

Journey to Malta, from the novel "Grok"

by Tom Maremaa

The journey to Malta would take almost four days.

Both men, with knapsacks and sleeping bags on their backs, stepped eagerly onto the train in Zürich. A whistle blew and they were off. In his knapsack, Grok had brought pictures of his family to show; he'd also got a wedding gift, with Zandie's help, from a Swiss travel agent.

The first night, they stopped briefly in Florence, where Fritz ran around ecstatically, taking pictures with his Leica. But Grok was thinking about Melissa, wishing she were along on the trip, taking pictures; he sat at an outdoor cafe, chain-smoking Gauloise and reading the Paris Herald Tribune. In Rome the following day, Grok's spirits lifted somewhat. By the time they got to Naples, both men were feeling wiped out, exhausted from the long train ride.

"Sehr langweilig," said Fritz. "Very boring."

Boring or not, if anything, Grok'd had more time to think of Melissa. He was a wreck. In Naples, they booked passage on a boat which would take them, overnight, to Valletta.

At a kiosk near the harbor Grok bought a postcard of Michelangelo's David for Melissa, a pack of Gauloises, and that morning's Paris Herald Tribune. He hastily scribbled a note on the card, saying how much he missed her, stamped it, and dropped it in a box. Fritz looked at him, shaking his head: "Sorry, but I have to tell you, Grok."

"Tell me what?"

"Italian mail delivery is bad. Sehr schlecht. Many strikes among the workers."

"Fritz, it's only a postcard," said Grok.

"Could be months before she gets it."

Grok was not amused: Fritz was getting on his nerves. Grok turned and opened the Tribune, checking the weather report for the Mediterranean. "Says it's calm and clear. Moderate temperatures." He looked out to the harbor: "Hope our ship is seaworthy."

"I hope so, too," said Fritz. "If not, I get seasick."

"Tomorrow, we'll be in Valletta. You'll be fine."

"Oh, by the way," said Fritz, reaching into his knapsack. "I bring with me the cubes."

"You did what?"

"Here. Take a look. Nice, eh?"

Grok quickly glanced around to make sure nobody saw the half dozen sugar cubes that Fritz was holding in the open palm of his hand.

"Are you crazy? Verückt! You want to get us busted?"

Grok's paranoia level suddenly shot up.

"Malta is quite beautiful, I hear. Could be perfect for my first trip, nicht wahr?"

Grok shook his head in disbelief.

As soon as they got on the boat, they found a couple of deck chairs and threw down their knapsacks and sleeping bags. Grok walked to the rail, looking out across the blue waters of the Mediterranean. He felt a strange sense of déjà vu, as if he had been there before—perhaps in some fragment of a dream, a lost memory now rediscovered. He wasn't sure, though everything looked inexplicably familiar. The ship, an old fishing vessel named The White Goddess, routinely shuttled people back and forth to the islands. It seems sturdy enough, thought Grok, if the weather's good. But why did Fritz have to bring along the LSD?

Just a few miles out of port a fierce wind suddenly kicked up. Fritz was standing on starboard side, leaning on the same rail as Grok, when the wind struck him full blast in the face, knocking a map out of his hand and slamming him against a cabin door. The wind was unbelievably strong. Deck chairs toppled over like

dominos. The boat rocked; people ran for cover in a panic. Grok's Paris Herald Tribune, with its news of the world, was grabbed by the blast and blown out of his hands.

"It is grego!" shouted one of the crew. "Inside, everybody inside! Hurry, please!"

But Grok just stood there, feet planted, arms akimbo. He didn't want to move. Grego is what the Greeks called this fresh wind from the north—at once a curse and a blessing for both ancient and modern sailors who navigated the unpredictable waters of the Mediterranean. The wind curled around Grok's body, standing his hair on end, straight up. He look electrified. His body suddenly turned cold, but still, he would not move. The wind wasn't strong enough to cut through him.

