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Syntagma Square

18 November 1977. The warm, blue Athenian dusk lasted a long time. Once in Athens, we inched towards Syntagma Square because of the crowds in the streets; they carried blue and white banners, posters and flags, danced, chanted. This was the last Nea Demokratia rally before the election; the ND colors were blue and white, not by coincidence, the colors of the Greek flag.

At Syntagma, half a dozen young people dashed toward us, shouting and waving flags. Someone poked a small flag inside the window and I, thinking it was offered as a souvenir, snatched for it. It was jerked back, I panicked, the stick snapped, and I was struck several times in the face with the jagged end. My face was bleeding, there was more shouting, more crowding, the tiny car was engulfed. For some terrible undetermined length of time, the car was rocked and pounded; we were surrounded by dozens of livid, distended faces with screaming mouths. E, overtly calm, steadily edged the car forward, one centimeter at a time, until inexplicably the mob abruptly parted and we darted into the nearest side street.

The sympathies of the hotel staff and a leisurely dinner were restorative; we decided to walk back to Syntagma for the election rally. Even four blocks away, the canyons of the dark, shabby streets glowed in blue and white. People on balconies tossed out handfuls of confetti and reams of handbills which turned and floated down through the air flashing out fragments of blue and white. The street was so carpeted with blue and white handbills that we walked in a silence like that of snow. Then at the last block, we were surrounded again, this time by chains of snake-dancing teenagers chanting *Ka-ra-man-lis, Ka-ra-man-lis!* and waving clusters of blue and white balloons.

Syntagma Square exploded into light – aircraft-spotting lights stroked the sky with great incandescent fingers, spotlights on balconies tracked through the crowd, dazzling one person after another. All the surrounding buildings were draped with blue and white flags, blue and white bunting. Blue and white balloons floating up through blue and white confetti floating down under a blue sky with a nearly-full moon. In mid-November, it was warm enough to smell the jasmine and lemon from the nearby gardens.

They mixed with the smell of roasting chestnuts at the stalls in the square.

As a political rally, it was completely familiar. There were posters and slogans, Nixon-girls in straw hats and blue sashes, men selling buttons. The difference was the Greek miracle: the light, the transformation of the tawdry into radiance. Karamanlis, Nea Demokratia candidate and Prime Minister, stepped out onto a floodlit balcony and began to speak. He was a splendid speaker, striking in impeccably-tailored blue suit and silver-white hair, perfectly coordinated to the evening. The crowd was happy with him and the evening, they cheered without listening, set off firecrackers constantly, and arbitrarily chanted *Ka-ra-man-lis, Ka-ra-man-lis!* We walked around the sides of the crowd and pushed directly under his balcony, bemused by the freedom, the apparent lack of security in the presence of innumerable roofs and balconies and windows crammed with people. The noise was terrific, the cheering and firewords incessant, and we remarked back and forth on how ideal a situation it was for a sniper.

We edged out of the crowd, and walked halfway around the square, past the windows full of fur coats and airport signs, and to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. I said, "The firecrackers are a perfect disguise for gunshots." The rally was approaching its end; we thought we might get to the Grande Bretagne bar before it became too crowded.

We had reached the kiosk beside the flower-seller stalls, directly across from the Egyptian Embassy, which was across a side street from the Grande Bretagne, when the shots were fired. There was no way to disguise these with firecrackers. The people around us fell forward like grass before the wind. There were more shots, then screaming. Helpfully, I began to tell E about the British firing on the crowd in the square in December of nineteen forty-four. The crowd rose as one body and, bent over at its collective waist, began to flow up the street away from the square in one amorphous mass. We ran with them, sheltering behind parked cars when the shots began again.

I stood up to see what was going on; two men pulled me roughly to the ground. Then everyone was running again, splitting off down side streets and into alleys. We kept going, thinking of the American Embassy. As we ran, a row of armored troop carriers hurtled in the opposite direction, eleven or so of them, followed by buses with soldiers and police in riot gear.

After we got tired of running and started walking, the traffic began to move in the direction we were going. Police cars poured past us; in a back seat, two men

were hitting a third on the head with clubs. Two buses of frightened people and armed guards rushed past, several ambulances. We noticed we were the only pedestrians.

