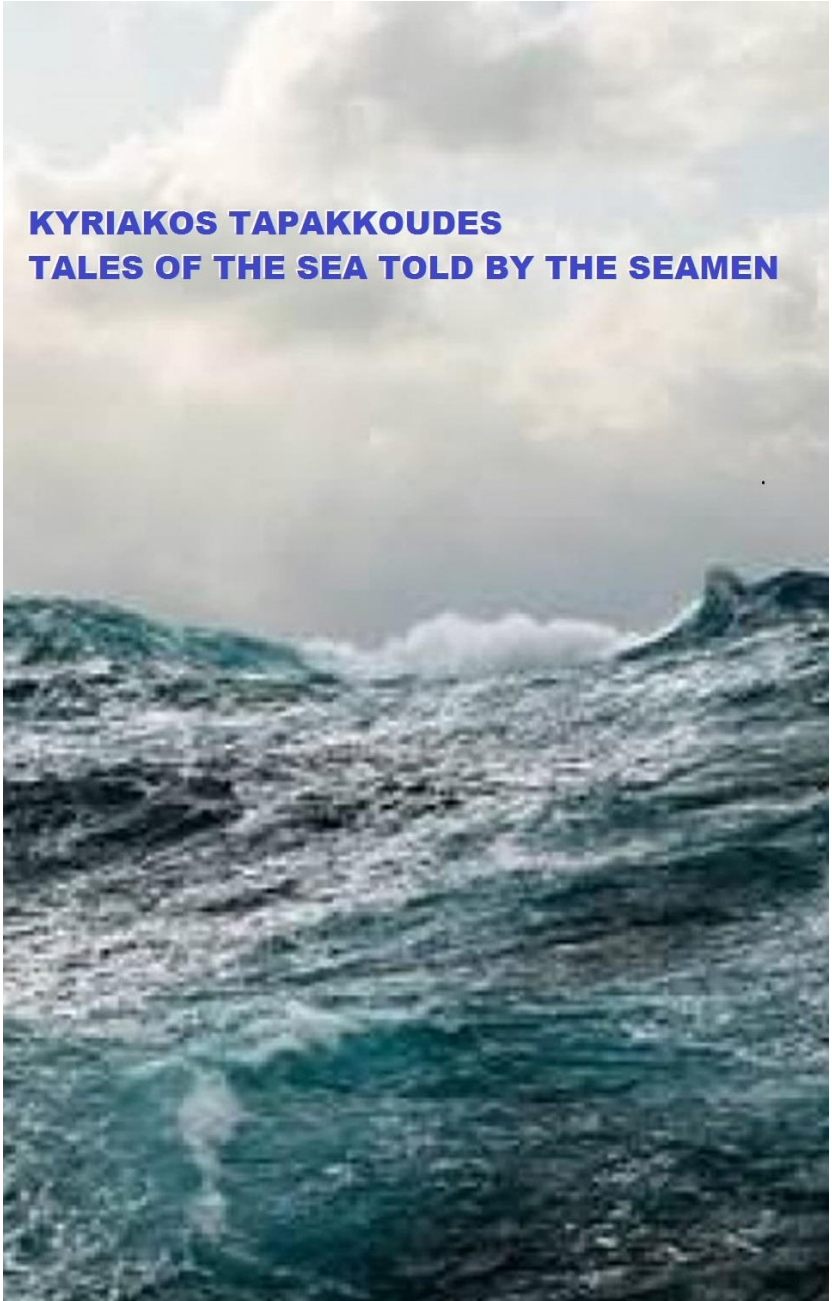


KYRIAKOS TAPAKKOUDES
TALES OF THE SEA TOLD BY THE SEAMEN





**Title: TALES OF THE SEA TOLD BY THE SEAMEN
(Sea stories)**

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We love tales, we love short stories, because the best are those told with few words.

Kyriakos Tapakoudis writes nautical stories and speaks about the abundance of wonders and beauty he has seen and got to know as a seaman. Working on ships from a young age, he sailed the vast seas and travelled to many ports in distant lands.

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PART 1, INTRDUCTION TO THE WRITINGS



WE THE SEAMEN, PROLOGUE

Squalls, gales, cyclones and storms. These are the companions of seamen when traveling the seas in their sea-faring ships, sailing across the oceans from port to port.

Many a time, while caught in the midst of these fierce elements of nature, they pray that this, this one voyage, will not be their last. Many a time they wonder whether they will reach the next port.

It is their destiny to live in awe of the supernatural forces of the sea, forces that move billions of tons of water, at times gently, at times mightily, many times shifting land and coastline in their wake.

It is their destiny to withstand immeasurable fear every time a huge wave lifts the ship up high in the skies and

keeps it dangling at great height. To hear the terrible creaking sounds of the ship while balancing in the air and count the seconds until the wave brings it back down on wide water.

Calm seas never hone skilled seamen; so, no seaman regrets long voyages in seafaring ships, no islander regrets sailing his caique out on the open seas, facing fierce, white topped waves, reaching heights of three and four metres.

When the immense waves on the ocean hide the sky, the sailors look through the big windows of the bridge and, with every striking wave, see the ship sinking under the water and then, when raised up on the wave's crest, see it teetering at great heights.

Behind sealed iron doors, some in the engine room and others on the bridge, they hold onto immovable parts of the ship, trying to balance against the rolling of the ship, or walk with legs akimbo to stay upright, leaning their body away from the listing of the ship. Nobody is able to sleep, they cannot close their eyes, and those who try, fall out of their bunks. They sit in the mess, on benches and chairs fixed to the floor, or stand, leaning on the bulkhead behind the portholes. Quiet, without talking, they look at the angry sea outside and wonder how many beauforts they can withstand. Fear takes shape on their faces when the ship is raised up, because, while hanging in the balance, at the crest of the wave, it may break in two; relief takes over every time the ship sits low on the base of the receding wave, and they have no fear when

the water covers the whole ship because they know that its bulkheads protect it from sinking. And again, pensive and quiet in their own hidden, dark thoughts, they wait for the next wave.

This life, the life lived by seamen, is a dangerous and unusual one, very different from that of land dwellers. It is governed by other rules, different ethics, it is a life that has adjusted to the difficulties of isolation and hard work.

They are never sorry about their profession, not even a little bit. They never regret their choice.

They travel without pause, through the painful fear when the sea is rough and with nostalgia for those on land waiting for them, as if they are possessed by a morbid attraction. Some enlightened poets write in their poems that seamen have their souls pledged to the devil....

Yet, I have travelled and withstood the many sufferings as a seaman, and, I say, no. They have not sold their souls, it is their love of the sea; she is difficult and unbearable, but those who fight her get used to her and fall in love, she becomes a habit and life itself. For she gives as many joys as dangers. Middle aged sailors cannot tolerate land, they prefer the loneliness of vast oceans and the music of gentle waves plashing, the howling of the winds when the weather becomes heavy and the sea swells.

Young boys fresh at sea experience on board the inhumanity and rage of hardened seamen and, at port, in the embrace of prostitutes, they get to know the sweet he-

donistic pleasures and the secrets and enjoyment of paid love.

They contract tropical diseases and become covered by deadly sores, they learn about forbidden herbs and drunken love in port dives.

For months and months, the sailors on tankers impatiently wait for the few hours they will dock, to run to the bars and surrender themselves to the delusion of drink and the embrace of women with red, painted lips that accentuate their sordid profession, who ask first for payment and then, gladly offer their false love.

A seaman's life is hard, but it is also sweet. It is a longing and a love for the sea. And, as the song goes,

Captains and so many others,

boatswains, sailors, engineers

each has his longings

this is how we are, we, the seamen.



THE VAST SEA

And God said on the Third day “Let the waters under the sky be gathered into one place so that the dry land may appear. And He called the dry land Earth, and the water Sea”.

And the sea He created was unexplored, unsurmountable, unpredictable, yet beautiful, unparalleled and incomparable.

He gave her the power to change and transform herself, and she possesses that power until today. God made her depths and morphology change shape with every current and quake, assume different formations, form valleys and ravines, some, densely covered in vegetation and others barren landscapes eternally covered by salty wa-

ter, their bottomless depths at times impenetrable by sunlight.

Life first spawned and evolved within her salty waters. The well documented knowledge of scientists could not contradict the theological treaties that explained this genesis. All agree however, that the sea is the cradle of life.

Her world is full of plant life that varies depending on the latitude. How sea plants and gigantic kelp grew and evolved is still unknown to scientists. Myriads of life forms, from microscopic and invisible organisms to huge fish and strange fairy tale dragons live within her.

When the vapours in the atmosphere liquified, they created myriads of tons of water which fell to the Earth and created lakes and seas.

Small seas and large seas, open seas and closed seas, pelagoes and oceans.

Seas that are rough and grey, seas that are blue and calm. The Mediterranean Sea lapped upon the whole south western side of my small village. Usually, the sea was rough as the area was exposed to south western winds, mainly the western wind known in the Mediterranean as "Pounendes". Whenever there was bad weather over the Greek seas, Pounendes savagely brought it to our area, and Paphos was always in its wake. Pounendes brought with him raging seas that pounded the shore from the Akamas peninsula to Petra to Romiou, and even further. My small village was in the middle. The shores, whether summer or winter, were beaten by the sea, always covered by the vapours of the terrifying waves that crashed

on the jagged indestructible rocks that stood on the beach and arrested their force.

The strong currents agitated the water and formed maelstroms that pushed and shifted the water with great force. Coupled with the huge waves, they formed a formidable force, a major threat, and made the sea of Chloraka very dangerous. As a child, I remember that many lost their lives at sea, mainly people who defied her or did not take her seriously.

So, the seas in Chloraka are rough and, despite being a small village with few inhabitants, it had the misfortune of losing many lives during the scorching summer days when people took a dip to cool off. The elders but also the younger generation say that never did a year pass without drownings.

This is where I was born many years ago, in this beautifully savage place, yet I longingly remember those difficult and hard times when, through a miserable and very poor existence, I was raised and became a man.

I remember when we had no food, not even our daily bread. I was thin and skeletal, but I never cried or complained, despite the hardships of my poor existence.

I was comforted by the vast and amazingly beautiful view of the sea and I would sit and lose myself in my musings. The roar and groan of the sea reached the windows of the small shack where I lived and penetrated the wooden shutters, filling my young heart with fear. As I grew however, I became used to this fear and the howling sea winds became necessary, almost like a tender

lullaby. These same winds at times roared in anger and yet, at other times, they calmly and serenely caressed the waves that softly crashed on the shores.

During life's great school of childhood, I would stand on the rocky shore and stare for countless hours at the vastness of the water. My mind would go through a thousand thoughts, but I could not comprehend the great mysteries of the sea, hidden in plain sight on her surface and her depths. I was ecstatic while looking at her, majestically spread before me, and, in the distance, I would see her coupling with the sky and forming the circular shape of the Earth. And I, a poor boy not yet educated, could not understand all these mysteries. I thought I could see the edge, the point where the world came to an end...

And, I was pleased to see the edge of the Earth.

People say that a rough sea symbolises problems and worries. They also say that, if the waves reach inland, the local people will have days of happiness and prosperity. Both phenomena occurred on the beaches of Chloraka, therefore the circumstances prevailing were somewhere in the middle, no insurmountable despair, yet no happiness either. This was a dry terrain, void of soil and water, and the inhabitants toiled in manual labour as stone masons, builders and carpenters. These were the usual professions, and only a few parents were able to send their children for further education. Most just managed to complete elementary education, because, in those days, secondary education could only be obtained by paying tuition.

I lived under these difficult circumstances and conditions until the age of eighteen. Those were adverse times, the whole population lived a difficult life and, for most, there was no work... The food was not enough to feed their children because the land was barren, practically all of it being bedrock. A rocky terrain, yet green with the ever-green pistacia bushes and sea squills, known locally as "schinies" and "arkoshilles", growing among the dry rocks. Between them, cyclamen and wild irises known as "macherades" as well as many other kinds of beautiful wildflowers adorned God's creation. It was a beautiful place and, despite the hardships I endured due to the poverty of the times, it remained embedded in my heart, forever loved.

Children's voices soon left our small house as my older siblings moved to other districts in search of a better future. The house itself was built at the end of the village, lonely and without amenities, without drinking water and without electricity. We drank water from a seven fathom deep well, and we drew it using a kind of pulley, always careful not to swallow any of the numerous leeches thriving in the well. When night fell, we went to bed early to save the kerosene that fueled the lamp, our one and only lamp. A lamp with a wick that just managed a gentle glow, so we had to do our homework early, before sundown.

Our mother grew some vegetables and potatoes to feed us. After school, we would help her in the small field that

was in the yard, pulling the weeds and hoeing the vegetable beds.

At the beginning of every summer, when the terebinths ripened, we collected them and took them to the mill to have them ground in order to extract the oil. It was a bitter oil, it burned the top of our mouths and our innards, but we used it out of need because we could not afford to buy corn oil from the shop. We called it terebinth oil and it had a coarse taste we didn't like, it tasted literally like poison. Now, however, after the passing of so many years, I nostalgically miss its taste.

During the summer, a small truck drove down the narrow road outside our yard with its back door opened. Slowly and painstakingly, it rolled down the slope in first or second gear. All the children in the neighbourhood ran and climbed in the back, and it would take us all to the beach. The driver was a kind man with rheumatism and, every day, he would go to the beach to bury himself in the hot sand to relieve his pain. He allowed all of us to climb in his vehicle and he happily took us to the beach. All he asked was a little help. We would dig a hole and cover him in sand, up to his neck. As long as he tolerated the heat of the sand, we swam and splashed in the tranquil and blue waters of the sea of Chloraka.

Before I learned how to swim, I would just go into the shallow waters and never dare venture into the deep. However, when one of us brought an inflated inner tyre tube, we would gleefully hang on to it and, as many of us

as the thing could hold, we went out into the deep waters.

From the deep, I could see another world. I saw the distant land differently, dry and yellow under the sun. I saw the scorching heat hover and fill the atmosphere with mist while I felt fresh bathing in the cool sea water.

It never crossed my mind at the time that I would become a seaman, or, that I would love the sea as much as I love her now. As a child, I loved the sea and played with her, but now I love her as she has played with me, for, soon, fate would lead me to sail on the ships and experience her good, and her bad side.



THE FIRST VOYAGE

Even in childhood, I thought and carried myself as an adult. Many times, I wondered why grownups sometimes told me that when I grew up, I would mature. I never thought like a small boy and wondered whether, maybe, adults thought like children.

My childhood and formative years were spent in poverty, and most days we had no food. I remember the cold

winters without heat, the cold baths, even cooking over a woodfire because we had no gas.

The only thing we bought from the shop was bread, and even that was on credit, and we paid it off with great difficulty.

My childhood was indeed difficult and poor. I remember my sick mother on her deathbed, suffering and dying at a young age, never having the chance to grow old.

As time passed, the memories remained indelible, but I gained inspiration and experience from everything I endured as a child. These were experiences that scarred me and helped me become patient and resilient, but, mainly, taught me to depend on myself. The hardships and lack of worldly goods caused by poverty during my childhood followed me forever, stayed with me for the rest of my life, and had a decisive effect on the formation of my character, my evolution as a person and, also, my conduct.

I finished school, got an education, learned how to speak English, and decided to embark on the ships. I felt the world could not contain me, I felt I was surrounded by walls imprisoning and limiting my horizons. These walls however were too low to hold me back, so, one day, I climbed over them and fled far away. I broke the shackles of my surroundings, widened my stride and ventured to the ends of the Earth. I became a traveller, I became a seaman and sailed the sea, I saw and got to know cities and villages, new places and people, new values and traditions, other cultures and new things, true mysteries.

I have vivid memories of the last months of my national service, I was serving at an outpost to the north of Polis. I would find work in the fields and earn a daily wage of five shillings. The bosses were hard men, I could not even stop to take a breath, and I worked very hard. The wage was low, but I didn't mind, so long as I found work every few days. I religiously saved my five shillings, so, when I was discharged, I had saved three pounds. I managed to find work that paid twenty pounds a month at a warehouse. This, however, was very temporary. I was dismissed shortly after, and the job was given to a relative of the boss. I do remember that day very clearly though, because I counted the pounds I had earned and saved with such hard labour, and they were enough to buy a ticket on the ship "Knossos".

I boarded the ship and thus begun the big voyage...

I stood at the stern and watched my country fade away. I found out that the ship I boarded was on its last voyage and was to be decommissioned. It was old, eaten up by the sea. All I hoped was that this voyage, away from my country, would not be my last, and I prayed that God would help me return one day, under better circumstances. With these worrying thoughts flooding my mind, I stood and bid farewell to my island until the land disappeared and all that remained was the infinite sea.

Time passed, and dusk found me in the same place, leaning on the railings. My ticket was cheap, and I was going to stay awake on deck.

I stood, and thoughts danced in my head. I was making plans and thinking of the unknown future ahead, and in my heart, I had one hope; that my future would be better than my miserable past.

At dawn, the sunlight revealed the endless blue of the sea, fading in the distant horizon. I felt my eyes heavy, so I sat down, leaned on the bulkhead of the ship and fell asleep with the cool breeze of the sea sculpting my face.

The splashing of the ship through the waves lulled me to sleep and I slept for quite a while, until the sun shone in my face and woke me. I lingered half asleep watching the passengers coming and going before me while, in the calm sea, dolphins swam and leaped in the water happily by the sides of the ship.

I remained leaning on the railings watching the playful waves; I was not in a hurry, I had all of God's time on my hands.

The day passed, then nightfall took over, and again came the morning. I then heard happy voices shouting "land, land". I lifted my head and saw the distant shores of Greece slowly approaching, and the port of Piraeus formed in the distance. I felt a chill pass through my body, in a while I would set foot on the sacred soil of the mother country, Hellas of the Hellenes, the land of spirituality and light.

ΜΕΡΟΣ Γ'

Ταξιδεύοντας με το πλοίο " Σαν Ντενίς"



PART 2, TRAVELING ON THE SHIP "SAN DENIS"



17 NOVEMBER, SAILING ON THE SHIP "SAN DENIS"

I disembarked from the ship "Knossos" and stepped onto the soil of holy Greece, the beloved mother country, the eternal mother land of the world's wise men and great heroes. The honoured mother of the brave. The land that birthed my ancestors. The country I learned to love and honour since I was a young child. The country I swore allegiance to while in the army and promised to shed my blood for if called to do so.

These were my thoughts as I trembled with emotion and knelt to kiss the sacred ground.

I was taught to think this way, these were the ideals I was brought up with, these were my great beliefs, beliefs that were implanted in my soul by my parents, my teachers and, the people in my village. During the life long journey I started at nineteen, I would discover that the Greece of Light had been turned into a country of darkness, and my beloved mother country had become a mother who cannibalised her children, had been bound hand and foot by traitors and individuals who did not love their country, vultures, lackeys of multinational companies and spineless weaklings worse than crows.

I stood on the pier of the grand port. It was full of cranes unloading corn and wheat from bulk carriers tied at the dock, and I took a look around. I saw huge blocks of flats casting shadows over Piraeus with the morning sun trying to shine through the high-rise buildings.

Having asked, I knew that the street opposite the docking area of the ship was called "Akti Miaouli". Known as the "golden" area of Piraeus port, its history was written in gold and petrol. Thousands of shipping companies operated from within the tall buildings made of glass and concrete, offices drowning in luxury that employed thousands. I should ask here. This is the place to find work on the ships. I was told after all, that it wouldn't be difficult. I felt confident with what I had been told, otherwise, heaven only knew, I would be penniless, not knowing

what to do, surrounded by strangers and in unknown territory.

Whatever happens, I thought, I may be in a foreign country, but we have a common language, Greek, and I was determined to fight for my future as best as I could...

As I stood trying to get my bearings by looking at the sun to figure out in which direction Athens and the Parthenon were, I heard a conversation in the Cypriot dialect nearby. It was a young man talking with a priest. He saw me standing alone and looking at him, he approached, we got acquainted. As it transpired, we were from neighbouring villages. He was a student from Kato Paphos called Andreas Papazosimas and he was studying Economics at Athens University. He had come to the port to collect a relative. He invited me for coffee at a coffee shop near Akti Miaouli. It was a place I knew about from Cyprus, frequented mainly by Cypriot seamen. After we talked for a while and got to know each other, Andreas proved to be a noble young man who suggested that, I need not hesitate to ask for his help whenever I have difficulties. This subsequently turned out to be very helpful and lifesaving because, finding work on the ships was not as I expected. When I started going from office to office looking for work, to my disappointment I realized that the seaman's profession was facing quite a crisis. My legs ached from walking up and down stairs from block to block trying to find work. The whole day passed and, with the evening approaching, I had achieved nothing. I was hoping to find a job immediately because I was

broke. I didn't even have money for food, let alone a hotel.

Despair started to take over. Things had been presented to me in a certain way, but in reality, they were quite different. In my desperation, I thanked God for helping me meet Andreas. Andreas was a comfort to my worries and I hoped that he would put me up; he was kind enough to offer help if needed. I called him from a telephone booth and was relieved to hear his voice reply on the other end. I explained my dire situation and he was immediately willing to help. He asked me to wait for him at the "Voskopoula" coffee shop and told me he would find me there in about an hour.

He came, saw I was morose and upset, smiled widely and told me not to worry and that everything would turn out fine.

We boarded the train and reached Omonoia Square. We walked for a distance until Syndagma Square and then took a bus towards Zografou, to his house. The house of my new friend Andreas Papazosimas.

He put me up, fed me, took me for a tour. Had it not been for him, I don't know what would have become of me. Every day I travelled to Piraeus looking for work but to no avail. After many days, I managed with difficulty to find work on a ship for a cheap wage, forty-five pounds sterling. It was a small ship of two and a half thousand tons called "San Dennis", owned by the Frangistas company. It was the evening of Friday the 16th of November, when I signed my employment contract with the ship

owning company. Afterwards, I took the train to return to Athens.

Coming out of the underground station at Omonoia Square, I fell onto a large crowd shouting and demonstrating for freedom. Numerous students had gathered outside the Polytechnic, and the crowds grew and flooded the entirety of central Athens. With them, labourers were singing the words “pote tha kanei xasteria”, literally meaning “when will there be a starry night”, a revolutionary Greek song against the “Junta” regime governing Greece at the time.

It was the beginning of the uprising of the Polytechnic, the uprising of the students, the youths and the whole Greek people against the Junta tyranny. The clashes with the police began that day, one day before Saturday, 17th of November. The big demonstration formed and started marching towards the Polytechnic. That was when the police attacked. Tanks appeared, and one knocked the gate of the Polytechnic down, breaching university asylum and taking over the Polytechnic. Shots were fired, and hand-to-hand combat ensued. The air was thick with teargas causing the crowds to flee.

Trapped in a crowd of anonymous people rising up and fighting for Freedom, I found myself watching the brutality of the soldiers against the Greek people whose only demand was Democracy.

Having only suffered the inhalation of teargas, I managed to escape the crowd firstly by running from wall to

wall and then walking with a fast pace hiding in the shadows of the buildings.

Having escaped the dangers of the revolution, I walked the long distance to Zografou. The next day, we found out from students that the police were firing indiscriminately at the anonymous demonstrators.

On that day, I bid farewell to my friend and took the bus to Elefsina port where the cargo ship "San Dennis" was anchored. This ship would be my home for the best part of next year. It was a small ship and, when it sailed, I felt it would be fair game to every tempest and wave. As it rolled, it caused me to bring up all my innards. Yet, in hindsight, I realized that the hardship was all worthwhile, because it became clear to me that, being a traveler and seeing new countries, exotic places and peculiar things was to be quite a big thing.



THE PROSTITUTE

I was nineteen when I left my country and ventured out to foreign lands. I abandoned my tormented little motherland destined by God centuries ago to suffer the same history of enslavement and persecution, time and time again. I left a few months before the Junta's coup d'état and the subsequent Turkish invasion sparing myself of the civil unrest and brutality of the invaders.

I set off looking for a better destiny, a job and a daily living. My voyage with the ship "KNOSSOS" may have been calm sailing on tranquil waters, but there was a storm brewing in my heart, because it was the first time I was leaving for unknown and faraway places, such that I had only seen on geographical maps.

With a thousand torturous thoughts unsettling my mind, I stood at the stern all day watching my island fall away, fade and disappear into the meeting point between the sea and the horizon.

