

Geraldine Wooller***Lingua Franca***

They met on the deck of a ship as it departed Naples bound for Australia, on a bleak December day in 1970.

Huddled in her coat she looked beyond the port with complex feelings and no one to wave to. She didn't care that her face reflected this, as she pictured the country in its entirety: the elegant cities and verdant countryside she was leaving. As the ship pulled away and the departing Italians called "Goodbye little Italy" – *Ciao Italietta!* – to their country of birth, the girl, Fiona, looked around and saw beside her someone of about forty who was waving and smiling.

The woman was dressed in stylish clothes with gold antique earrings and a lambs-wool scarf tossed around her shoulders. Thick, copper-coloured hair framed a proud face. There was about her a lingering air of refinement, a legacy from what the girl would later judge as a wealthy family brought down in the world. A European woman *par excellence*, the older woman turned to the younger one and said in Italian:

"You are leaving family behind?"

"No", the girl shook her head. "I am returning home".

It wasn't Italian, the European woman's accent, but she knew the language well, that was evident. As the ship inched away, Ina kissed the palm of her hand, pursed her lips and blew the kiss towards a diminishing port. Fiona laughed and imitated the affectionate gesture. The day was less grey than it had been only minutes ago. An Italian man on the other side of Ina joined in the kiss-blowing. She did another one on her left palm and with her right hand made a fist as though she were winching the kiss to those still standing on the wharf.

"You have friends and relatives here?" It was Fiona's turn to ask.

“No! My country is Romania. I am saying farewell to old Europe”. And there they stood on the top deck, waving goodbye to people they didn't know and, for the girl's part, a country she didn't want to leave. But she knew that a sense of camaraderie held her there beside the woman as well-wishers on the wharf turned into mere ants. A man beside Ina started to court her even at this stage, smiling and suggesting a drink at the bar. It turned out that he was the First Class cinema controller.

“First class!” Fiona said to her the next day, wagging her head, for they were already on joking terms. Ina chuckled and flapped her hand grandly, dismissing him. When you're thrown together on board a ship you do strike up acquaintances easily, Fiona knew this much. It was almost out of necessity. But she and Ina were already meant to be life-long friends; nothing was surer.

They were part of a tight group on board: a Polish woman and her daughter; a middle-aged Italian man, suave and travelling alone; a young chap going to Australia for the first time who was inclined to sadness. In fact soon after they met he started to cry, to Fiona's consternation, while telling her of his family left behind.

Italian was the language their group had in common. Ina had been living in Rome for the past year, waiting to emigrate to Australia.

After leaving the Mediterranean, the ship – small as liners go, but sturdy – made its way into the Atlantic ocean. They soon encountered rough weather and Fiona lay on her bunk in the stuffy cabin she shared with three other girls for several days. Nothing and no one could lure her upstairs, not even a visit from the intrepid Ina who didn't mind the tossing and rolling of the ship. Fiona remembered poems from school: *A wet sheet and a flowing sea / A wind that follows fast / And fills the white and rustling sail / And bends the gallant mast.* Oh, if she could rejoice in it like that. Would she suffer an early death? Let this be a gallant ship so that a watery fate is not sealed. Not yet, please.

Over the next four weeks they fell into seaboard routines: meeting for drinks, playing cards, joining the gym group, trying out the pool; all those things you do with a lengthy voyage ahead. Ina was comfortable in any company, having several languages up her sleeve, including Hebrew, learned as a child and honed later in Israel. This was, she told Fiona as they sipped Campari in the lounge one evening, after the Soviet regime had clamped its claw onto her family's life and comfort. She lost her position as head designer in a fashion house – indeed that was closed down – as well as her fur coats and worldly possessions, which had been considerable. Her good humour remained intact as she told this tale. Fiona was attentive: was her new friend's style in-built or had she developed it along the way?

