

A vintage advertisement for Hotel Amerika. The background is a light green wall with a white valance featuring brown tassels. A woman with blonde hair, wearing a yellow off-the-shoulder dress with lace trim, a black choker, and white gloves, stands with her arms crossed. She is holding a red apple in her left hand. To her right, a small, colorful gnome figurine stands on a white pedestal. The text 'HOTEL AMERIKA' is overlaid on the image, with 'HOTEL' in black and 'AMERIKA' in yellow.

HOTEL
AMERIKA

The Template

I could dig in anywhere—1920, 1950, 2016. I could begin in Italy, Pittsburgh, New York, or Nebraska. Begin with my parents, my grandparents, or me, and from every point of entry, our story is the same: three generations unhappy in love.

“You Monardo women,” one of our Pittsburgh cousins said to me once, “you don’t have much luck in marriage, do you?” He was talking about my mother, her mother, and me.

“We’re not unlucky,” I told him, “we’re unimaginative. We keep having different versions of the exact same marriage.”

It’s 1929. Or *Anno VII* on the Fascist calendar, marking seven years after the rise of Mussolini.

My family’s village in the mountains of Southern Italy. I’ll call it Belforte.

A pretty fourteen-year-old. Her mother tells her a man has asked to marry her. The girl says, No! This man is nobody she cares about. Her people know his people, of course, but to the girl he’s a stranger, some guy who’s been to America and come back with a little money, looking for a wife. The young girl is still nursing a broken heart from a romance gone bad, the sum total of which couldn’t have been more than a few occasions when she locked eyes across the piazza with a boy her age; maybe he passed a few notes to her when she knelt at Mass with her friends. Maybe there was a moment when they actually spoke to each other at the fountain while she filled her family’s tin jug. And then the romance suffered some reversal or lapse that could never—in that place, at that time—be talked out between the fourteen-year-old girl and that boy who looked at her with so much nice attention. She still aches. And now this man, almost twenty-eight years old, wants her. *No!*

But the girl’s mother tells her, “Marry him. He’ll take you to America.”

In time, the young girl and the older man, Stella and Giuseppe, will become my grandparents, but they are still basically strangers to each other on their wedding day, December 12th, 1929. Although Giuseppe is a month short of twenty-eight, on the marriage certificate he’s twenty-three. That four-year error in the groom’s age—was it a registry mistake or an intentional muddying of the truth? Even back then, did the girl’s youth, together with the significant age difference between bride and groom, strike someone as slightly not right? For young Stella, this arranged marriage does have the feel of a too hastily moving forward dream, and her anxiety will never completely dissipate during the fifty-two years that they will be married. A few days before the wedding, Stella’s brothers walk the nine miles to the city of Vibo Valentia to purchase her wedding accessories, but they come back with two unmatched white high-heel shoes. Years later, she will tell me, “That’s how we started out, on the wrong foot, for sure.”

The Dress

It is offensive to give someone a gift of gladiolas, the funeral flower, and it is bad luck to try on wedding dresses before you are engaged. These lessons were taught me by my Calabrian kin. Like the ancients, we used our superstitions and supplications to placate the gods who had us in their teeth when it came to those two most bewildering aspects of life: marriage and death. But that Wednesday afternoon in my New York apartment, when I stood up from my desk, walked away from the manuscript I was copy-editing and reached into my closet, I told myself it was safe now to tug out the dry-cleaner’s bag shoved behind my everyday clothes. When I lifted the blue plastic, there it was: my mother’s wedding dress. Two nights earlier, sitting on my tall kitchen stool as I made coffee (or was I pouring wine?), my boyfriend—I’ll call him Sam—had wrapped his hands around my waist and said, “I want to get married. Let’s get married,” so the only danger now was that I was interrupting my copy-

editing and I had a deadline.