He listened, cocking an ear. The wind carried a chorus of voices from the past: Phoenician oarsmen chanting in unison as they rowed...Greek sailors, in quest of hidden treasure, singing to the gods for the favor of good weather...Sirens luring the unsuspecting to shipwreck...The war cries of Turkish galleys advancing on Marsaxlokk to pillage Birgu and carry off its inhabitants as slaves...The whispered commands of German submarine captains in the Second World War, preparing for the kill...

Inside, Fritz got sick and threw up his last meal. Grok went in and tried to comfort the young German, whose Teutonic pride was wounded by his vulnerability to the rhythms of the sea. He threw a blanket over his friend and brought him some tea. It would be a long night. The winds calmed down eventually, though the boat rocked back and forth; the voyage was anything but smooth.

The following morning when the White Goddess cruised into Malta's Grand Harbour, both men disembarked, shaken and weary from the journey.

For a moment, Valletta appeared as if out of a dream, a timeless landscape, at once ancient and modern. Boats in the harbor looked as if Cézanne had painted each of them by hand, in richly textured deep reds, yellows, and blues, like his most famous still-

lives. Against the azure sky, church spires jutted upward, bespeaking of Malta's devout Catholicism. In the distance, the streets were crowded, a bustle of activity. When they stepped on the docks, Grok heard a splatter of European and African languages, a polyglot's delight, and looked for Marsa, who was to meet them. Fritz took many pictures with his Leica. Where was Marsa? Grok thought. I wonder if I'll even recognize her....

But it wasn't long before Marsa appeared.

She was standing on Barriera Wharf by Victoria Gate, waving a little flag to greet the young travelers as they came ashore. She had seen pictures of young Grok over the years and was certain that she would make him out in the crowd. His arrival was a gift, in her eyes, a bridge that spanned the century. Many times, Zandie had written to her, insisting that she come to America but always she had said no. Now Zandie's son was coming to her son's wedding. A complete circle.

"Grok! Grok!" she shouted and waved to catch his attention.

When he saw her he was, at first, astonished at how much she still looked like his mother. She was grayer and heavier, but the other physical resemblances—her face and hands—were striking. They had both aged in similar ways.

She threw her arms around him and hugged him.

"Is this your brother?" she said, letting go.

Marsa knew it was not Grok's brother, but it was her way of putting the German at ease. Fritz smiled and stepped forward.

"This is my friend Fritz the doctor," said Grok. "He's been a little under the weather on the trip. Haven't you, Fritz?"

"Ja, ja. I am not—how do you say?—cut out to be a seaman."

"Bongu! Welcome to Malta!" said Marsa.

"We're glad to be here," said Grok.

"I pray for your safe passage. Weather is sometimes very bad this time of year."

“Ja, ja. We got hit by north wind, rough waters,” said Fritz.
“I, I throw up many times....”

“You look so much like my mother,” said Grok.

“Yes. We are twins. But your mother is artist, I am cook.”

She had on a simple black dress and black shoes, with thin, white socks folded several times over her ankles. Her streaky gray hair was pulled back tightly, accentuating her forehead, which was now sharply lined. Her silver earrings, in the shape of a dghajaboat, made a tingling sound when she hugged Grok. Despite her age, she still had a strong passion for life. There was an exuberance about her, a flair that was only hinted at in the many black-and-white photos she and Zandie had exchanged over the years. Her eyes were animated and bright. The manner in which she spoke, her tone of voice—all contributed to the impression of exuberance.

“How is your mother?”

“Fine. She sends you her love.”

“Grazzi.”

“And wishes she could be here.”

“Well, I am so glad that you come to Malta. As you can see, I am an old lady. My brothers call me old bag lady, because I still carry bags of food from market to restaurant every day. And my brothers laugh at me. I laugh too. But, as you know, I am a survivor. We suffered greatly during the War. Many casualties and losses. The Nazis—excuse me Fritz—bombed our island to smithereens, as Brits say, but could not conquer us.”

Fritz was not feeling well. They got into a cab and drove north on Britannia Street to Marsa's house.