The younger woman too had her little romances on board, one with the First Class (oh yes) deputy to the captain who would visit the Australian girl in Second Class at every opportunity. Within a fortnight he had proposed marriage as he clasped her in his arms, dancing. She hadn't known this kind of experience; indeed she still had little experience of men at all. He was slender and courteous, a cultivated man who held her in an embrace that was entirely protective, without squeezing or gripping. She did like him. But he had a lazy eye behind his spectacles and therefore, she told Ina, she couldn't accept him.

"But why not, cara?"

"Because I have one too. Less pronounced", she explained as Ina lifted Fiona's chin with one finger and gazed at her friend's eyes, looking for the defect. She shook her head.

"It's barely noticeable, my dear. I wouldn't have known".

"*Lo strabismo di Venere*: the look of Venus, Italians call it: I'm told the goddess squinted a little...what a story! But such a couple would look comical in company, don't you agree?" Ina considered.

"I think you reject him rather because you can't love him, nothing more".

Fiona's other officer wasn't, as far as she could see, romantically preoccupied with her in any serious way. They discovered in each other a common interest in food and the cinema. So it was that she visited him in his cabin every few days where they would savour the gourmet snacks he had prepared, washed down with the best Italian wines, in between dissecting their favourite movies. She had never been so at ease in a man's company.

The ship made its way steadily through the doldrums towards Australia and by now more passengers were trying out their English. Fiona reluctantly dredged up hers; more than a few words had been forgotten over the past three years. Meanwhile Ina seemed to have finished her affair, if that's what it was, with the First-Class cinema man. He must have been a disappointment to her, Fiona decided, as she answered a question about him with a shrug.

"Why should I bother wiz soch dogs!"

It was possible that men thought she was a great flirt; Fiona thought it worth pointing out, as she observed Ina from across the room, her friend with chin lifted, the exceptional blue eyes narrowed towards someone, through half-closed lashes; she appeared to be sending promises! The girl said.

"Really, flirting? But I can hardly see zem, darling. I don't like to wear my glasses!"

At the end of four weeks the port of Fremantle hove into sight and the newcomers were already taking on a wary attitude towards this flat-looking place where they were berthing, despite the *Welcome* sign at the terminal. Alfonso her lazy-eyed suitor sadly bade her farewell and she knew she would miss his graceful, courtly ways. Her mother and two well-intentioned relatives met her off the ship. She sat listening in a hypnotic trance to things she knew nothing about: football; schools the children were attending; the price and location of someone's house. Uncle Barney thought to mention Europe: *Remember we drive on the left here, love!* He was trying to be kind, or funny. Only her mother who was driving, quietly asked about the voyage. Fiona looked

out of the window at the strange, well-ordered and sparsely-populated streets, thinking about her shipboard mates. Ina was bound for the rag trade in Melbourne. The girl wanted to swim after the ship.

But they had said they would write, and they did, for years, with Fiona finding her way through Ina's barely-decipherable writing. Italian gave way to English over time and the younger woman balked at haphazard prepositions. *He was looking after me in the bus*, Ina wrote about an encounter, meaning that someone was looking at her.

Within a year Fiona took a trip to Melbourne and stayed with her friend. The apartment in East St Kilda was a one-bedroom, tiny kitchen set-up, pretty and tasteful, and with several photos of Ina about as a beautiful young woman. For breakfast she had bought Weeties and Rice Bubbles, bacon and eggs and fruit juice and bread for Fiona.

"I'm sorry, Ina. I have the smallest breakfast...toast and coffee. Maybe we can have eggs and bacon for lunch?" But on seeing the girl's face, Ina shrugged and tipped the cereals in the bin and said they were going to town to have lunch.

"You and I will go from David Jones at ze tram".

"I'm not sure whether we're coming or going", laughed Fiona.

"Eh?"

Ina had established herself. She had a job supervising machinists in a factory. On reading her letters from a distance Fiona had felt the disillusion. Not exactly your *haute couture* Ina had written. But now, here, she detected from anecdotes the snubs at work. In addition to her job Ina took on private pupils, teaching them how to cut, emphasising originality and at the same time trying to sell her own designs to an indifferent market.

