers trailing down into the crotch. A neighbor, a widow who sewed for money, used a Vogue pattern to make dresses for me of fabric that wouldn't wrinkle.

My mother, my father and brother, plus three cousins on my mother's side came to the airport to see me off. I couldn't wait to get away from them.

The Italian language class was held in a high-ceilinged, fluorescent-lit room full of earnest female American students with midwestern accents. I found it remarkably boring. So instead of

going to class, I went to museums, I walked, and I encountered people.

At the *Piazza dei Ciompi*, as we both were rooting through a box of old *latticino* marbles, I met a British expat who told me he had gone to school with Prince Charles. He confided, as I am sure he had many times before, that the future king wasn't particularly bright. He said he and a few friends were invited to the *Palazzo Pucci* the following evening, did I want to join them.

I said I would, but instead spent the next evening with a Greek architecture student, Theo, I met at the Brancacci Chapel.

I need to interject here: during the time I was supposedly a student in Florence, during the summer of 1966, I met exactly one school-age Italian — an earnest young woman from Montecatini who was living at my *pen-sione* and cramming for entrance to medical school. We saw each other at the main meal of the day, which she ate with her head down and in silence, speaking only to the *Signora*, with her hand partly over her mouth. It seemed as though every other young Italian had left the city.

The Greek contingent from the *Facoltà di Architettura* was still in Florence. Theo told me, in his mash-up of Italian, English and Greek, that the architecture school was full of Greeks because it was inexpensive, and also one of the best in Europe. He was handsome and charming, but very difficult to understand. It was a relief when his rowdy, laughing crowd of friends joined us. Three of them spoke English.

Costas looked a little older than the others. He joked less. He seemed serious and earnest. I noticed that while everyone else was guzzling wine, he sipped his; it didn't seem to interest him. But it was obvious to all of us that I did. When we crowded into his beat-up Volkswagen bug, Theo behind us on his Vespa, Costas asked me to sit in front.

We drove to *Piazzale Michelangelo*, parked and climbed to a spot where there were benches and low stone walls to lean against. The sun was just setting and the city looked bathed in gold.

“*Guarda il bel spettacolo!*” someone exclaimed with an exaggerated British accent. “*Guarda il bel spettacolo!*” they kept repeating, laughing.

“The English have the worst accents,” Costas explained. It made me both self-conscious about my own exorable accent, and relieved that I wasn’t a Brit.

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They were all on vacation from the university and had time to play. With Theo and Stelios, and Stelios’ wife Ersi, we drove to see Michelucci’s new *Chiesa dell’autostrada*. Costas and I drove alone to Pisa, and then to the beach at Viareggio.

Costas showed me his architectural drawings: buildings that to me looked strangely old-fashioned, with prominent carved wood rafter tails. They were very different from the stark linear sketches I would see later from his friends.

He taught me to count in Greek, to curse, and lascivious slang for parts of the reproductive system. He said he was disappointed that I wasn’t a virgin. When he turned me over, he said at least I was “a virgin from the back.”

I had never experienced the kind of voluptuous erotic pleasure he gave me. I was besotted by it. When he suggested that I leave the *pensione* and move out to Scandicci, to the apartment he shared with Theo and another student, I went. I knew it was selfish: I saw that the *Signora* was stricken when I told her. She supported herself by renting rooms to students; she had been counting on the money from me. How could I go with that man, she said to me. “*É un’ brutto*,” she said, he’s ugly, and I knew she was talking about

something other than his looks. I didn't listen.

When he asked me to pose for him without my clothes, I resisted. "No one will ever see them," he said. "Only me." He kept bringing it up. He would wait until I was lying sated beside him, and then ask. I finally relented. He set up a tripod, posed me sitting in a chair, and lying down. I was surprised when he lay on top of me and photographed us together.

I always knew he was going to back to Greece to see his mother.

"Come with me," he said one morning as we stood at the local bar in Scandicci having coffee. "Theo is coming with me, and Stelios and Ersi. We'll be crowded, but it will be a good trip." Then he lightly moved his hand along the back of my neck, in a way he knew would arouse me, and smiled.

"Marry me," he said. "Sure," I said. It was my way out; that was the way I saw it. My mother's older sister had done it; she had married a Czech diplomat and lived what seemed to me then a life of adventure. She'd escaped from her family's blue-collar roots in upstate New York, and I was trying to escape from mine. "I am in love with a Greek," I wrote to her. "An architect."

He didn't bring up money until we were about to leave. "I need to borrow money for the trip back," he said. "I'll pay you back."

"That's fine," I said. I didn't care about the money. We were getting married. There was a part of me that wanted to be taken care of. Besides, I felt flush. An uncle of mine, my father's younger brother, had just been vacationing in Italy with his wife and had given me a gift of cash.

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There were five of us in the Volkswagen bug. Because of the luggage, Ersi sat almost all the way to Athens on her husband's lap.

Everyone sang and told stories, mostly in Greek, up the coast of the Adriatic and down through Yugoslavia. Costas, Theo and Stelios took turns driving. We stopped for food and to relieve ourselves, but they kept on driving. Finally, in Thessaloniki, where Costas had cousins who could put us all up, we stopped.