Night fell and day broke, and daylight found me on the side of the ship, leaning on the railings watching the distant shores of Rhodes approaching on the skyline. Gradually, the citadels of the walled city and the impressive medieval walls that defended the city during olden times started appearing. These were imposing defensive structures dating from the time of the Knights of St. John, and now a famous attraction of grandeur and beauty. The liner tied up alongside the long pier and the loudspeakers of the bridge informed us that we had a few hours to tour the city of Rhodes.

The buildings of the central square next to the port were ancient with very few new structures among them and were combined in a way that created an amazing spectacle for the eyes and senses. Vendors with their wheelbarrows and tiny shops with merchandise aimed at tourists, small taverns built into the thick city walls, narrow ascending streets and steps that led to the battlements, all together these were an amalgamation that created the unique and famous Greek medieval tourist destination of Rhodes.

I remember that date, it was around the twelfth of November 1973.

The second time I visited Rhodes was a week later. The calendar showed that it was the 19th of November, a week

after my first visit. I remember the date well because, on the 17th of November, I had signed a contract with the ship owning company Frangistas. The 17th of November 1973 was a day of monumental events. Events that commenced the countdown towards the fall of the Junta government in Greece following the uprising of the students and the storming of the Polytechnic. On that day, I was returning from Piraeus by train and, as I exited the underground station at Omonoia Square, I found myself among a crowd of demonstrators demanding freedom, while a whole army of policemen and soldiers accompanied by tanks were shooting at them with plastic bullets and teargas.

The following day, I travelled by bus to Elefsina, where a ship was discharging its cargo. The ship was the "San Dennis" which carried lumber from the ports of Odessa and Novorossiysk to its scheduled destination of Greece. I presented myself to the captain who recruited me as ship's crew, and then sent me to report to the first officer for assignment of my duties.

We remained at Elefsina port for a few more hours to discharge the cargo, and then sailed for Nafplio and then Rhodes. We distributed cargo to both these destinations.

We arrived early evening and, as soon as we tied, the cranes started unloading. It was eight o' clock and I had just finished my eight to four o' clock shift in the engine room. I went out onto the deck and saw the port and the town awash with lights; neon lights that turned night in-

to day. Once more, I gazed at the medieval walls with their tall citadels and yet once again, their grandeur and mystery carried me back to old historical times.

We needed a few hours for discharging the cargo and then we would sail to another island port of the Aegean. I knew I had a few hours to myself to meander around the city, but, as I was employed on the ship for just two days, I had no money. I decided to tour the medieval town with its surrounding walls and citadels on foot.

I passed the port's entrance and entered the town through a tall gateway in the walls. The town, from a planning and architectural point of view, was in the same condition as it was when it was built many centuries ago. Tourists walked up and down and, among them, so did I. I gazed at the shops' windows, weighed down with ceramic souvenirs, perfect replicas of ancient Greek amphorae and other objects, as well as with tourist guides and magazines.

To the side of a shop window, at the end of the building, I saw a woman standing. I watched her from afar as she stopped passersby to tell them something, but they just walked away from her. I stood for a while watching, because I noticed that she only spoke to men who walked alone. I suspected that she was a prostitute at work.

She noticed me watching her and coyly walked towards me swinging her hips. She looked straight into my eyes, her eyes being the most beautiful dark eyes, outlined with black kohl in the shape of a fish, eyes so large and radiant, the likes of which I had never seen before, eyes

that filled me with longing. She was slim and had a small body, but she was also rather old. I thought she must have been around fifty. Her face was raked by wrinkles and prematurely aged. I thought she might be younger, but the hardships of her profession had not allowed her to stay young and beautiful. Her clothes were not embellished and, apart from her eyes being heavily made-up, she was unkempt, unadorned and without much makeup. I would have never imagined her to be a “common woman” had I not seen her previous behaviour. She looked like an unfortunate woman, unremarkable and plain, a woman that would pass unnoticed in a crowd, unless someone noticed her amazingly beautiful eyes. Two sparkling beautiful eyes, exuding brightness and light.

I thought to myself “I have no money to pay her” and, in any case, I did not feel drawn to her as a woman. She was two and a half times my age and somehow, I did not consider myself a suffer of any sort of Oedipus complex. In any case, soon we would be sailing to Russia where, as I was informed by one of the seamen, the women were abundant and really loved sailors.

- Hello handsome, would you like some company?
she asked, with an accent not unlike our accent in Cyprus.

We started talking and I told her I was a novice sailor and had no money, that I had come from Cyprus penniless and that I was on the ship for just one and a half days. She gazed steadily into my eyes with those beauti-

ful eyes of hers, sure in the knowledge of their beauty and power, and somehow convinced me that I wanted her. She told me she was a Cretan Turk and that she was an expert in love making. She said that she really wanted me, that her body longed for mine.

I understood that she was just saying these things to convince me, and I was surprised when I realised that I really wanted her and that, being an older woman and a professional, she could teach me a lot about sex.

I was nineteen and inexperienced with women. I had lived all my life in the countryside, in a society where people could have sex only after they became engaged or visited one of the few brothels. Both were impossible for me because I was poor and penniless. So, I made do by pleasuring myself, but every time, I wondered how much stronger the pleasure and enjoyment would be when making love with a woman. I always had great expectations about my first sexual encounter, and now that a woman had approached me for the first time in my life, though a prostitute, I was upset because I had no money to pay her.

She had a sweet demeanour, spoke with a childlike innocence and, even though she was talking about sex and pleasure, carnal love and delights that were for sale, she did not look like the usual street walkers or red-light hookers with the hardened attitude, vulgar appearance

and conduct. She had a gentle appearance and a sad face and, as she stared at me with her huge eyes, she made me feel as though she was a saint.

I told her she did not look like a prostitute and I detected a degree of satisfaction in her face. She didn't answer and continued to lure me. She said I could borrow money from my colleagues, that I could ask for an advance payment from the captain, that I could even pay her in kind. I thought she seemed quite knowledgeable of seamen and knew a lot about them and their way of life. This was natural, I concluded, if she plied her trade in the port. Evidently, she learned a lot from the sailors.

One thing led to another and she convinced me that, instead of payment, I could give her two cartons of KENT cigarettes. These were expensive luxury cigarettes of the time, with a light blend, favoured by aristocratic women or those who pretended to be such.

Since she gave me the impression that she knew everything, I asked her whether I was allowed to take her on board the ship, to my cabin. She answered that of course I could, Rhodes was a free transit island.

My cabin was on the second deck, next to the funnel. It was roomy and comfortable and had portholes on both sides, even though I always kept them closed because soot and smoke from the funnel sometimes blew inside

the cabin. I worked in the engine room in the bowels of the ship and rested at its highest point, just below the bridge. The rest of the crew's cabins were on the inside of the ship. To reach mine, I had to go out onto the deck and climb a metal ladder situated on the edge of the deck. When the sea was rough, the waves crashed over it and, when the ship rolled, one had to be very careful when climbing up. It was so dangerous, that I could not go there to sleep when it was raining or when the sea was rough and had to wait for the rain or the storm to subside. Those were the reasons why they gave such a roomy cabin to me, a novice, and not to an older seaman or even an officer.

We climbed on the deck and I led her to my cabin. We crossed from one side of the ship to the other without meeting any crew members and, in the twilight, I helped her up the ladder. We got inside and, without wasting time, she began to strip.

She removed her shoes and her dress and stood in her slip. It was see-through, and I could see her underwear, silky, dainty and pretty. Leaning forward to remove her nylon stockings that rested high on her thighs, she looked at me encouragingly, as I stood there awkwardly without moving, watching her. She straightened and came close to me. She stood in front of me and, gently touching her body onto mine, started unbuttoning my shirt, slowly and seductively.

When she felt I was aroused by her touch, she coyly asked me to give her the cigarettes we had agreed upon.

I was taken aback by this and felt my libido drop. My ego was hurt because I realised she did not come with me because she loved me or was into me, but because she was a hooker and her love was for sale, because we had agreed that I would give her two cartons of KENT cigarettes.

I opened the drawer under my bunkbed and gave her the two cartons. She took them, turned around and placed them to one side. Then, she stretched her arms, crossed them, gripped her slip and pulled it off. She was now half naked in her underwear.

My first time was a sweet novel experience, a pleasant sex act that ended successfully and without problems unlike most men's first time where, according to sexologists, they tend to under deliver because of nervousness.

We lay on our backs and I looked at the low ceiling while euphoria swept over me. She was a good teacher, and in her sweet way, she did not allow any fear or negativity affect me at this delicate moment of my first time. Pleased, I asked her whether she wanted a cigarette. She nodded, and I turned on my side reaching towards the nightstand for a packet. As I turned, I thought I caught a

glimpse of movement in the twilight, outside the port-hole.

Taken aback and frazzled, I thought we were caught red-handed. I quickly pulled my trousers on and opened the door to catch the perverts peeping through other people's windows.

As I opened the door, the guilty peeping toms did not run away; to the contrary, they started cheering. Stunned, I listened to them teasing and congratulating me on the magnificent show I had just put on. Worried, I looked into my cabin to see whether my companion was upset and saw the woman with a cigarette hanging from her mouth, half covered by a sheet over her pelvis and thighs, her breasts hanging down loosely, without an ounce of shame on her face.

Suppressing my own shame, I did what everybody else was doing, stoically allowing myself to be swept away by the same vulgarity of my colleagues. They had all gathered around, just shy of ten men. The ship was small, and so was the crew.

Remembering the story after many years, I think to myself how lucky that poor old prostitute with the beautiful black eyes was that night. She took on all the crew that same night since, having watched the excellent show, they were all aroused and wanted to have sex with her. And, of course, she was paid for her service.



THE NEW RECRUITS, the black sea

The Nereids were the granddaughters of Oceanus and they lived deep under the sea. Under their powers the sea could be either rough or calm. They could transform themselves into angry monsters stirring the abundant waters of the sea, yet also become beautiful nymphs and mermaids floating in the smooth ripples singing like the sirens of Ulysses. They were fairies, nymphs existing to this day in Greek traditions.

Joyful and blessed with their own divinity, immortality and beauty, they passed the time either angering the sea or calming her down, dancing and swimming with dolphins. They swam alongside or behind the lonely ships

that sailed the large oceans for endless days. Their presence offered solace to lonely sailors who longed for the company of loved ones left behind.

They often accompanied us when we sailed the calm seas of the Mediterranean. Many times, we felt their invisible presence frolicking with the dolphins that followed our ship. They jumped into the air singing with the happy voices of young children playing and transferred their joyful mood onto us when our nostalgia and sadness took hold.

Other times however, they were in a foul mood, so they tortured and tormented us. During one of our voyages to Odessa, and this is what I write about today, they must have been particularly enraged because they caused the sea to be so rough that our small ship was thrown about like a nutshell, at times climbing on the crest of a wave and then leaning over about to plunge into the deep dark waters of the Black Sea. The waves were constant and mountainous and they beat upon us without pity. The danger of sinking was great, fear had taken over our hearts while dark thoughts clouded our minds. But, we were sailors and had come across rough seas and fought them many times in the past. With patience, hope and endurance, as well as faith in God, we resisted turning fear into a companion and way of life.

The Black Sea represented the crossroads of the ancient world and this became even more evident by recent diving expeditions that brought to light many wrecks of

mainly ancient Greek ships, in an area linked with the glory years of Greece.

In general, most shipwrecks in these waters were solely a result of the strong underwater currents that sank ships with great ease. The Black Sea is truly black in both name and colour and is very dangerous. Most shipwrecked sailors have never been found and legend says that the Nereids take them down into the bottomless depths where they live and keep them for company; and, when they are bored of them, they calm the sea and come to the surface to swim and play with the dolphins. In the throws of their games, they create foam that covers the sea and that is the only time its colour becomes lighter and from black, the sea turns black and white.

The rolling of the ship was strong and I was down in the engine room, standing with my legs akimbo and cleaning burnt oil off the delaval disks using petroleum. I stood with my legs wide and my back wedged hard onto the oil filter to balance myself against the rolling of the ship. I was having a hard time succeeding, and the third officer was watching me from the other side with a smile on his face. He was a seasoned and hardened seaman, used to rough seas, and he could handle them well. He was from Soufli, a small town in the Evros area of Greece, famous for its silk. His name was Theodoros Daoutides and, even though decades have passed since, his name has remained engraved in my memory, because he was truly a good man, the only man who stood by me, helped and advised me, and taught me my first lessons about a

ship's engine. Maybe because he hailed from a remote area near the border and knew about the pain of isolation, and, maybe because Cyprus was a remote island far from the other Greek areas, perhaps these facts brought upon him some feelings of camaraderie towards me because I was Cypriot. Also, maybe he was a person who made friends easily and this was the only reason for this friendship, as we both carried out the same shift, he as a third officer and I as a new sailor. He explained the difficulties and how to overcome them, warned me about the good and the bad people in the crew, and taught me how to handle them with temperance and cunningness.

THE NEW RECRUITS, the seasoned seamen

At the time, Greece was under a dictatorship and everyone who supported the regime acted in a fascist manner while, everyone who was against it or a communist, acted in a revolutionary manner. The neighbourhoods and alleys of Piraeus were full of illegal immigrants and crime was rife to a large degree. The Junta on the one hand fought savagely against the people in favour of the Greek and Christian ideals, underground and hidden from sight, the same fascists and their supporters, without being answerable to any laws, reigned over the gangs of thieves and illegals.

The lawlessness that prevailed ashore to a certain extent, also existed on board the ships, only worse. The seamen had no real love and respect for each other, habitually hypocrites. Behind closed doors, nasty and undermining words were uttered, and words were twisted in order to cause problems and vendettas. And, among all, were the snitches. Captains and second officers usually had their own guy who informed them on everything about everyone. They approached their colleagues in a friend like manner, but their ultimate goal was to extract information.

My brain could not comprehend this situation and wondered why, indeed, didn't the opposite happen, in other words, why didn't we all endure the hardships of the endless days of great loneliness and hard work in the middle of inclement weather conditions with love for one

another. I brought to mind and compared other situations of forced human concentration and found that the same happened everywhere. The army, prison, on board ships, places where people unknown to each other, with no links such as familial relationship or friendship between them yet, they always treated each other badly. Nastiness is inherent and runs in the blood of most people, it spontaneously comes out towards others. It is in the character and nature of humans and, if allowed free reign within the subconscious animalistic instincts of man, without the control effected by principles and laws, such nastiness would spread and bring utter catastrophe. So, the human and animal instincts are the same and lead the individual to seek nourishment and reproduction, the only distinction being that humans are tortured by the ability to reason.

These animalistic instincts sometimes led some bad seamen to vulgarity and shameful deeds. To satisfy their subconscious nastiness and their unnatural sexual needs, they bothered the younger crew members and, in particular, the "first timers". As older soldiers in the army bullied the new recruits and called them "fish", the same happened in ships, but to a greater degree, and to such point that most youngsters could not take it anymore and were forced to abandon the profession of seaman. The word "fish", used to describe young soldiers, is very characteristic and means to compare the young soldiers with the new seamen who, until becoming seasoned

seamen, looked like fish out of the water as their survival was doubtful.

Some of the older crew members had no moral scruples and inhibitions, and with audacity and vulgarity intensely bullied the youngsters, especially if they were handsome and well built. Some capitulated to their appetites out of fear or to gain their "protection", while those who withstood and did not surrender did so with difficulty, fighting off the immense pressure that was placed upon them.

Those who could not take it, abandoned ship at the next port, angered and disgusted by life on board the ships. This hard coexistence of new recruits with men deprived of relationships with the opposite sex, on voyages that sometimes lasted many days, rendered them vulnerable to their sexual drive as deprivation caused them to seek homosexual encounters. Many times, those who had the pervasion within them, when given the opportunity, carried out lawless and depraved acts that caused their victims immeasurable despair, and ruined their souls and personality.

These situations, as well as the dangers of the profession, forced many to abandon life on the sea. There is an ancient saying, stemming from all these dangers that exist in every aspect of a seaman's life; any seaman who withstands life on the sea for three years has made the sea his mother, destiny and lover.

THE NEW RECRUITS, the beginners

I was a new recruit and the older guys saw me as a “fish out of the water”. As they did with all beginners, in their attempt to impose their superiority as senior seamen and, having the right to do so by unwritten law, they looked upon and treated me as if I was ignorant. Their attitude was negative and their demeanour towards me was thuggish and rough. The unwritten seamen’s law dictated that the newbies had to run the gauntlet of hazing, drudgery and shaming in order to be considered equal to the more senior seamen.

This was something I was not prepared to endure, and I was determined to forcefully resist to the bitter end. I knew my strengths and my resistances, but more so, my stubbornness against anything I did not want. From a very young age I was very proud and did not take kindly to insults. I treated the people who liked to ridicule others or impose themselves upon others in the exact same manner.

Among them was a tall blonde sailor who looked like he was from German ancestry; he claimed however, that he was a Pontian refugee. Belligerent and embittered, he had woman-like white skin and hair almost the same shade of white. He also sported a thin, sparse moustache. He really had an unlikeable sour face. His body was thick boned, solid and huge; he actually looked like a steam roller. He was strong and used this strength to assert himself. The crew cabins were on the aft deck, but his

was in the middle of the upper deck near the bridge where the officers had their cabins. He boasted that he was the head guy of the captain, and his arrogance was palpable. He was only a simple sailor, but he was spreading the rumour that soon he was to be promoted to the position of second officer. He was a loner since everyone avoided him because of his bad demeanour. He worked hard on his own accord, without being ordered to do so by the second officer or the boatswain. Their attitude towards him was quite loose and it was obvious that they did not want to have any confrontation with him.

They did not want to cross the captain's informant. These snitches have no sense of honour, they are malignant tiny humans who enjoy reporting their comrades to the authorities; and such authorities look after them well, because they need them, they depend on their assistance and support in order to assert their power.

The psychology of informants is the result of their suppressed needs which have been pushed by their small mindedness deep inside their subconscious. Having such repressed feelings, they are drawn into becoming informants to escape the misery of their marginalisation, and being informants, they feel that they rise above their deficient miserable personality and receive satisfaction; slowly, they are driven into their informant persona by an unjustifiable lust to wreak revenge against everyone around them.

This was my opinion of the tall sailor, he was an inconsequential snitch disliked by the whole crew but, due to

fear was flattered by all so as to stay on his good side. It was an obvious situation that he comprehended well and enjoyed in his powerful position of captain's informant.

It is with this man that I had my biggest clash as a new recruit but for other reasons as well. Reasons that occurred during the first part of my life aboard this ship.

THE NEW RECRUITS, the dangerous cargo

Leaning over and careful not to be bowled over by the strong rolling, I rubbed the thin discs of the delaval with wadding to get them clean. The roaring of the engine varied, loud at times then stifled, depending on the pitching of the ship as the waves lifted the stern out of the water causing the propeller to spin free in the air without any resistance and then back down into the deep waters. The third officer was on standby and concentrated on the orders coming from the bridge. The expert handling of the engine and the maintenance of a proper course against the huge waves and strong currents would keep the ship from sinking. The sea was very rough, and the crew was on standby on the bridge as well as in the engine room. Every now and then, the first officer would descend to the engine room to make sure everything was OK. He worked on the ships for many years and was very experienced. He realized this storm was very dangerous and was worried, so he was on duty with the rest of us. He was constantly climbing up and down the stairs with the shadow of fear in his face. The waves were over 12 metres high and the currents were strong. The ship rolled dangerously, and our cargo of timber was larger than usual. They had filled the cargo holds and on top of these, they had also tied large piles that reached right up the funnel. The sailors had tied them down tightly, to keep them from falling into the sea in case we were caught in a storm, but this addition of extra height on top

of the deck changed the ship's centre of gravity, increasing the danger of sinking as the waves caused the ship to list so far down, that it seemed to kiss the surface of the sea.

Unfortunately, the captain followed the orders of the ship owning company and risked the safety of the ship by overloading cargo, in the hope that we would not come across excessively rough seas. They played roulette with the safety of the sailors and illegally loaded a much taller cargo than the allowed limit, so the company could earn more profit and the captain possibly receive a bonus of be favoured by his employers.

The crew was in turmoil and very displeased by the overweight and tall cargo from the very beginning, since the Black Sea was often rough and could easily sink us. But, nobody could do anything; discipline on ships is absolute and the orders issued by the captain are law.

We sailed from Odessa port with calm seas and the hope that it would remain like that and not put ourselves in danger. The route was short, at most, we would reach Preveza in Greece within five days.

The Nereids of the sea however had other plans. Maybe the calm and inactive sea bored them, and, out of the blue, they decided to open their mouths and release northern winds and raise huge waves to the sky. The currents that usually ran in the deep surfaced and, hand in hand with the winds and waves, created a tempest that snatched our ship, threw it up high and started stubbornly wrestling with it, as if trying to sink it.

We saw death before our eyes and felt his foul breath on our face as we watched the storm increase in intensity by the hour. The captain, having received information over the wireless that the weather was to worsen, called a meeting of the officers to see how we were to withstand since they all knew that the tall cargo was very dangerous due to the way it was stacked on deck. It was Swedish timber spread out on the whole deck, forming a pyramid and stacked from low down to a very high point. Passing from the stern to the bow was impossible. Anyone trying to climb over the cargo would surely be swept out to sea.

They concluded that they could not send the sailors on deck to release the timber into the sea and free the ship of its dangerous cargo. They decided that this was absolutely impossible because the storm was such, that they would surely drown. They decided thus that only good luck and deft maneuvers of the ship could save us. The wireless operator was ordered to send out a mayday signal and we, the crew, were ordered to standby with our life vests at the ready.

After a while, the third officer sent me on deck to make coffee. We may have been in danger, but that did not mean that the end was upon us. A strong bitter coffee would boost our system and maybe also, boost our morale.

With legs akimbo to throw the weight of my body on the opposite side of the ship's listing and, holding on tightly to the railings of the stairs and then the corridor, I headed

to the small galley. There, I found all the crew, sailors and officers, sitting silently and morose, with a worried look in their eyes, but at the same time, ready to do whatever was needed. The silence was heavy and the mood even heavier.

All the coffee pots, cups and glasses were broken on the floor, they were not able to stay up on the shelves even though they were quite secured. I asked whether there were any news and the boatswain shook his head. Seeing that I could not make any coffee and not wanting to look at their frightened faces, I turned around to go back to my work in the engine room.

At that very moment, a large wave hit the ship and it listed heavily. I did not manage to stay on my feet and gravity forcefully grabbed me and, to my good fortune, threw me onto a colleague who was sitting on a chair screwed to the floor. The same time, we heard a hair-raising screech, then a loud noise, like a shower of meteorites falling and hitting the roof of the stern deck, where we were sitting. The sound was deafening and hollow. For a split moment, I thought that we were sinking, that maybe we had fallen upon the symplegades rocks of Ulysses and were being crushed between them or, maybe, that the cargo of timber had broken loose and was hammering us on its way to falling into the sea.

THE NEW RECRUITS, by the grace og God

We were on the deck above the engine room, in the crew's quarters. Left and right were the cabins and in the middle were the galley and the mess, with two corridors on the left and the right. Outside, on the stern and under the thick metal plates of the deck, was the small helm that kept our course steady. Whenever we hit rough seas and it struggled against currents and waves to maintain a steady course, it made a whistling, sharp and shrill sound. This was caused by extreme oil pressure within the hydraulic mechanism used to overcome the resistance of the sea and maintained a steady course.

The crew's quarters, that is to say, the living space for the crew, were manufactured with thick metal plates to withstand moisture and rust from the salty water. In big ships, these quarters were three floors and sometimes even larger, but our ship was small and therefore our quarters were only one floor high. They were like a sealed box made of thick bulkheads with round double-glazed port holes and thick metal watertight doors which protected us during bad storms against the fury of the sea. Inside our cabins, we were shaken by the waves and often fell out of our bunks. We listened to the angry roar of the sea, as if she was trying to scare us. However, we felt safe behind our thick metal plates, we were used to the dangers of the big storms, after all, we had withstood them so many times before.