Hanging on a cloth-covered hanger, the gown was a graying waterfall of lace and silk that Gramma Stella had sewn for my mother, Catherine, when she married her distant cousin, a man a decade older than she was. I'd been shocked as a kid to learn that my parents had had an arranged marriage. Growing up in suburban Pittsburgh and the first of our clan born in the U.S., I wanted to believe that our family had blossomed from nothing less American than a love match. I didn't like that Mom's parents had picked out the guy, then brought her back to their Southern Italian village to meet him, but I was reassured when she told me, "I wouldn't have had to marry him if I didn't like him, but I liked him right away."

What was there not to like? He was attractive, older, accomplished. And the attraction was reciprocal—I know this from a diary my mother left me and also from the way my parents gaze at each other in their courtship photos.

And so the two families moved forward with the plan, ignoring the fact that beyond the well-orchestrated, closely chaperoned *coup de foudre*, the couple were not well matched. The groom, the first in our peasant tribe to go to university, had studied Latin and Greek but knew only a few words of English; and the bride, who hadn't quite finished high school, could giggle her way through some Pig Latin with her cousins but spoke very little Italian beyond the rudimentary dialect. For him, the marriage would facilitate immigration to the U.S., where he could establish his medical career and provide for his six siblings and widowed mother in war-ravaged Calabria. For Catherine, who'd spent much of her childhood absent from school with rheumatic fever that led to chronic heart disease, this wedding would be a lavish compensation for all she'd missed out on—beginning with the gown I was now ready to try on.

As an eighteen-year-old bride, my mother had weighed barely one hundred pounds. I was shorter than Catherine and smaller boned, but I was a thirty-five-year-old bride-to-be and fleshier than a skin-and-bones teenager; it was a struggle to pull the dress over my shoulders and down my middle. The waists of Gramma's formal wear were always punishing, with the tiniest

zipper hidden in the left seam so as not mar the flow of fabric and the perfect silhouette.

I'd been waiting to try on this dress since I was a little girl. Back then, I believed mightily in the pretty picture of marriage captured in my parents' wedding portraits. Their wedding album was the size and heft of Moses' tablets. As I got older, though, I became aware that just under the surface, the two marriages that buttressed our immediate family—my parents' and my grandparents'—were fraught and anxious. On nights my grandmother babysat for us, I heard her on the phone with her brother, crying, and I caught a few Italian words that meant *her*, and *that one, always the same*, and *he still scares me* and *where would I go? There's no leaving*.

With my parents, I'd see the grudge visible on my father's face as he delivered his good-bye kiss somewhere in the vicinity of my mother's face every morning, and I'd see her checked fury as she received not the actual kiss but its shadow. In the evening as he left the table, his terse "Dinner was good," and her equally terse "Thank you."

Rarely did I see them touch.

I can't contemplate my parents' courtship in Italy without thinking of Elizabeth Spencer's 1960 novel *The Light in the Piazza*, in which a wealthy American woman is traveling in Florence with her teenage daughter, Clara, whose perfect beauty masks the tragedy of her injured intellect: due to an accident, Clara has the mental capabilities of a ten-year-old. When mother and daughter are befriended—pursued, really—by a handsome young Florentine shopkeeper, the absence of a shared language between them hides the truth of who Clara is. And the mother begins to see an opportunity for her daughter, a path into a future—marriage, children—that she had thought wouldn't be possible for the girl, but suddenly here it is. If the mother keeps Clara's condition a secret, the girl's playful silliness can be chalked up to an inability to speak Italian. Italy—with its particular indulgent forgiveness of tourists, a forgiveness that is really the Italians' native opportunism playing with the touring Americans' guilelessness and lust for romance—is the perfect place to pull off a trick of this sort. And if you're fooling yourself as well as the others, is it really so bad? At the novel's end, anticipating

her husband's outrage when he learns that his daughter has indeed married the unknowing Italian, the mother says, "I did the right thing. I know I did."