We went on to the bar at the Hilton. It took a very long time to be served with very expensive, warm, and watered drinks. Several drunk Americans complained to us about the Greeks. The phone on the bar rang; someone answered it, listened, hung up. He turned around and remarked to no one in particular that the PLO had attacked the Egyptian Embassy and were holding hostages. Thirteen people had been killed.

No one seemed to mind. We left and tried to get back to the Square, but all approaches were blocked, and every blockade was clotted with angry or frightened or weeping people arguing with very weary police. At our hotel, we were accosted by a young man who identified us as Americans and himself as a PLO commando. He wanted us to tell an unbiased story to the world. As E was returning to Washington the next day, it seemed possible. What we were told was closely substantiated by what I was able to learn over the following months:

He – HD – and his brother, members of the PLO, were students in Athens. The brother and a small group of Palestinian students had chosen the rally as a time to protest the visit of Anwar Sadat to Israel. When the students, all of them unarmed, started climbing over the Egyptian Embassy fence, the Egyptian guards opened fire on them, shooting out into the crowd and injuring several. Hafid had not been involved; he was now between phone calls to hospitals and police stations, trying to find his brother. His concern was that his brother would lose his visa and his education, and his family would be shamed.

Spokesmen for the police verified a few days later that the students had been unarmed. Nineteen people had been injured: two, an Arab student and a young Greek father, died in hospital. All the shots fired had come from the Embassy, and directly at us. On questioning, three of the Egyptian guards admitted to firing their weapons, but two of them said they had only fired warning shots into the air. Six petrol bombs were found on the Embassy grounds, but no one, not even the press, ever tried to connect them with the students. The Embassy issued a statement sincerely regretting the incident, and complimenting the action of the Greek police, which indeed, from what we had seen, had been superb.

The day after the shooting, I went to the airport to see E. off, then I

returned to the hotel intending to collect my bag and go on to the bus station for Nauplion. Hafid was in the lobby, apparently on good terms with a pair of large and unwashed young women. As the conversation unfolded, I learned that the two women financed their lust for travel by sleeping their way from country to country. They did not appear, at first or second glance, to have the appearance that would make that system very likely, but clearly it had been successful enough for some years. They proceeded to analyze for me, in great detail and with extremely carrying British voices, the skills and attributes, anatomical and social, of the men of a number of countries, pronouncing those of the whole Mediterranean area severely deficient. Too much beer, they said, gesturing to convey their precise meaning; Americans were far and away the best.

I set out for the bus station. There were no taxis wanting to go that way, so after two hours of increasing frustration, I attached myself to a well-dressed American saying I would go with him anywhere, and keep the taxi afterwards. He was distressed, but a gentleman, and it was a taxi. Once at the bus station, I learned there were no tickets to Nauplion until tomorrow afternoon, Election Day. As with the decree of Caesar Augustus, all Greeks had to return to their native villages to vote and apparently they all rode the bus.

It was back to finding a taxi, back to the hotel. The desk clerk sent my children a telegram, and I counted my money. There was precisely enough for one taxi to the bus station, and one bus ride. I could eat at the hotel and charge the bill on American Express.

I awoke on Election Day to pouring rain and the great booming Russian bells of the Cathedral. HD was breakfasting with the women. He was tidy, they were not; I was not invited to join them. I went for a walk; the streets were deserted. At the main intersections and the Post Office, large posters explained how to vote: those who voted in Athens were to vote at polling stations grouped alphabetically and by sex.

Hafid emerged when I returned to the hotel and announced that he had a taxi waiting to take me to meet his brother, now released, and some friends; I should hear their stories before they left the country. I briefly considered leaving notes for the police and the American consul, then shrugged. We rode in the taxi for quite a long time. Twice we changed taxis. Then we walked several blocks in the rain to find when we arrived at the apartment that HD did not have a key. We waited.