This time though, the huge waves dangerously rolling the ship from left to right and stretching our nerves tight with worry, tilted us at some stage so far, that we came parallel with the sea. Our breath was taken away, our stomachs were tied in knots and panic started taking over. The ship had listed too far, almost 90 degrees. Nothing stayed in place, nobody managed to stay standing unless he was holding onto something steady. How could the ship possibly recover? Had we any time to think, we would have said, "no, this was not possible". Before realizing that we were actually sinking and that this was the end, we heard loud and hollow sounds, and the ship started to recover its balance. The violent rolling steadied and became smoother. The loud banging stopped and there was an eerie buzz of silence. All we could hear were the howling winds and the wild waves raging outside, a harmony of elements working in unison to ruin the tranquility of nature and disturb God's creation. These were indescribable moments, yet, we had no time to feel fear. Everything happened in a split second, and our thoughts were not given the chance to form a full circle and instill terror in our hearts. What happened? Fortunately, we had not come upon the symplegades rocks that, according to mythology, stood like citadels at the straits between the Black Sea and the Bosphorus, opening and closing and cutting ships in two, nor was the ship cut in two by the tremendous tempest. The tall and dangerous cargo we carried did not lean us into the water. On that day, the Angels in the heavens were watch-

ing over us and kept us safe, they did not allow the demons of the deep and the wicked Nereids to draw us under and drown us.

On that day, St. Nicholas patron saint of all seamen, saved us at the last minute. Like all Christian vessels, whether large or small, we had his icon hanging on the bridge, for protection. At such difficult moments, people who have lost their faith in God regain it and within their heart, begin to believe in Him once more. When all is over, and hope abandons us, the Saints and the Angels, by God's grace, intervene and prevent shipwrecks or save helpless, drowning seamen.

What the captain wanted to do but was impossible because of the great storm, happened by God's grace. The captain had decided that, to save the ship, the cargo needed to be untied and released into the sea. This, however, was impossible because, any sailors who would venture out onto the deck would immediately be swept into the sea by the waves and drown.

As the rolling of the ship was extreme and the tall cargo had listed the ship right down onto the surface of the sea, the bonds holding the cargo in place snapped and the cargo of timber that stood above the levels of the cargo holds slid into the sea. On their way into the sea, many pieces of timber hit the roof of the crew's quarters, which explained the hollow sounds we heard during those final moments when we run the great risk of sinking.

This was how we were saved. Relief filled our hearts and all of us, whether we were or not, immediately thanked and praised God.

THE NEW RECRUITS, the captain's beautiful wife

The storm abated and the horrible whistling of the wind had finally ceased. We were all exhausted by the rough sea and the intense rolling that tortured us for so many hours but mostly, we were exhausted by the stress during those difficult moments when the sea nearly drowned us in her deep waters. Relieved, and happy to be alive, we finished our shifts and went to bed. I lay down fully clothed, still in my dirty work clothes, and with thoughts of the tragic moments we had just endured still swirling in my head, I fell asleep, exhausted and fatigued as I was.

I found myself still lying down late next morning, the sunshine streaming through the port hole blinding me. The curtains were open and outside, the sky was blue and without a cloud in sight. Seagulls were flying overhead, a sure sign that we were near land, and the rolling of the ship had ceased completely. I thought we had entered the straits and left the rough Black Sea that wanted to drown us behind.

The Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits are two narrow and long canals joining the Euxine Sea with the Mediterranean Sea, and Europe with Asia. They are two well-known straits that are an extension of one another and connect the Black Sea with the Sea of Marmara and, further on, with the Aegean Sea. They are some of the most dangerous straits for sailing and, for this reason, by law, a qualified local pilot must always navigate the ships sailing down them.

Pilots in English or Navigators in Greek, they are people with knowledge of the area. They know the usual weather conditions, currents, tides, depths and type of depth, as well as possible shipping hazards in the particular area where they operate navigating ships. Every time we sailed the straits, the Turkish Naval services would issue our permission to sail through and provide a pilot.

Groggy from sleep and before getting coffee from the little galley, I scaled the tall door and went on deck to breathe in some air, full of salt and iodine. We had sailed two days ago in the evening as the sunset coloured the sky with shades of crimson. Now, here we were, almost noon, with the sun shining and reflecting iridescently on the calm waters. Here, at the end of the Black Sea, I stood at the bow and gazed at the land to my left and to my right. An amazing view, a view I admired every time we passed from these straits, beauty that could not be captured by the mind alone, all laid out in front of me, so beautiful, so wondrous. This view was compensation for all those shifts and sleepless nights inside the metal hull of the ship, all that unbearable loneliness. Human eyes very rarely came across such beauty. The shores were densely populated with majestic mansions and old buildings, towers, palaces and tiny islands containing beautiful buildings, immortal against time, and on the Asian side, an endless and thick greenery that tumbled right down to the land's end and gently kissing the sea.

The deck was spotless, washed by the enormous waves of the previous night's storm and the hatches were hermeti-

cally shut over the cargo holds. The cargo in the holds was safe and protected while all cargo stacked above deck had been washed overboard and lost at sea.

The second officer and the boatswain were inspecting the damages from the storm, while the captain's wife, who was travelling with us, was leaning on the railings gazing upon the beautiful shoreline. She was quite short, but one did not notice her height because she had a perfect body accentuated by the blue jeans she was wearing and a tight blouse that showed off her pert perfect breasts exuding femininity and sexuality. Femininity is the only true form of beauty and there is no better nor rarer jewel. Maybe this beautiful lady understood that she aroused a longing within the male population and dressed in tight clothes that showed her beautiful curves. She hardly ever left the bow's deck, but when she did, the whole crew was in upheaval, trying to catch a glimpse and admire her.

Knowing she caused such arousal, she made a point of wearing clothes that outlined her firm breasts, radiating sensuality and sexuality.

She turned and started walking towards me. I remained still, ecstatically watching her swaying figure approach, so aroused that my temples felt they were going to explode. I had seen her once before from afar and now she was here, right next to me. She stopped and greeted me.

- Hi Cypriot boy, isn't your name Kyriakos?

She came so close, we almost touched, and she reached out and placed her index finger on my bare chest where my shirt was unbuttoned and slowly, almost like a sweet

caress, she dragged it downwards. She saw the turmoil she caused and, pleased with herself, she continued touching me with her index finger. It was a touch that seemed innocent enough, a simple caress or a friendly touch, it may even have been pretence. But to my unfortunate younger self, it caused impure thoughts and my body shuddered. I thought, if just the touch of her hand could cause such arousal, the touch of her body would surely kill me.

I did not however harbour any illusions. I believed she was toying with me like a cat does with a mouse. Maybe being aware of her sexual aura and her sensual expression she liked teasing men. It did not make sense. She was the captain's wife. Why would she give attention to an unremarkable kid like me, a new recruit, a person nobody noticed? Unless she had a decadence, a naughtiness, and a lot of self-indulgence.

When I think of her now after so many years, I remember the sweet contrast between her angelic face and her infernal shapely body. I remember her eyes looking at me. Behind their gaze I saw a vulgar sensuality.

Many times afterwards when at various ports I laid down with women, I would close the lights and imagine holding her in my arms. Every now and then, when I nostalgically remember the good old times of my youth as a traveller over land and sea, she is one of my sweetest memories.

THE NEW RECRUITS, the love triangle

The gossip on board the ship was rife. Secretly and covertly among the crew, supposedly in confidence not to be heard by any snitch, the conversation was mainly about the captain's wife.

They said she was a woman with a voracious sexual appetite who had no inhibitions about casting her web over anyone she craved, with her husband's tolerance who shut his eyes to the painful truth, thus avoiding consequences he perhaps did not want to suffer.

They assumed that, maybe, she was having an affair with the captain's spy, that blonde sailor with the huge muscles who was built like a brick wall. Perhaps that was the reason they allowed him to stay in the bow's living quarters, with them. Maybe they had created a love triangle, an ancient phenomenon since the beginning of time, a sexual deviance deriving from animalistic and decadent instincts, with no ethical inhibitions and irrespective of social or educational status.

They considered she had an infernal sexual appetite and in order to satisfy it she did not hesitate to engage in acts that left behind nothing but ashes and scorched land. Actions without ethical or social boundaries, a way of life free from any sexual culture.

The rumours among the crew were out of control, each added his own bit and only God knew what was true and what was false. They called them unscrupulous vulgar deviants with no feelings.

These were heavy accusations but quite usual among people with nothing better to do with their free time. Truths and lies, a favourite pastime and a sad hobby of hypocrites who love intrigue and deceitful machinations, the sole purpose being, apart from personal gratification, to cause harm to others out of envy.

Infidelity is a painful situation that damages the relationship between a couple. The reasons vary, sometimes they are strictly personal and unique such as sex being one thing and love being another. Usually, what remains secret does not cause heartache, but once it comes out in the open, there are consequences. Many times, however, between some modern and advanced couples, there are certain beliefs that may reduce any feeling of guilt. They compromise and cooperate in relationships that exist solely for pleasure and gratification, without commitment or familiarity that could cause issues and rifts between the couple. Thus, there is no need for any party to lie and offer excuses, as there is complicity and even cooperation. By living this way, people do not go through painful separations, nor do they suffer soul-destroying feelings such as jealousy, anger and sadness.

This was the conclusion reached by the second officer who, wanting to appear philosophical, gave a reasonable explanation and justified the people who acted in this manner. However, we all knew his personal story, and his destiny caused him to be an unhappy man with a fat and unlikeable wife who had made his life a misery. She would flirt in front of him with just anyone purposely to

ridicule and put him down. It was evident that she was nasty and had the upper hand with him, with obvious results. She was well fed and plump, he was a thin man, mere skin and bones, wasted away because of her wickedness. She would come and stay with him from time to time, whenever she was bored with life on dry land and wanted a change. It was plain to see that he wanted to justify his own tolerance of her and, feeling guilty for being weak, was trying with philosophical treatises to justify the unjustifiable deeds of others.

And so, the gossip spread and the crew had things to talk about and issues to discuss and pleasantly pass the endless hours aboard the ship.

There are many true cases where stories armed hands and turned them into murderous weapons for no good reason, just because the untrue and misleading words of sycophants caused them to believe that dark conspiracies were being secretly woven against them.

I want to say that all seemed to be true words, but they were words used by bad seamen to hurt other people. They tried to create problems for me and frighten me by carrying tales and gossip. They started badmouthing and saying that "I said this, and he said that". The boatswain started it by telling me that the blonde sailor saw the captain's wife take a shine to me and became angry and jealous; that I should be careful because he was a nasty piece of work. To make me believe him, he recounted that some time ago there was a similar incident and, having the same suspicion, the blonde sailor beat an unfortunate

young sailor every day until he was forced to abandon ship at the next port.

I did not pay much attention because I believed that I had not given any reason to be misunderstood, and I was certainly not going to allow myself to be drawn into dangerous sexual games in the middle of the ocean where anyone could easily be swept out to sea by a large wave and drowned. And so, I believed that any possible suspicions and jealousy of the supposed lover of the captain and the captain's wife, would die down.

THE NEW RECRUITS, the final clash

Every day at noon, we gathered in the small mess for lunch. The cook was a small man, but he made up for his lack of stature with a great talent for cooking. He prepared amazing food and we all looked forward to tasting each dish. He had a natural talent for expertly cooking everything he touched, meals and treats that we all eagerly awaited not only for sustenance purposes but also to enjoy the food he prepared so well.

Despite the pleasure of these exquisite flavours I eagerly awaited, I also felt uneasy at the same time. This was the only time I met with the captain's musclebound snitch. He was one of the first to come and after eating in a hurry, we would head to the bow deck carrying a tray with food prepared by the cook for the captain and his wife who usually ate in their cabin.

A great tension had built up between us and I always felt his threatening gaze upon me and I realized that a clash with him was inevitable. Some crew members, true gossip masters, carried tales that exacerbated matters between us. Taking advantage of his great attachment and the special Ibsenian relationship he may have had with the captain and his wife and following the sad, as it later transpired, incident of the self-indulgent conduct of the captain's wife towards me, they gossiped and manufactured intricate schemes and scenarios out of nothing. They created a false stand-off situation based on a hypothetical emotional preference of the captain's wife causing the unfortunate

sailor to think that we were great enemies and relentless rivals. As time passed, an immense hatred grew inside him ready to spill over and possibly lead to a fight to the death, there, in the unknown vast and deserted sea where many sailors were swallowed by the black waters during dark and moonless nights.

They planted and cultivated a great jealousy in his soul, a suspicion that I was his rival while on the other side, I was certain and understood that such a simple and innocent incident with the captain's wife was enough to turn him viciously against me, just like a bloodthirsty wild beast.

As he was much larger than poor me, I was aware of my inadequacy in comparison, so I made a point of going later for lunch at a time when all the crew was gathered. This method proved to be a good preventive measure and kept him away from me for quite a long time.

Fear however had taken hold of my soul, and my terror, kept alive through the gossip of my lovely colleagues, grew in time into a panic and a nightmare, a relentless torture of my mind and entire existence. As time passed, I felt the confrontation lurking and saw the increasing hatred in his face.

We all realized that a bad thing was soon to happen. Most could not wait. They looked forward to a fierce fight to enjoy as spectators and then for days afterwards to have something to talk about and break the monotony of their lonely life aboard the ship. My thoughts were also bleak. I finally concluded that there was no other solution; either

he would cripple me, or I would be the first to attack him on a dark night, kill him in his sleep and then, covertly throw him overboard to be eaten by fish. As the days passed, I kept thinking of this solution and in time I became obsessed and believed that there was no other way. During my shifts I would endlessly think of ways to do it, I watched his movements and came up with scenarios. I made a plan but there was one major difficulty that bothered me; whether I would find the courage to go ahead with this heinous act because I did not have the instincts of a killer. This terrible doubt kept me from proceeding with the plan that would rid me of my daily nightmare, the torturous terror that had nested deep within my mind. It was a day without waves, yet strong underwater currents caused the ship to roll annoyingly. We had rinsed and cleaned the engine and the petroleum we had used filled the bilges. Bilges are the lower part of the engine room where the backwater accumulates. Because of the strong pitching of the ship, there was a risk of backwater overflowing and dirtying the floor. I was told by the second officer to hurry and eat my lunch and rush down to the engine to start the pump and drain the backwater. I donned my work overalls and went to the kitchen. I explained my situation to our lovely cook and being the sort of person with a perpetual smile on his face and a joke for everyone, told me to go and sit in the mess and that he would happily bring me my food himself, without waiting for the steward.

I sat in a chair riveted to the floor and happy that I was going to eat before the normal lunch time and thus avoid meeting the nasty sailor, I placed my hands on the table and eagerly awaited the goodies that our cook was about to bring. I leaned back and watched the door in anticipation of the cook's arrival and the best food ever....

I first saw his shadow darken the door and there was something about it I did not like, it seemed different. I immediately realized it was not the cook but my relentless enemy, the captain's private sailor.

I was gripped by great fear but instinctively, in the manner I had planned many times in my mind in the event we found ourselves facing each other, I got up and immediately rushed him head first and grabbed his thick legs. The fear I had within me multiplied my strength and with this strength I lifted him. His body buckled, he fell to the floor and I fell on top of him. A strong thud was heard as his head forcefully hit the bulkhead that was on the wall, driven by the momentum of my attack. I immediately got up to kick him but was surprised to see he remained seated on the floor, with a glazed look over his eyes.

He stayed on the floor for a little while and then groggily got up and dragging his feet on the floor, headed down the corridor that led to the deck on the side of the bow.

A little further away, the cook watched surprised, not able to believe the sight he had just witnessed, the formidable sailor retreating with his tail between his legs.

How I would have loved ending the feud and taming the beast, ridding him of his grudge against me! It was very

difficult for me to believe that he got scared and, as simply as that, gave up the fight. I did not believe he was afraid, even for a second.

It was true however that I had shown great fearlessness, I had managed to tackle him, however I did not believe that the battle was over. This was our first clash and I had won the first round. I could not compare myself to him, the difference in size was too great. I was a youngster, thin and short, he was in his thirties, almost two metres tall and was built like a brick wall, a thick mass of muscles.

To be truthful, when I saw him retreat I felt a huge relief, I had been temporarily saved from a bad situation. I knew the story was not over and thought that he was simply in a lot of pain and had retreated for just a little while.

Everyone admired and congratulated me, and everyone accused the tall sailor of being a coward.

I was particularly happy that I was spared from suffering in his hands so easily, and my mind, stressed for days by the agonising expectation of our clash relaxed a little.

I thought that from now on, my life as a new recruit had, at least, entered a better dimension, and I would no longer face hostile attitudes from the older sailors who were used to belittling the younger sailors...

And it was true. Their conduct towards me changed, they treated me with respect and appreciation and saw me in a different light. All because I had exhibited unexpected daring during the clash.

Days passed and all was well, except for the strange absence of the sailor who stopped circulating in the crew's

living quarters. He remained on the bridge with the captain and his wife. He did not even show up on deck for work. He even stopped carrying food up to the captain and the task was taken over by the steward. It was a strange conduct no member of the crew could understand and so, the assumptions and gossip started to come and go once more. One gave his version, another gave his own, and soon rumours were created and were gleefully discussed during their free hours, breaking the monotony of their daily lives.

And they continued talking and referring to me sympathetically as the poor Cypriot new recruit who, for a loaf of bread, found himself in foreign lands and deep seas and oceans. Who left his country during war times and was saved from the Turks only to find himself in danger of being devoured by sharks during a dark night due to an unjustifiable, illogical envy stuck in the head of some crazy sailor.

Days and weeks passed, and life on board the ship followed its usual course. Hard work and endless loneliness, with the eternally beautiful Black Sea and the Aegean whether rough or calm, cradling us in their mysterious waters. During our free time the seamen told stories of the sea to pass the time.

The gossip dissipated slowly and in time, stopped altogether. Every now and then the bad sailor circulated among the rest of the crew, but he was always distant and quiet. His behaviour had changed, he looked at all the crew with an expression akin to that of a scared wild beast

and when he came across me, he would not look me in the eye.

Some said he had lost his mind and others that he had suffered damage by the violent blow on the bulkhead.

In my mind however, there was a worry, and therefore I was always cautious. My instinct warned me that something bad was going to happen in the end. I thought that, as he was mentally disturbed, maybe at some point his mind could also react strangely since the thoughts of the deranged are very different to those of the sane.

Many times, during the endless shifts down in the engine room, I mulled the situation over and tried to analyse it. I understood that his behaviour hid a silent danger and rued the time when his furry would explode. Always careful and without allowing the passage of time to make me relax, I avoided meeting him as much as I could and, on the rare occasion this occurred, I was always on standby and alert.

In the engine room workshop I made a wrench in a specific size for easy use in my hands, not as a tool to use on valves but as a weapon for protection, if needed.

So, as a trainee mechanic, I walked around with this wrench in my hands looking as if it was part of my work but, at the same time, wanting to appear strong enough to defend myself. Maybe this action was effective because many days, weeks and months passed, and nothing happened. I started revising my thoughts and was relieved to conclude that everything was in my mind and that it was over.

THE NEW RECRUITS, the meaning of death

Six months had passed, and all was good. Once or twice I tried to break the ice and spoke to him, but he remained silent. I did not see this as strange, he showed the same behaviour to the rest of the crew as well. I believed that his nastiness had gone, that he was not as vicious and dangerous as he appeared, that his previous aggression against me was momentary and caused by the sycophants within the crew. Therefore, while it had crossed my mind to disembark due to the situation, I had now changed my mind and wanted to stay on the ship longer. It was a small seaworthy vessel and it carried out short routes in the Mediterranean and every few days it entered a Greek port. Positions in such ships were scarce and seamen preferred them because they were not away from their country and families for long periods.

My cabin was isolated and away from the others, on the stern deck and next to the ship's funnel. The smoke from the funnel left a long trail behind the ship and when the wind blew haphazardly, soot scattered on the deck and doused my cabin to an extent that, despite being frequently washed by the high waves, its colour had changed from white to grey. Many times, when entering or leaving my cabin, pieces of solid soot fell onto me like gentle rain.

I spent a lot of my free time standing next to the funnel thinking and watching the playful sea. I counted waves and watched dolphins happily swimming in the sea

while the horizon from afar beckoned us to follow it to the ends of the earth. I really enjoyed sitting and admiring the coast of the Bosphorus. We sailed the Hellespont frequently and every time, high up by the funnel, I stood and admired the exquisite shores that lay around me.

My cabin was separated from the engine room by two staircases. One was small, about two metres long and led to the deck while the other, quite long, led to the engine room. Between these were the crews' cabins, the galley and the mess. In the beginning, I used to count the steps every time I scaled them but with time I got over the habit. This was my usual itinerary and, for as long as I was on board this ship, I very rarely walked to the bow. This was a good way of avoiding bad encounters.

However, as time passed and nothing happened, I became carefree. I started circulating freely on board and in the ports without being particularly cautious.

And where I believed everything was forgotten, one evening, just as it began to get dark, I came out of the hot engine room and instead of walking up the steps leading to my cabin, my legs led me to the bow. I felt I needed the gentle sea breeze on my face and wanted to enjoy the view of the setting sun dipping into the horizon and disappearing. I had no intention to go any further, all I wanted was to walk a little.

A few metres ahead and like a jack-in-the-box, the sailor suddenly jumped out from behind the first raised cargo hold. He was hiding behind the hatches and was lying in wait for me. He surprised me, and I had no chance to re-

act. He grabbed me by the neck and I felt his hands tightening like a vice and lifting me off my feet. Without air, I started punching him as hard as I could, but he remained still and tightened his grip without feeling a thing. He was like a stone wall. With his immense strength he lifted me up to his face and I saw his expressionless eyes looking at me without any feeling, as if he was carrying out a chore and not murder.

In the throes of death, when I had no more air and realized that life was leaving my body, the seconds became centuries. I felt my arms dangling downwards and my brain accepted that this was the end, I accepted death.

With certainty I saw death approaching and my mind was filled with terror.

The tight grip around my neck caused immeasurable pain, but the terror and agony of death by far exceeded this pain, and the feeling of being unable to react and resist desperately blocked my brain....

And suddenly, there was nothing, there was no more life. I was taken over by a feeling of calm and the acceptance of my inability to react made me decide that the end had come. I calmly surrendered myself to inexistence, and felt peace take over.

What is death? What does it feel like? Many ask this question. Most probably, this is the biggest question in life. What do we feel when our soul leaves our body? Does what we perceive as consciousness die with the body?

I lived through it and felt it, and I am in a position to say that it is simply a black void. I had no thoughts, no consciousness, nothing. I felt I was not there. I was slipping into a black sleep-slumber with no dreams, and, when I woke, I felt that I had slept for a long period while, in reality, I was without life and in my death's unconsciousness for maybe a few minutes or seconds. I woke and felt pain, I had difficulty breathing. I was left lying on deck, in the dark, and nobody realised a thing....

I lifted my body with difficulty and leaned on the back of the hatch that kept the cargo hold sealed. I remained in that position for hours, looking up at the stars, trying to come around but also come to terms with the fact that what happened, was real.

I experienced something. I experienced the feeling and agony of my own death. In the beginning and once I was certain it was imminent, there was a great fear of death, but afterwards I surrendered to the peace that comes with the end, when everything becomes different and life leaves the body delivering the soul to the absolute calm and peace imposed upon the body by death.

And, what I felt was nothing. Ever since, I am not afraid of death. I do not wish it upon me because I love life, but when it is to come, may it come in the best possible way.



THE WEDDING PARTY

As soon as the ship docked at the port of Novorossiysk, Katsifakis, dressed in his best suit, jumped onto the pier and quickly walked towards the exit of the port, vigorously signaling a taxi parked to one side.

Novorossiysk is the largest port on the Black Sea. It is not a tourist attraction, it is an industrial town producing metals and foodstuff. In the past, and until the October revolution, there was a strong Greek presence in the town.

The thing that made the town beautiful now was the immense greenery and in the spring weather, with the

snow having almost melted, the plants were abundant and the similarly built low-rise buildings were buried behind hedges and trees. Wherever one turned one's eyes, there was greenery. It was a lovely sight, truly a sight for sore eyes.

Equally beautiful was the sailor dressed in his best suit. During this trip, he was going to marry his beloved, a Russian lady who bewitched him with her beauty some time ago. He met her on the first day of his first voyage a while ago and had made her his lover for one night, offering her a blouse in the latest fashion that he brought with him from Greece. From that moment she was only his, and each time, she waited for him at the end of the pier. Every time he visited, he brought her gifts, mainly fashionable dresses and fine underwear that were scarce and very expensive in the, then, Soviet Union, as they were not considered essential goods and thus the regime discouraged their import by imposing prohibitive import duty.

