

December 1978

The residency permits were long overdue, so we went down to the formal park where the old men sit and smoke in the afternoon amid the roses that grow around the statue of old Kolokotronis with his helmet plumed with chicken feathers. For formal photographs, we would have visited one of the photographers' shops along the main street where we would have been swathed in velvet cloaks and photographed with gondolas and weeping willows. But for identification purposes, or to give a boyfriend, it was the park photographer. The photographer and his camera were young with the century, and like the century, they both showed signs of great fragility. His equipment consisted of a camera on a tripod, two buckets, and two chairs. One of the chairs he tied upsidedown to the back of the other to support a faded red curtain suspended for a backdrop.

One at a time we took our place in the chair in front of the curtain. He adjusted our collars and stroked our hair back. He took the lens cap off the camera and retreated under a black cloth, moving a knob back and forth. He replaced the lens cap, motioned to the sitter to be motionless, removed the lens cap again holding his hand out for the count like an orchestra conductor. Then he pounced as quickly as his back would permit and returned the lens cap. This process was carried out four times for the four of us. There was adequate time to examine the camera, repainted a dozen times with red paint, taped and wired together, one leg propped on a cigarette carton for stability. One side of the camera had a collection of mirrors and combs for composing oneself before the sitting. The other side displayed samples of what he could do when he set his mind to it: heart-shaped photos of plump lovers entwined with doves and vines; rigid young men with sentiments for Mother. The photographer wore a stained yellow smock – all public photographers do – and was nearly the same color, at least the visible parts of him, except for the nails on his right hand which were stained the reddish-brown of squirrels' teeth.

After we had all been processed, he told us to return in half an hour. During the half an hour, we walked by and watched him, he set up each negative in front of the camera and photographed it again. When we came back again, he rushed out of a restaurant and happily waved our photographs which were dripping water. They were in pairs, head to tail, and cost just over a dollar a pair. Our twelve pairs were obviously all the work he had done that day, and very likely provided the bulk of his occupation for the week.

But he was one of the fixtures of the square, along with Kolokotronis on his horse, definitely a major equestrian work, and the pigeons and the old men and the roses and the useless young men and the couple holding hands and the three Venetian mortars and the Turkish mortar with its wonderful deep satin bronze coloring. My Dutch friend Anke said that the mortars were always cold, even in August they were too cold for the children to sit on.

Armed with the photographs, we went to the police station to see about residence permits, admittedly a year and a half late, and we had some concern that the police would choose to dwell unpleasantly on that point instead of giving us credit for coming in at all. We combed Rosalind's hair again and pushed her into the door ahead of us, to soften their hearts. The officer on duty smiled and waved his hat and said, "Is no problem, come tonight. Or tomorrow. Or the next day."

In December, the dusk came early. At the quai, four ships in port made for an unusual amount of activity. A tiny Greek ship, home port Salonika, was off-loading fertilizer. A small freighter, home port Constanza, was loading oranges. There was a Panamanian ship, its winches screaming like maniacal gulls, its smell absolutely distinct, something like a galley must have smelled. The Panamanian ships were the ships no one else would touch; the crews all seemed to have been sentenced deservedly to Devil's Island. The few sailors who came to Nauplion were usually well-behaved and polite to women and children, it was too small a place to be otherwise, but the Panamanian crew was obscene in a dozen languages and waved gestures at us that I was unwilling to explain.

This time there was a Soviet ship: they were immaculate and their crews had impeccable manners. Their crews were not usually allowed to leave the ship except for volleyball, and it was nearly impossible to speak to any of them. Most of the crews had women. I had picked a bunch of heather as we walked. I waved and pointed, and directed it up to a blond woman in a kerchief. The sailor who delivered it to her insisted on a kiss before handing it over. Under the stern, out of sight of the rail above, a fisherman was smilingly attaching fish to the lines some of the sailors had set out. A farmer peddled up on a bicycle with a bag of oranges; the Soviets tossed down coins, he threw the oranges up to the lower deck, sailors there caught the oranges and tossed them higher up, golden balls flashing in the dusk.