Costas introduced me to the cousins. Both were older women in black dresses with black stockings rolled into a knot beneath each knee. They were sitting on folding chairs in front of the house and gestured for me to sit with them.

“*Kaliméra*,” I said. They nodded, intuiting that was the extent of my conversational skill. Costas hugged me and with everyone else went inside.

After a long pause, one of the cousins said to the other in Greek, which by then I had begun to understand. “Don’t worry, the same plane that brought her will take her away.”

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“Will you love my God?” Costas said to me, lying next to me in the hotel in Athens. I thought it was one of the most ridiculous questions I had ever heard, so I didn’t reply. He knew I was Jewish. There was not one chance I was going to convert.

I did not like the hotel. It was too far from the center of the city and being there made me uneasy. The place was strangely quiet; I never saw another guest. The evening Costas installed me there and made love to me, after he left I had decided to read. When I turned on the light above the bed, the bulb was red.

“Why would you put me in this kind of hotel?” I asked him the next day.

“It’s not easy to find a hotel where I can be upstairs with you,” he said.

By day, alone, I walked around Athens or went to look at the ancient jewelry at the National Archeological Museum. I found Athens hot and crowded and frenetic. In the neighborhood where I was staying, I discovered a restaurant where I could go into the kitchen and point to what I wanted to eat. But I didn't like eating alone in restaurants, and I was lonely. I didn't see Costas for days.

Finally, he invited me to have dinner at his mother's house.

His mother was very polite to me. She was a short, stocky, somber woman dressed entirely in black. She spoke no English, but I immediately intuited that I was there as a school friend, not a fiancé. She pointed me toward the low-ceilinged, tight dining room that I suspected also served as a living room. Costas told me where to sit. On the wall directly across from me was a huge, hand-colored photograph of a man with extravagant mustachios dressed in Greek military uniform. The top of the heavy frame jutted out from the wall and loomed over the table.

"My brother," Costas said when his mother was out of the room. "Killed in the Civil War."

His mother brought in a large, heavy platter of *keftedes*, lamb meatballs, and then left again.

"We're waiting for someone," Costas said. "Have some of these. They're delicious."

A few minutes later another woman joined us. She was younger than his mother, although by no means young, and also entirely dressed in black.

"She was engaged to my brother," Costas told me in English. "She comes to dinner every Thursday."

"She's wearing black for him?" I said. I felt stupid asking it, but I wanted to be sure.

“Yes,” he said.

“They never married?” “No,” he said. Dinner was awkward. Costas translated a few bits of conversation. Mostly I praised his mother’s cooking, which was exceptional. The brother’s “widow” barely spoke.

Eventually, I excused myself and asked for the lavatory. Costas got up and led me outside, into an unlit paved courtyard. The bathroom was in a separate, small building with a cement floor with a drain in the center. The shower consisted of a pipe that stuck out of the wall, with an encrusted showerhead and no curtain. I had the uncomfortable feeling that the room needed a good scrubbing.

After the meal, after I thanked his mother with the words he had taught me, after we went back to the hotel and had sex, Costas said, in a mix of English and Italian, “When we are married, no more *cosmetici*, no more *minigonna*.” No more cosmetics, no more miniskirt.

Then he informed me that we would move into the house with his mother.

Not on your life buster, I said to myself. Absolutely not. I was not escaping the Bronx to go live in Patissia, Athens, in that depressing house with his mother and the “widow” of his brother coming to dinner every Thursday evening. Not in that house with the portrait of his brother leaning over every meal. Not with that bathroom across the courtyard with the weird toilet I still wasn’t sure would even flush. And I was not going to convert. I was not giving up cosmetics. I was not going to stop dressing any way I wanted to dress. I was not going to efface who I was, or what I thought, to fit into some outdated ideal of an old-fashioned Greek’s idea of what a woman should be or act like.

That was it. It was the end of the erotic torpor. It was the end of my own passivity. Done. The next morning I went to Piraeus with my

suitcase and got on a ferry to the Cyclades. I wasn't even positive where I would go, but I remembered that when I once again ran into the pretentious Brit who had mentioned Prince Charles, he had talked about the Greek island of Ios. He'd said it was beautiful, inexpensive, and it was easy to rent a room there.

I stopped in Santorini. I'd been a wimp and had left a note at the hotel for Costas. I felt guilty, but then I realized that in a way I was running for my life. I stayed overnight then got another ferry to Ios. And as the ferry was pulling near the dock I saw them, my friends from the University of Florence School of Architecture: Theo and Stelios and Ersi, and other people I knew, waving as they recognized me on the bow. They had been there seeing off some friends from Athens.

When I told Stelios later, as we sat at a long table with Ersi and Theo and the others, eating fresh-caught grilled fish and drinking retsina, that I had had enough, I was done with Costas, Stelios said "Good. You know, he has no money. This is how he manages. Every year he finds some good-looking woman to seduce and pay his way. I'm a little surprised it took you this long; you seemed like the smartest of the bunch. I'm glad you left. But I will say you looked great in those photographs he took. I liked the ones without him in them."