They began with a simple sexual relationship when he first picked her up from the docks where she was working but within a year it had developed into a relationship of true love, which now lead to marriage. At that time, the citizens were suppressed by the Communist regime and many girls dreamed of such good opportunities. Only she knew whether she truly loved him or not, but in any case, she agreed to marry him and leave with him for Greece.

She was a true beauty, very desirable, with a heavenly body that would raise the dead. Tall and slender, she had a perfect face, white, fresh and plump. A wild beauty and an untamed attitude that caused us to wonder whether he would be able to tame her. She had all attributes for success in the American film industry but the bad fortune of living in Russia and not America. Therefore, we didn't know who was doing a favour to whom. Katsivakis, who was marrying a woman from the docks and was to turn her into a respectable lady, or the beautiful Russian, Liouba was her name, who was offering her heavenly self with her gorgeous body and rare beauty.

I believe both were winners. He was marrying a beautiful woman beyond his wildest imagination and she would be able to escape from the misery and tight restrictions of her home country.

This was the only way she could obtain an exit permit. The rules were strict and did not easily allow citizens to leave the country because they knew that whoever left would not return. They preferred western countries where freedom was a de facto right, unlike in their country where everything was under the control of the state.

How long such a marriage would last was anyone's guess, but most of us gave it an expiration date. It was obvious that he would not be able to control her feisty temperament and that, when in Greece, the country of freedom, a slick guy with a lot of money could steal her from him. The woman looked like a goddess and had every potential of becoming a star. At the end of the day,

she was a woman he had picked up from the dock, so what else should he expect? We were all thinking this way out of envy, but he was blinded by love, he glowed, and the whole world belonged to him.

So, off he went with huge leaps and bounds, looking forward to meeting his love, and from the decks we egged him on but yes, deep down, we envied him for his beautiful bride to be.

Liouba was a very beautiful woman, and we resented our lucky colleague who had her all to himself. He served on board the ship for two years without disembarking, for her sake. At least once a month the ship docked in Novorossiysk to unload mainly grains and take on timber. She always waited for him, excited and joyful because every time, apart from his love for her, he also brought her many gifts.

So, since they were in love with each other, they decided to get married. The wedding was going to take place today, in this foreign land. Everything was arranged, the priest was waiting at the church, the bride's family were dressed in their finest clothes. Surely the bride would look amazing.

We were all invited, but I was not going to see the bride in her wedding dress as I was on the afternoon shift and would not be able to attend the religious ceremony. I would however be attending the party in the evening.

I was not yet twenty and my experience with love was minimal. When we docked at ports, beautiful as well as ugly women waited for us in the bars and the streets so I

expected that I would soon learn and gain experience so as to know how to treat my official lovers later on. This was my first ship and, as it was a freighter, we spent many days in ports and therefore had time on our hands to spend – how else – with prostitutes, drinking and having fun. In time, I would surely acquire a lot of experience.

However, an incident happened to me during this voyage, during my first commission on this ship. I was unsure whether or not it was a pleasant experience, because I was drunk and did not quite understand how it happened.

We had gathered, crowded and crammed, in a small Hall with a cassette player blaring music on top volume. All the crew was present, except the night shift and we were celebrating our colleague's happiness, his wedding earlier that day to his beloved Liouba.

We were all in the Hall together with the bride's family and it was so small it could hardly accommodate us. We were inside, standing with our bodies against each other, listening to Russian music, drinking copious amounts of Russian vodka and dancing to the rhythm of the music. I was not used to drinking and had never drunk previously in my life, primarily because, due to the poverty of most of the Cyprus population at the time, we never had any drinks in our poor household as we could hardly afford bread let alone alcohol and secondly, because I did not generally like the taste of drink. That day however, while celebrating our colleague's joy and with the en-

couragement of the people around me, I had a few drinks. I stopped in time, when I realised that the alcohol was starting to affect me.

At this point the nice mother-in-law who cared for all the guests came up to me to make sure that I continued drinking with the others in celebration of her daughter's happiness.

She was around fifty, perfectly made up and dressed, and looked very beautiful. I thought she did not need so much adornment to look beautiful. Nature had given her a shapely, well-proportioned figure and it was obvious that her daughter had inherited her body. Her face was a little wrinkled, maybe from life's hardships in the then Soviet Union where most lived under conditions of poverty, or maybe due to her age.

In broken Greek she started talking to me and poured vodka and orange juice into my glass. We started drinking to each other's health. Mixed with the juice, the vodka slid easily down my throat, leaving a pleasant taste in my mouth. As much as I tried the next day, I could not remember how much I had to drink that night.

After the first drink I found her attractive, after the second I lost all inhibitions, noticing her large breasts and long legs.

On the third drink I saw her naked back and her big breasts floating in her huge décolletage.

Wasted on alcohol, I looked at her longingly without daring to do anything because I was shy and respectful of

her house; I was not even going to attempt a polite flirtation.

So, we continued drinking together. At some stage, I remember dancing a slow dance with her in a tight embrace and after that, all I have are flashbacks. I was lying on my back on a divan and she was sitting astride, caressing me. I remember waking and falling back into a drunken stupor.

Yes, I was well and truly drunk. Maybe she was also drunk, I don't know. I only remember that every time I came around, I felt her moving on top of me and, feeling embarrassed, I would look around at the others talking, dancing and drinking. Nobody gave any notice to us, it was as if we didn't exist, as if we were doing something natural.



CONTRABAND, the Bosphorus

There are certain seas where dangerous unexplained phenomena occur and several ships sailing upon them never managed to reach a port.

The Black Sea is one of them. It is an unexplored territory full of stories and myths frozen in time, a place where man cannot discover the great mysteries hidden by its deadly waters.

The scriptures say that here is where Noah's Ark came to rest. Some people say that there is no oxygen in its deepest waters, and this is the reason why shipwrecks and drowned seamen on the seabed remain in the same condition as they were before sinking, eerie ships and remains of drowned seamen unaffected by decay.

The Black Sea is also known as the Euxine Sea. This is a compound Greek word comprising of the “eu” and “xenos” (meaning “good” and “visitor”), euphemistically meaning a sea that is unwelcoming to visitors. Again, there are references in the scriptures about it being bottomless and that nature on its shores is mostly dead and lifeless. Scientists give a scientific explanation. Some say that it is due to a nuclear explosion that took place during ancient times because, they argue, science was more advanced in the distant past in comparison to today and as a result, Earth was completely destroyed. Other scientists say that thousands of years ago the waters of the Mediterranean Sea in Marmaras rose due to a cataclysmic rainfall and spilled into a freshwater lake on the other side, forming the Black Sea.

According to mythology the two seas were separated by the Symplegades Rocks, two huge moving boulders that crushed every ship passing the Bosphorus until Jason, the ancient Greek hero, managed to pass causing the rocks stopped moving leaving the way to the Black Sea open.

The ancient Greek name Bosphorus is analysed into the ancient Greek words “vous” and “poros” (meaning “bovine” and “passage”) as mythical Io escaped through the straits in the form of a cow.

Io was a priestess of Goddess Era and a lover of Zeus. When Era discovered the unholy affair between them, Zeus turned Io into a cow to protect her from Era’s wrath. Era however wanting to punish Io sent a cloud of horseflies to torture her. Io was chased all over Greece

and was tormented by the flies until she managed to cross the Bosphorus and escape.

In more recent history, in the A.D. years, the Byzantines gave the name "Straits" to the Bosphorus "Straits" and because of the strategic significance of this channel, the Roman Emperor Constantine built the capital city of his Empire there and called it Constantinople.

The shores of the Straits are densely built and full of beautiful city buildings. The surrounding hills are adorned with Ottoman palaces such as Top Kapi. The city itself is full of monuments and buildings such as the Saint Sophia Church and the Blue Mosque.

I was fortunate enough as a young recruit to sail this magnificent sea, the most beautiful sea sailed by so many sailors, myriads of times, a sea that was the birthplace of heroes where in its waters the history of the whole world was written. I was given the chance as a young man to sail this sea, become acquainted with her beauty, taste her saltiness and be lulled by her waves.

I was aboard the ship "San Dennis", a small freighter of two and a half thousand tons which was too small to undertake long voyages in the great oceans. She sailed the Black Sea transporting timber from Russia to the Greek islands and citrus fruit from Greece back to Russia.

These were short routes and a lot of seamen preferred to embark on this ship to be close to their families as the trip lasted only five days either way.

Employment was in high demand and pay was low so many crew members delved in the trade of certain items

that we purchased in Greece and sold in Russia. These were women's haute couture items and chewing gum from Chios, products very difficult to find in the Soviet Union because imports into this vast communist country were highly controlled. This trade therefore was classified as smuggling and anyone caught committing this offence would be subjected to strict punishment. We stashed the products in good hiding places not easily found by the customs officers and during our shore leave, we would take them ashore with the help of the guards who were bribed with a few rubles in cash. Rubles was the national currency of the country and the profit we made from our little trade was many times higher than the cost of purchasing the goods in the first place. This money however could not be used in any other country, so we spent all our profits on local shopping and a good time.

During this voyage, a careless sailor tried to sell contraband to an undercover policeman. He was arrested immediately but thankfully, after an intervention by the captain, he was released after being given a serious reprimand. Being Greek sailors, we had this privilege in almost all the countries we visited, the locals and the customs officials were very friendly to us.

After this incident we were all scared to trade in contraband with street vendors.

The open sea is not controlled by any state, and it is free for anyone to sail. These seas are called international waters and the only state that may assert its control over a

ship is that of the ship's flag. At sea, the representative of this control and absolute commander is the captain. The captain of the ship, being the person in charge, has huge legal power and authority over the crew and any person on board the ship. He is also responsible for safety and order and has unlimited powers to the extent that at sea and in international waters he may even use deadly force if ever the need arises.

On departure from the port of Novorossiysk and while sailing on the open sea, we were faced with a great surprise. The captain exercised his power and ordered all of us to hand over all the items we had in our possession and traded in the Soviet Union while carrying out our small-scale smuggling operation of luxury goods such as chewing gum and smart clothing. Their importation from other countries was prohibited and therefore these were items in high demand.

He was angry because the sailor illegally selling chewing gum to Russian citizens was caught by customs officers in the port of Novorossiysk... He had not been charged and was only given a strong reprimand. It was just a small-scale smuggling operation we all did, even the captain himself, in cooperation with the customs officials. This is why we were surprised by his decision and considered it unreasonable; after all, we had the right to legally purchase goods from all countries and all we needed to do at each port was to declare them so that we did not trade in them illegally.

So, we surrendered our goods, and nobody dared to keep anything, not even a small item, because we all knew each other's hiding places and we also knew that the captain had an informant among us and therefore, if we hid even the smallest thing, he would surely find out through him.

The contraband was stacked on the big table in the officers' mess forming a small mountain. There was a wide collection of items ranging from small packets of chewing gum to larger items of clothing, and a lot of nylon stockings that were in great demand in Russia.

We were all curious about why the captain went ahead with this action, even in anger. The value of the goods, when calculated in prices of other countries, was not high, so we concluded that it was because of his bad mental state at the time. We let it pass believing that within the next few days and before reaching our next destination his intentions would be made clear.

CONTRABAND, in Alexandria

Our next destination was Alexandria in Egypt. Alexandria was founded by Alexander the Great and is the ancient cradle of Greek letters. It used to be the largest port and the country's capital. During its heyday it was one of the most prominent cultural centres, having the largest and most famous library in the world before it was destroyed by. This renowned library housed the works of the most prominent and wise intellects in the world.

The city is also historically linked to the largest lighthouse considered one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. The lighthouse was a tower standing at a height of one hundred and forty metres and was the highest building of its time. It was intricately structured and at the top stood a statue of Neptune. Designed during the reign of Ptolemy I during the 3rd century B.C., it remained in operation until the 14th century A.D. when it finally collapsed during an earthquake. It was built on the Faros island from which it took its name, and the name "Faros" has since been used as an official term for lighthouses throughout the world.

We passed the ruins of the lighthouse and sailed parallel to the extension of the jetty connecting the islet with the shore, forming the renowned protected port of Alexandria.

We slowly entered the deep port with the assistance of the Arab pilot sent by the port authority to guide us in, and we docked next to a Russian submarine which had

surfaced and tied for refueling guarded by warships surrounding it. As soon as we docked, customs officers came on board for the usual inspection, accompanied by a number of street vendors who tried to sell us souvenirs and fake gold in an attempt to trick us. It seems it was obvious to them that I was a new recruit and they descended upon me first, trying in broken English and Greek to persuade me to buy fake jewelry.

This trading was interrupted by an increase in the traffic of customs officers hurriedly boarding the ship. We realised that something was going on, but we had no idea. We saw them heading towards the middle deck on the bridge, where the captain's office was located...

Until our departure the following day, we did not know what had happened, none of the bridge officers informed us. Either it was nothing serious or it was, and they were ordered by the captain to keep it quiet.

We didn't stay long in port. We discharged cargo all day and night and departed the next day. We only just had time to go around the large city and visit the main sights. There were no bars with women because at the time Egypt was a strict Muslim country and so, accompanied by a paid guide, we visited hidden prostitutes who lived far away from the port to avoid being targeted by the police authorities.

The city itself was very impressive. During our excursion around Alexandria we noted that the whole city and its layout were similar to those of a Greek city, with archaic elements, orthodox churches and Greek signs on many

buildings. This was the Alexandria of the Greeks until, under Nasser's government a few years earlier, the authorities seized their properties and deported them from the country, dividing the Greek wealth to the poor Egyptians of Alexandria. This was the usual fate of the Greeks, their eternal persecution.

The next day we sailed, and our hearts felt heavy, we felt bitter for the fate of the Greek refugees who, from the times of the Turkish Egyptians through to the Modern Turks and, recently, the Egyptians, endured many hardships and were persecuted to a great extent...

As soon as we were in deep waters, we got a message ... and it was bad news. We found out what had happened with the customs authorities in Alexandria. The captain had forgotten to declare the goods he had confiscated from us. They remained spread out on the main table in full view of the officers who did not find them registered on the list of goods provided by the captain who had totally forgotten to declare them as duty free goods. In compliance with the law, they seized the goods and imposed a huge fine of thousands of pounds Sterling upon the ship for undeclared goods. This amount was paid by the shipping company through its agent and subsequently would be deducted from the captain's salary because through his negligence he was the main person responsible for what happened.

It is widely accepted that kindness is rewarded, and evil is punished. The captain, without any particular reason, took all the items we had in our possession wanting to

punish us for our little contraband trade in the Soviet Union, a trade we knew he also carried out. Now, he was also punished, maybe even by the hand of God who does not tolerate injustice. Because he was called upon to pay, and in an attempt to avoid doing so, he assembled us and asked that we share the debt because, as he alleged, we all participated in the contraband.

However, when one is called upon to pay for another person's mistake, one cannot accept. So, on behalf of all, the boatswain explained to the captain that we did not accept this arrangement because he was the one who had illegally confiscated our items and rather than ask us to shoulder the fine imposed due to his own mistake, the correct thing would be for him to actually compensate us for our loss.



THE FROZEN SEA IN ODESSA

Ice forms when sub-zero temperatures slow down the molecular movement of water. This immobilization causes the molecules to adhere to each other and turn water into solid ice. Salty seawater however does not freeze easily in sub-zero temperatures because the salt crystals inhibit the slowing down of the water's molecular movement.

When water freezes its mass increases because it expands, contrary to other materials that contract under the same conditions. This happens because when the water is in a liquid state, its molecules slide over each other and their traction forces weaken whereas, when the water becomes ice, a void is created between the frozen molecules, thereby diluting its density. In this way, ice becomes lighter than water and floats on its surface. Seawater however freezes when its temperature drops be-

low 20 degrees Celsius. On the northern coast of the Black Sea, when temperatures are dangerously low, the water near the shore turns to ice and this sometimes causes the ports to close. Such weather phenomena occurred in 1974 when the Black Sea near the coast of Odessa had frozen completely. It was a very rare phenomenon, which happened also in 2012.

In 1974 I was working as a trainee mechanic aboard the ship "SAN DENNIS", a small freighter usually travelling the route between Greece and Russia. On that particular voyage, we had loaded oranges from Kiato in the Peloponnese and our destination was the port of Odessa. When we entered the Black Sea and approached the Ukrainian port, we came across parts of the sea that had frozen over. As we approached land, the ice increased. In the beginning, the ice was just on the surface but gradually it thickened and became deeper. At some stage we were forced to stop because the sea was frozen to such thickness, our bow could not break through the ice. We put the engine on "idle" and waited for the pilot and the icebreaker to come and lead us into port.

Those who could not tolerate the cold stayed inside and watched the sea and the swell of the frozen waves through the portholes. Others who were tougher watched from the deck. It was an amazing sight and despite previous knowledge from books, newspapers and television, it was beyond our imagination. Many people may have seen frozen lakes, icebergs and glaciers during their lifetime, but the motion of the waves in a sea that

has frozen over is a unique and immensely beautiful sight.

Winter on the Black Sea is a difficult season but at the same time very impressive as the frost and low temperatures change the face of nature and create rare and amazing phenomena. The water created fantastic formations as it lifted with the movement of the waves and then froze in motion. The sea looked normal except it had a white colour just like the pure white of snow and seemed immobile as if painted on canvas by a great painter or printed on paper by a famous photographer.

The pilot arrived in his launch together with the icebreaker and we followed it into port, to dock.

An Icebreaker is a particular type of ship with a sharp and reinforced serrated bow that, under full propulsion of the ship, first breaks the surface of the ice and following that initial break, the weight of the ship opens a wider path in the ice enabling the ship that follows the Icebreaker to sail through freely.

The city of Odessa loomed a little further from the port, all white from the snow and the frost and the neoclassic Greek buildings that filled the whole city gave a touch of beauty to the old town of Greek émigrés. Odessa's history as an important port in the Euxine Sea starts from ancient times when, as a Milesian settlement, it had close contacts with Greece. During the Turkish occupation of Greece, a big number of persecuted Greeks sought refuge in Odessa. Many dealt in commerce amassing great for-

tunes and financed the Greek revolution which liberated Greece from the Ottoman empire.

It is a city flooded by historical memories and nostalgic images of its Greek past with great cultural and intellectual traditions. It was founded by the ancient Greeks and this is evidenced by archaeological findings as well as its subsequent history closely linked to the Greek émigrés who, visualising the liberation of their country from the Turks, founded a secret organisation for this purpose called the Society of Friends (Filiki Eteria).

Being given the chance to travel there and knowing a lot about the history of this city, I intended to roam its streets and get to know but did not give due consideration to the cold. As soon as we docked and after the customs' officials inspected our papers, I descended the ladder together with others and on foot set off for the city that was a few hundred metres away.

I am sure most people cannot imagine the feeling of several degrees sub-zero cold. This is what we faced as soon as we set foot on land. We felt the immense cold penetrate our bones and as soon as we walked for a few metres our limbs froze and stiffened. The cold was so intolerable that we felt it scraping our skin like a whip relentlessly hitting us in the face.

That day, the whole city of Odessa was in a deep freeze. All the residents had stayed indoors, and all work had come to a standstill. That year, 1974, the whole state had been hit by an unprecedented wave of arctic weather so cold that even the sea froze over.

With these thoughts, and with my limbs already freezing to the point of becoming quite painful, I decided to return to the warmth of the ship. With a fast pace I started going back. The ship was not very far yet already I felt my legs freeze as I walked that I could hardly move them. I tried to run in order to warm up and reach the ship faster, but it was difficult as I felt my whole body freezing.

I was heavily dressed in an attempt to protect myself from the cold but despite this I felt my body stiffening. The blood particularly in my hands and feet started freezing and the pain was intolerable.

The pain in my body was so immense that I could not take it, it was unbelievable.

With great difficulty I managed to climb back on board the ship with extreme pain to the extent that I wanted to cry out but was not able to do so as my face and vocal cords were also frozen stiff.

As soon as I was on board and without wasting any time, I hurried down into the engine room near the electric generator. It was the only machine working at that time in order to produce electricity and I hugged it as tightly as I could, trying to pass warmth into my stiff body. I stayed there quite a while, I am not aware how long, until I felt my blood circulating, my body defrosting and my limbs moving again while the pain gradually got better.

Next day and from my warm bed, I looked outside from the porthole and saw that the sea ice had melted. The weather was better, the arctic cold had subsided. I got up

still feeling pain and numbness in my body. I saw people moving on the dock and workers on the ship's deck unloading the cargo. Life in this foreign land had found its rhythm once again and the air was filled with the usual buzz of a big city.

Taking into consideration the cold of the previous day, I took measures. I arranged with a colleague for a taxi to come directly at the foot of the ship's ladder. He drove us around the city to all the sights, the monuments, the museums, the department stores and nice restaurants. Inside the warm taxi we toured the beautiful city and got to see its great history as well as its close connection to Greece since ancient times.



THE APPARITION

Novorossiysk, a large Russian city, belongs to the Novorossiya Region and is the largest port on the Black Sea. It is an industrial city, known for the production of steel and other metal products.

Before the October Revolution, it had a very strong Greek community with many powerful Greek traders of that time being established there and who later fled to Constantinople.

During the city's occupation by the Germans in 1942, a small group of Soviet sailors defended a part of the city for 225 days until it was freed by the Red Army and thus prevented the German supply ships from using the port. For this great feat the city was honoured by being given the title of Heroic City in 1973, the year of my first voyage aboard the ship "SAN DENNIS". The glory of the city is memorialised by the composer Dmitri Shostako-

vich with his composition "Chimes of Novorossiysk, the Flame of Eternal Glory".

The winter was on its way out at that time and the spring blooms were abundant. All the lush greenery brought great beauty to the city. We were sad to bid farewell to the beautiful location and the beautiful women, but they were even sadder to bid farewell to us. We were not very sad leaving them because in every port there were women waiting with open arms for the ships to return. It is commonplace for most seamen to consider these port-side loves as temporary games of flirtation and sex, without undertaking commitments and without being caught in love traps or ephemeral and dangerous relationships.

We had discharged our cargo of oranges from our holds and took on timber. We filled the holds, and also loaded large piles of cargo up to three metres above them. Because of the extra weight, the ship lay low in the water and the deck was almost at a level with the surface of the sea. We all hoped that we would not come across any heavy seas because, being so overloaded, we ran a risk of sinking.

Our destination was Egypt, the land of the Pharaohs and in particular Alexandria, the Greek city of letters. We left Novorossiysk and set sail for the famous city that Alexander the Great founded on his way to conquer the world.

The entire shoreline between the Aegean and the Euxine Sea offered a view of great beauty. The landscapes were so amazing, they left our minds in awe. To this day, these

remain beautiful and renowned places, awash with history. History full of real events, myths and fairy tales, all together comprising strange and bizarre folklore legends, created through time by repetition and the contribution of each subsequent narrator's own imagination.

I was also aware of these stories and every time we sailed the Bosphorus my thoughts wandered and gave life to fantastic intangible beliefs as if they were real, as if they were happening in front of my very eyes. Especially during nights with a full moon, when legend says that sirens emerge from the water, I would scan the horizon intensely in case I caught a glimpse of a mythical spirit surfacing in the moonlight.

Legend says that the Black Sea had black mermaids with black hearts that lured sailors into the depths of the sea for their amusement.

Legend also says that spirits and kind fairies surfaced and sang to the sailors to comfort them and soothe their hearts as they were in foreign lands and anyone fortunate enough to see them would have good luck for the rest of their life.

I was standing at the stern one evening after my shift in the engine room daydreaming about seeing such a spirit when on the horizon in the distance, I thought I saw a large mass of water rise and form an apparition of a human face coming forcefully towards us...

It was the deteriorating weather raising a strong wind and rough seas. It was Neptune rising in anger from the deep attacking us with the worst intentions. He stirred

the sea and ordered the waves to strike us with menace, to toss us pitilessly and torture us, to torment and scare us.

The ship listed dangerously with every wave and an indescribable fear of sinking filled our hearts. We knew that the sea was dangerous and that the myth about the black mermaids was true. The older sailors said that they were daughters of Neptune who emerged from the darkened depths of the sea at his command and pulled ships to the bottom. Our only hope was God, so we turned our faces up and prayed for deliverance. At such times of danger, man needs a miracle, so believers and non-believers alike pray to the same God for protection.