After two years they met again in Melbourne when Fiona visited. Ina's English was still eccentric. She was now in a two-bedroom apartment, situated just across the way from an enormous cemetery. The Italianate, metres-high

white monuments could be seen from her balcony and Ina said, laughing, she didn't have far to go when her time came.

"Come, darling; we will make ze shoppinks", she said, adding that she was taking Fiona to a jam factory. Or was it a gem factory, to see precious stones?

"A jam factory to buy dresses, Ina?"

"Yes, we will be in stitches".

They went to the House of Stitches, in the newly-converted Jam Factory shopping centre, where the older woman, gracious as royalty, introduced Fiona to people she knew. Fiona bought *three* quite lovely street dresses plus two pairs of shoes and they almost danced away to catch the tram.

It seemed Ina was a little older than Fiona had imagined – which surely made a lone transition to the great southern land, knowing not a soul, even more admirable. Ina's past was more than exotic to Fiona, it was a mixture of privilege and setback. There was her divorced husband who was a lawyer, and after that her dearest love – a man called Max now dead in Israel – and her family, scattered all over the world. Recalling this background Fiona questioned though only to herself whether Ina had made the right choice in coming to Australia. Though why not? An open, immigrant country where new lives were meant to be available. She had done it before in Israel and over time made new friends in Melbourne – some of them Fiona met. Good people and all of them settled you could say, yet adrift somehow, without family.

There was the occasional man in Ina's life, including an Egyptian who, after they had made love, would go and wash himself all over.

"I say to him, listen: I prefer you wash *before* we go to bed, like me", she told Fiona with a laugh. The frank request would have been accompanied by a smile and a graceful movement of the head.

Her bathroom was a cornucopia of fragrances. On one visit the younger woman emerged saying she had used the particularly delicious-smelling deodorant.

“Yes? My white frangipani? Zat is for the downstairs, darling”.

“Downstairs?”

“You used it for the upstairs?” laughing at her friend's disconcerted face.

Ina talked about coming to see Fiona in Perth but never did. Over the years it was the younger woman who visited Melbourne, sometimes on conference business. One year she drove across with Phillip and Ina put them up, making it clear they were quite odd, since the couple chose to sleep separately. Fiona explained they were easing into their affair. Phillip would be happy on the sofa.

Fiona told her friend that she and her young man were “good buddies” and Ina nodded her head in a way that looked to her friend as if she was trying out the concept. But she saw to it that her guests visited the Botanical Gardens, the Art Gallery, took them to a play, to the opera – and she insisted on paying for everything.

The following year on another visit Fiona was breathless on arrival, standing in the living room beside her suitcase, sharing her happiness: “Well it's happened finally, Ina. I'm in love! I've never felt like this in my life”.

Ina rejoiced, bringing out her best glasses and a bottle of wine. Was he the same one she had brought last time?

“Ah, no; in fact it's not a man at all”. And Fiona waited.

A look of understanding slowly settled on Ina's face before she nodded slowly, knowingly.

“You know”, half closing those hyacinth eyes Fiona had admired so often. “I sink I am a little bit ziss way?”

This left Fiona laughing helplessly with relief. “Somehow I doubt it, cara”. They hugged each other then drank to fresh starts.

Two years later Fiona had to attend an important meeting after Boxing Day in Melbourne, near a proposed new site for the arts body she represented. Ina insisted she stay for New Year, since their times together were so few. She had friends she wanted Fiona to meet, who had invited them and a group of

others for an evening meal, to see in the New Year. Fiona made a phone call to Perth to explain her prolonged stay.

“Fine! I’ve got permission”, she announced.

The German couple, Heidi and husband Hans were enormous people, as round as beer barrels and touchingly kind.

