



"A beautiful, sensitive,
intense exploration of the
restless human heart searching
for peace, love, and home..."
—NATALIE GOLDBERG,
author of *Writing Down the Bones*

BOWING TO ELEPHANTS

Tales of a Travel Junkie

MAG DIMOND

Praise for *Bowing to Elephants*

“This beautifully written memoir is a chronicle of inner and outer adventures, grounded in deliciously detailed descriptions of fine food and fine art, of city streets and wild landscapes, of architecture and literature, and exalted by the author’s quest to respond to the cries of the world with compassionate action.”

—Mirabai Starr, author of *Caravan of No Despair*
and *God of Love*

“I love this book! Each page is witness to the author’s deft movements among the worlds of travel, childhood, and her heart. It takes a true master to weave a tapestry like this. And to do it in a way that does much more than simply tell a tale. *Bowing To Elephants* is a true gift because it transforms and elevates the experience of the reader.”

—Ben Gioia, international speaker, best-selling author,
and founder of InfluenceWithAHeart.com

“Eloquent and honest . . . Each place is depicted in great visual detail, and all five senses are played upon, make the related experiences tangible. The text also illustrates a deeper sense of a place, recalling the emotions of particular moments and evoking how the visited locations are special. Such details make Dimond’s travel writing deeper than most . . .”

—Katie Asher, *Foreword Reviews*

“ . . . [I]n the vein of *Eat, Pray, Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert’s story of finding herself amid a year of exploring other countries, *Bowing to Elephants* (subtitled “Tales of a Travel Junkie”) is Mag Dimond’s account of never sitting still . . . ”

—Anthony Aycock, *IndieReader Reviews*

BOWING TO ELEPHANTS

Tales of a Travel Junkie

MAG DIMOND



SHE WRITES PRESS

Copyright © 2019 by Mag Dimond

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, digital scanning, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, please address She Writes Press.

Published September 2019

Printed in the United States of America

Print ISBN: 978-1-63152-596-4

E-ISBN: 978-1-63152-597-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019937405

For information, address:

She Writes Press

1569 Solano Ave #546

Berkeley, CA 94707

Interior design by Tabitha Lahr

She Writes Press is a division of SparkPoint Studio, LLC.

Names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the privacy of certain individuals.

To Lavinia Dimond, my grandmother, my hero,
who shaped my path.



To Madeleine Violett, my reckless mother, who
offered beauty and broke my heart.

CONTENTS



Introduction | 11

One: The Beginning of My Traveling Life—Florence | 13

Two: Beauty and Pleasure in Paris | 29

Three: Alone in Venice in January | 51

Four: Burma Pilgrimage | 71

Five: Spiritual Practice in Bhutan | 103

Six: Duality and Impermanence in India | 125

Seven: Falling in Love with Elephants in Kenya | 155

Eight: On Not Knowing Vietnam | 173

Nine: Shadow of Death in Cambodia | 199

Ten: Coming Home to San Francisco | 217

Acknowledgments | 259

About the Author | 261

“In these memoirs or recollections there are gaps here and there, and sometimes they are also forgetful, because life is like that. . . . Many of the things I remember have blurred as I recalled them, they have crumbled to dust, like irreparably shattered glass.”

—Pablo Neruda, *Memoirs*



“In probing my childhood (which is the next best thing to probing one’s eternity), I see the awakening of consciousness as a series of spaced flashes, with the intervals between them gradually diminishing until bright blocks of perception are formed, affording memory a slippery hold.”

—Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory*

Introduction



The journey of exploring one's past is circuitous, and often painful and complicated. One has to peel away layer after layer of fragile and ephemeral memory to find the story. I discovered in my search that I needed to move backward and forward in time in order to find the "through line" of my narrative.

I began this book as a series of essays about my travels to far-flung places, and what I discovered as I wrote the pieces was that certain characters from my past life showed up and asked to be heard; they reminded me of cultural and intellectual gifts, some loving kindness, and frequent interludes of profound neglect and loneliness threaded through my childhood. It appeared that this memoir was not just about being a world traveler, but it was also about the early internal yearnings that propelled me to specific places. In the end, it was the story of discovering my authentic self and learning how to love by exploring foreign lands.