We fought the heavy seas for many hours. Protected behind sealed doors to prevent the water that was washing over the ship coming inside, with our faces distorted by anguish, we felt that seconds were hours and hours were centuries.

Finally, with God's help, we entered the straits and the calm waters of the Bosphorus. With my heartbeat gradually slowing down, I thought that this time we had just made it. I realized how dangerous a sailor's profession can be and wondered whether I would be able to persevere. I brought to mind the sayings of older seamen that, even though seamen fear the spirits of the Black Sea more than they fear its rough seas and storms, if a lucky seaman happens to see one, he will be fortunate for the rest of his life.

Believing that I met Neptune's spirit in the form of a big storm, maybe I too was touched by the good luck of this sea legend.

P.S.

Since then, I noticed that during difficult phases of my life God was always at my side to help me and that good fortune follows me to this day in life.



IN NICOMEDIA, TODAY'S IZMIT

In 1920 a big number of Turkish inhabitants from nearby areas attacked the Greek residents of the villages around Nicomedia. They ransacked their homes and slaughtered the women and children. Setting the houses alight, they led the old men and young children of over 14 years into the village Church. There, the Turkish commander tortured the seventy-year-old priest with indescribable barbarity. He put a horse's halter around his neck and gouged one of his eyes out with a knife, dragged him into the sanctum and there, he butchered him on the altar like a sheep. They then dragged his body out with his

head barely attached, tied it behind a horse and dragged it around the streets of the village before finally throwing it down a ravine. Afterwards, they set fire to the others in the Church. Those who managed to break the door down to escape from the fiery hell met their death in the churchyard either by gunshot or stabbing. Those that managed to escape ran to the mountains naked, barefoot and hungry. Young women threw their babies down gorges and ran like crazed animals in the forest in an attempt to flee from the menace of the Turkish mob and army renegades while others, like the women of Souli, jumped with their babies off a cliff thus liberating themselves with an honourable death. And so, with the usual anger and hatred these barbarians have for the Greeks, they cleared another Greek territory and repopulated it with Turks.

Izmit was one of the first ports I got to know. Like every other port, it had its own interesting characteristics that inspired one's imagination. Once known as Nikomedia of Bithynia, today's Izmit is located on the coast of the Bosphorus, at the exit from the Black Sea and at a short distance from Constantinople. It was one of the largest Roman and subsequently Byzantine cities of the world, after Rome, Antiochia and Alexandria. It was built on the route connecting Europe and the East, making it a great commercial centre.

During Roman times, the Prefect of Niomedia ordered the beheading of Saint Barbara and decreed that the sentence should be carried out by her own father. This was

the father's own wish because his beautiful daughter had loved and embraced Christianity. She "accepted her end from her father's hands and by her father's sword". As soon as he carried out his crime, he was struck dead by lightning and this was said to be divine judgment.

I was employed on a small ship travelling between Greece and Russia and sometime between these routes we docked once at this Turkish port to load scrap metal for transport to Tito's Yugoslavia, as it was known at the time.

This was my first commission, the ship was a small vessel of two and a half tons called "SAN DENNIS" and it was so small, it fell prey to every storm and every wave. All members of the crew spilled their innards from the rolling of the ship, but it was worth the hardship because we were world travelers and this fact alone compensated for all our suffering.

The Bosphorus is famed for its beauty. There are majestic castles and palaces built on and in the sea. From ancient times until today it is one of the most significant sea passages. People sailed through here for years from the time of the Argonauts' expedition to World War II operations. In the winter the weather is foggy and with a lot of frost. The sea has many currents that flow against each other and when they collide and swirl, they create waves that break in different directions making the sailing of a ship difficult and necessitating the use of a Pilot to navigate.

The shores of the Bosphorus are filled with ancient civilisations, ports and modern cities. There is Constantinople,

the most beautiful of them all, the city which gave birth to kings and intellectuals and developed letters and culture, the city which has the covered market, the forgotten Fanariotes Quarter and, most importantly, Saint Sophia Church which draws all the attention and causes such sadness to Greek visitors who cannot but remember the lyrics “glories past when thou wert aweless and recounting them to cry”.

Next to Constantinople is Izmit, possibly the biggest protected natural harbor. Its mahalas spread over low hills on the opposite side of the port and a little behind the lower part of the city since Turks usually like to live on higher grounds to enjoy the views and a cooler breeze. Izmit used to be the ancient and renowned byzantine Nicomedia which has now changed its name, with the calm sea almost touching the houses lined up around the shore, with the beautiful view reminiscent of Greek landscapes where the sea belonged to both the Gods and the people, a little like ancient Greek art.

Outside the low buildings, the cobbled streets and lined up like soldiers sat many middle-aged men. Playing with their worry beads, smoking cigarettes and hookahs, they gazed lazily and watched us and the sea. They spoke in the Greek language and asked about events in Greece.

I was speechless. I saw people with physical characteristics like ours, speaking our language fluently, even better than we did, and sounding a lot like Cypriots. I was on Turkish land, a few months following the Turkish invasion of Cyprus and I was wary about being arrested by

fanatics since they had captured so many Cypriots prisoners and transported them to Turkey. Following the exchange of prisoners, 1619 Greeks captured by the Turkish invasion forces between July and August were unaccounted for and presumed missing. There were rumours that some were kept in isolation in various parts of Turkey in order to be islamised, forced to join the Islam and renounce their Christian faith, either by persuasion or force. My mind immediately went to the Cypriot missing persons, my heart leaped from my chest and I thought to myself "Oh my God, maybe I have come across our missing, those sought in earnest by the Cypriots...". On the other hand, I knew that it did not make sense as they were all middle-aged and, seeing how friendly they were, I was encouraged to approach and talk to them. They told me their story. They were Cretan Turks that were relocated to the city of Izmit during the exchange of populations in accordance with the 1924 Treaty of Lausanne. They confessed to me that they felt Greek because they were Greeks that had been islamised and in their mind they worshipped Mohamed together with Christ and Saint Mary. It was a sad story of immigrants violently uprooted from their land and turned into refugees. Following the defeat of Greece, the Turks enforced the treaty relating to the exchange of populations and, using this as a rouse, deported almost all the Greek inhabitants of Asia Minor.



VOYAGE TO LIBYA, the long wait

Our little ship "Agios Dionissis", bearing the name "SAN DENNIS" on its bow, was heavily loaded with scrap metal.

We set off from Nicomedia in Turkey, now known as Izmit, a naturally protected harbour next to Constantinople, where we took on cargo for a short trip to Yugoslavia. Exiting the closed sea of Marmara, we passed the city close to ancient Troy and the infamous straits of the Dardanelles, sometimes called Çanakkale.

We entered the eastern Aegean Sea where Asia ends and Europe begins. We passed the Archipelago and having navigated the deep blue sea of the Cyclades we entered

the Isthmus of Corinth. Those of us not on duty stood on the stern admiring the beautiful Greek coastal line as we navigated the narrow man-made strip of sea that connects the Saronic bay with the Corinthian bay. We sailed by the Ionian Islands and through the Ionian Sea, passed Corfu and Albania, and entered the Adriatic Sea.

We set sail for Yugoslavia, the southern land of the Slavs, a country created as a kingdom in 1918 after the defeat of the axis and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. At the time, we were heading to the port of Bar to discharge our cargo. Yugoslavia was a large independent country re-established by Marshal Tito after its dissolution by the axis army during World War II.

The port of Bar is the only access of the country to the sea and it is located in the southern part of the Adriatic, in an area where the sea and the inland traffic are connected so cargo can be transported to the state-owned metallurgical industries via this network.

Following a quiet voyage on the tranquil Adriatic Sea, we reached the port and while the labourers were discharging the cargo, we went for a walk in the city. The city was separated from the sea by a street, long and straight, full of shops and cafes situated in ground floor buildings on both sides. Sweet Greek music was emanating from all these buildings, songs by Demis Roussos and the hospitable proprietors were standing at their shops' doors smiling and beckoning to us to enter.

I thought they were Philhellenes who loved Greek music and us Greeks, but I also thought that probably this was a

trick to entice us into becoming customers and buying their products.

Whatever the case, we spent a few pleasant hours in this port, since discharging the cargo did not take long. Another cargo of bagged cement was already on hoists awaiting us on the dock and this was quickly loaded into the ship's cargo holds by the port's large cranes. It was a low and very heavy cargo stowed at the bottom of the holds. This cargo was dangerous because it added weight to the lower part of the ship, leaving the upper part light and prey to rough seas or currents. It was the worst type of cargo a captain would want to load on his ship...

We set sail for Libya, the engines effortlessly spinning the propeller without churning the calm waters and causing a wake. The sea was still and looked asleep, tranquil as if it was resting.

We were travelling with economic speed and calculated that this would be an easy short voyage that would last a few days.

Down in the engine room I was on shift and could feel the engine working without difficulty from currents and waves. The propulsion of the ship was easy, and I thought we were surely going to have an easy trip. I checked the oil in the hydraulics of the tiller and the tiller itself – the rod that turns the steering wheel flap – and then I turned on the pump to empty the bilges from the backwash and oil.

I looked at the clock on the engine's dial. It was four o'clock. My shift was over, and I handed over to my re-

placement who came down exactly on time. After I explained to him that he needed to keep his eye on the eighth piston because it was leaking oil, I carefully climbed the oily and slippery ladder and came out on deck. I was grateful to breathe in the fresh sea air after leaving behind the atmosphere of the engine room the air made heavy by the constant operation of the engine. I went into the kitchenette and made myself a black, bitter eastern coffee, just as I liked it, and went out to the stern to sit on the thick metal plate that was the floor of the deck. I leaned on the railing and my thoughts wandered into the depths of history, trying to recall the past of the country where we were heading... A country which, according to mythology, bore the name of a young woman called Libya who was the granddaughter of the Nile and Zeus and in whose honour they named an area west of Egypt.

A country in Northern Africa having the Mediterranean Sea as its northern border and the rest being covered almost exclusively by hot, dry sand. A vast barren and dry desert blending with the calm, cloudy and yellow sea, the same yellow colour as the desert land. In the haze of the hot atmosphere the yellow colour gave the impression that the land and the sea came together as one and could not be told apart.

The days passed and having reached our destination, we waited in queue for the official customs inspection.

They came and they left, ordering us to anchor pending further instructions.

We cast our anchors in the cloudy sea and we saw them disappear into the unending depths. It seemed like the sea was bottomless and my mind wondered to mythology, ancient theories and metaphysical beliefs about bottomless seas where underwater there was nothing but a dark and mysterious abyss, filled with the remains of ships that had turned into stone, filled with treasures and petrified mermaids wearing golden wreaths in their stone hair guarded by dragons and sea monsters.

The sea around us was still but as soon as the evening fell, we felt the ship move like a pendulum in the water. Its centre of gravity down in the holds was immobile due to the weight of the cement while the rest of the vessel moved and pitched rolling forcefully and jerkily. It was a wild movement that killed us, we were all holding onto the rails or wherever we could reach so as not to be toppled by the pitching. It was a weird phenomenon; the surface of the sea was completely still and not affected by the strong currents wrestling each other underwater.

The days passed and our supplies finished. The water from our tanks was coming out cloudy and rusty indicating that this too was coming to an end. The currents did no cease to shake us about, making our lives difficult and intolerable.

The Libyan authorities showed no indication of allowing us to dock and left us prey to the strong currents of the Libyan Sea. We were in a country with no order, a dicta-

torship, and the Libyans had no regard nor cared about foreigners. The head of the state was Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, a coup d' état instigator and revolutionary who established himself as the de facto leader of the country since 1969. He was a cruel dictator who many times clashed with other states and in particular, with the western world, and maybe that is why they left us for so many days in the queue without replenishing our stores and water. He was a lifelong dictator whose luxurious palace loomed majestically over the culturally ancient city of Tripoli. The picturesque old market surrounded by the walls of Medina was at the entrance of the city while a little further was a great central square known as the Green Square, which extended right down to the sea. The surface of the sea was calm and still while in the deep the strong swirling currents disturbed the bottom causing the sand to lift into the water giving it a cloudy yellow colour, same as the desert covering the whole country...

The days passed and it looked like we were forgotten. It was as if we did not exist, and in vain we waited for any indication from the port authority. Our food was running out, and the whole crew was ordered by the captain, to fish for food. The lower the level of the water in our ancient tanks, the rustier it was and whenever we drank from it, we suffered from stomach aches. It was summer and we had no hope of rain, the Libyan authorities had forgotten about us, so the odds were against us.

We were ordered by the shipping company not to seek assistance from the authorities and wait until they took a de-

cision. The order was strict because the dictatorial authorities of Libya were inhumane, they could arrest foreigners without cause and imprison them in jails where they were eventually lost and never seen again. They were hostile and they showed it without regard to anyone.

Fearful not to annoy and anger them and not to give them reason and opportunity to manifest their power and cruelty, we remained quiet without asking for assistance. Our life became intolerable and our only food were the fish we caught and cooked. These were big tasteless fish that lived in a sea with no flora, in water that was cloudy because of the sand on the bottom, fish with no substance which we used only out of necessity, as food.

Our biggest problem however was the water. We used seawater for our personal hygiene and the captain undertook to ration the potable water among us in small measured quantities so that it lasted longer. We boiled it before drinking because it had become dangerous to our health. By now, all we had left was the water on the bottom and it was full of residue, limescale, mud and rust.

Unfortunately, and despite being careful, the second officer and an engine room trainee fell gravely ill with chills, high fever and immense pain all over their body. We were sure that they contracted Legionnaire's Disease. We prayed to God that they hung on and at the same time hoped that we did not succumb ourselves.

We were worried, thirsty, scared and exhausted, so we put all our hopes in God.

We could see the shore a few kilometres from us, but it was impossible to go there and find the water we desperately needed. The dictatorial regime was being inhumane, and we expected and hoped for a miracle, we hoped that their God would guide them to allow us to dock quickly and end our suffering.

Their God however may not be as kind as ours who proved to be charitable and compassionate. Maybe somewhere in our crew there were honest men whose prayers were answered. When we were almost without hope, we suddenly saw the mid-summer weather become darker. The clouds gathered quickly and thickened hiding the sun and leaving the day with very little light, and us in twilight.

At the same time the wind picked up and lightning tore through the sky. In the distance the sea seemed to evaporate and rise to the sky forming grey clouds, and we felt that the atmosphere had become heavy. It was a sudden squall, a sudden change in the weather that caught us by surprise.

Happy and feeling hopeful, following orders by the captain and the first officer, we spread tarpaulins in readiness to collect the rainwater. We spread the tarpaulins in a way to form creases and placed empty receptacles underneath, to collect the water.

The sky darkened even more, and it started raining relentlessly, increasing in intensity and the rainwater was so dense, we could not see each other. In the beginning it was

yellow because of the dirty atmosphere but soon it cleared and fell clean and strong.

The rain pitilessly beat us, but we stood in it with our faces turned upwardly, one could say masochistically enjoying the beating, while at the same time cupping our hands to drink with greedy pleasure.

As suddenly as the squall started, the same way it ended. The blue sky appeared once more and the atmosphere, clear of dust, smelled of freshness, sea and iodine.

The sun, also clear of the desert dust, reappeared after the rain bright and hot and started heating the weather that had somewhat cooled by the rain.

I felt pleasure and relief, I was sure that God had performed a miracle to help us. A certainty nested in my heart, that soon we would see the launch coming from the port with the pilot who would navigate us to the dock.

Walking with my legs apart to balance against the constant rolling of the ship, I went to the small kitchenette of the crew to make myself a coffee, now that we finally had fresh, cool water. I allowed the coffee to brew well and greedily inhaled its aroma, as it was days since I had the luxury of a well brewed Turkish coffee. I filled a cup to the brim holding on to it with one hand to prevent it from sliding off since anything left on a table would fall off and break because of the rolling of the ship. This movement was very annoying and would not allow us to relax, it tormented us pitilessly. It was a constant, irregular rolling that did not stop for the whole time we were anchored,

while the currents underwater relentlessly continued their irregular flow, shaking us in the same, irregular manner. The furniture was fixed to the floor with screws or stuck so it would not move during rough seas. I sat on the settee wedging my legs under the table to prevent myself from falling over and I sipped my strong coffee with great pleasure.

Having quenched my thirst after so many days and with the bitter taste of coffee still in my mouth, I allowed my thoughts to wander. I thought of the customs officers of the country and wondered how people could be so unnecessarily cruel. The port was empty of ships, but for reasons unknown to us, we were not allowed to tie in the port; they did not even give us water. They allowed us to suffer thirst and hunger, drink dirty water until two of our number came down with an infectious disease, maybe even typhus, putting their life at risk.

Deep in my thoughts I did not see the sailor on duty come in and stand beside me. He nudged me to make room for him to sit, and he quickly told me that our troubles were over, the bridge had spoken to the customs authorities and we were told to prepare for entering the port, tie up and discharge our cargo. In a while, not too long, the launch with the pilot would come bringing also a doctor to examine the Second Officer and the trainee mechanic who were gravely ill.

VOYAGE TO LIBYA, the vicious murder

Libya is a country with ancient Greek cities, a lost Greece with ancient remains, Greece that passed its civilization to the whole world, even to this God forsaken country. The capital of the country is Tripoli, an ancient city established by the Carthaginians under the name Ia which, around 600 B.C, was renamed by the Greeks and given the name it bears today.

In my thoughts, before getting to know the country, I imagined Libya to be a dry land with windswept castles made of plinth and yellow desert soil inhabited by humans and not only by snakes and other desert reptiles due to its geographical position and its subterranean wealth.

I read it was governed by the iron fist of Gaddafi and that it was one of the safest countries without thefts, robberies and terrorists, that one could walk the streets, narrow alleys and markets freely without the slightest danger and that the Libyans were a proud and hospitable people.

As I disembarked, I saw Tripoli in front of me like an extension of the port, separated from it by a wide street. I crossed over risking my life as the cars were both right and left-hand drives and the drivers drove on both sides of the road, did not stop at traffic lights and sped without considering others beside them. They were frantic drivers, using the roads without regulations and every now and then one would hear the “crash” of a road accident.

As it were, Libya was as I had imagined it to be before I became acquainted with it, a country with dry land full of yellow low buildings and parched sandy soil. There were no clubs, only coffee shops and restaurants which stayed opened until midnight, while few people – only men – circulated in the streets wearing white, dirty jel-labiyas. The Libyans were Muslim Sunnis who would become hostile – as I had read – and dangerous if a foreigner showed disrespect to local traditions and morals and if his actions were disrespectful, especially during Ramadan. A foreigner should not provoke, for example, by drinking alcohol in public places since drinking is strictly prohibited to Muslims, and women visitors should dress modestly.

After I crossed the avenue that separated the port from the city, I saw in front of me a huge square lined with palm trees that stretched towards the sea and in the distance loomed the magnificent walls of Medina and the Tripoli castle which housed a museum with exhibits ranging from ancient historical times to the present.

The Medina market was in a small alley and consisted of a small parallel square called a “covered market” because it was covered by roofs held up by magnificent old columns built with exquisite artistry and skill. One could hear the metallic hammerings of the copper beaters and ironmongers who were manufacturing mainly souvenir items for tourists and hanging them up on the wall ready for sale. This was called the copper market, even though other metal and silver goods were also made there.

I entered the covered market crowded with merchants who had their wares spread on the ground or small benches. The smell from the dates mixed with the fish laid out on the low benches. Flies whirled around the air in clouds and the carpet merchants shook cloths around in an attempt to shoo them away.

In this intolerable stench I walked the whole Tripoli bazaar without finding even a small thing to buy as a souvenir. I only bought a fan to shoo the awful flies and deflect the hot atmosphere of 45 degrees Celsius which literally cooked the country and its people. I walked away from the benches with the fish and the strong odours and sat at a small table behind a wooden bench where a busy little man with his jellabiya sleeves turned up was standing over a brasier filled with fire, cooking meat in a frying pan. As soon as I sat, he came towards me. He spoke broken Greek, so we understood each other without difficulty. I told him I wanted to try an Arabic dish and he said that he would fry some meat I would surely enjoy. In a few minutes he brought me a plate with a large piece of meat, a huge steak. I tried it and loved it. I ate it greedily and really enjoyed it. These were new flavours for me and I was happy to taste them. When I asked, he said that it was camel meat. He explained that the nomads in the desert drink camel milk because it is very nutritious and like eating parts of the animal as well, its chops but mainly its hump which is considered a delicacy.

The older the camel, the more one needed to cook the meat because it was tougher. Camel meat was popular in

the Middle Eastern countries but in recent years had started becoming popular in the west as well due to the export of large quantities of tasty salami and pastourma sausages made with it. My fillet was actually a chop and I really liked it. Since then, and whenever I happened to pass through Arab countries, I always asked for the same dish, camel meat.

He finished his story and offered me Arabic coffee, bitter and strong which I also enjoyed, and I laid back on the old, comfortable rope chair, musing and watching the merchants peddling their wares.

The ancient historian Diodorus of Sicily wrote that the Gorgons were a Greek mythical nation of women living in Libya near lake Triponis and were constantly at war with the neighbouring Amazon tribes.

According to Greek history, an ancient Delphic oracle encouraged settlers from Santorini to emigrate to Northern Africa and in 631 B.C., they founded the city of Kirini.

Near the port of Kirini was Apollonia. During the Greco-Turkish war in Crete, a group of Cretan Muslims abandoned the island and found refuge next to the ruins of the ancient city and ended up building the village of Sou-sa.

Even today, the older generation speak almost fluent Greek in the Cretan dialect and dream of Crete as they heard it described by their forefathers. Even during the

ottoman period, a considerable number of Greeks fled to Libya, mainly to Tripoli and developed it, as most Greeks dealt in commerce, shipping and sponge-diving.

In Medina, the architecturally prettiest part of the old town of Tripoli, there is a Greek quarter next to the Green Square with houses and a part of the market around the orthodox church of Saint George.

The entire market of Tripoli that is enclosed within the Medina walls is made of narrow streets and alleys, small squares full of open air and closed tiny shops with peddlers and larger scale merchants advertising their wares by trying to shout over each other.

In the closed market of Tripoli there were many shops with gold and silver jewellery, brass and ceramic artefacts, leather goods, carpets and fabrics while at its eastern entrance, under a tower with a big clock showing the time, stood the small café where I was sitting.

The helpful and busy little man, the proprietor, asked me whether I wished to enjoy smoking a hookah, and said that it was very rare for Europeans to pass without smoking one.

I had just started smoking, a bad habit I picked up to break the monotony of the endless hours of my shift in the ship's engine room. A cigarette was my only compan-

ion and pastime during my lonely hours when my only company was the du-dum du-dum of the diesel engine turning the propeller with such force that it roared against the force of the sea while pushing the ship through the water.

I accepted gladly and, leaning on the comfortable old wicker chair I started enjoying the smoke while watching the comings and goings of the mixed crowd of vendors and shoppers of all kinds filling the covered market.

The little man started explaining the history of the hukkah in his broken Greek.

He explained that the hukkah, or narghiles, is a Persian invention for a light and pleasant smoke, and its name derives from the Persian word nargioul meaning coconut because, in place of the glass globe used today, the used a coconut. A vertical pipe is connected on the top of a glass globe half filled with clean water. This vertical pipe is called "Loulas" and tabaco with small pieces of lit charcoal is placed on top of it. As soon as the smoker starts sucking, the air in the globe is reduced creating a vacuum and the smoke from the burning tobacco together with air enters the globe through the vertical pipe and creates bubbles and a rumbling sound. The smoke is filtered and cooled when passing through the water, and this is the difference between the hukkah and other types of smoking.

Sucking on the light smoke and filling my lungs, I subconsciously started singing a song called “when Loulas smokes”. Wondering how this song came into my head, I concluded that it was because smoking a hukkah was passed into Greek culture and tradition through the “rembetika” songs that played every day on the radio.

I finished, paid the man with an extra dinar as baksheesh and he thanked me by saying “may Allah keep you safe”.

I had heard and now realised that Libyans loved Greece and the Greeks because I detected a warm appreciation and hospitality in the kind man’s attitude towards me, and I considered this as a first sign and indication that this was true.

The city spread around the wide square. On the right there were low modern buildings built along a street parallel to the square. They were built in accordance with European standards and housed shops with windows full of European products.

