

Prologue

How a raffle ticket changed my life

Twenty years ago I had a normal life. Then I bought a raffle ticket. Who knew two bucks was going to change my life forever?

Everything was on track. I had graduated university, travelled a bit locally, gotten married, was contemplating children and a mortgage, had a professional career, all before I turned thirty. But within three months I had lost it all and instead had a free airline ticket to Europe (via the raffle ticket) and a huge redundancy package (via having lost my job). No husband, no job, lots of money and an airline ticket. And still I hesitated. Then my landlord gave me notice.

I was in my late twenties, not the time you give up your life to go travelling. It was the time to buckle down, get even more serious about your career, do a post-graduate master's degree, buy a house, or quickly find a man and start procreating. All of these things I had expected of myself and desperately wanted to want enough, so that one day they might seem like the rewards I had always thought they would be. Even though I couldn't seem to make my life work, I didn't have the will left to figure out a different one.

I spent the first six months of that long ago trip consoling myself on the beach in Greece and Turkey over the life I had lost, and then admitting to myself the profound relief I felt in no longer having to have it. During that time I had no itinerary or even a vague idea of where to travel. I decided to stay a month in Rome, unheard of in backpacker terms. Staying for a month in one city is a lifetime. When I eventually

found myself there it took only three days to fall in love with it, deeply and profoundly, like I had found a soulmate.

My passion for wanting to stay in Rome meant that I accepted any job I could get. Knowing that I had no grounds to apply for legal residence, it was therefore hopeless to think about having any kind of career job. At first I was the manager of an illegal *pensione*. Then I was a model for an art class, a job in constant demand. And I lied to get work, which at one point resulted in me staring at around 250 people across the counter of a bar at the opening night of the 'first Australian bar in Rome', along with Phil, the other Australian who had also illegally stayed and needed to lie about his experience, both of us expected to pull beers rapidly for all of them, neither of us ever having actually done it before. Luckily, Italians are not big connoisseurs of beer and didn't seem to notice the lack of foam, or the presence of too much, in their glasses. But even the most lowly jobs are not legally open to non-European citizens for more than a few months and I took the only option open to me. I advertised myself as an English language teacher.

A professor from a university contacted me and offered me two jobs: one where I would teach a subject in English that I knew something about to university students, the other one was where I would accompany him all around Europe on free tours, staying in the most luxurious hotels, meeting dignitaries (as this Professor was the only one in his field in Europe) and not actually doing much teaching. This role required me to be his 'girlfriend'.

But teaching didn't pay nearly enough to keep me in the habit I wanted to become accustomed to, and after two years I started to look around. I noticed that down the street from me was an office where a lot of people who spoke English seemed to exit every evening. Speaking fluent Italian was a pre-requisite for any job in the Italian market, as was

the kind of VISA I could not qualify for, so I needed to look at places where English speakers were sought after and where I could work using English as my primary language. One day I walked in with my CV and asked to speak to the HR Manager.

There was no sign on the door or anywhere in reception to identify this building. There was an acronym written across the top of the building – WFP – written in huge letters and surrounded by some circular leaves. This was in the days before the internet, and the only other place where I had seen a similar symbol and acronyms was on the television, marketing the plight of pandas throughout the 1980s. I therefore assumed it was some Italian version of the World Wildlife Fund, with the letters changed to reflect the different sentence structure of the Italian language.

I was asked to come back tomorrow and do some preliminary tests. Here started my career in the United Nations. Buried in the bowels of HR administration procedures, where nobody ever referred to the organisation in full but only by acronym, before the days of branding, websites, email, the need to have a market ‘presence’ and a corporate identity, I diligently managed tasks and processed documents, wondering why there was always so much reference in them to rice and the costs of shipping, while pandas were hardly mentioned at all. It turned out I was not, in fact, working for the World Wildlife Fund but for the World Food Programme of the United Nations. I was equally happy, however, to be working for the world’s largest humanitarian organisation providing emergency food to millions of people in times of natural disasters, war and famine.