It all begins as I ask my mother an urgent question that demands witnessing and truth, and the honest answer I'm seeking does not come. My family was falling apart, and the woman whose love I desperately sought couldn't admit

it or comfort me. From this time forward, my young life would become a journey *to understand the truth* of things. The chapters in this memoir illustrate how most of my adult adventures have been, in a way, responses to earlier questions lurking in my heart and mind from the time I was a girl (Why do people separate themselves by class? How is it that art and music nourish the human spirit? What are we to make of death? How do we find love?). In each chapter I've woven together my present-day travel stories with those emotional scenarios from my childhood and adolescence that had pushed me to become a traveler.

I wish you a thought-provoking adventure as you traverse the mosaic of my present and past lives. You won't get lost, I promise, and you may at times find that the winding trajectory offers unexpected and moving sensory experiences that *invite you in . . .* to smile and reflect, and to be reminded of the many rich stories your own heart is holding.

One: The Beginning of My Traveling Life—Florence



I had been waiting so long to ask her my question. Waiting as she moved from her bed to the dresser to put away her underthings, waiting as she stopped to light a cigarette, waiting as she stared at her huge pink-and-red painting on the bedroom wall. I sat cross-legged on her bed in the late afternoon, staring at the floor and trying my best to be patient. I was pretty good at that for an eight-year-old. . . . But I was tired, a little scared, and confused.

There had been a much longer waiting before. Several years at least of watching my mother and father slowly fall away from each other and from me, sitting over creamed spinach at the dinner table, cocktails in the living room, or driving silently in the car. I saw it all: the meanness and the fear. You see, from the beginning I was a witness.

A couple of nights before this, I had lain in my bed in the dark and heard her scream at him, and then there was silence. Some nights before that, I had heard a telephone being hurled at the wall as she shrieked, “You never listen to me—I don’t. . . .” (And then I couldn’t hear the rest.)

"It's all impossible!" I felt invisible in my dark room with the nightlight burned out, and pretty soon a cold wiggly fear came. I tried to hear what was happening in the living room—I needed to know what it was, or at least I thought I did, but what I really wanted was to burrow deeper under my blankets to sleep and forget.

I fixed my eyes on her now as she continued to busy herself with her laundry, and then I finally spit it out. "Mom, I have something to ask you."

Instead of answering me, she asked, "Oh, by the way, Maggie, did you remember to feed the cat?"

"Well, of course I did! I always do." My voice began to sound louder and a bit braver.

"Yes, now just what *is* this question of yours?"

Her mind was on something else then, I could tell, and for a fraction of a moment I just stared at her movie star looks in the early evening sunlight, that beauty that set her apart that I knew would never be mine. She looked at me now, as though daring me to speak.

"Mom—are you and Daddy *okay*? Are we going to be all right? I'm worried—"

"Of course, we're all right!" she replied too quickly. "What made you think that? Everything is fine. You fret too much, my dear." She was trying to reassure, I could see it, but her tone was too chilly.

"But I heard you both yelling. Just the other night . . . and some nights before that. . . ." I wanted her to hug me or just touch my face with her fingertips, but instead she reached over to the dresser for her comb, ran it through her straight brown hair, and pursed her red lips in the mirror.

"Nothing is the matter. You must learn to not be so horribly serious all the time."

Less than a month later, I sat on my grandmother's large

gray sofa in her living room as she cautiously announced to me that my parents were going to divorce, that my father would be going away. I remember thinking she was telling me so my mother didn't have to. She was doing it *for* her daughter-in-law, who had a hard time being honest with her family. Her hazel eyes were soft and moist and filled with affection as she looked right at me, ready to offer comfort.

"That's all right, Grandmother. Now the fighting will stop, I guess," I said with a big sigh. I didn't have anything else to say; I think I felt relief that soon I'd escape the war zone I'd been living in. I was just as calm as my grandmother, and quite collected for an eight-year-old.

Frozen in that moment of composure and skewed logic, I knew my mother had not told me the truth, and I wanted to believe it was because she just didn't know how. Nobody ever taught her to. . . . Was this all happening because she just didn't see me, or because speaking the truth was too frightening? Or both? In the end it didn't really matter, for soon I would simply become the invisible child she was stuck with, the little girl who sat quietly through long dinners waiting for her chance to speak and be heard, trying to decipher the people around her so she could learn how to fit in. From here on, my mother and I would be uncomfortably bound to one another. I was an unavoidable player in her life, and my path as witness of my life and carrier of fragile memory was set.