I followed that route and, walking leisurely, I was looking in the windows with the Japanese Seiko watches. My sailor colleagues had told me that they were very cheap in this country. I intended to buy myself a Seiko watch, it would be my first ever watch so I wanted it to be both good and cheap.

While walking and looking in the windows, the sun relentlessly bore down on my head, made me perspire and gave me a raging headache. The dry and thin air caused the horizon in the distance to shimmer in the intolerable heat and created multicoloured lines and a fog that limited visibility. Constantly waving my fan I tried to cool myself down, but this was ineffective as the draught I created was hot because of the hot air coming in from the desert.

I started thinking of my colleagues, the second officer and engine room trainee that were gravely ill, maybe suffering from Legionnaires' Disease and fighting for their life. They were sick for many days on the ship without medical care but now, fortunately, they were in the hospital in Tripoli, transported there by the Libyan Customs authorities. I hoped the hospital had air conditioning so my colleagues would be in a cool environment to recuperate and survive.

The whole crew was worried about them as we knew the notoriety of the Libyan leader and the hatred he had instilled in his fanatic followers for all people coming from countries with western culture. Gaddafi was a descendant of Bedouin nomads and was a cruel and inhumane dictator whose name was linked with the recent history of Libya. In 1969 he led a revolution and ascended to power, overthrowing King Idris, establishing a totalitarian and military regime. In America he was known as the

rabid dog of the Middle East as he was a great adversary of the West. His name was linked to high-jackings, and incendiary speeches always aimed against western imperialism that stole, as he claimed, wealth-producing raw materials from Third World countries.

The information about this man was conflicting, in Greece the left-wing parties praised him while the right-wing parties accused him. It was, however a fact that in the 70's, when the cost of living everywhere else in the world was becoming more expensive and a large section of people, even in advanced countries, did not have easy access to food, the government in Libya had abolished all taxes on foodstuff. Another result of his government was that Libya had the highest per capita income in Africa and Libyans were richer than the people of other neighbouring countries. This was because Gaddafi did not allow the exploitation of Libya's mineral riches by foreign companies and countries.

The people may have suffered under the strict dictatorship, however this was the case for those who did not worship Moammar Gaddafi, the leader. This dictator however, had passed laws under which a large part of the income from oil was distributed to the people.

The USA were against him because he was the main threat to the USA domination in Africa since his views were totally against their interests and also because he

was attempting to unite the Arab countries against the USA.

The creation of a strong Arab world was contrary to the interests of the USA and Israel, so they were trying to bring Libya to its knees by creating chaos and anarchy. For this reason, the dispute between Gaddafi and the West had reached its peak during those years and his fanatic supporters saw everyone coming from the West as an enemy of their leader and were hostile towards him. This also happened to Libyans who did not declare their love, respect and allegiance to the leader of the nation.

Under these circumstances known to all of us on the ship, we were ordered by the captain to be careful with our conduct while at the same time we were greatly worried and afraid about the future outcome for our colleagues. Were they going to treat and look after them or were they going to abandon them to their fate, and allow them to succumb to their illness like helpless dying dogs?

With these uneasy thoughts in my mind and constantly waving my fan to air my face, I stood before a shop window selling Rolex watches and was examining the small tags with the prices, trying to extinguish the unpleasant thoughts in my mind. The prices were astronomical but fairly so, as these were gold watches of a globally renowned luxury brand.

He was young, slim, tall and handsome. He wore a bright white spotless jellabiya and his movements had an air of authority. He appeared from opposite the road and walked tall, exuding authority and superiority while at the same time his appearance caused awe and was reminiscent of a prince from an eastern fairy tale.

The few pedestrians as well as I looked at him with curiosity because his appearance was interesting. He walked across and stood in front of the shop window next door and nodded his head towards me in a discreet greeting. I returned the greeting with a nod and, as I took my eyes off him, I caught a glimpse of a short Arab a little further on the pavement, in a faded jellabiya and a turban covering his head swiftly walking towards me in a strange manner.

Maybe my curiosity was caused by the hard look on his face as he looked at the man in front of the next shop window or maybe I got a bad vibe about him.

He seemed to head straight towards him without any special reason but just seeing the hardness in his eyes made me realise that something bad was about to happen.

In his right hand he tightly held a large shepherd's crook that ended in a huge, club shaped gnarl. The size difference was obvious; a huge club and a small human figure, bare-

foot and with fiery eyes, inside a large, dirty, sack-like jellabiya. The eyes were like those of a wild, enraged animal, determined and hard, and the closer he came, the clearer I could see them, dark, red, bloodthirsty, demonic eyes, full of hatred, fixed on the man who appeared to stand majestically and fancifully in front of the shop window full of Rolex watches.

I felt sure that something was about to happen to the young man standing before me. I thought of shouting a warning, but I immediately thought of the instructions of the captain not to involve ourselves in other peoples' business and not to provoke anyone in this country.

In a fast pace he came where the man was standing and, stopping abruptly behind him, he lifted the crook. The sudden movement caused his turban to fall away, revealing a young, adolescent, but not at all innocent, face as cruelty wrinkled his skin and made him look like an unstoppable dog ready to pounce.

Before the other man had a chance to sense his presence and react, he forcefully brought the crook down on his head. As if struck by lightning, he fell to the ground dead, without uttering a sound. His head was pulverized, blood and brain matter spattered everywhere, and I felt lucky that none of it struck me.

He held his crook in one hand and with the other lifted the turban and, looking in my eyes, wrapped it around his face. He quickly left the scene and disappeared towards the port. The other pedestrians walking up and down the same street showed no interest in what had just happened. No-

body seemed to mind, nobody leaned over the lifeless body to see whether he was still alive and needed help. It was as if nothing happened, as if this was a usual part of daily life, like someone had discarded a bag of rubbish that nobody wanted to pick up because the rubbish truck was going to pass and collect it soon enough.

Stunned, I stood for a while looking at the dead man's white jellabiya quickly turning red and his blood pooling on the street, and I was not sure whether I was frightened or shocked by the whole incident. I only remember that I decided to return to the ship, hide in my shell and my security, because I just witnessed that Libya was not the friendly, safe country that I had read about in a magazine.

With quick steps, almost running, I found my way back, looking left and right, ready to defend myself in case I was attacked by the murderer who knew I had seen his face. My imagination was out of control, filling my mind with frightening thoughts and creating all sorts of scenarios about being attacked. If need be, I was prepared to fight for my life with my bare hands.

I completed the route in a short while though it felt like a century, and when I reached the pier where the ship had tied, I climbed the ladder two steps at a time. When I arrived on deck, I scanned the whole harbour and the street. I saw no trace; the little man was nowhere.

I was relieved and thought that these are the things that happen in countries under dictatorship, where the laws are not applied equally to all. I thought that maybe the victim was a dissident and the killer a secret policeman of the re-

gime that governed the country. This would not surprise me, I was almost sure that his was the case since only a few months ago I had seen similar incidents taking place in Greece under the junta government of Ioannides, a dictatorship which, on the 25th of November 1973 with a similar coup d' état, succeeded the Colonels' Junta which governed Greece since 1967. Brigadier Ioannides, a dissatisfied hardcore junta supporter, used the Polytechnic uprising as an excuse to restore public order, and, with the pretext that dictator Papadopoulos deviated from the Principles of the Revolution of the 21st April, organized a coup d'état on 25 November 1973.

I knew this firsthand because on the day before I sailed I happened to be trapped in Omonoia Square, the central square of Athens, on that terrible day of the Polytechnic uprising and saw the cold blooded shots fired into the crowd of students who were protesting for liberty and democracy, and the savage treatment of the Greek people by the soldiers supporting the junta.

Maybe my recent experience was the reason I considered the action I had just witnessed as a natural occurrence, since this country was also governed by a military junta. In this country, in 1969, a Libyan army officer, Muammar Gaddafi, a revolutionary and coup d'état instigator, together with a small group of army officers, staged a coup d'état under his leadership and overthrew King Idris while he was on holiday in Greece.

I formed the opinion that one should avoid travelling to non-democratic countries.

With these thoughts, I turned and walked to the small kitchenette of the ship to make a coffee, bitter like the incident I had just witnessed with my own eyes, a tragic episode during which an unsuspecting human being fell dead, killed, murdered, most likely for political reasons.

VOYAGE TO LIBYA, the stowaway

It was almost time for my shift and I was sitting in the small kitchenette of the ship waiting for the few minutes left to pass before I descended the ladder down to the engine room. At that moment the door opened, and the First Engineer walked in.

- “Kyriako, get ready, we are on Stand-By, we will be leaving this God forsaken place soon”, he said.

Worried, I asked him about the Second Officer and the cadet who were sick in Tripoli hospital and, with a sad look on his face, he answered that we had no information from the Libyan customs authorities. We would head for home, hoping that they will recover and be sent to Athens by air.

I was quite upset about the bad news because I was aware of the bad faith and malice of the Libyan authorities against Christian Westerners, and I feared that the worst could very well happen and my colleagues would disappear, be lost forever like so many others in this country.

I got up with a heavy heart and went down to the engine room. There, I found the Third Engineer and we carried out the last inspection of the engine and the auxiliary machinery.

We started the pump to load ballast sea water, that is to say, fill the ballast tanks with sea water to increase the weight of the ship so that it sinks a little and sits lower in the water. Taking on ballast is done when the ship is to

sail empty of cargo to make it heavier, enabling the propeller and the rudder to engage better.

So, we took on ballast by filling the auxiliary tanks with sea water so enabling the ship to sail better but also have the required draught to avoid rolling when we sail empty having discharged our cargo.

As soon as the First Engineer came down, we received the order from the captain to prepare. We started the engine and as soon as the tug pulled the ship away from the dock, we followed instructions from the bridge and gradually increased the engine's revolutions, fore and aft, and headed for open waters. We stopped to allow the pilot to disembark, and we headed full speed ahead for the motherland.

The engine was ticking over like a clock, the sea was calm, and the currents had subsided. The ship was cutting through the water effortlessly.

The first Engineer stayed a while below deck and, like always advised us to have our eyes focused on the engine. We started chatting and were told that we were heading for Novorossiysk in Russia, to load timber. We would then return to Greece to deliver the cargo to various islands.

I thought that it would be one of my best voyages because we would pass the Bosphorus and the narrow isthmus that separated European Turkey from Asian Turkey and connected the Sea of Marmaras to the Euxine Sea. Euxine Sea is a name deriving from the euphemistic replacement of the

previous name Axine Sea which denotes an inhospitable sea, a folkloric etymology corruption of the Phrygian word "axaenas" meaning dark or black from which derived the later name "Black Sea" as the waters there have an unusual darker colour in comparison to that of the Mediterranean.

The name Bosphorus means passage of the ox, that is Voux (Greek for ox) and poros (Greek for passage) and derives from the Greek myth of Io and her voyage after being turned into an ox by Zeus for her own protection. Mythology also suggests that this is where the Symbligades Rocks crushed every ship attempting to pass the Bosphorus, until Jason succeeded in getting through, after which the boulders stood still. The beauty and strategic significance of these straits led the Roman Emperor Constantine to build Constantinople at this location. The area around the Bosphorus is and always was renowned for its beauty and its endless shores that are the most beautiful in the whole world.

Therefore, we would sail the mythical Black Sea no ancient God could tame, and reach Novorossiysk where girls waited for us at the port holding scarves and gifts to welcome us. After, we would pass the Euxine Sea once more, the sea and straits of Marmaras and then we would be in the Aegean Archipelago, the cradle of Aegean civilization. According to mythology, the sea was named after Aegeas, father of Theseus and king of Athens who threw himself and drowned in the sea when his beloved son, returning victorious after slaying the Minotaur, forgot to change the black sails of his ship to white sails, as they had agreed between

them before he set sail for this difficult expedition, to indicate his victory.

And finally, the islands, scattered over the blue waters of the Cyclades, a circle and two parallel lines of islands, given this name because of their circular formation around the sacred island of Delos, birthplace of Goddess Artemis. A complex of rocks and islets with centuries of history, a creation of Poseidon, God of the sea who, according to myth, transformed the Cyclades nymphs into islands after they caused his wrath. A group of islands with minimal and simple landscapes dominated by the optimum Greek colours, the white of the buildings and the blue of the sea, creating amazing natural views as the Gods decided to adorn them with abundant charm giving them a particular image that is famous around the world.

The ships' engineers are in charge of the maintenance and good operation of the ships' engines.

They work mainly in the engine room and ensure that the engine and other auxiliary machinery such as the electricity generators work smoothly. The overall control is mainly carried out from a console and with the assistance of the engine crew who carry out maintenance and repair, enabling the ship to sail without any problems.

The profession of a ship's engineer is difficult and hard. It comes with a lot of responsibility, entails manual work, long hours one one's feet and night shifts. The work is done with other crew members of various nationalities, habits and customs as the ship owners prefer other nationalities because of the lower labour costs, a fact however that cre-

ates problems in daily life since cooperation and team work is essential in the limited space of a ship. The working conditions are particularly hard and unhealthy and include also all difficulties and problems that are part of a seaman's life as well as additional risk of accidents when working in an engine room. It is a profession for people who love the sea and travelling, have special skills around machinery and it demands a high level of responsibility and attention as the correct and safe sailing of the ship depends on the actions of the engineer.

Engineers need to be intelligent and skillful in order to carry out precise calculations regarding the consumption and supply of fuel, lubricants and spare parts. Within the context of their work, third officers and cadets need to inspect and register the exact amount of fuel and lubricants in their storage tanks every four hours, which is also the duration of their shift. They check the gages to see whether they are working properly, the amounts they register, they inspect the hygiene and water supply pumps, the air compressors, the storage bottles and their mechanisms, in other words, they make sure all machinery provides full service so that the living conditions of the crew are good.

My shifts were 12:00 to 16:00 and 00:00 to 04:00. It was getting dark, I had not gone to bed, and was sitting in my cabin listening to music on the cassette player waiting for the time to come to relieve my colleague. I remember I was listening to a song just out by the popular singer Mitropanos about a place in Greece called Kythira. It was a lovely song but that night, having sailed from Libya, I could not con-

concentrate on the music because my thoughts were still in the market place of Tripoli and the murder of an unsuspecting Libyan by a person of his own faith. As much as I longed to forget the whole abhorrent incident, it was impossible, it was too soon.

I slipped into my boiler suit and headed to the engine room, but my mind's eye could still see the dark and determined cruel look of the killer, his features altered by hatred, terrifying and fierce. These were images I did not want in my thoughts and, in an attempt to delete them I forcefully shook my head left and right, but to no avail. I knew that in time, these thoughts would only be a memory but now, they were dancing in my head and would not leave me.

I descended the tall stairs and stood before the control and operation console of the engine room, looking at all indicators and gauges showing pressure, temperature, water level, fuel, and making sure all was well. All was well and at the same time I heard the voice of the third engineer behind me confirming – “All is well”.

I turned and saw the third engineer and the cadet I had just relieved descending the stairs to the lower deck. We talked for a while and we were joined by the other third engineer, the one I was joining for this shift.

We took over and signed the engine's log and were left to ourselves. The third engineer was a likeable man and he loved telling jokes. We had an argument in the past because he sometimes became boring, but he was relentless, never stopped talking and got on people's nerves. So, with the ex-

cuse of wanting to inspect the auxiliary machinery on the lower deck, I would leave him to go and find some peace and quiet.

This time, before he was given the opportunity to start talking and while he was inspecting the console, I picked up a spanner and descended to check the bilges.

I was checking everything, taking my time and, as I had four whole hours of shift to kill, I was meticulous with every inspection, counting the minutes for each one, the same number of minutes I had counted hundreds of times before.

I knew I needed forty-five minutes for a full inspection. I needed another fifteen minutes to empty the bilges, that is, start the pumps to empty the backwater into the sea. After that, I would go upstairs and make two coffees, one for me and one for the third engineer. During this coffee break, whether I liked it or not, I had to put up with his endless monologue. His jokes may have been boring, but admittedly they were clever and humorous. Thirty-five years have passed but I still remember his name was Michalis and once, when I felt I could take no more, he told me the following one-liner I remember to this day:

- "Once there was one then he left and there was none".

It was a witty short joke understood only by those with a fine sense of humour.

At dawn, close to four o'clock and almost at the end of my four-hour shift, I started doing one last inspection, as I always did.

I descended to the lower deck, the lowest part of the engine, and started my inspection from the bilges up. I went to the edge, where the bilges ended leaving a gap between them and the ship's hull in order to look at the underwater part of the hull to see whether water had accumulated. By observing any rise in the level of the water without good reason, we could tell if there was leakage.

In nautical terminology, bilges are the lowest part of the engine room at the ship's underwater hull where all the backwater collects, they are the water receptors or, in layman's language, the ship's drain. I turned on my flashlight and threw a beam of light in the dark opening. I noticed the backwater moving. As the ship was sailing on a completely smooth sea without any undercurrents, this indicated a possible leak. Quite concerned, I leaned forward and lifted the cover of the next bilge to see what was happening.

The sight before me was one I could not have imagined, it startled, worried, scared me. I was caught completely unprepared.

In the bilges, between the ship's pipes, sitting in the backwater and oil was a curled up small, dark human figure. The beam of light from my torch fell on a frightened face, eyes wide with terror. My instant fear dissipated upon realisation that it was a harmless stowaway.

With the wrench raised in readiness to use if necessary, I leaned in and looked at him closely. To my great surprise, I recognized the killer of the unsuspecting citizen standing in front of the shop window with the Rolex watches in Tripoli.

- "Why are you here?"

I asked in a menacing voice. He opened his mouth with fear and in a faint voice repeated the words "please help". Realising that I had nothing to fear and seeing that he spoke English, I sat back on my knees and started questioning him.

The short story he recounted was heart wrenching, touched me and brought me before a dilemma on what I should do. Deliver him to the captain as was my duty and as the law provided so that he would notify all nearby port authorities, in which case, as we were still in Libyan waters, the relevant authorities would pick him up with all the expected repercussions? Or keep quiet and be guilty of aiding a stowaway?

And he told me his story...

His sister was twelve years old and was a student in their neighbourhood school. One day, a so-called education inspector visited the school. This man was actually one of Gaddafi's secret agents. There were many cases like his; when Gaddafi wanted little girls for his bed, he would send his people out to get them.

He took his sister forcefully, while she cried and fought, and spirited her away. All traces were lost, and despite the efforts of her brother and parents, they could not find her.

Time passed and eventually a jeep stopped outside their house and dropped off his sister. They all ran to embrace her with joy, but she seemed different, she could not smile and remained sad and speechless.

They all knew what had happened, and it caused them great pain, she had been subjected to an ordeal that dam-

aged her soul deeply and she would carry the trauma for the rest of her life. But they were her family and hoped that time and love would help her overcome this and pull through.

As she recounted what had happened, it seemed that she was raped multiple times, degraded and beaten by Gaddafi, who was known to be a pervert and a sadist who enjoyed subjecting boys and girls in his personal harem to unspeakable acts. When he was bored with her, he gave her to his agent, the one who took her from the school, and when he was bored too, he sent her home...

After a few days her brother found her hanging from a beam in their home. She could not stand the shame and took her own life. A black cloud shrouded their home and their hearts. She was his only precious sister and he swore revenge. After her funeral, he came up with a plan of action. He knew that he could not get close to Gaddafi, the instigator of this act, but he decided to kill his henchman, the man who captured, stole and raped little girls.

He stalked him for many days until he got his chance to kill him outside a shop window full of Rolex watches...

Everything he said convinced me and made me feel empathy towards him. I thought that had this happened to me, I would do the same thing and maybe more. So, without second thoughts, I decided not to report him, leave him in his hiding place until we docked at a port where he would have a chance to escape. I was even going to help him, give him food and money if he needed it.

I told him this and left him reassured in his hiding place. I climbed to the deck, handed over to my colleague and went off duty.

During my next shift I went down to the bilges, called him but did not receive an answer. I leaned under the bilges, but he had vanished. I was not surprised, for sure he changed hiding place to protect himself in case I changed my mind and reported him. I knew the ship had good hiding places where a man could hide and not be seen. He could find food in the small kitchenette where food was always kept in the fridge so long as he moved carefully during quiet hours, while the crew was asleep.

VOYAGE TO LIBYA, an unlikely saviour

Troumbas street in Piraeus was a neighbourhood of ill repute, its side streets full of brothels and cabarets.

Between 1950 and 1967 there were more than 100 red light houses and many cabarets offering all kinds of services, as well as coffee shops that doubled as drug dens, while most people circulating there were dangerous criminals. Life in the area was also dangerous with many gangs and muggers lurking in narrow alleys while murder as a means of settling disputes between racketeers and pimps was a daily occurrence. In 1967 the military junta governing the country closed most night spots and dives, and even changed the name of the street from Troumba to Notara in an attempt to develop the port area since this street of ill repute was parallel to Akti Miaouli where many shipping companies had established themselves in office buildings.

Despite this however, Notara street and the surrounding alleys had revived during the 1970s and 1980s, and cabarets advertised their wares with photographs of naked girls posted in their windows, while, the narrow alleys and squares were once more, full of thieves and homosexuals and transvestites established their own areas where they solicited and picked up customers.

On the street crossing the old Troumba and Akti Miaouli there were two cinemas that remained opened during the early hours until late at night, and they screened porn. These were the first years after the screening of porn was

allowed freely following the fall of the junta and all the timewasters of the port and surrounding areas from Hadjikyriakos and Drapetsona until PasaLimani crowded these cinemas, and where the more “comme il faut” homosexuals, wearing their trilbies, were frequent customers in the hope that, in the dark and with the libidos of the viewers heightened during the screenings it would be easier to find companionship.

Next to the cinemas was the coffee shop “Voskopoula” a place frequented by Cypriot seamen. This is where I used to go whenever I disembarked and where I always managed to find Cypriot acquaintances to hear news about my long-suffering country since, after the 1974 invasion of Turkey, many people I knew were registered as dead, missing or prisoners of war.

One day I was at Akti Miaouli and, as time passed and it got dark, I decided to leave. I had disembarked from the ship “SAN DENNIS” and arrived at the offices of the Fraggistas ship owning company to collect my pay. On that day, I had a considerable amount of cash in my pocket having been paid my wages for almost seven months of work aboard the ship as a trainee engineer.

On that day, I first went into the “Voskopoula” coffee shop and then one of the cinemas where I watched two back-to-back films, one pornographic and the other karate. It was the time when porn and karate were very much in fashion.

Having passed my time I exited the cinema and realized it was evening. I walked towards the train station to

catch the train for Petralona. The distance was about one kilometer, so I leisurely made my way looking into the shops' windows. A little before the station was Themistocles Square, where recently they had erected a big bronze statue of Themistocles, so I sat a while to look at it. I struck up a conversation with two women, a mother and daughter who owned the kiosk in the square and so time passed, night fell, and it became dark. I thought of taking the bus rather than the train, so I changed direction, crossed the square and passed the Agia Trias church, with the intention of going to the bus stop that was on King George A' Avenue that crossed Akti Miaouli street.

The area behind the church was dark because the light from the electric street lamps could not reach that spot and it was deserted. I quickened my step wanting to pass through the darkness and reach a lit area, my mind filled with thoughts of criminal gangs lurking in dark areas waiting for lonely victims.

A few metres before I reached the light, four human silhouettes suddenly appeared in front of me and blocked my way. In the dark I saw their arms stretched out towards me. In the dense darkness it appeared as if they were holding deadly weapons, maybe pistols, knives or crowbars and clubs. I turned back ready to flee and realized that three other human silhouettes had blocked my escape route. I knew that they were going to rob me and decided not to react but give them all the money I had on

me without resisting and maybe in this way escape with my life.

As they menacingly moved slowly and steadily towards me, one of them made them all stop by uttering an abrupt whisper, like an order, in a foreign language that sounded Arabic. He said a few more words in their language and they all turned and left, swallowed up by the darkness.

He was a small, skinny man and he approached me with his hand stretched out wanting to shake mine. I gave him my hand and felt him squeezing it warmly. In the beginning I did not comprehend, I stood trying to see his dark face that became one with the darkness of the night. He spoke to me in English, I heard him call me "my friend" and pulled me gently by the hand towards the lights of the square. I was intrigued with curiosity but also had a suspicion. I tried to pierce the darkness with my eyes to see his face. When we reached the lights, I saw my unexpected savior.