A few years after I had been living in Rome, I met a diplomat at a toga party. We were side by side, pushing a supermarket trolley disguised as a ‘chariot’ and in which rode his wife, around a circular driveway as part of a race against other party guests. It was after the

belly dancing display but before the fake human sacrifice. Here started my stint in Foreign Affairs.

I was happy and peaceful for the first time I could remember since I was a young child. The day I realised this, I was walking down my street on the way to the shops and something stopped me in my tracks. I stood on the footpath, wondering what this thing was that I was experiencing, this difference that I couldn't quite put my finger on. I was missing something, and the thing that had gone had been so much a part of me for so long that its absence made me feel something was wrong. I realised that it was the absence of anxiety. *So this is what peace feels like*, I thought.

So the man who took my breath away the first time I ever set eyes on him was kept at a distance for six more years before I was sure that giving up my singleness was going to be worth it. And it was. Like winning the raffle ticket all those years before, marrying Alfredo felt like I had won first prize again.

My heart responded to Italy's maternal character, the firm agreement that everyone needs to be cared for and forgiven. The greeting of each other every morning, the time taken to chat for a few minutes before serving the customer, the acknowledgement of each other as humans that have good days and bad days. And, as we all have bad days, the forbearance of someone who is having one, not expecting too much of them, giving them time and space, frustrating as that is if you are waiting for them to cut your hair, cash your cheque, make your sandwich or answer your call. You know that it will be the same on the day you need others to wait for you.

Twenty years here has included setting up my own practice working as a Management Consultant for international foreign affairs organisations and flying to over thirteen different countries across Europe, Africa and the Middle East; working for the United Nations

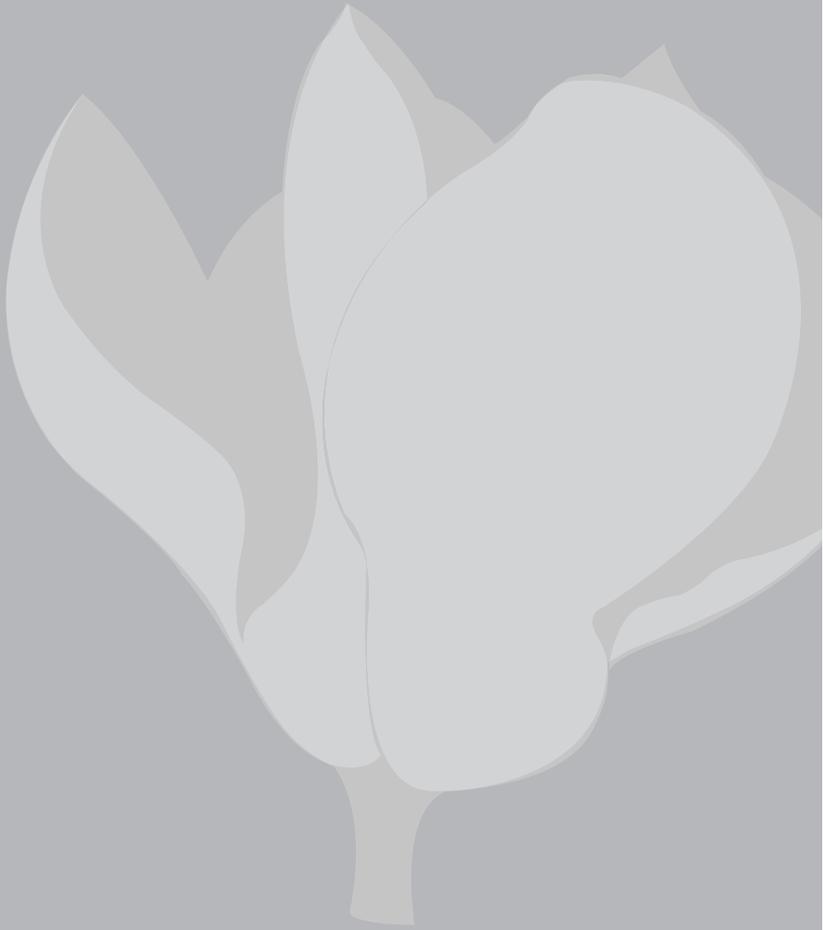
emergency response, development and health organisations in Geneva, Rome, Budapest, Barbados, Bonn and Dakar; hearing Fidel Castro speak live on May Day in Havana, Cuba, and having my hire car commandeered by his soldiers with me as their designated driver for the day; taking a train back to Australia via Russia and Mongolia; co-driving a hovercraft to Capri; and never ever having to own a car.