The group started with nuts and a drink at 7.00 p.m. Others arrived and they went on to *hors d’oeuvres*. A South American woman with violent blue-black hair claimed to be a singer and accompanied her stories with a little ditty, wobbling all over the notes that Fiona visualised on the keyboard, between the cracks. But who cared? Everyone here had a past and met your eye with a handshake. How civilised, thought the Australian woman – the only one there. They were at table by now and Heidi emerged from the kitchen bearing aloft the entrée – *oeufs à la tapenade*, an egg dish laced with cognac. It was exceptionally good; Fiona had her fill and her eyes met Ina’s across the table. Ina gave her a wink in the candle-light though after three glasses of wine Fiona’s eyes were beginning to water, in the darkened room.

One story came naturally and inevitably after another. Fiona made an effort not to slump. Hans kept the wine glasses replenished until Heidi re-appeared in triumph, holding in front of her copious bosom the *pièce de résistance*, a gigantic turkey stuffed with chestnuts, apricots and God knows what else, followed by a huge platter of mixed vegetables.

No two guests were from the same place. The woman with the mad hair whose laugh was a wild cackle, was from Peru, the man with lugubrious lines on his face that stretched from nose to chin, from Poland. Another was Shanghai-born and his quiet smiling companion was, amazingly, Russian; amazingly because Fiona had never seen Russians as quiet. Further, there was an Irish woman, freckled and funny, who kept telling extravagant yarns.

At midnight they all stood up from the turkey – Fiona barely able to rise to her feet – and toasted each other and to everything good they could think of

for the coming year, with the mournful Pole raising his glass to “this wonderful country” Australia. They sat down again, more wine was brought and the Polish man made the announcement that he had gone to school with the newly elected Pope. Mad Hair woman roared at this:

“He is *such* an attractive man”, eyes rolling. “Wholesome. All my life I look for such a man with so much breeding, such education and sex appeal both. And he has to be celibate!”

“I have a cousin who is a *cardinal* in my country”, ventured the Russian woman. But Irish, not to be outdone, told the history of her grandfather, a former Lord Mayor of London. Fiona was by now nearly undone, rocking with plenitude and smiling with what felt like a fixed look of idiocy. Heidi was laboriously wheeling in a trolley – like the tea lady in a large office – of biscuits, cheese, dessert and liqueur.

“No, no, please Heidi, I can’t, I can’t”, the Australian girl moaned, but the hostess was pressing more food on her. Fiona wanted to cry. However she accepted Black Forest cake, cherries and cream.

Time passed. *Coffee!* The Peruvian woman who as it happened was descended from a Ceylonese prince told a story. Heidi returned with chocolates and tea for the digestion. By now the guests barely noticed her, so deep in talk were they about the Ceylonese royal family, the downfall of Shanghai, the papacy. The Russian lady was belatedly getting into the swing of it, singing a wavering little song that brought tears to her eyes.

Released at last Ina and Fiona stumbled to their taxi, in a last-minute flurry of hand-shaking and cheek-kissing, Fiona staggered a little as she grasped the door of the cab while Ina, regaining her composure – actually she had never really lost it – displayed her usual air of insouciance then climbed in beside her friend. The sun was coming up. They called a parting thank-you to their portly hosts and Fiona detected something, was it a feeling of desperation in the German couple’s demeanour? Hans and Heide stood and waved until the taxis

were out of sight, in this city so far from their own, on what was probably for them still the wrong side of the world.

Years went by and she occasionally thought of that extraordinary feast – the unforeseen excess of it. Neither before nor after did she meet people at a dinner party who had gone to school with the Pope, enjoyed connections with an Asian royal family or were related to the Lord Mayor of London. Some of those claims had to be true? But the real truth of the gathering had been the group's brave optimism and defiance, and if it hadn't been for Ina she wouldn't have been however briefly drawn into their sphere.

Visits to Melbourne stopped for a long time. She tired of her job, moved on to other work, and therefore had no cause to travel for conferences. Her love affair had finished after two years, then she had another, of shorter duration. She and Ina exchanged cards at Christmas and on birthdays, Fiona having to read Ina's handwriting several times over.