In the aftermath of the wedding that tied Catherine, the chronically ill American girl, to the overburdened Italian doctor, I imagine Gramma Stella saying to herself those same words. *I did the right thing. I know I did.* Repeating it a lot, but maybe never able to fully believe it.

"Leave well enough alone," I was told when I asked questions. When my mother was cleaning out the cedar closet, I begged her to pull out her wedding dress so I could see it up close. She shoved the blue bag farther back, muttering, "If I pull that thing out, I'm going to burn it." I was saddened by her disappointment, but what had she expected when she agreed to an arranged marriage? I vowed I'd know exactly what I was doing when it finally came time for me to get my hands on that dress.

But now here I was, engaged, *fidanzata*, and in the mirror I saw clearly this wasn't the wedding dress for me. Even with the zipper gaping open, I couldn't exhale. The lace was close in color to my winter pallor. I did a half-turn and watched the long train swoosh out to the side, a little movement that felt nice. "Okay," I said out loud, "I got this out of my system." In truth, it was a relief to disqualify that heirloom, infused as it was with a murky, complex history. *Make it all new, you still have the chance.*

As I lifted the skirt to pull the gown up over my head, though, it got stuck at my shoulders. If I tugged, the fabric would rip: sacrilege. If I pulled the skirt down again, I'd have to wear the dress for the rest of my life.

I'm a prisoner in my mother's wedding dress.

I was fully aware of how, in the retelling, I could play up the comedy of this moment. *Somebody, quick, call the fire department!* But with my head swathed in faded lace and my arms stuck over my head like a person under arrest, I recognized the bad joke I was caught up in and I started to cry.

There are only two ways for this to go.

I'd get married and end up trapped, eternally bored and uninspired, the way I imagined marriage felt

for my father; or, married, I'd feel taken for granted and insecure, like my mother.

I heard the strained dress fabric rip a tiny bit as I worked my way free until I stood there exposed—a thirty-five-year-old woman in her underwear and no longer capable of imagining for herself a marriage different from what she'd witnessed as a child. I had left home young, rebelled in a thousand different ways, but I would never wipe out the bad news about marriage that was stamped onto my bones.

Sam and I were engaged for fourteen days. All my life, I'd gone around asking friends, How do you know when you're in love? How do you know who's the right person? Then I met Sam and didn't have to ask anymore. Sometimes when we worked in different corners of my apartment on a Sunday afternoon—he was a journalist, but also, like me, he was writing a novel—I'd look over at him and, without the ambivalence and with much less fear than I'd felt in previous relationships, I'd think, Marry me. I might have asked him myself if I hadn't been so sure that eventually he'd ask me. But, sadly, we were well matched even in our fears: my anxiety that we would turn into my parents aligned neatly with his anxiety that we'd turn into his.

Still, during our three years together, as we rode the subway out to his apartment in Brooklyn, I'd glance at him wedged next to me in the crowd, close my eyes and see our children. I'm just over five feet tall, he was over six feet, and I imagined our gorgeous daughter with his long legs, his blue eyes, our dark hair, reading her way through all our books. Maybe on her way to the fridge she'd stop at the piano to improvise, just as he did. Maybe wandering the apartment, she'd sing beautifully, just as he did. I could see all of it clearly, including the part where he and I would grow old and cranky and lean on each other as we rode up and down Broadway on the M104 bus.

When our relationship unraveled—when our mutual anxiety trumped all the goodness between us—everyone was confounded. Even Sam and I were. I recently found this in a journal my mother kept at that time: *My heart aches for her—she loves him & he her & so why can't [they] decide?*

It still haunts me that “she loves him & he her” wasn’t enough. Before that break-up, I had believed that a lifelong “American-style” marriage—happy alchemy of passion, companionship, and equity—was still possible for me, even though it had been slow in coming. Afterward, I felt myself slipping into a kinship with my mother and grandmother that was almost sisterly, as if we were equals, none of us more capable than the others of shaking whatever Old World spell had been cast over our hearts. *You thought you could do better, but No.*