The streets were narrow and crowded; traffic moving at a crawl. When they finally got to her house, which sat on a little hill, they stepped wearily inside and were suddenly greeted by a crowd of people: all of Marsa's relatives, her brothers, uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, and their respective families. The wedding was only a day away but the celebration had already begun. Music was playing on the phonograph; people were drinking and talking loudly. Fritz was

about to pass out; he felt faint and sick to his stomach. Marsa took him upstairs where he lay down on a bed and rested. Downstairs, when the old men saw Grok, they suddenly began chanting: "Hurry boy! Hurry boy!"

"What are they saying?" he asked Marsa, who had returned to introduce Zandie's son to her family.

"During War we call English pilots Hurry boys. They fly Hurricane airplanes, you know, and get in many dogfights with Germans. They are very brave. Heroes to our people," she said. "You look like Hurry boy."

Grok sat down and drank some Darjeeling tea. He wanted to see Johnny again, who was there in the crowd with his bride-to-be.

Johnny stepped forward and extended a hand. The two men hugged each other.

"How are you, man?" said Grok.

"Fine."

"Last time we met, I guess I was seven years old. That chess tournament in London. You look great."

"You too."

"This is my friend Fritz."

"Pleased to meet you. I want you to meet my lovely bride to be, Maria."

Grok extended a hand to Maria, who smiled shyly at him, then blushed. She had dark hair and blue eyes and reminded Grok a little of Melissa, whom he still missed.

"You are more handsome than your pictures," she said.

"Why, thank you," said Grok. "This is great! I feel like I've had a reunion with my second family."

"Come over here," said Johnny. "I want you to meet my uncles, Vittorio, Lorenzo and Ferramolino."

Marsa's three brothers asked about Zandie, whom they still remembered from Paris in the twenties.

"She's fine," said Grok. "Sends all of you her love."

Johnny took Grok aside. "Tell me, Grok. Do you still fly?"

"Nope. What about you? I heard you went to flight school—pilot training."

"Yes, for a while. I wanted to be just like my father."

"I did too. But after my dad's death, I gave it up. Never flew again...."

"I'm sorry."

"It's a loss," said Grok. "Travel is a lot tougher when you don't fly."

"I quit flight school about a year ago."

"Why?"

"I discovered I could make a better pizza than I could fly a plane."

Grok laughed.

"The world has too many pilots and not enough pizzamakers," added Johnny.

"That's what my uncles told me. Now I'm going to take over my mother's restaurant and make the best pizza ever!"

Later that night, after the relatives had gone home, Marsa sat down with Grok in the kitchen. "Grok, I feel a deep sadness in your voice," she said. "You have suffered a loss. What is her name?"

"Whose name?"

"The woman you have fallen in love with."

"Melissa."

"Ah, yes. Just as I thought. British. Very pretty name, Melissa. Long dark hair and green eyes. And she wears very short, short, short mini-skirts."

"Yes. How did you know?"

"That's the picture I get of her from you. Ah, yes, the British can be so cruel in matters of the heart! In 1964, we gain our independence from the Brits. They do wonderful things for our country, but we are stubborn, individual people. Now we have our freedom.... It's wonderful. So, tell me, Grok, why did she leave you?"

"Said she had to go back to England. She's a photographer, and she had assignments there."

"This woman wants her freedom too. Don't worry. You will see her again."

"I hope so."

"Grok, I must tell you, privately. Germans are not well-liked on our island. There are many bad memories still from the War. Your friend Fritz is sick now but he will be okay tomorrow. Please look out for him."

"Is he in danger?"

"Just be careful."

All of Malta was in the church the next day—friends, relatives, acquaintances.

The ceremony was about to begin. Grok sat in a pew at the back with Fritz, who was indeed feeling much better now. The sound of organ music suddenly reverberated through the old church for the processional. Johnny looked more handsome than ever, dressed in formal clothes, beaming happily. If only his father could have lived to see him, thought Marsa, who was trying to hold back tears. The bride appeared, her wedding gown, stretching down the long church aisle, carried by five little girls with garlands in their hair. The father of the bride walked gracefully, arm in arm, with his daughter to the altar. The church, St. John's, had been built in 1577, during the height of the Renaissance, complete with barrel vaults, pilasters and chapels open off both sides, and was the perfect setting for the Catholic ceremony, which was long and solemn. The exchanging of vows went on and on. People were nodding off, but not Fritz, whose head was reeling.