The friends, AL and HM, arrived and let us in. It was the inevitable

student apartment, poorer than most, with dirty clothes on the floor, a crumpled *Playboy* under an unmade bed, unwashed dishes in the kitchen. I needed a bathroom, but not enough to use an unwashed bathroom in an unknown apartment inhabited by self-styled PLO commandos. They argued among themselves. HD said that I must promise not to write their true names, and they would talk. He gave me a cup of coffee and began to explain his life.

The focus of his grievance was the lack of a passport from a country of which he was a citizen. His passport was Syrian, but it was marked "Document de voyage pour les refugies palestiniens" and it was those seven words that caused the wounds: he was forever pronounced an alien. Many countries would not grant visas to Palestinians. He and his friends wanted to be identified as coming from their own country, Palestine, from which their fathers had emigrated in 1948.

Most of HD's family now lived in Syria. HD was one of eight children – one married, one working, one a "law girl," three were still in school, he and his brother were studying in Athens. "My father have eight, my uncle have twenty-one. When I ask him why he bring so many, he say, in twenty-one, perhaps ten bad, perhaps ten good for Palestine."

"I myself will make ten and will tell them, make eleven if need. My brother fight to see his land. Is stupid. My father have other idea, studying is make strong for country. Three years my brother is studying to make captains, in three more years he have certificate, finish. Now all finish– for what?"

"He is stupid. Now he has no visa. Today the police tell him, you go. Tonight he must go back to Syria. In Syria, maybe they shoot him now or maybe they do nothing. If Syria like Sadat this week, they do nothing.

"Myself, first I am in commandos, not for fight, for bring money in the home. I teach children how fight, teach weapons. One time, is one fight, Syria and Jordan. I kill my cousin. After I shoot, I see his face. So I put my gun on the table when I go back. I say, if you want fight Israel, I fight. Not this anymore.

"I go school, learn English. When I get my baccalaureate, I am so happy I am singing all the night in English. I learn building petrol tanks, you know the welding? Then I do hydraulic pipes for pipelines. I learn X-rays for two years. Now my company send me Athens for study, send me Switzerland fifteen days to learn new machine.

"I am paying my brother in captain school. Now all finished, all stupid. My family is shamed. My father he is accountant, my mother secretary. In home is another woman to give the children food. Perhaps in two-three years I marry. If my fiancée is not a virgin, I will kill her."

He stopped talking. Two more friends came in, both bruised and with torn shirts. They had been among those arrested, and were to be deported the next day. They said the brother had been taken directly to the airport by the police. Everyone started arguing. No one seemed to remember I was there. HD told me it was time for me to leave.

No one made any move to do anything, so I went out into the rain and spent my last drachmas on a taxi that appeared immediately. I got my bag while the taxi waited, borrowed money from the desk clerk, and went to the bus station. By supper, I was home. The children wanted to know about the shooting and the commando. The neighbors wanted to know about the telegram: no one sent telegrams to children.

Late in the evening I went to PASOK headquarters to watch election returns. PASOK's candidate, Andreas Papandreu, was a friend of my closest friend in Washington, so I had followed a Greek system of loyalties and made a small campaign contribution. It was just like election returns in the States ? everyone had too much to eat and drink, the room was full of smoke, we cheered and groaned, we lost. Most of the night Nauplion was kept awake by the car horns and motorcycles of the celebrating Nea Demokratias.

ND had carried 54% of the votes; PASOK, predicted to win, had carried 24%. Two days later, PASOK filed an appeal in court to overturn the election on grounds of fraud. Just like Menelaus when he lost a chariot race to Antilochos at the funeral games for Patroklos.

The following Saturday, the American whose taxi I had hijacked appeared at the door and invited me to dinner. He was deeply troubled. He had come to Greece to reason with his son who had thrown over a perfectly good job in the States and was now living on an island, supporting himself by teaching English. What really concerned my friend was that, after two weeks of travelling in Greece, he had come to the conclusion that his son was absolutely right. He returned to the States sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Then on Sunday, HD appeared. The children were delighted for they had

never seen a commando of any persuasion. HD let them down because, in truth, he was slight, clean-shaven, and rather lethargic. He instructed me to meet him at a cafe at two. He was not there at two, nor at three or four. We never heard from him again.