

## A Family of Aliens

Natasha Garrett

'But they are all divorced!' exclaimed my mother, after I told her that my American boyfriend and I were planning to get married. By 'they' she meant Americans. The rebellious, independent woman in me rolled her eyes; I knew plenty of Americans who weren't divorced, and the ones that were appeared to be living perfectly normal lives. I also wanted to make my parents happy: the burden of being an only child. Of course we will never get a divorce, I promised my mom.

I came to the United States from Macedonia as an undergraduate student, determined to return home as soon as I graduated. I approached my college years as a temporary stint, something to be tolerated until I got my diploma and packed my bags. However, the more time I spent in the States the more hesitant I became about leaving. Sometimes I suspect I enrolled in graduate school for no other reason than as a way of postponing my decision to stay or leave. Over the years I had acquired a great group of friends and a job I genuinely enjoyed. I fell in love. Gradually and unintentionally, America had become home.

It was my fiancé's suggestion that we should get married in my home country of Macedonia, so that my family could plan and enjoy a traditional Macedonian wedding. I was hoping that such a gesture would impress my parents, but one can never be sure. Not leaving them with much room to form an opinion, we arrived in Macedonia five days before the wedding. By the time his parents flew in from Florida, two days before the wedding, my fiancé had already become the proverbial son my parents never had. Despite – or maybe because of – the language barrier, they got along wonderfully. His beer was always ice cold and accompanied by a dish of nuts to snack on; a freshly fluffed pillow was immediately placed behind his back whenever he sat down. In return, he obligingly sampled tripe soup, tolerated endless kisses on each cheek by both male and female relatives, and endured numerous appointments in tiny offices of various bureaucrats who ate greasy breakfast pastries or smoked at their desks in order for us to get a marriage license. It showed commitment and character, my mom proclaimed.

We had the ceremony at the Justice of the Peace, like everyone else in Macedonia; it was hardly a sentimental affair. Crying would have been out of place. In the parking lot outside, we were greeted by a group of gypsy children playing hand drums in exchange for a few coins. The children detected the presence of a foreign groom and, hoping for a bigger tip, exclaimed, *Mister! Mister!* At the reception afterwards, my cousins quickly taught my in-laws some basic folk dance steps, preparing them for the marathon dance session that followed. Towards the end of the evening, the band played 'Oh Susannah' and 'When the Saints Go Marching In,' possibly the only songs in English they knew, as a nod to the groom and his parents. It was their way of saying: you danced with us all night, now we are dancing with you.

'Any man that marries a woman marries an alien creature,' writes Gabrielle Donnelly in her essay 'Coming Home'. Donnelly, an Englishwoman of Irish descent, moves from England to the United States and creates a happy new life in Los Angeles. She finds the contrasts exhilarating: the sunny weather, the famous American optimism, the openness and friendliness of people. 'I can breathe in Los Angeles,' she writes. She marries Owen Gerald Bjornstad, 'six feet tall and three hundred pounds (he's trying to diet down to two-fifty) of mostly muscle, with hands like hams and forearms like thighs, a ruddy beard, a rafter-ringing laugh, and a personality to match his size.' Her friends in Europe describe him as 'very American'. Their different nationalities do

'A Family of Aliens.' Natasha Garrett.

Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 1, November 2017.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

not seem to be a cause of discord in the relationship, or at least not more than any other difference between a man and a woman. Her marriage is yet another confirmation that in America she has found her physical and spiritual home: 'As I have embraced America, so I married an American'.

I recognised myself in Donnelly, and not only because I also married an American. I imagine Owen Gerald Bjornstad to be a little bit like my husband: a bearded, good-natured, funny, wholesome Lutheran man, married, literally, to an alien – the legal term for a foreigner in the United States. What resonated with me was her enthusiasm about her relationship, her confidence that marrying Owen wasn't an assault on her own identity. I was eighteen when I came to the States, so it felt natural to marry someone from this part of the world. However, a quick mental survey of my foreign friends' marital status reveals that they have overwhelmingly opted for a spouse of their own nationality. While some people may view their spouses as comrades against the invasion of foreign language and culture into their lives, I chose to sleep with the enemy.