Friends and family died for both of them. Ina's adored brother in Israel passed on and she wrote Fiona a long letter about it soon after. Fiona had been delivered what she would see later as a set-back (one of many that life serves up) but which at the time felt like a kick in the stomach. She didn't write to anyone for a long while as she cast around to gather her life together again.

But one day she again took a flight to Melbourne, jump-landing in the worst turbulence imaginable. On arrival at her friend's house, sitting in the kitchen, she was plied with food and drink as usual which she couldn't face. Ina looked hurt, amazed when Fiona asked if she could lie down for an hour.

"You know I'm a poor traveller?" said Fiona. "It was a rough flight". Ina nodded, rather distractedly when her friend reminded her of how sick she had become once on board ship, that time long ago.

A certain elegance remained but Ina was growing deaf, and was choosing to talk rather than listen; after all it's easier to deal with, that way. So Fiona sat quietly, saying as little as possible, since it only afflicted Ina more to ask

for further repetitions. She had developed a technique of saying “Hmm?” after every utterance Fiona made. This too was, as far as the younger woman could see, a more social way of asking for a repeat. Far better certainly than a continual stream of *Sorry? Pardon? Or What?*

“Do you remember that extraordinary banquet we went to one New Year, Ina? That kind couple”.

She finally replied once she understood what Fiona was saying that she hadn't seen those people for a long time.

In the evenings they watched Ina's favourite television channel and were shouted at by ads until Fiona fled to her room. Sometimes when the television was not on they sat and talked but the conversation always centred on Ina's ills (she'd had a mastectomy some years back and now had new fears), or on her dead brother, and she would start to weep. Fiona lapsed into silence, helpless and useless. She tried to show commiseration but felt her face falling into exasperation. A hand on the shoulder, the universal gesture of sympathy, would worsen her friend's distress. You can't shout sympathy, and nor could she tell of her own life's disappointments, though God knows she'd had a few.

She found herself escaping to the city (Ina didn't feel like coming) or taking long walks (her friend's bad knee didn't allow it). Fiona was by now unable and unwilling to try to describe her own recent years. Ina didn't ask anything. Twenty-six years had gone by since they had first met.

Because of numerous infirmities Ina couldn't go out anywhere, preferring her television and Sydney Sheldon novels. The days dragged by and they had long since run short of things to laugh about. And then it was time for Fiona to leave.

“I'm sorry I was not more *amusante*”, Ina said – with what was certainly a degree of irony – on Fiona's departure. She gave her old friend a peck on the cheek and a hurried word as with relief she finally spotted her taxi from the window. She ran downstairs, turned around and waved goodbye.

The day after her return home she went to her computer and typed a letter thanking Ina, her friend with whom she no longer shared a language, and she urged her to be happy. Later she re-read the copy and was surprised at its clumsiness, though she'd tried to make it...what had she tried to make it? ...humorous, bracing.

She never heard back, despite two more attempts to salvage the matter. A long time later in a last-ditch attempt to make contact she searched for Ina's number through the new phone book, but could find nothing. Nor could the telephone people. The woman at Directory Assistance tried hard to help, as if she was personally involved. Funny, and touching, how others can be a small comfort.

The French are right – everything passes. Love as well, yes. Except: the image that remained was of a copper-haired woman on the deck of a ship, laughing and generously blowing kisses to the strangers on the wharf, and to Old Europe, that after all hadn't done well by her and her kind.

Geraldine Wooller was born in Perth and completed her PhD at the University of Western Australia in 2012. She has taught Italian, Linguistics, Creative Writing as well as English Literacy & Oracy, and currently teaches English as a Second Language. She has published four novels (*Snoogs & The Dandy*, *The Seamstress*, *Transgression* and the forthcoming *The Rhythm of Life*), numerous short stories and essays. Her second novel, *The Seamstress*, was short-listed for the inaugural Barbara Jefferis Award as well as for the Western Australian Premier's Award and the Dublin Impac Award in 2008.

gwooller@westnet.com.au