I have had the chance to get to know Rome, my love, very well; its history, its failings, its short-sightedness, its arrogance, its self-doubt and its secrets. I have had the chance to give tours of it, write about it and apply my natural curiosity as a social anthropologist to its inhabitants, its myths, beliefs and identity.

This book is a personal guide to a city seen from the inside. It is an insider's experience of the mystery, misery and magnificence which is modern-day Rome. It includes important facts, such as why Sunday is a re-enactment of the Middle Ages, what 'The Changeover' means and when to do it, when it is okay to go calling in your pyjamas, what to do on a day off in Rome, tips for how to survive the blistering heat, and how to recognise and take advantage of a money laundering enterprise.

Like all infatuations, I expected my feelings for Rome to wear off and decided that I would leave when I no longer noticed the Coliseum, when I treated it as just another roundabout for traffic, the way the locals do. I am still waiting.

SPRING



Chapter 1

Liars, food wars and spring in Italy

I've had the opportunity to host a lot of visitors during my seventeen years in Rome. It is always difficult, mostly because they think you are constantly lying. Like when you tell them that if they plug the hairdryer in at the same time as the washing machine there will be a power blackout. Sometimes for hours. Sometimes in the whole apartment block, even though Italy is one of the seven most industrialised countries in the world.

Or when you tell them about springtime. That just a few short weeks before April the city is bare and freezing cold and that in a few weeks, just after April finishes, the city will be sunburnt and exhaustingly hot. It is hard amidst the lush, cool, waving green foliage and brilliant flowers to imagine the city bare, or that the air could ever warm up so much that you don't want to be outside.

But both are true. Rome's electricity grid was built for another time. The amount of electricity allotted per household is not usually enough for more than one or two electrical appliances. Fridge and washing machine, okay. Fridge, washing machine, hairdryer, not okay. Fridge and hot water heater, okay. Fridge, hot water heater, DVD player and several lights, not okay. There are many different combinations. Most of them I have learnt well by now, but guests take about two or three days, and several power cuts, before they believe me.

Guests are often also intrigued by the electric sockets in our apartment. Each one is an individual, like a snowflake. Some have two

thin holes, some have two thick holes. Some have three thick holes, some have three thin holes, and some have two thick holes and one thin hole in the middle. They each require a different kind of adaptor. It's okay though, most hardware stores sell many kinds of adaptors. It seems to be easier to make an adaptor than standardise electrical sockets in Italy.

The electrical sockets in my apartment are, for my guests, a good introduction into Italian society. If guests can accept that within the parameters of electrical sockets there may be a world of difference, that no two sockets may be alike, and that you need to adapt to them rather than vice versa, then it helps them to understand Italian society. Italy as a society is rigid with rules, bureaucracy, rituals and traditions that are slow to change. It is therefore important that within these structures that keep Italy essentially Italian, individuals be allowed to express themselves and flourish. This means that room is made for everyone to be different in their own way.

This is reflected in the traffic and in Italian politics. In spite of the enormous amounts of congestion and time it takes to get anywhere, if someone wants to stop or slow down and have a conversation with a person on a *motorino*, a moped, driving next to them, everyone waits. If someone wants to cross three lanes of traffic at the last minute everyone lets them do so, without tooting. If someone is in a hurry and doesn't want to queue at the toll booth they just drive up to the front of the line and someone will let them in.

In Italian politics, the ruling party is usually made up of a spectrum of smaller parties all joined together from the full breadth of left to right. It explains the constant elections and referendums at a State, province, and city level, and the occasional dissolution of the government due to a lack of a quorum.