"I must tell you, Grok," whispered Fritz. "I am stoned."

"What?"

"The sugar cubes—I have two of them for lunch. This is really a trip! Mensch im Himmel!"

"Oh, God! Are you going to be all right?"

"I'm fine. Sehr gut!"

A few rows behind him, Grok could feel somebody looking at him. When he turned and glanced over his shoulder, he saw a

woman dressed in white, smiling flirtatiously at him. Her lips were painted bright red and when she caught his glance, she pursed them seductively, as if blowing a kiss. Grok felt a little embarrassed and quickly turned away. But he could still feel her presence. When he looked again, he noticed that on her stark white dress was a rose, but not just an ordinary rose. This one had five large petals and was blood red. After the ceremony, he turned to look again out of curiosity at the woman in white—but she was gone.

At the reception, which was held in Marsa's restaurant, a local band played pop music. After congratulating Johnny, shaking his hand and hugging him, Grok smiled: "May I have a dance with the bride?"

"Of course," said Johnny.

"It would be an honor."

Grok got to dance with Maria, who reminded him so much of Melissa that, for a moment, he thought he was back in Zürich, in Melissa's arms. Fritz stood by the punch bowl, sipping a glass of juice and watching the celebration. The woman in white suddenly appeared by his side and was now eyeing him, with her most seductive look. Fritz was too stoned to understand anything she was saying. Soon corks popped and champagne flowed. Everybody gaily toasted the newlyweds. The cake was cut, pieces passed out. Hundreds of people had jammed the restaurant now, which had been rebuilt since the War and had grown famous for Marsa's pizza. Johnny would carry on the tradition. Marsa served every variety, including her own favorite Greek pizza, which came with marinated tomatoes, roasted eggplant, kalamata olives, Feta cheese, Mozzarella and fresh herbs. Her peasant bread crusts were thick and heavy, but very tasty.

Marsa introduced Grok to the son of the mathematician she had known in Paris. "His great, great, great grandfather invent algebra," said Marsa. "Pretty smart, no?"

Grok was slightly overwhelmed. "I'm studying math," he said. "Nothing too complicated. I'm just trying to figure out the math for machine intelligence. Solve the Turing Test."

“Difficult. Very difficult, I would say,” said the man, in an upperclass British accent. “I doubt, frankly, that it can be done. Ever. There are just too many bloody variables.”

Marsa saw Fritz talking with the woman in white, drinking champagne. She interrupted Grok's conversation with the mathematician. “Sorry, Grok, but I must tell you. Tell Fritz to stay away from that woman. Please. Jekk joghgbok! It is dangerous.”

“Why? What is it?”

But by the time Grok went looking for Fritz, he had already disappeared.

“Do not go after him,” cautioned Marsa. “This woman—she is very strange, lives in Terra Kumba house.”

“I don't understand.”

“Terra Kumba is house owned a long time ago by Malti nobleman. During the war, many Hurry Boys go there for drinks and pleasure. Now it is off limits, ever since this woman live there.”

“Who is she?”

“Some say she is daughter of British colonel, who is now dead. Others, that she is Greek, with magic powers. Others, that she comes from Egypt, from small village on the Nile.”

“What's there to fear?”

“She live by herself in Terra Kumba, except for...”

Marsa's voice stopped, a lump appeared in her throat.

“Except for—what?” Grok demanded.

“Her animals. She have many animals.” Marsa looked sternly at Grok. “You must not go. Please.”

“I've got to find Fritz!”

“Wait. If you go...” Marsa disappeared into the kitchen. A short while later, she returned with a white, powdery substance in a small paper bag.

“Take this,” she said, handing the bag to Grok, “if you go to Terra Kumba.”

“What is it?”

“Special white herb, a garlic. It will protect you.”

“From what?”

“The spell of the woman who lives in the house. Please be careful.”

To read further, check out "Grok" at <<http://www.amazon.com/Grok-Tom-Maremaa/dp/1583486267/>>