“*Quand u buono non c’è,*” Gramma Stella used to say in our Calabrian dialect, “*u triste vala.*” This meant, “When happiness isn’t possible, sadness will have to do.” Two years after Sam and I parted, with nothing left to lose and hoping to have a child, I did marry. Just like my mother and her mother, I had a marriage of convenience, except that I arranged my own betrothal—found the guy myself, negotiated on my own behalf. Just like Mom and Gramma, I pledged myself to a man who was more than a decade older than I was and whom I’d known less than six months. I’d met him in April when he was a visiting poet at the university where I taught fiction. The poet and I made each other laugh, which, in lieu of deep love, seemed as good a place as any to latch on. And he wasn’t at all frightened by how much I wished to have a child, even though he was the father of three teenagers already.

A few hours before our September 1st wedding, which would take place in the poet’s house, in southern Missouri, I found myself in his backyard stepping my bare feet into a puddle of warm mud. My hair was damp from the shower, and I was already in my wedding clothes—a flowered 1940s shirtwaist dress I’d bought two days earlier in a vintage shop for eighteen dollars. None of the standard white froufrou for me. More determined than ever to outwit the marriage demons, I was stripping away everything but the most basic rites.

In my family, everyone married at a church altar, but my ceremony would take place in the tiny room with tall windows that had recently become my writing room. The poet had declared the pretty room mine three weeks earlier when I’d arrived for a visit and to get to know his sons, who were welcoming beyond my dreams. *Instant family.* After the drawn-out *maybe* that Sam and

I had suffered, all our cautious questioning that yielded nothing but pain, I now decided to defer. The poet’s enthusiasm for our relationship—and our marriage—seemed unfettered. He was the one who had brought up marriage at dinner on Monday night, and over the past four days he’d done most of the footwork—found the justice of the peace and the jewelry store for our rings. In the tradition of the arranged marriage, I assumed the role of the pliable bride, which actually felt a little bit nice. Something like falling backwards onto a bed of feathers, ignoring that I might sink too deep to ever crawl out.

Until a few hours before the ceremony, when I was suddenly alone in the house while the poet ran to the grocery store for flowers and I became short of breath. I couldn’t stand still with this thing I was about to do, so I stepped out into the backyard.

Maybe I’d clip a geranium to put in a vase. The house was off a country road, in a new development where the lawns were still works-in-progress, but the poet and I had filled a few pots with plants, and he’d put in a vegetable garden. Maybe I’d cut a tomato from a vine. The next day I planned to make a big dinner for our newly stamped extended family. But then I saw that puddle the sprinkler had left in the dirt, and, suddenly, gripped by some primal arousal, I unbuckled my black strappy sandals and sank my bare feet into the mud of rural Missouri. *I’m a peasant.* Over and over, my feet lifted and plunged in, insisting on knowing that wet earth, which was as warm as heated towels. *I’m getting married and this is my peasant pedicure.*

Eventually my heartbeat settled, and I started laughing, as I would have if a troupe of bridesmaids had been with me. And then my closest friends and cousins did surround me, I heard their voices. *An impromptu wedding! This is perfect for you!* No one but my stepsons-to-be, my mother and brother and his family, who were on their way, knew about my wedding, so in my imagination, my friends could say anything, could convince me, *Yeah, do it!*

I was still laughing when, off to the side, the grandmothers and great-aunts appeared. Bent, old village women dressed in their sour black, a few with missing teeth, their twisted braids thinned into *code di lucertole*—

“lizards’ tails.” If there was a thimbleful of youth left in those women, it was in their eyes, which mocked me. *Silly girl! You, you think with all your schooling you can make marriage and men into a fairy tale. We were just like you, and now, look.*

I did not look, didn’t listen, and if I had, would the poet and I have been spared what unfolded for us—three miscarriages, umpteen breakups and reunions, fiery counseling sessions, slammed doors, a punched door, even reconciliation twice after divorce? As much as those ancient women loved me, they were powerless to divert me on my wedding day; still, they didn’t leave without warning me, *Bella*, you can be married or not, but love will have its way with you in ways you can only glimpse while you stand there sunk up to your ankles in the muck.