Individual rights to opinions, at whatever the cost, is highly

tolerated as a collective principle. Each person is made room for in their uniqueness, while being supported by communal traditions and lifestyles. If you all have to be electrical sockets, you can at least be different kinds of electrical sockets.

Spring in Rome is an easy thing to adapt to. Foliage bursts out of every possible space available in a concrete-covered city. Where there is a space between wall and sidewalk, there is a sprig of green bursting out of it. The trees, which sit in tiny squares of soil carved out of the concrete sidewalks, are laden with pink blossoms. Not the fly-away, fairy floss pink kind, but the heavy, fuchsia kind with serious, sensuous petals.

Rome glistens in spring; it glistens with new life and with the magic that comes with birth. It is all the more spectacular because Rome sheds everything in the autumn. In winter the city is foliage-free; not a leaf or shrub remains to break up the concrete grey that is everywhere. Luckily, the sun shines valiantly all through winter, although you get used to stark branches everywhere and increased vision as suddenly all the leaves disappear and all that is left are the buildings.

Then suddenly, after a long absence, the colour green is everywhere and envelops everything it can. Tiny daisies with perfect, egg-yellow centres and bright, white petals are present in every stretch of wild grass. They come out to carpet everything with their cheeky presence and their uncontested right to be here every year in April, for only a matter of weeks, just to herald in spring.

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The air is soft and warm and laps at my skin. Everywhere, above and below me, are the new flowers of the season. It has been spring for a month now and the transition is almost complete, from bare grey twigs to soft coverings of bright greens, dark greens, and delicate

frostings of white and pink blossom. The delicate baby pink blossom that trumpets the arrival of spring has almost gone. In its place are the heavier white clouds of blossom, the heady white magnolia flower, the highly perfumed white jasmine flower. When the wind blows it rains white petals.

Here, spring is all the more precious because it is brief. In practice it only lasts a month or two before the summer heat overpowers the gentle air and the green foliage's glare begins to hurt my eyes under the burning sun. The air becomes hot and heavy, the radiance is only present in the very early morning and, like in winter, shelter has to be taken from the outdoors.

Just before leaving Australia seventeen years ago I saw a film called *Enchanted April*. I went with my grandmother. We both loved it. It was a tale of four women, set in the 1920s in London. They hire a villa in Tuscany for the month of April. They don't know each other, and share only a desire to escape the cold and wet London spring. They experience the magical powers of April in the Italian countryside and their souls are refreshed, each life changed a little for the better.

I went home in a trance after that movie. It was raining in Australia. The only piece of nature in my inner-city backyard was a strip of mud that must have once been a flower bed. I took off my shoes and slid my feet into it up to my ankles, under the rain, slowly raising each foot, one after the other in order to feel the earth. I sat for a long time under our one tree – that came over the fence from someone else's backyard – and marvelled at the knowledge that I too could go to that magical place called Italy, and that maybe it could be as refreshing for my soul too.

I think of that film every spring. April truly is enchanted here. The green of an Italian spring is a soft, succulent kind of green. It gently draws the juices up into the veins like sap, causing a feeling of coming back to life after a long, cold winter. It shows that life can be trusted to

begin again no matter how long and dark the winter has been and in spite of the fact that everything looks like it has died.

It is April here, now. Enchanted April. And it is possible to be outdoors for as long as you want to in perfect and benign temperatures.

The birds are a riot of noise as I jog around my neighbourhood today, trying to jolt my body back into its new time frame, to stave off the jet lag that I know will soon engulf me. I have just arrived back from a visit to Australia and must get ready for visitors who are arriving tomorrow. The noise, the vibrant colours, the sunshine all help tremendously to keep me awake and stimulated. Everywhere I look there are flowers. Wisteria melts its way along wire trellis and fencing and stops me in my tracks with its perfume. White blossoms weigh down bushes and everywhere there is new foliage. It has the shininess of new born babies and it shyly pronounces itself, pokes, unfolds and sways everywhere. Shades of green, from deep sea to lime, coat the tiny streets and old stone houses. The air is warm with promise.

I run past two women speaking and I take in their conversation. The conversations are always the same and I can almost predict them by now. At mid-morning, which is when I am running, they will be about what the speaker had for breakfast and what they are planning to have for lunch.