I remember months of brooding silently in our little Belvedere house on the lagoon, waiting for something to happen. And then my father packed up his gray suits and brown loafers and left quietly and without ceremony, as was his nature. Before too long, I was watching my mother and some of her artist friends having a moving party, wrapping pots and pans in plain paper and taping up boxes and occasionally raising their wine glasses in a triumphant gesture.

I was in charge only of packing up my clothes and stuffed animals and making sure that I didn't forget any of my books. When I wasn't rummaging in my room trying to be useful, I sat at the kitchen table and just watched her. She caught me staring at her, tossing her hair aside with a quick move. "Maggie,"—she always called me "Maggie" when she was not in a loving mood—"how many times do I have to tell you not to stare like that? Sulking is very unattractive, you know. It didn't work out with your father because I just didn't love him anymore. . . . That's all there is to it! You'll get over it." And with that, she returned to her boxes, her wine, and her friends.

Some months later, we traveled across the Golden Gate Bridge to live together in a Victorian apartment in San Francisco, just my restless mother, myself, and Rhubarb the Siamese cat. My traveling life had begun.



I hold an old memory now. From the haze of many years it comes into focus: the Tuscan hills lit up in autumn in burnished golds and reds, softening my heart. As evening descended on the city of Florence and the cypresses stood tall and proud around the old stone house on this fall day, our little family began to settle in for an evening in the villa. My mother had packed us up, my stepfather and me, and led us off to Italy so she could be close to art—as far as I knew, that was the reason. She had spent several years in art school in the early fifties, after we moved to San Francisco from the East, and had adopted the bohemian artist's path when she was married to my father. She appeared to be driven by beauty, its creation and acquisition. She had been so stunning as a young woman and so conditioned to being called beautiful that she

became obsessed with the *idea* of the beautiful life as she grew older—perhaps. Or maybe she saw her future as some sort of blank canvas waiting for the right eyes. This dream, along with her own trust fund income, brought us to the Villa dei Cipressi above Florence in 1956. There had been other moves before this one, in between the uneventful divorce from my father and a quick marriage to a man she had met while working as a cocktail waitress at the Tin Angel, a San Francisco jazz club. My stepfather, Raymond, was smart and eccentric, raised with many siblings in a poor Norwegian immigrant family from Brooklyn. He loved books and drawing and had a handsome angular face scarred by childhood smallpox. I was becoming used to moving by this time, and just put my head down and forged ahead the way I had to when she failed to explain the reasons for her choices. I don't remember being either scared or excited about moving to a foreign country thousands of miles away when I was only eleven.

That evening in Florence, the sun had finally gone down, and we sat around our large oval dining table as candles cast a small umbrella of light above us in the giant stone *sala*. Steaming pasta with butter, a big bowl of Parmesan, a roast of pork all perfumed with rosemary and surrounded by shiny dark green zucchini and brilliant tomatoes, and of course, a salad of beautiful wild lettuces. My mother had put the red wine in a glass carafe where it shone like a ruby. She always knew how to create a beautiful picture. We even had soft white cloth napkins and white plates with little gold edges on them.

As she and Raymond served up the food, they talked about how they had to find a cook and housemaid to cope with our needs, while I wondered about the unusual little school I was going to and the possibility of finding new friends there. They clinked glasses ceremoniously, and she exclaimed with a broad smile, "Isn't it too divine, Mag? Here we are in the most

beautiful country ever! Aren't you happy, darling?" I wasn't sure about the "divine" part. I hadn't fallen for this place yet—it had all happened so fast, after all, the divorce and the new husband—I just wasn't ready to be charmed. But I was just a little curious about starting seventh grade with a bunch of American expats in an ancient Italian palazzo. She didn't wait for my answer to her question about being happy but turned toward my new stepfather to issue instructions about the necessary calls in the morning so we could get some domestic help.