He was the small human figure with the fiery eyes, the eyes of an enraged wild beast hardened by determination. The same dark, red and bloodthirsty demonic eyes, full of hatred that I had seen just a few months back in the Libyan capital when I became the witness of a brutal murder committed right in front of me. The man I discovered but did not report to the captain as was my duty, after he explained to me why he had killed the man standing in front of the shop window filled with Rolex watches.

And now, I meet him in Themistocles Square, the leader of a gang robbing and probably killing unsuspecting and innocent passers-by. I thought I was lucky that he was the leader and I was spared but, after we said our good-byes and I boarded the bus to leave Piraeus, I thought that, had I reported him, maybe his gang, without him as its leader, would not have appeared before me, maybe even the gang itself would not have existed at all...



TROUMBA IN PIRAEUS

Piraeus by night, with its dives, cabarets, brothels, coffee shops, hash dens, the bullies and the lads, the singers of “rebetika” Greek songs, the lady boys, the pickpockets and the harbour thieves. All concentrated together in one neighbourhood close to the harbour on Troumba street and surrounding areas.

In 1832, with the creation of the Greek state and the naming of Athens as the capital city, the harbour was brought

back to life and developed into the largest port of the country. To facilitate the ships and their supply with water, they dug a well on the dock in 1860 and installed a pump (in Greek slang: “tromba”) for supplying the ships with water. The area was named Troumba because of this pump (tromba).

Troumba was the area of ill repute of Piraeus and, during the time of the American presence in the area, it enjoyed its heyday due to its prostitution and lawlessness, the cabarets, prostitutes and pimps. Every time an American vessel of the 6th Fleet docked in the harbour, the residents and people from the surrounding areas came up with ways to get their hands on the Americans’ money.

So, during these times of poverty where people did not even have a place in the sun, Troumba ended up being a lawless place, with its own unwritten rules.

Every Wednesday when I was a child, I remember Leonidas’ cinema where I paid half a shilling and watched Greek films. Through them I learnt about this place of ill repute and its tough life. I got to know the hard character of the people through actor Giorgos Foundas who played the honest but tough man, the sneaky and unscrupulous snitch played by Stephanos Stratigos and, through the unique acting of the immortal Effie Economou, I got to know about the nasty prostitutes and the honest women who stooped to such level either because they were drawn into that sort of life or were forced to do so by poverty and bullies. These scenes affected the viewers and drew their minds into experiencing imaginary ad-

ventures. These were otherworldly stories, about the past, successfully presented by Greek cinema. These films presented the poverty that ravaged Greece after the war. When poor beautiful women would come to Piraeus with the excuse of looking for work; where even married women resorted to selling their body. A subterranean unlawful world full of mystery and fear which scared the law abiding, peace loving citizens.

As I was in Greece, it was natural for me to think of visiting the notorious neighbourhood. They had changed its name in an attempt to change its history. It was the period between 1973 and 1978, and they succeeded in changing nothing. This was still an area full of pimps, homosexuals, prostitution and erotic cinemas. A hedonistic world, where seamen and other customers partied with female companions in the cinemas, eateries and coffee shops all day, while during the night, they watched strippers in the cabarets in the company of pimps and bouncers who stood in the side-lines, discretely watching and ready to intervene, where necessary.

In the beginning, influenced by the films I had watched which showed the dangers that lurked in the partly lit darkened depths of these dives, I did not go into cabarets. I passed my time lounging in the coffee shops "Hellas" or "Voskopoula" which were the usual haunts of sailors but mainly of Cypriots who were walking the Piraeus coastline looking for work on the ships. I did prefer, however, going into the two cinemas on the coast which showed back to back adult films. It was the era

when the public showing of pornography had just been allowed and this resulted in the cinemas filling to bursting point with insatiable viewers. It was something new for Greece after the fall of the military junta that had ruled Greece for seven years.

I had just been discharged from the ship. I remember I walked down to Piraeus and, on entering the coffee shop "Hellas", fell onto an old friend from my village, my best friend Andreas with whom I grew up and who was my buddy, in everything good, and everything bad. He was studying to be an aircraft engineer.

Together with my friend and two more lads from Kalamata, we decided that this was the day to celebrate. Being alone and feeling lonely in foreign lands, we decided to seek female company and entered a cabaret. It was early evening; the customers were few and the prostitutes were plentiful. In the dimly lit place smelling heavily of incense, there were half-naked women all looking beautiful and desirable. We were welcomed and taken to a corner at the back of the room, an area a little secluded and a little raised from the floor. We sat on comfortable couches and in a very relaxed atmosphere we watched beautiful girls dance only for us. We ordered drinks for us, and also for the girls. I didn't enjoy drinking, I always had just one or two. That night, I wanted to be in control and not become giddy, so I decided I would only have a beer. I was worried, afraid we might get involved in unpleasantries with the pimps, the thieves and robbers. I guess I

was still influenced by the films with Foundas and Kourkoulos.

I cannot remember ordering a second or third drink that night, I cannot remember many things at all, only that I had a good time. I had flashbacks of hedonistic and pleasant moments with the gorgeous girls, touching me, caressing me, kissing me sweetly.

With no further memory the next day, I woke in the old hotel, lying on the old bed, alone. On my back and looking at the ceiling, cigarette in hand, I tried to remember what happened the night before. All I recalled were flashing memories of pleasure and sensuality, visions of bare-breasted girls in the bar touching and fondling me.

With dread I reached out and pulled my clothes towards me, certain about what I would find. I looked in the pockets. A large sum of money I had withdrawn the previous day was gone, nothing was left. All was spent on prostitutes. I needed to get up early and go to the company to draw on account of my next commission's wages. I could not continue living on shore for more days, I had spent all my money in one night. It seems the waiters, the women, the cabaret owners had their ways and used incense and other substances to relax the customers into spending their money with ease. This was probably what happened to us. However, I was not really upset, for me, that was a new and relaxing experience.



PART 3, TRAVELING ON THE SHIP "S. UNION"



IN MONTEVIDEO

Uruguay is a small country on the Equator, located in South America, between Brazil and Argentina, and its name means “river of the colourful birds”. All the native inhabitants of the country were exterminated during the colonization period and today there are practically no descendants of those people. Today, Uruguay’s population are all European immigrants.

Montevideo is the country’s capital and it is in the south, on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean. It has a population of 1,5 million and maintains its colonial architecture, and it very green and full of impressive plane trees.

At night, the city is filled with the sounds of drummers moving around the city or sitting around fires playing the so-called Uruguayan beat, created by the African slaves brought over by the colonialists a little before 1800. This drumming is a poignant expression of the enslaved Africans' nostalgia for freedom.

The drumming has an impressive sound and rhythm and the white invaders fell under its spell and included it in today's Uruguayan culture. Mostly on Sundays, the people crowd the streets and parade with their African drums made of wood and animal skins. In formation, they proceed drumming loudly and in sync while men and women, usually youngsters, follow them dancing with animated moves. The renowned tango was created in these neighbourhoods by street dancers and in these same streets the internationally known song "Cumarsita" was heard for the first time.

The day we docked at the port of Montevideo was hot and humid from the constant and relentless drizzle of rain. The heat combined with the humidity made the clothes stick to our sweaty bodies. Unfazed, we donned our best clothes and walked down the ship's ladder to go into town, the rain soaking us to the bone. None of us thought to wait till the rain stopped, we were in a rush just like a hungry man needs food and a thirsty man needs water, eager to go into the bars around the port and meet women, party with them and get drunk, touch them and be touched in return. In a side street there was a dark and empty bar. I entered with my companion, one of the stokers. It was completely

empty, with no barman or proprietor in sight. We were about to leave when an internal door opened and a beautiful woman with an amazing body appeared. She spoke to us in Greek and my friend the stoker immediately started flirting with her.

I sat at the edge of the bar and ordered a brandy coke. Slowly sipping my drink, I watched them cuddling. My clothes were stuck to my back and every now and then I looked outside at the weather planning to go and change clothes as soon as the rain stopped. As the rain abated and I was about to tell my friend that I was leaving, the door opened again and another girl walked out, slim with slender legs and narrow hips. She must have been about twice my age with a kind and sad face. She looked like a person who led a troubled life, psychologically tired, with sweet and sorrowful eyes. She saw me getting up, came close and took me by the hand.

- “Where are you going?” she asked in broken Greek, “stay and let’s get to know each other, we love Greeks and your ancient culture”.

She did not release my hand but continued holding it tenderly, putting me in an awkward position. After a while she realised I was feeling a little uncomfortable and, on her own accord, went behind the bar, poured two drinks and gave me one. In a while I ordered two more, the again two more, and without really knowing whether I picked her up or she picked me up, we left holding hands.

These are everyday human experiences that turn into indelible memories even after the passage of many years,

especially in cases of seamen who, while away from their country and in bleak foreign lands, find solace in female arms that offer false tenderness and make-believe love and try to create fake feelings, in faces soon to be forgotten at the next port, but these memories remain ineffaceable in their mind for life.

My next shift begun at 04.00 next morning. I sleepily forced myself out of bed, got dressed, paid the lady, said my goodbyes, and left. I walked back to the ship and found it had discharged its cargo and stood empty, something which caused the ladder to be too high for me to reach. I called the sailor on duty who was leaning on the railings and he signaled to me to wait. He used the walkie-talkie in his hand to call the boatswain and he came to the hoist with one more sailor and lowered a large basket-like cage on the pier. I hopped in and they pulled me up.

I went to my cabin to put on my work overalls and go down to the engine room to start my shift.

While below deck I was walking up and down to pass the time and suddenly caught myself having forgotten her name. I realized that it was merely a simple sexual encounter with fake feelings of tenderness, an act of human necessity and facilitation that I received from a skinny woman in a cheap hotel in exchange for payment.



THE GHOST SHIP

The ship was empty, and with no cargo, it sailed under fuel-saving speed towards Saudi Arabia. The temperature in the engine room, as usual, was close to 50 degrees Celsius and the heat was intolerable as the ship was old, badly maintained and had seen better days. The pipes were full of joins and extensions and boiling steam escaped from most of these, making the atmosphere dangerously hot and foggy. The extractor fans were working strenuously trying to suck out the heat and the fans created a cool draught inviting us to stand under them for most of our shift in an attempt to cool off.

The sea was rough and the ship, being without cargo and with less ballast than usual, was being shaken by the currents and the waves, making a bad situation even worse.

It was a summer's day and I was carrying out my afternoon shift. I was working on the boiler changing a broken join and being scorched by the insufferable heat. I was bare-chested and in shorts, with thick asbestos gloves on my hands, trying to loosen the tight screws that were warped due to the high temperature of the steam. Exerting myself in the unbearable heat, I managed to change the broken join and was gathering the tools to climb down when I heard the third officer calling me to get down quickly. I picked up the bucket with the tools and swiftly jumped off. Out of breath, the third engineer explained that we had an urgent incident. A message came from the bridge to accelerate full speed ahead and fill the ballast tanks to capacity so that the ship could reach its full speed.

Extremely curious but without complaining, we got to work. The stoker altered the dials on the boilers to increase the supply of fuel and strengthen the fire in order to produce the steam we needed. I opened the valves and turned on the large pumps to increase the ballast of the ship, and the third engineer took over the control panel to ensure the smooth operation of the engine room and issued the relevant necessary orders. Everything took place in a matter of minutes but before we even finished, the first and second engineers came down into the engine room. Pleased to see that in a case of emergency everything in the engine room was executed without delay, the first engineer explained that we had received a message

about a ship in danger and that we were sailing full speed ahead to assist.

I finished my shift and went up to the stern. I sat on the metal floor and felt the heat radiating from it, despite the fact that it was under the shade provided by the stern's awning, and I allowed my eyes to sweep the distant horizon, just visible through the foggy atmosphere and hazy under the hot sun.

I leaned with my back to the bulkhead and allowed my body to rest, my thoughts transcending the distant horizon and travelling far away, reaching my country. I visualized how many countries stood between me and my homeland and how many countless miles separated us. I had sailed to earn better wages because in 1973 Cyprus was suffering from high unemployment and great poverty. I chose to work on a tanker because it docked less frequently so I avoided spending a lot of money at ports in an attempt to save most of my pay. My salary was low and every pound I managed to save was a good profit. If we managed to be the first ship to reach the ship that sent the mayday call and saved the shipwrecked sailors, in accordance to shipping laws, we would get an extra month's pay for free. This would be a very welcome extra income, I thought, but I was immediately angry with myself for thinking this way, of my own personal benefit that derived from misfortune instead of worrying about my fellow seamen in peril.

I got off the floor and stood at the railings watching the long white frothy line formed by the propeller behind the

ship; when the ship rose high on the waves, the sound of the engine and the spinning propeller changed. I watched this while my thoughts run wild and, at some stage, I noticed that the ship stopped heaving and the sea was calm and resembled oil. Its colour changed to white like that of phosphorous and the day grew dark even though the sun had not gone down yet. Puzzled, I watched all these strange occurrences wondering whether they were real or whether they were figments of my imagination.

On the horizon, clearly in front of us and at a distance I saw a ship with white sails and a huge hull in shades of brown, appearing like a bright vision in the darkened evening. There was no human activity on deck, and it sailed at great speed, parallel to us. I thought I saw some white images moving on deck. It seemed deserted and sailing on its own and I watched ecstatically as it caught up, sailed by and quickly disappeared in front of us. It seemed like a scene from a film in fast-forward mode. A sudden and inexplicable vision outside normal parameters, and my mind recalled stories told by seamen during the endless hours of their shifts when they had nothing else to do.

I recalled the well-known story widely recounted among seamen about a ghost ship that appears when a big disaster was imminent, such as a shipwreck or an accident at sea that would result in death. They say it is a beautiful vessel without a crew and in it sail the spirits of all who perished at sea and that these souls are so many, the car-

go holds overflow and souls trail behind forming visions of colourful waterfalls upon the surface of the sea, in brilliant shades of colour. They also say that it appears and disappears suddenly. The souls of the drowned seamen stay behind and beckon the crews of other ships to follow. Just like the ancient Sirens of Ulysses, they bewitch those with weak hearts and willpower and persuade them to follow.

I was overcome with worry and my mind immediately thought the worst, I wondered whether the ship of death had come for us. Maybe the old steam boilers could not withstand the pressure for maximum speed and would explode. I knew the pressure was immense and that an explosion would be similar to a big bomb going off and would result in great material damage and loss of life.

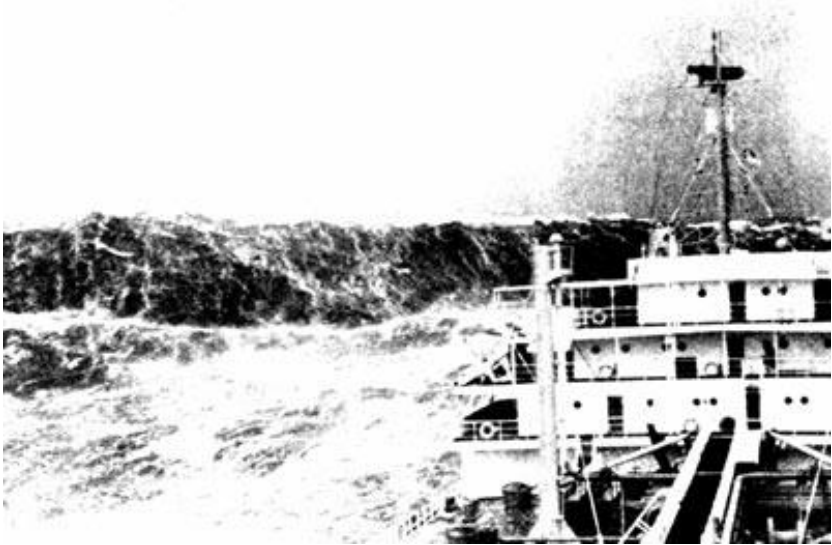
I wrestled with cold logic and told myself that I was just thinking bad thoughts and that my mind was playing tricks; such things do not happen, they are simply illusions caused by superstitions. I even thought that I was imagining things, that I was daydreaming. Suddenly, and while uncertainty had taken over my thoughts, I felt the ship reduce speed. Surprised and full of curiosity, I went down into the engine room to see what was happening, sure that new information had been received regarding the salvage order we had been given.

Indeed, the third engineer informed me that we were ordered to continue our course as before the change for the salvage because others had already arrived first to the ship in danger and offered their assistance.

I didn't think of one month's free salary lost since we didn't help the other ship. My mind lingered on the ghost ship I thought I had seen. I say "I thought" I had seen because, when I asked my colleagues, nobody else had seen it. The incident stayed in my mind because I considered it a forewarning, or, alternatively, maybe I was simply affected by all the books I had been reading. Later that night, the wireless operator informed us that he had received a message that the ship needing assistance had suffered an explosion in one of its ballast tanks where welders were at work, it flooded and drowned three sailors.

The thought that, as the legend would have it, the ghost ship appears in areas where a disaster is about to happen in order to take the souls of the drowned and sail away with them, entered my mind once more.

I was convinced now that I really had seen the ghost ship, but it had not come for us, it had come for the three drowned sailors on the other ship.



THE STRONG WAVE – TANKERS

Tankers are ships with tanks in place of cargo holds, where crude oil is stowed in order to transport it from its place of extraction to where it will be refined.

They are huge and have a capacity of up to 500.000 tons. The liquid cargo transported is dangerous because it is unstable. Tankers sink and even break in two more easily. They are high risk vessels because they carry dangerous cargo. The seamen working on these ships are strong, brave and patient people, able to tolerate a life full of danger and isolation since life on tankers requires great stamina because they sail for long periods of time and seldomly set foot on dry land. It is a choice of employment that requires courage because it is full of danger and long periods of loneliness.

As my commission on the ship "SAN DENNIS" ended, and knowing all the above facts about tankers, I decided to work on a tanker because the pay was much better, triple the amount I was earning so far.

It is easier to recruit crews for cargo ships because they carried out shorter voyages, docked in harbours every few days and usually remained docked in the harbour for a few days while discharging or loading cargo. Life was better on cargo ships, more agreeable, and many seamen preferred working on these ships. This was the reason why it was easy for me to find a placement on a tanker. Tankers were manned mainly by seamen who consciously took the dangerous nature of the job and placed it into the furthest compartment of their subconscious, simply because they desperately needed the higher income.

I walked up and down Akti Miaouli and entered office after office looking and enquiring about work. I finally signed an employment contract with the company "S. Niarchos" and sailed as a Trainee Engineer with a monthly salary of 140 Pounds Sterling on a 45.000-ton tanker called "SOUTHERN UNION", built before 1960. This was one of the first ships Niarchos, the shipowner, had purchased, most probably for a good price, and it was so beat, it risked drowning us every time it hit rough seas. The shipowner however did not take into consideration such small details and continued using it.

It was a golden age for tankers. Stavros Niarchos was a self-made man, he started as an employee in a flour mill

and ended up being a multi-millionaire. He convinced his uncles and his employers to purchase six cargo ships to transport grain and he personally borrowed the money to purchase one of these ships himself. During World War II, he chartered it to the Allies, but it was destroyed in the war. He used the money he received from the insurance company as capital to extend his fleet. He mainly purchased tankers. This is how Stavros Niarchos made his debut as a significant presence in the field of international trade.

One of his first ships, "SOUTHERN UNION" was a tanker with an old hull, made of steel plates which gave it strength to withstand rough seas but had no air conditioning. The combined heat from the steam boilers and the naturally insufferable hot climate of the Persian Gulf made the lives of the crew unbearable. The temperature in the engine room would reach 50° C. As a bit of fun, we would break eggs on the hot plates of the deck and watch them cook in seconds under the hot sun.

The ship's propulsion was by propeller attached to an axle. The axle itself was turned by a steam turbine fed with steam from the boilers. The engine room of the ship was located in the depths of the stern and was divided into two compartments; the boiler room housing the boilers running on diesel and the engine room where the turbine turned the axle. The pipes carrying the steam were old and fatigued, could not withstand the high pressure and a lot of steam escaped every now and then causing the air to fog up. By the time we fixed one worn gasket, another

blew out. It was a tiring process of constant repair in order to limit losses and maintain adequate steam to move the turbine which in turn spun the propeller's axle. It was dangerous, hard work and, I am adamant that, in the history of steam propelled ships, there is not even one engineer who can say that he never sustained a serious burn. Despite all this, we gritted our teeth and waited for the days to pass and we dock at the next port and enjoy a good sleep on dry land and off the ship. Fortunately, the aged and battered ship did not undertake long voyages, and this time there was a charter agreement for the island of Ceylon.

Sri Lanka, the name meaning Blessed Island, known in the past as Ceylon, is in the south east of India. It has a warm and humid climate because it is near the Equator. This is an island with dense vegetation and jungles, endless tea plantations, huge statues of Buddha sculpted on rockface, as well as National Parks with wild animals and dangerous snakes with horns and other repulsive diabolical creatures with weird colours. For its strange beauty, Ceylon has been described as India's Tear as well as Tahiti of the East. Colombo is the capital city and the port. Before 1980, the buildings were low, mainly makeshift shacks with some majestic stone buildings left over from the time of British Colonialism.

The weather during our last voyage to Ceylon was bad, and so was the sea. When a tanker is laden and in rough seas, sailing is exceptionally dangerous because, due to the heavy cargo, the ship is low on the sea, with only a

minimal part of the deck above water. Therefore, when the sea is very rough, the waves cover the deck and only the crews' quarters and the masts remain above water.

The weather on the day we were approaching the port of Colombo was this bad but, as always, a few hours before arrival, we needed to inspect the pipes that supplied the anchor and deck machinery with steam. We slowly opened the valves and allowed steam to gradually flow into the pipes so the sudden expansion would not crack them. Despite our care, one of the flanges broke and needed repair. It wasn't a difficult job and the Third Engineer assigned it to me. The broken flange was approximately half way between bow and stern. Huge waves washed over the deck and caution needed to be exercised because many times in such weather the sea snatched people off tankers' decks and washed them out to sea. Usually nobody survived such mishap as the wake of the ship would draw them under and they would disappear. I donned my asbestos gloves as necessary protection from the hot steam, and holding on to the steam pipe for balance, I started making my way out to fix the broken flange. I reached the fault near the middle mast, and very carefully, balancing on alternate legs depending on the rolling of the ship, I removed the screws to change the flange. The waves mounted the deck and every time would wet my legs. Carefully and methodically I worked, taking care not to be swept off by a large wave while under my breath I prayed to the Virgin Mary to look after me. Screw after screw, some I unscrewed easily

and others I had to cut with the cutter, I was almost finished when suddenly a huge wave covered the deck and swept me off my feet. With immense force, it swept me away and I was unable to react and hold on. On the bridge, the Captain and the Second Officer together with the duty sailor were dumbstruck seeing the huge wave sweep me away. They stared with their mouths open, unable to utter a word. They were sure I was lost, swept out to sea.

When the wave rolled off, I was lying on the ship's deck and not lost in the deep waters. I had taken the precaution of tying a rope around my waist which I had also connected to the steam pipe. The Captain and the others breathed a sigh of relief. They had not realised I had survived because from such distance, they could not see I was tied by a rope. They started making the sign of the cross and thanked God, believing it was a miracle that such a strong wave did not sweep me off. For me, however, it was the Virgin Mary's grace that led me to think of tying myself down, thus saving me from drowning.



IN CEYLON

Ceylon is an island state near the Equator, covered in forests and jungles, with a humid and warm climate. It is a charming country with western and eastern influences that were left behind by various invaders, and an assortment of religions and cultures.

Colombo is the capital city and a significant Asian commercial centre. Because of its naturally large harbor and strategic location on the commercial routes connecting the East with the West, it was known to traders since ancient times.

We travelled to Colombo regularly for a whole year.

Stavros Niarchos' company had a contract to transport fuel to the country and our ship was assigned to carry out the charter for the next term. We would load from Libya, navigate the Suez Canal, Red Sea and Arabian Sea, enter the Indian Ocean and reach the large harbour of the city.

Colombo was a beautiful Meridian city with wild vegetation and a lot of mosquitos. Unfortunately, there was also the threat of contracting malaria because of the humid and warm atmosphere hovering over still and stagnant waters in many parts of the country.