When someone told me many years ago that Italians talk about food a lot, I thought they were exaggerating. But they were not; most conversations I overhear in my neighbourhood, at any time of day, with any amount of people, are about food. What someone ate recently, what they are about to eat, how to cook something, where to buy it from, variations on cooking it. Italians are the only race of people I know whose topic of conversation while eating a meal is commonly about what they will eat for their next meal.

Shortly after moving in to my current apartment block, as I was

coming home one day, I could see a group of women sitting together at a communal doorway, gesticulating and yelling wildly at each other. I was a little concerned. This area was new to me and still carried the slight stigma of once being one of Rome's poorest and most crime-ridden areas. I was slightly worried that such an argument might escalate and lead to blows, given that the content was obviously serious and passionate. As I walked timidly past with my head down, I overheard one of the women say, 'Well the way I make a *mozzarella in carozza* (mozzarella cheese deep fried in bread) is very different from that. I would first start with frying the bread in extra virgin olive oil from the Sabine region, not from the Piedmontese region.'

Food discussions in Italy are across genders and inter-generational; there is no limit to participation based on sex or age. The best bonding experiences I have with new Italian work colleagues or clients occur when food is discussed. All barriers go down, everyone is equal, and social hierarchies coalesce and form before my eyes. I often find it easier to get people to accept my advice after I have discussed food with them. I once worked with a team of people who started off every morning discussing what they had eaten or cooked the evening before, in detail and with recipes. Not only did I get paid for that time, but I came away with a vast array of culinary skills and knowledge.

So as I run by I hear the women discussing what they will prepare for lunch and how it will fit in with what they will have for dinner, and how it will contrast with what they had for breakfast. I am reminded also of the reason why I think I am in Italy: to learn to live like that. To learn to live one day at a time, with nothing more on my plate – figuratively – than I can handle in one day, and reasonably spaced around three fantastic yet simple meals. I still struggle with it and at this rate will be here for the rest of my life learning how to do it. Not a bad life task.

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I make it to the end of the day without succumbing to jet lag by bribing myself with the promise that if I make it to 8pm I will take myself to my favourite restaurant for a bowl of the world's best *rigatoni amatriciana*, a type of pasta with tomato and bacon sauce. After having sampled far and wide, and seventeen years' worth of Italy's *amatriciana* recipes, this one is by far the best. In fact, everything that this woman cooks is unsurpassed. This is attested to by the fact that everyone I have ever taken there is now as addicted as I am. And the best part about this restaurant is that it is across the road from where I live.

Being such an amazing restaurant you may assume that it would be hard to get a table on such short notice. It probably would be if it was easy to see, find or even identify as a restaurant. It is located at the bottom of an apartment block, the kind that is everywhere in Rome. This particular apartment block, however, was built as part of an architectural competition and is well-known in the area – it was built and is used as public housing. It has the usual washing hanging from many of the windows and the occasional yelling match being conducted in or around it. Yet down a circular drive, off the street, almost into the bowels of the building, there is a small, average-looking door that you may not immediately recognise as a restaurant.

You will only find it if you stop while walking past one day and notice there is a small sign on the fence of the public building that says *Er Timoniere* (Roman dialect for 'the boat driver') and then you ask your husband what it means, and your husband tells you, and then you wonder why there is a sign saying 'the boat driver' on the outside of a building. Unless you walk towards a door at the bottom of the building that is lit up, even though your husband is dragging you back, saying, 'Don't go down there, it's probably someone's house,' then you would probably never find it.

This has been confirmed by the fact that several neighbours who have lived across the road from it most of their lives have never heard of it, and that most Saturday nights, if out walking, my husband and I get asked for directions from people who are standing in front of it.