So off I went to Miss Barrie's American School, housed in a huge, dark, damp-smelling building on the Via dei Bardi on the right side of the Arno across from the city center. A tiny dowager, a certain Miss Barrie from Boston ran the place quite invisibly, relegating the mechanics to Mr. Faust, an imposing tall gentleman who sported large, horn-rimmed eyeglasses and Old-World manners. There were about twenty-four of us in all at the school, a motley crew of young Americans aged about eleven to sixteen, thrown together in Latin, Italian, and English classes, and huddling on cold mornings while Mr. Faust intoned the basics of algebra to us in his German accent. Looking back, I mostly remember the dark main room with the large, oval table and a rickety, ancient iron chandelier hanging down from above, where our little voices echoed dramatically against the high ceiling, and how the room was lit up periodically by the perky Miss Barrie herself, looking the part of Bostonian matron in her crisp, dark suit and ruffled, white blouse, as she announced in perfect diction, "Now, boys and girls, we are going to go on a grand journey to discover the beautiful mind of William Shakespeare. . . ." I believed in her from the very beginning.

Our school was a claustrophobic little world, really, but I felt comforted by the closeness; it made getting used to all things foreign easier. Eventually I found a young boy

with pearly white complexion and pale blond hair to focus my attention on, and I spent many hours trying to make myself known to him. I must have succeeded, because before long Michael and I were writing little personal notes to one another, delivering them into jacket pockets in the coat closet, or passing them off directly in class under the large table when we happened to be sitting next to one another. Living with this little secret was exciting and strangely familiar, like the times I used to hide chocolate candy bars for myself in my desk back home, or rifle through my mother's dresser drawer to smell the lavender sachet and feel the soft things she put there. I understood concealment. This boy and I knew something different was up between us as we grinned stupidly at each other across the rooms we inhabited at Miss Barrie's, but I'm not sure we knew to call it love.

Back at the villa later in the afternoon, I sat in my bedroom with high ceilings and wrote in my red leather journal about feeling lonely and confused by my beautiful mother, who preferred her evening cocktails to my company. I was alien to her, as her company had probably been alien to her mother long before. Even though she had been tended in childhood by governesses and such, my mother chose a new and modern look to her life, without any nannies, of course, and I was simply overlooked. I wrote too about Michael and me, and about how adorable my stepfather Raymond, was. I think I had a crush on him from the start, which he seemed to encourage—he often smiled right at me and made plenty of time to talk; he appeared to like me a lot. Some nights he sat with me in my bedroom and sang the same mournful English ballad, “Greensleeves,” again and again in his strange atonal voice, making me feel quite special.

Before long we had the warm bountiful company of our new cook, Elda, in the house, and she served us our

dinner in the giant living room by candlelight, of course: a big white tureen of soup and platters of steaming egggy fettuccini, crusty *scaloppine alla Milanese*, and a perfect green salad. “*Ecco, il pranzo! Buon appetito!*” she’d announce proudly as she beamed at my mother and the rest of us. She soon became my hero, and I followed her many afternoons after school, into the kitchen and stayed to watch her do her magic there. She made creamy mayonnaise from scratch, pouring the thick olive oil into the egg with reverence, and *straciatella* soup—golden chicken broth with whipped eggs in it—as well as a spaghetti *carbonara*, hearty peasant pasta with salt pork and egg, lots of butter and cheese.

I often gave up my journal writing to sit with her in the kitchen as warm light poured through the windows from the west, and I watched her gently wash dark leaves of basil, slice perfect tomatoes, and grate parmesan while humming a warm melody to herself. When she picked up a chicken to prepare, she did it with joy, patting its plump pink body with her big hands that were dark red from all her hard work, smearing the olive oil all over, and stuffing it with big handfuls of rosemary. She had handpicked that very chicken from the butcher’s that morning and knew it to be the perfect one for our dinner. Every once in a while, I accompanied her on her shopping trips and watched as she joined the animated conversation with the cheese man, the produce lady, or the baker with his huge white floury arms, both of Elda’s hands moving continuously to persuade and cajole, everyone’s voices rising and falling. It was opera and dance right there in the morning sunshine. I learned in those moments just how seriously Italians took the daily gathering of food.