There was no way I was getting away without learning about what my mother and grandmother had known in marriage.

Not long after, with my feet rinsed and dried and my sandals buckled back on, I opened the front door and hugged the handful of wedding guests. The justice of the peace, mustachioed and white-suited, was as affable as Mark Twain.

By that evening when we all went out to dinner, a man who was practically a stranger was my husband, and I was his third wife.

Five years we were together.

The Betrothed

Now, whenever I imagine my parents’ courtship in Belforte during the spring of 1948, a new veil of poignancy falls over the scenes. I see the two families sitting around the long wobbly table in my father’s family’s dining room, everyone still a tad overly exuberant and polite as they get used to the idea that two families are becoming one. The war is over but still recent enough that at least one prayer is unanimously offered up by everyone present: *Ringrazia Dio!* To blunt the afternoon sunlight, the slats of the tall wooden shutters are tilted. Early spring, but already flies buzz over the after-dinner baskets of cheeses and fruits and whatever else was hauled up from the farm to camouflage the scarcity in Nonna Anna’s post-war kitchen. She is trying to recreate,

as closely as possible, how things were when Alfredo’s father was alive. He’s been gone less than two years; the truth is, if he were still with them, there’d be no reason for this engagement.

Catherine strains to follow the gist of the dinner-table conversation while also hyper-alert to Alfredo’s glances. Will he dare again to tap her sandal under the table with his shoe? Will this be one of the lucky days? Maybe alone for a second in the hallway or in the shadows during the evening walk, they’ll have another chance to kiss? Maybe, but these Sunday meals go on for hours. So hard to stay awake. Oh, if only she could slip off her sandals under the table, cool her feet on the tile floor, but her mother’s eye is constantly catching Catherine’s to signal *No!* Daily, her mother reminds her, People here are watching you every minute, don’t you forget that.

A ceramic plate of the Last Supper looks down from one wall; and on the other hangs a long horizontal still-life of melons, peaches, limes, grapes arranged against carcasses of duck, goose, rabbit, and a few dead birds. It’s a garish emblem of bounty, and, sitting below it, the assembled relatives have no inkling that, for all their earnestness, the marriage they’re working toward is already spoiling.

The young couple’s happiness, even as it begins, is exposed to too many expectations. Each time someone says *America*, the others hear *gold*. Meanwhile, whenever Gramma Stella looks at Catherine, she now thinks *doctor’s wife* rather than *invalid*. And if a workingman like Catherine’s father hears *doctor*, of course he’s going to think *has it made in the shade*.

I doubt that any of those gathered gave much thought to how it would be for a young Italian physician to enter a country that still remembered Italy as the enemy. And how would Alfredo launch a career in the U.S. if he was just beginning to learn the language? No one could have guessed how low his salary would be during the years before he’d qualify to sit for medical-licensing tests, to say nothing of how many years it would take to complete a residency. Alfredo himself couldn’t have imagined it. If the families had considered the practical questions, the wedding most likely never would have happened.

But something about that trans-Atlantic marriage between the distant cousins—perhaps just the grand scheme of it—has wiped out everyone's native skepticism. So, into Nonna Anna's tiny liquor glasses they pour one more round of Anisette to toast *i fidanzati*.

Saluti!

Across the table, everyone smiles, looking into one another's eyes, or perhaps just above the brow, but eagerly nodding, thinking *America, doctor, gold*, and other pretty misconceptions that weave through and among them like garden snakes coiled in the shade of fig trees blossoming on the parched farm patches from which none of us will ever fully manage to depart.