So we book a table and head to *Er Timoniere* as my reward for fighting off jet lag. Inside, it first strikes you as a dining room in a private house. If you arrive at 8pm, which we mostly do even though it is considered incredibly early by Italian eating standards, the cook's husband and co-owner is usually still eating his meal in front of the television, on a sofa chair with a tray in front of him. We are generally the first there if we book for 8pm, and we spend time exchanging a few friendly words to our hosts, who know us well by now. The restaurant is partly underground so there is not much natural light, the décor stems from around the 1960s and there are no matching plates or cutlery. It is brightly-lit and small. There is an original restaurant beer fridge from the sixties along one wall, ancient prints and photos on another wall, a display of fruit and vegetables in front of a large mirror and a kitchen the size of a small fishing vessel.

The co-owner/cook, and her family who wait on you, prepare every meal individually, which means the food doesn't come out at the same time. The wine, water and delicious bread tide you over though. The restaurant fills up quickly and stays full until midnight, with patrons that range in age from eighteen to seventy. Loud conversations and big groups are the norm here and they are all welcomed and treated as though they are family.

I order my *rigatoni amatriciana* and the waiter jokes with me, 'Just for a change huh?' When it arrives, before my husband's dish, I enfold the bowl in my arms, croon to it and sniff its wafting odours, anticipating the goodness it will instil in me once I can no longer see it. It is my 'welcome back to Italy' present, my jetlag/hangover cure-all,

my tonic for the heartaches of modern living. I have tried to analyse it, to take it apart bit by bit and study the ingredients, to isolate perhaps a key one, to logically be able to answer why it has these effects on me.

Is it the warm, tangy olive oil? Is it the bite-size, chewy chunks of cured pork from Tuscany? Is it the liberally sprinkled, aged sheep's cheese, or the home-dried chillies that I can faintly taste? I don't know which it is, but all together they sate my soul and remind my body that the earth is full of good things. Whenever my mother-in-law cooks for me it has the same effect. I think that these women cook with love, that you can taste it in the food and is the reason why you feel so exceptionally good when you eat it.

Rigatoni are short cylinders of pasta. They are cooked *al dente*, meaning that they are quite chewy and not at all soft. They are ribbed and hollow, perfect for the tomato-based *amatriciana* sauce to cling to. The tang of the tomato in the sauce is so deep that it almost tastes of the earth. Its concentrated flavours go right to the bottom of my stomach and start warming me from my feet up. My ills and worries start to float away and I emit little groans between each mouthful, to my husband's curious delight. My worries now are new. Do I eat one *rigatoni* at a time to make it last longer or do I put two on my fork and have a double delight each time? How can I scoop up enough oil and at least one piece of deliciously salty smoked *guanciale* (pig's cheek) with each forkful? How can I stop my husband from nabbing any, poised with his fork, watching me from across the table?

A typical Italian meal includes a course known as an *antipasto*, a pasta dish (*il primo*), some meat, fish or cheese (*il secondo*) and vegetables (*la vedura*), and some dessert (*dolce*) and possibly some fruit or cheese (*frutta o formaggio*). In my youth, when I first came to Italy, I could do it all, all five courses. I was a lot lighter and generally a lot hungrier, having often to ration my food intake due to finances.

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The second dish of my welcome back to Italy meal is only a vegetable dish, as it is all I can fit in. Luckily, here in Italy vegetables are never disappointing or boring. I order *cicoria* which has no equivalent in English and which I have never seen in Australia. It is a dark green, bitter, leafy vegetable which one elderly Italian gentleman once described as 'medicinal'. The cook here prepares the *cicoria* '*ripassata*', which means that after boiling it, it is re-cooked in a saucepan of hot olive oil, shot through with garlic and chillies. It comes to the table soft, salty, caressed by oil and with the flavours of garlic and bitter greens being borne upon a faint sting of chilli. This time bread must be used as well. It may seem strange to order nothing but a plate with one type of vegetable on it, but eating this *cicoria* feels as decadent as a freshly baked chocolate lava cake.

There is no room or time for dessert. I have reached the limit of my boundaries. I stumble back across the road, almost blind from jet lag, but with the rest of my body zinging from the absorbed love of the meal. The indigo spring air greets me and I raise my head to take in the twilight scent of jasmine. The first long, flat surface to lay down on I have seen in two days awaits me, and I am guided into sleep by *Er Timoniere*, the boat driver.