My mother had been a pretty good cook when I was younger, but this buxom young woman who tended our kitchen was a magician. She had huge breasts and dark hair

that fell down her back in giant waves, and eyes that flashed dark and loving. She taught me the vocabulary and the dance of food. The lettuces were *bellissime* (most beautiful), the tomatoes *meravigliosi* (marvelous), the chicken *perfettamente fresco* (perfectly fresh). She took a purple eggplant and sliced it into perfect white disks, she held a shiny red pepper in her hands as though it were sacred, cutting it then into perfect rings on the wooden board, and she examined all the different lettuces and wild greens with great care before tossing them in the salad bowl. She saw me observing her. She lit up the kitchen with animated gratitude, a deep husky laugh coming from her expansive body as she began to share stories of growing up in southern Italy. “*Vuoi sentire una storia della mia vita in Calabria?*” You want to hear a story of life in Calabria? I was studying Italian at Miss Barrie’s then, but it was from Elda that I really got the language. *And the food, of course.* She and I ate and talked together as days and months passed; we laughed, chopped vegetables, poured golden olive oil, whipped eggs, grated mountains of cheese, and found friendship.

Elda’s Spaghetti Carbonara

4 eggs beaten
1 pound bacon, cut into small squares
½ stick unsalted butter, cut into bits
¾–1 cup coarsely grated Parmesan
Salt and fresh ground pepper to taste
1 pound spaghetti

Cook bacon in a skillet (we used a crude salt pork when in Italy), draining off fat.

Cook pasta in large (8 quart) pot of salted boiling water until al dente, firm but not hard. Drain.

Toss steaming pasta in large bowl with beaten eggs (thus cooking the eggs), cooked bacon, butter, and grated Parmesan. Add salt and pepper to taste. Serve with extra parmesan on the side (you can never have too much cheese!).

Serves 4.

The year in Florence was a tender year when I found what felt like love, as my mother and Raymond joined Florence's claustrophobic expatriate society. On Saturdays, Michael and I took off for the movies where we sat in the dark and held hands while watching one of Elvis Presley's latest hits, like *Love Me Tender*. By the end of the fifties, Elvis movies had made a huge splash in Italy, and what made the experience so surreal was that they were always dubbed in Italian except for the singing. Elvis's deep sexy voice touched me inside and made me believe in romance, as I leaned in closer to Michael in the dark theater and inhaled his tweed jacket.

During the week, Raymond usually helped me with my readings and essays; I eventually understood that tending to my academic tasks had been one of the reasons my mother married him. He treated me as though I were a grownup, which amused and bothered me at the same time, because it really wasn't true. He took his new parenting role seriously but wasn't very good at expressing his feelings, a trait he shared with my mother. Every once in a while, she actually saw me, and she'd stare at me through the cigarette smoke and proclaim proudly that I was the "perfect" child, particularly when she was surrounded by her friends. I was "perfect" then,

I suspect, because I was quiet and compliant, and because I now looked elsewhere for love. Later, when I was in my forties and feeling unusually vulnerable, she once gave me, for no reason, a little needlepoint pillow that announced “my daughter is perfect” in white against a pink background, and I was speechless with the irony of it all. I think we both were. There had been nothing perfect about our relationship. We lived together through many years in separate bubbles, with rare, usually unsuccessful, attempts on my part to be seen and cherished, and occasional extravagant gifts from her to dazzle me . . . which made us an awkward pair indeed.

I was eleven that year in Florence, on the verge of falling into love and romance, which I was reminded of everywhere I went: the Elvis Presley movies, Italian love songs pouring out of apartment windows, Shakespearean sonnets delivered by Miss Barrie, Elda’s love affair with food in the kitchen, and lurking in the ancient stones and alleyways, the story we had been told in Italian class of Dante and his Beatrice. We were being taught rudimentary Dante then, and beginning to explore his *Inferno* and listen to the sad tale of his romance with the noble and distant Beatrice. I found myself visualizing Michael and me disappearing into their story as we walked up the damp *lungarno* toward the Ponte Vecchio. Following the failure of his love affair, Dante made this woman the muse for his entire body of written work, which kept her in his mind and heart for his entire life.

Dante’s *Inferno* later became one of my most deeply loved works in literature. As I continued studying the poet and his words over the years, I learned that a brilliant mind was no defense against loneliness and exile. As part of the White Guelph “family,” Dante eventually found himself on the wrong side of a bitter civil war in the city and was banished from his beloved Florence at the age of thirty-six.