Every place dictates its own rhythm and routines, and my family life is shaped to a great degree by American culture. I am doing most of the adapting, though after a couple of decades it shouldn't feel so foreign. If we lived in Macedonia I imagine the culture of the household, such as mealtimes and social customs, would be quite different. The burden of adjusting to a Macedonian household would have fallen on my husband, although I suspect he would happily adopt many of the customs, like sharing a daily aperitif with a neighbor.

I may be fully adapted to American culture, but I infuse a healthy dose of Macedonia whenever I can. I insist, with mixed success, on having my family take their shoes off at the door. I cook plenty of so-called ethnic dishes, such as cheese and leek pies, roasted pepper spreads, aspic, bean and smoked ribs stew, along with my mother-in-law's recipes for mac'n' cheese, tuna noodle casserole, meatloaf and scalloped potatoes. I have roasted numerous Thanksgiving turkeys, glazed Easter hams and baked Christmas cookies. I came to understand cranberry sauce, overcoming my anxiety over serving fruit alongside meat. For fear that my American citizenship would be revoked if I didn't, I learned to make apple pies. 'If I hadn't married you I would have gone hungry,' my husband likes to say. We laugh at the cliché, at the truth of it.

The year we bought our first house, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, my parents came to visit from Macedonia. This was my dad's first visit to the States and my mom's second. Seven weeks went by quickly: we completed some minor home improvement projects and visited relatives in Florida and in Washington, D.C. 'Next time you visit,' I promised my parents, 'we will go to Niagara Falls'. 'Next time we visit,' my mom retorted, 'there'd better be a grandchild in this house.'

We obliged.

My parents have been visiting us, frequently and for extended stretches of time, ever since our son was born. During their visits, they make every effort to adjust to and embrace the country and the culture that is a home to their beloved grandson. Despite their limited knowledge of English, they manage to communicate with all our neighbours and my son's teachers; they fearlessly navigate the irregular and often confusing city bus system; they go grocery shopping and correct the checkout person if an item is rung incorrectly.

My husband and I do what we can to ease my parents' role as grandparents. We named our son Oliver, a name easily pronounceable by everyone in the family. My husband's first choice would have been Russell, a long-time family name, if only it didn't sound too much like *rasol*, a Macedonian for sauerkraut. I am raising my son bilingually, primarily so that he can

communicate with his Macedonian grandparents. Using Macedonian when talking to my son also allows me to replicate my mom and dad's parenting style, although I scare myself regularly when I sound too much like my own folks.

In my bilingual household, the language gravity shifts. Among the 'core' group (myself, my husband and my son), English is dominant; among the Macedonians (myself, my parents and my son) it is strictly Macedonian; in all other situations, there is simply a lot of translation going on. The family aligns and realigns repeatedly. While I catch myself bouncing from the extreme left to the extreme right of the Venn diagram that is my family, my son seems perfectly comfortable nestled in the intersection of the two spheres.

Maurice Sendak, the author of *Where the Wild Things Are*, once explained that the strangeness between relatives who don't speak the same language was an inspiration for his story. The monsters were based on his uncles and aunts, 'foreigners, lost in America, without language'. I was terrified of my parents and my son becoming aliens to each other, unable to communicate. In reality, they have become allies, pushing gently but persistently against the forces of distance, language and culture that could have torn them apart, but which have ended up adding nuance and richness to all our lives.

**Reference:**

Gabrielle Donnelly, 'Coming home', in M. N. Danquah (ed.) *Becoming American: Personal essays by first-generation immigrant women*. New York, Hyperion, 2000.

---

*Natasha Garrett writes poetry and personal essays. Her work can be found in Transnational Literature, Gravel, Mothers Always Write, and Allegro Poetry Magazine. She has a PhD in International Education from the University of Pittsburgh. Originally from Macedonia, she lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and works at La Roche College.*