I have lived in the world of literature for as long as I can remember, and have always been drawn to exiles, whether it was Homer's Odysseus trying to find his way home, Pablo Neruda whose conscience drove him from his homeland, or the wild Irishman James Joyce who only fulfilled his vision when living outside his own country. I noticed that comfort and acceptance eventually came to those who were far away, but it was usually an ease tempered with grief, long sad years of drinking to forget and writing in order to remember. I began to know this as I grew up a shadow in my mother's company, trying to discover my own authentic story.

Reading the *Inferno* marked the beginning of my ongoing curiosity about the hero's journey, the passage all humans take as they move forward while holding in their hearts what came before. I wanted to see my life and the lives of others in the context of epic storytelling and grasp the interconnection of all human endeavors. In Hell, Dante reflects on many painful human qualities—misguided love, corruption, deceit, and greed—as he brings to life men and women from his city of Florence and characters from ancient history and myth. He is the author and major player in his epic poem, listening to stories of deep pain and confusion, yet never denouncing the ignorance or lack of morality that brought about the suffering. I don't think he considered human beings inherently evil, and this put him at odds with the harsh Christian hierarchy of his times. *The Divine Comedy* is the revolutionary work of a progressive mind that looks at man's relationship to such realms as Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, written from the tender heart that adored Beatrice, and in the vernacular of Dante's people, so that all citizens of the land might read it.

I walked across the solid Ponte Vecchio over the Arno a lot during my year in Florence, with its small elegant shops selling precious gold and coral and amber, and I often

imagined a small gang of Renaissance painters—Massaccio, Da Vinci, Piero della Francesca, and Botticelli—sauntering along behind me in paint-spattered tunics. Dante was never far away either. I seemed to have my feet in two worlds. My head was filled with these characters—Dante with his love for Beatrice, Da Vinci and his Mona Lisa—as I cherished my blue-eyed beau whose delicate features suggested a young prince dressed in black velvet with white ruffles at the neck. Did he ever say he loved me? I wonder. What did we say to each other? I don't remember any of our conversations during those afternoons together. We were so very shy; we held hands as we walked side by side through the ancient, gritty streets, with little attention to where we were going, until we found ourselves in front of a bright sweet-smelling fruit stand, and he splurged on a yellow peach to share in the late afternoon. These little moments were like images from beautiful paintings.

Before I arrived in Florence in 1956, I had never experienced anything ancient in my life, and walking the cobbled alleys taught me about old: the musty damp grayish smell, even in summer, all the passages dark and maze-like, and then the grand tall arches and elegant wrought iron lamps. Florence's solid stone buildings were like formal straitlaced businessmen with not so friendly faces. Old and dark and forbidding. I loved it all from the start. There were many streets in the center that never saw the sunlight, and there was moldiness in the air even in summer, once in a while punctuated by the sugary-smelling *pasticceria* (bakery) where brioche, marzipan, and brightly colored tarts were proudly splashed across the window display, or the noisy caf  s where bitter coffee filled the air. Italians believed in pausing, I noticed, whether it was for *caff  * and a smoke or a little lie-down in the afternoon after lunch. This way of life was so much like

a dance: rush and hustle, pause and converse, eat and drink, rest well, and then join the parade again on the street.

I have returned to Florence half a dozen times in the ensuing years and found that magic transparency missing. I looked for those places where some sensory experience, some smell or flash of light on the edge of a building, some dark interior would take me back—perhaps a visit to the convent of San Marco where Fra Angelico’s luminous blue frescoes shone, or the long wooden galleries of the Uffizi.

As a traveling friend and I trekked the narrow snaking streets on our way to some church or other one summer about eight years ago, I fell into dreaminess, a memory struggling to form that would bring back my twelfth year: burnt espresso in the air, the scooter exhaust, roasting meat with rosemary, golden light reaching down and blessing an arched doorway, a cloud of cigarette smoke, as children scurried along with their soccer ball, and a dark-robed priest walked purposefully with his head down. Finding those doorways to the past seemed futile, perhaps because I tried too hard and wanted it too much. I wanted to fall in love again in present time with this cramped haughty city, or perhaps I wanted to feel what it was like to be loved by a young man who looked like he had stepped out of an old painting. But I should have known better: Florence is an Italian city very few people these days associate with romantic love. It is a buttoned-up, ladies-in-sensible-suits town that teaches you all you need to know about the Renaissance, the refinement of the Italian language, and where you can get a steaming bowl of *ribollita* and perhaps a decent *bistecca alla fiorentina*, if you’re lucky. No clues on how to find love. But how often do we hunger for love in exactly the wrong places?

At the end of one full school year, we said good-bye to Elda and our neighbors across the road and to our little

red Fiat. I wrote one last love note to Michael promising I'd stay in touch, and then we packed up and moved to Rome. I don't remember my parents telling me the reason, but I had a hunch that this conservative city was too quiet and predictable for my mother, and when she found an international school for me in the big city that my two grandmothers would pay for, she made up her mind to travel.

I felt disappointed and sad; I had actually settled into Miss Barrie's cozy world, felt deep camaraderie with Elda, and was engrossed in chronicling my young-girl adventures as visions of ongoing love danced in my head. Elda hugged me and promised, with tears in her eyes, she would come down to Rome to see us—"Ci vediamo, sai, ci vediamo a Roma, son sicura"—We will see each other soon, in Rome, I'm sure we will—but I doubted this would happen. When faced with the sadness of letting go, we are compelled to make promises we cannot keep: to write, to visit, to hold on, to love, and to remember. . . .

In the steamy late summer, as the soft rolling Tuscan hills and cypresses melted into the flatter, less interesting landscape of central Italy outside our train windows, I tried not to mope, and I watched as my mother chattered excitedly about going to Rome, waving her cigarette in the air, and Raymond remained quiet, his head stuck in a Henry James novel. Once more I had to learn about the letting go and moving on, and I now shifted my attention inward toward that authentic hungry little self that hung out in the shadows.

Two: Beauty and Pleasure in Paris



“Masterpieces . . . are knowing there is no identity and producing while identity is not. . . . If you do create, you do not remember yourself as you create.”

—Gertrude Stein

What excites me most about visiting Paris? Those feminine soft-boiled eggs perched in pristine little white cups, *café au lait* and gold flaky croissants for breakfast, a cheesy *croque monsieur* and glass of rosé for lunch, or the brilliant pink sorbet after dinner? Yes *and* no. For a food lover like myself, there are few matches for this city, where individual lives unfold around the preparing and consuming of excellent food. France’s culinary traditions are legendary and seductive, this is true, and I am a foodie, but I believe what I really travel to Paris for is to stare at exquisite nineteenth-century paintings, grand old churches and palaces, and wander the damp streets and quays along the Seine (are the streets of Paris always glistening with dampness, or is that

BOWING TO ELEPHANTS is a travel memoir with a twist—the story of an unloved rich girl from San Francisco who becomes a travel junkie in an effort to avoid the tragic fate of her narcissistic, alcoholic mother. Haunted by images of childhood loneliness, Dimond journeys to far-flung places—into the perfumed chaos of India, the nostalgic, damp streets of Paris, the gray, watery world of Venice in the winter, the reverent and silent mountains of Bhutan, and the gold temples of Burma. She discovers kinship, comfort, and love amongst the giant elephants in Kenya, and looks for answers to old questions in Vietnam and the tragically ravaged landscape of Cambodia. In the end, she learns to see herself as a citizen of the larger world, accepts the death of the mother she never really had, and finds peace and her authentic self in the refuge of Buddhist practice.

"The prose is gorgeous and novelistic . . . Overall, this is not merely an account of strange lands and novel adventures, but also a moving saga of a woman wandering the world in search of home. A luminous, engrossing meditation on family love and loss."

—KIRKUS REVIEWS

"A beautifully crafted memoir, weaving vivid descriptions, inner truths, suffering, and celebration into a tapestry of family revelations, love of the details of life, and worldwide adventure."

—JACK KORNFELD, author of *No Time Like the Present*

"More than your average travel memoir, *Bowing to Elephants* elegantly weaves together the author's love of exotic locales with her internal quest for meaning and reconciliation with the past. A beautifully written, evocative, and moving literary journey."

—SEAN W. MURPHY, award-winning author of *One Bird*,
One Stone: 108 Contemporary Zen Stories and *The Time of New Weather*

SPARKPRESS

Visit us at www.gosparkpress.com

Cover design by Mimi Bark

Front cover Leaves © Shutterstock, Elephant © Arcangel

U.S. \$16.95 MEMOIR

ISBN 978-1-63152-596-4



9 781631 525964