Every voyage, I eagerly awaited to disembark on the land spread before me, a place so green, so beautiful and overgrown with tropical vegetation. I loved walking the streets and observe the people moving up and down, their simple clothing being but a piece of fabric thrown over their shoulders partially covering their body. Among them, countless traders peddled their wares while the streets were buzzing with two and three-wheeled motorbikes and bicycles as well as cars of a passed era. A city unlike those of Western countries, a different culture untouched by progress and development, as if time had stopped.

Colombo harbour was deep, and the ships docked practically next to the shore, on wharves that extended considerably into the sea. They were wooden and narrow yet sturdy since large tonnage tankers could tie alongside. The distance to the entrance of the port was 200-300 metres and there we would meet a medley of taxi

drivers and guides waiting to transport us and give us guided tours of the city and the country.

Even though the city was an extension of the port and at a short distance, we usually took a taxi because the fare was cheap but also because the taxi drivers would give us tours of the sights and the parts of the city they knew well. This was particularly useful to us sailors because the first things on our minds were pleasure and entertainment as each round trip, loading and discharge, lasted up to a month. With a minimal fee, they gave us tours from morning till night, until the opening hours of the bars, which were our final destination.

Even though Colombo was the capital city of a country with a population of eighteen million people, it boasted only two bars, and there should have been more. Both bars were huge and full of prostitutes looking for customers. No prostitute exercised her profession publicly as family values and, even more, religious beliefs, were strict and did not allow it. Despite this, there are prostitutes all over the world, some hidden and others out in the open. I remember the first impression I had during my first visit to these bars. I saw a vast establishment, a huge banquet hall, full of women trying to hook up with the few customers. There were no local customers, the only local men were the waiters. It was obviously a place specifically made for foreign visitors, mainly sailors, who yearned for female company after their long voyages across oceans. This was why the place was so big; it had to accommodate all the prostitutes of

the capital. Drinks were cheap and so were the women, so we offered them all drinks and danced with them until we settled with one girl and were taken by her to a cheap hotel.

The national currency, the rupee, had small value against international currencies and so the drivers used to ask payment in dollars and pounds sterling. Even the Cyprus pound had value. We knew this and would reach an agreement with them to exchange dollars for rupees for a significant profit which covered our expenses during our stay in the country.

During one of our trips, we docked and noticed that the city was very still, with no life around and no movement. It seemed asleep and the people were closed in their homes and did not go out to work nor carry on with everyday life. It appeared that the city was under a curfew. The labourers and engineers assigned to discharge the ship's cargo were few on the dock, and further inland, there were only one or two taxi drivers awaiting us.

The taxi drivers knew Greek and we could easily communicate with them. It was the same in every other port as Greek shipping was number one in the world.

We found out from these taxi drivers that this particular day was a great religious Buddhist festival and that was why everything was closed; it was a holiday for all. Even the bars, the owners of which eagerly awaited a ship to dock so the seamen would rush to spend their money, were closed. The few who were circulating around the

city that day were not Buddhists but probably belonged to another religion and were not celebrating. Most of the population of Ceylon are Buddhists, but there are other religions such as Hinduists, Muslims and even Christians.

I had just finished my shift in the engine room and, together with a new recruit trainee engineer, we dressed in our finest and went on shore leave. It was nine o'clock in the evening and we planned to go directly to one of the two bars at opening time. On learning that everything was closed we were very upset because after so many days at sea we were looking forward to going on shore, letting our hair down and having fun. We walked a little in the hope of finding some shops that were opened but everything was closed, and the streets were empty. Every now and then an old car would speed down the street and disappear into the city. Even the open-air fruit market that buzzed with life was deserted. It was obvious that the vast majority of the residents were Buddhists and were celebrating their grand festival. So, with nothing to do and having walked for quite a while, we felt disappointed and decided to return.

We started heading back with our heads hanging down in discontent since arriving at a deserted city was of no value to us. The fact that we didn't do any shopping was not a serious matter to us, but not having picked up women was indeed monumental. In the middle of the ocean and interminably lonely, with hard work our only solace, we longed to dock and have some fun, drink, get

drunk and indulge our libido. The voyage was long, and so was the longing. Here we were, on shore. I was clean shaven and doused in expensive cologne. I wore my fanciest clothes, and, with my buddy, we walked the town. Yet, here we were, returning to the ship unfulfilled and morose. We would go to bed and, by the time we were relieved again from our shift, the ship would have discharged its cargo and we would be ready to sail away. With a heavy heart, we walked slowly without being in a hurry to get back. At a distance, we saw the ship standing tall in the water looking huge, a sign that it had discharged most of the cargo.

As we walked silent and pensive, an old taxi stopped, and the driver started talking to us in a mixture of Greek and English.

I will never forget his appearance no matter how many years pass, it is etched in my memory as if I had seen him only yesterday. His skin colour was an odd blend of black and brown and, combined with the asymmetrical features of his face, made him look very ugly. However, the thing I cannot forget is how detestable he was, with hard furrows across his face and with eyes an indescribable colour that looked like the eyes of a venomous serpent ready to pounce without warning and inject its deadly poison. He reminded me of a strange snake I had seen in the large zoo of the country during my last trip, a snake with a huge horned head on a slender and very disproportionate body. A snake so terrifying that I have never seen again despite

researching in encyclopaedias, I still remember it and shudder. In any case, he did not look like a normal man and as soon as I set eyes on him, I disliked him.

While chatting he asked us whether we wanted to have fun and, if we did, he said that he had his own women and could take us to them. There was nothing we wanted more at the time and we immediately said yes. He grasped the opportunity and charged us more than the regular fare, explaining that everything was prohibited on this day and that his risk was double, therefore he charged more. We asked him what the second risk was, and he explained to us that, on this day, the prostitutes did not work and so he would take us to his wife and daughter and that this was the risk. If people found out, they would shun him.

I was immediately furious because, in my country, family is a highly sacred institution. I was ready to tell him to go to Hell, but the trainee turned and said:

- “What do we care, it is his family, and, in any case, he may even be lying to justify the extra money he is demanding”.

Wanting to have my fun, I accepted my friend’s explanation without giving it much thought.

We entered the taxi and he drove for a few kilometres. We arrived in a neighbourhood with small houses that looked like they were made of thin cardboard, like the shantytowns of underdeveloped countries shown on the news. The asphalt had come to an end, and he was driving the car on a dirt road. Obviously, this was a very

poor area. There were street lights attached to poles and, in the faint light, we could see the poverty and misery of the place. The streets were without pavements or asphalt and riddled with potholes filled with stagnant water. All the houses were tiny, with one or two rooms, low and crooked, listing towards one side because of the wind as they were made with thin and crude materials.

We stopped in a yard in front of a cardboard house a little bigger than the others. He opened the makeshift door and in the faint light we saw a woman sitting on an old chair with a bowl in her lap, cutting some vegetables. He spoke to her in their language and we saw her giving him a surprised look.

My friend and I became worried, but the taxi driver turned and reassured us. The woman went into the other room and came out holding a young girl by the hand. She did not look older than sixteen. Being young at the time, we paid no attention to the fact that she may have been underage. In any case, my friend had chosen her for himself and he was barely eighteen.

We noticed however that both women looked frightened I thought that they may have been terrified and unable to refuse the commands of their master.

The despicable man said something further to the two women and they beckoned us to follow them. We went out into the yard and they led us into a room. It was a single room divided by a low wicker mat, and on either side of this there was a bed. My friend and I stood with the two women and we all felt very uncomfortable.

The older woman removed her clothes and lay naked and on her back on the low bed and beckoned me to approach. I however no longer wanted sex, under the circumstances I considered it to be a humiliating act. At the same time, I heard the young girl crying silently at the other side of the room.

We understood exactly what was going on. The wicked taxi driver was selling them against their will and forcing them to have intercourse with clients. They were terrified to refuse. I understood that the older woman had accepted her fate, but it may have been the first time for the young girl, and she was terrified. In the end, she explained that this was the case to my friend and was crying in fear, pleading with us to show mercy and not tell her stepfather that she cried.

My friend the trainee engineer was a kind and sensitive boy, so it was easy to agree not to touch them nor tell on them and ask for our money back. We managed to somehow explain our intentions to them and relieved, they kissed our hands.

I never regretted this and felt relieved with our decision. On the way back though I could not help but think that the poor girl was spared this time, but what about next time, and the time after that?

In time, whenever I recalled this episode in my life, I felt pleased with the way I conducted myself. I knew that I had done the right thing and hoped that I would continue doing so for the rest of my life.



SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES

All over the world, ports are centres for the sale of sex and drugs where unemployed lonely seamen looking for employment, or crews off ships that docked to discharge cargo, seek warmth in carnal gratification after long voyages across seas and oceans. Sometimes the prostitutes walk the streets alone trying to sell their body and, in other cases, pimps are willing to give seamen a tour around the temples of entertainment and lust. Usually this is conventional and classic lust and carnal pleasure, but sometimes it is heretic unorthodox lust out of the context of traditional values. These are sex and drug markets transcending the limits of human denigration, full of drug mules with no inhibitions, women who sell

their bodies, and men who pimp and exploit them shamelessly with profit the only thing on their mind, where all limits of morality, decency and propriety are breached.

In ports, young women and little girls line up waiting for clients, and young sailors unfamiliar with the system or those who want something alternative, turn to the pimps and sex dealers to find it.

Depending on the stringency of the law in every country and port, things may vary.

I remember once in Bari, before the ship even tied up, locals jumped the rails and boarded the ship. The fact that in Italy private citizens had the right to board a ship under foreign flag when docked in a port did not seem strange to me and did not raise any suspicions in me. I simply assumed they were customs officials or port labourers. In my greasy overalls, I stood by the engine room door and watched them walk up and down.

Having nothing better to do until my shift was over, I watched. Standing a little further from everything and watching what was going on, I quickly comprehended that contraband and games were taking place between the crew and the visitors. Dealings were taking place in goods seamen bought from other countries for trading, such as Seiko watches and calculators from Japan, Zenith cameras from the Soviet Union and illegal substances from cheap countries, usually Latin America or Africa. I remember once in Nigeria, we anchored outside the harbour to refuel and launches actually came alongside with

customs officers and labourers offering us such substances very cheaply, mainly in exchange for luxury cigarettes such as Rothmans.

In all this frenzied commercial activity, I saw a local youngster talking with the ship's cabin boy and, after a while, they walked away together and entered the cabin boy's cabin at the end of the corridor. I figured he was going to show him something for sale or that they reached a more private arrangement since one usually does not know another's sexual preferences, whether he is straight or not. The cabin boy seemed a serious young man, very masculine, and we never thought of him as homosexual. However, my eyes had seen many things, too many things, and nothing would surprise me.

In time, it was obvious that something other than contraband had taken place in the cabin. Not only because they were inside the cabin together for a long time but because, after we sailed, our cabin boy came down with a serious illness caused by a sexually transmitted disease and we just managed to deliver him for treatment in time before he died at sea as his illness took hold very quickly and ate away at his body, causing him intolerable pain.

Homosexuality has genetic origins and, combined with environmental influences, makes a person a homosexual. That is to say, most gay people are born with a predisposition and homosexuality is not a choice they make later in life. The wider public considers this bad and even a crime sometimes while open-minded and educated people simply see it as a sexual preference.

Scientific research however emphasises that particular care needs to be exercised during such sexual encounters because, as public criticism forces homosexuals into secrecy, they tend to change partners. Doing so facilitates the spread of diseases.

All seamen are at risk of contracting contagious diseases because of their unusual living environment and circumstances of work. Again, studies have shown that of those seamen who fall ill and die, most deaths are not due to accidents or drowning, as many would think, but to contagious diseases, mainly sexually transmitted, especially during the past when these were not treatable. It is therefore an undisputed fact that seamen risk contracting a wide range of diseases, most of which are caused by having sex without taking the necessary precautions. In my view, the most usual ailments suffered by seamen are herpes, papilloma, genital lice and gonorrhoea. Many definitely contract more dangerous diseases but because of their severity nobody wants to mention them, in contrast with the more frequent and usual STDs mentioned by many because they are considered run of the mill, like 'flu or a cold.

So, our young cabin boy contracted gonorrhoea. Those few moments of sexual pleasure for which obviously no precautions were taken, brought him a lot of suffering, pain and hardship. In his haste and in the throes of passion, he hurriedly released himself into the enjoyment of sexual deeds without using protection. For a few seconds of lust

that were over so quickly, he did not operate correctly, he did not protect himself.

And here he was now, in the middle of the Indian ocean, suffering the manifestation of a dreadful disease. In the beginning, he hid the problem masking his pain and serving food in the mess without showing discomfort.

As the hours and the days passed however, the sickness started eating away at him and weakening his system. It was clear on his face and in his movements that something was hurting. When we asked, he said that he had a problem with his back and at the beginning we felt sorry for him and helped by serving ourselves.

Until one day, I saw him come out of his cabin with his legs spread open as if he suffered from ire, totally unable to walk, with tears running from his eyes, his face in a spasm brought on by insufferable pain. I asked him what was wrong and, crying, he answered that he contracted a disease, that it was eating away at him and finishing him off, and that he could no longer stand the dreadful pain. He wanted to die, to spare himself. At that moment, the boatswain appeared at the other end of the corridor and approached. He was an older seaman and experienced, so he immediately realised what was going on and asked:

- "Faggot, you got the clap up your bottom?"

Turning to me he said:

- "Hey, Cypriot, this is a serious situation, run and get the Second Mate."

The Second Officer, or Second Mate as he was usually called, was responsible for everything that happened on

the ship, and had to ensure that everything run smoothly and correctly. He was, of course, answerable to the Captain and would update him about everything and would take orders only from him.

In the cabin boy's case, he concluded that he had to be confined to his cabin until we arrived in port, to see a doctor. His ailment was contagious, and he should not circulate or work, and, most importantly, should not serve food to the crew. So, he gave him some painkillers, locked him in his cabin and gave the order that nobody should let him out or visit him.

As the days passed, the cabin boy was writhing in pain locked in his cabin, and his cries were heard throughout the day and night, piercing our ears. It was a situation that frightened us because his cries were heartbreaking. The pain, it seemed, was unbearable and got worse by the day.

I considered the situation inhumane. Why wasn't the Captain requesting a helicopter to lift the cabin boy off the ship? I wondered whether it was deliberate because the cost to the company in such cases would be high. I also thought that possibly the Second Mate did not care about the human lives on the ship and left the poor boy to suffer his destiny and bad luck. My thoughts were valid because, during a previous voyage, I had seen evil and inhumanity in this man. I remember an incident like it was yesterday, an incident that made me very sad and caused me to write him off as a human being. We had sailed from a port and the assistant boatswain (his name

was Sakis, I still remember him well) had bought a small monkey. This monkey was a tiny thing, very graceful, calm and well trained, a delightful little creature. We all loved him and would play with him. That was until the day the Second Mate, a man made of skin and bone, as if food did not touch him because of his heartlessness, found out about him. He grabbed the little animal and forcefully threw him overboard. This was a sad incident that has remained etched in my memory, as I watched the little creature swimming in his desperation to stay afloat. And the ship sailed away leaving the poor little monkey behind, to drown and be eaten by fish. I knew that animals were not allowed on ships because there was a danger of transmitting contagious diseases to the crew and that the Second Mate acted based on regulation but, notwithstanding this, I still considered his deed cruel.

One day, the screams of pain and the cries of despair from our patient that saddened and embittered our hearts, stopped. We all thought that the worst had happened and worried, we asked the Second Mate for information. He gave us a reasonable explanation, that he was transferred to sickbay in the front deck, so that the rest of the crew's work and efficiency would not be affected by his cries. I did not really believe this explanation and I wonder to his day if this was indeed the case, or if the poor cabin boy did not survive the pain and the dreadful disease, whether he breathed his last breath in that ship and whether the Second Officer and the steward carried

his lifeless body to the fridge until we arrived in port, as provided in the regulations.

We all had this horrible thought, but we were obliged to accept the Second Officer's explanation.



A SAILOR'S NOSTALGIA

Extreme temperatures of over 50° Celsius are often recorded in countries of the Middle East, countries with areas covered by the hot sands of the desert. The scorching sun and the stifling heat in the summer make the lives of the inhabitants very difficult and unbearable. The majority of

the population cover their body for the whole day by wearing white jellabiyas since white deflects heat.

The largest part of these countries is covered by the Sahara Desert and are sparsely populated by humans. In many cases the only residents are a few wild animals and plants that survive without water.

In ancient times there was plenty of water in the Sahara and it formed large rivers with banks covered in vegetation and full of life, but after the passage of millions of years the climatic changes and strong earthquakes changed everything. Today, scientists say that all rivers that flowed on the surface of the Earth have submerged and now flow underground in the depths of the planet and that they are at such depth that man cannot exploit them and to try to do so would be counter-productive due to the high costs involved.

As part of this area, Saudi Arabia is a country that, upon arrival, a visitor receives a different feeling. Another kind of sense, dangerous and deadly like the desert surrounding it. Saudi Arabia is a country that very frequently imposes the death penalty on both locals and foreigners.

On weekdays, people walk without worries and children play ball and other games in the squares, but on Fridays people are executed by beheading for crimes such as possession of drugs or robbery, but mainly for offences against religion as their sense of religion is very strong. After all, this country is the cradle of the Muslim religion and birthplace of Prophet Muhammad. These are

offences that are punishable with death by beheading in public areas, and this is a powerful deterrent.

In those years, before 1980, the country's authorities made life very difficult and repressed for both locals and foreign visitors, except for seamen who worked on Greek ships, and this was because the Saudis liked the Greeks. There was a deep appreciation for anything Greek and an infinite respect for the Greek people. This is what I noticed and received from the local population, even from my first voyage there, and older seamen explained to me that indeed, this was the case. I thought that maybe they admired us as Greeks because of Alexander the Great who conquered their country and spread Greek culture.

The people in Saudi Arabia engaged in the production and cultivation of pearls, as well as the cultivation of palm trees because, as a desert state, palm trees flourished in its soil. Mainly however, they engaged in the extraction and worldwide exportation of petrol which is abundant in its sub terrain. In the large port of Dammam, in the middle of the Persian Gulf, there are huge terminals for the extraction of petrol. Huge metal structures extending deep into the sea form artificial docks, where ships tie to load the precious liquid. Our ship docked at one of these docks and anchored to load mazut.

We came from Japan. We had travelled to Nagasaki, one of the best natural harbours on the island of Chiusu, the ancient town of Shogun and the Samurai.

We had carried there a cargo of mazut, and, after unloading, we quickly departed for the Persian Gulf. Sailing the

Indian Ocean, we reached the Gulf of Oman, on the north-western part of the Arabian Peninsula and passed through the Ormuz Straits that link the Ocean with the Gulf.

The Persian Gulf or Arabian Gulf is important to the world economy as it produces and exports large shipments of oil. It links Arabia with the Indian Ocean, and touches the coasts of Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the Arab Emirates, and part of Iraq and Persia.

Shipping traffic was high at that time, so we were sailing carefully at low speed. The sea was calm and still, with a murky white colour like that of the desert. The weather had changed, the coolness of the sea slowly faded away and a hot wind started to blow from the shore, and, as we approached, it became hotter. The wind was light, and it brought high temperatures from the Sahara Desert, turning the atmosphere dull and hazy. In a short time, we realised that the weather had totally hanged and had become unbearably hot.

It was a dry, scorching wind originating in the great desert, dragging sand and dust in its wake. It was a Sirocco, hot and dangerous like Livas (south-west wind), the wind that scorches crops and causes damage in its wake.

It was a Sirocco, blistering and perilous, blowing from the south-east, originating usually from the Sahara, crossing North Africa, passing the Mediterranean where it gathers moisture and thus cause rainfall and fog. It moves at a speed of 55 knots and may last half a day to several days at a time.

From my porthole I watched the sailors handling the ship's ropes wearing thick gloves to prevent burns on their hands as the whole deck had heated to great temperatures by the boiling Sirocco. My cabin was located quite high up and, having a panoramic view, I watched the ship approach and come alongside the pier, docking under the pilot's guidance. I saw the labourers passing the slack lines over the dock's bollards and the sailors manning the winches, slowly and steadily tightening the ropes so that the ship gently came alongside the dock, tightly secured and safe.

Having tied up, my gaze wandered towards the shore and a little further away I saw a desolate land without housing or infrastructure apart from a straight, wide road, black like a snake, starting from the coast and disappearing into the desert.

Sleeping quarters, warehouses, offices, machinery installations and petrol pumps were erected in the middle of these artificial large platforms and docks and all together formed a large floating port secured and immobilised on the surface of the sea by weights and anchors. It was an immense floating platform with all the infrastructure and installations of a Lilliputian town, with a helipad and large oil extraction and pumping machinery.

A little further off the dock, a few hundred metres away from where we had tied up, I saw another tanker lying low in the water, a sign that it had almost finished loading. The logo on the funnel was of a Greek ship owning company, indicating that most of the crew would be

Greeks. I immediately wondered whether there were any Cypriots among them. I was away from Cyprus for a long time and I missed receiving news and updates from my home country. It was the period after the 1974 Turkish invasion, and I was concerned about what was happening in my divided country. I also wondered whether I would meet anyone from my own village. Two young villagers from Chloraka had left a little earlier than me to work on the ships. First to go was Paschalakis Fouartas, and a little later followed Giannakis Polemitis who went to meet Paschalakis. They were both older than me and I thought at the time that, since they were not daunted by the prospect of leaving for foreign lands, why should I be? With them as an example, I took the big decision and sailed on the ships. I left my land and now, here I was, in a faraway country, standing on a high deck, wondering whether I would meet fellow villagers on board the other ship.

I shook my head from side to side to escape my nostalgic musings. I thought once more, how possible would it be? In the whole world to meet someone from my village here, just because I felt nostalgic. The Earth is inhabited by almost seven billion people and I was from a small village with a population of just one thousand five hundred souls. A very poor place for someone to easily find work, any type of work, during those hard times. That's why some young people ventured to leave and travel far away from their land in the hope of a better future. Paschalakis and Giannakis thought of working on ships and, eventually, when they docked at an American port, jump ship and

stay in that rich western country described in the newspapers and shown in films as the promised land, as an affluent country of opportunity. With this dream, Paschalakis decided to go abroad and with the same ideas, his friend followed. I did the same thing a little over two years later. So, the two left, and nobody had received any news from them, neither friends nor family knew what had happened to them. I imagined that they had already settled in a foreign country, surely after all this time they had found the means to succeed. They were probably comfortably settled somewhere washing dishes in a restaurant. A difficult job nobody liked but was in high demand, a job degrading for a man and therefore always considered as temporary, a beginning, until given an opportunity for something better. For those who travelled abroad for a better future, America was an attractive and favourite destination because it was a prosperous country. This was why the two friends thought of going there. Maybe when they landed there, they would have a chance; this is what they thought and dreamt.

Nostalgia for home is generated in travellers of the world who leave their poor countries in search of a better fortune. It is fed and watered by their sweat and blood in exchange for a little hope in life, in exchange for bread and employment.

In me it appeared and took hold when I began my long sea voyage, my wondering around the world, with hope in my heart for a better future.

My thoughts were racing, memories took me back to my village, and a sadness took over because I hadn't communicated with my people for a long time. I had travelled abroad for the sole purpose of finding work and now, in the middle of an Arabian desert, I was overwhelmed by an unbearable longing for what I had left behind. My nostalgia hurt like being stabbed with a sharp knife, a pain known only to those who emigrate. Nostalgia for beloved places and people, friends, siblings and relatives, a bitter and raw pain.

With my mind clouded in memories, I climbed down the deck and walked to the bow of the ship, the point that was nearest to the ship tied in front of us. I lifted my hand as a shield against the sun and carefully observed the deck, trying to make out if people were moving around. The hazy atmosphere was shimmering in the high temperature and my vision was limited. Looking carefully, I eventually saw a sailor stooped next to the mast, the sun pitilessly beating him, strenuously stripping rust, and at the same time my ears were assaulted by the loud noise of the copper stripping tool banging upon the thick plates of the deck. Every now and then he would stop and with a cloth in his other hand, would wipe the profuse sweat off his naked torso. It was extremely hot and the light Sirocco wind blowing made the heat even more unbearable and intolerable. The sailor however continued working, he seemed tough and had stamina since sailors working for months and years under adverse weather, in both hot and cold conditions, become hardened and learn to endure

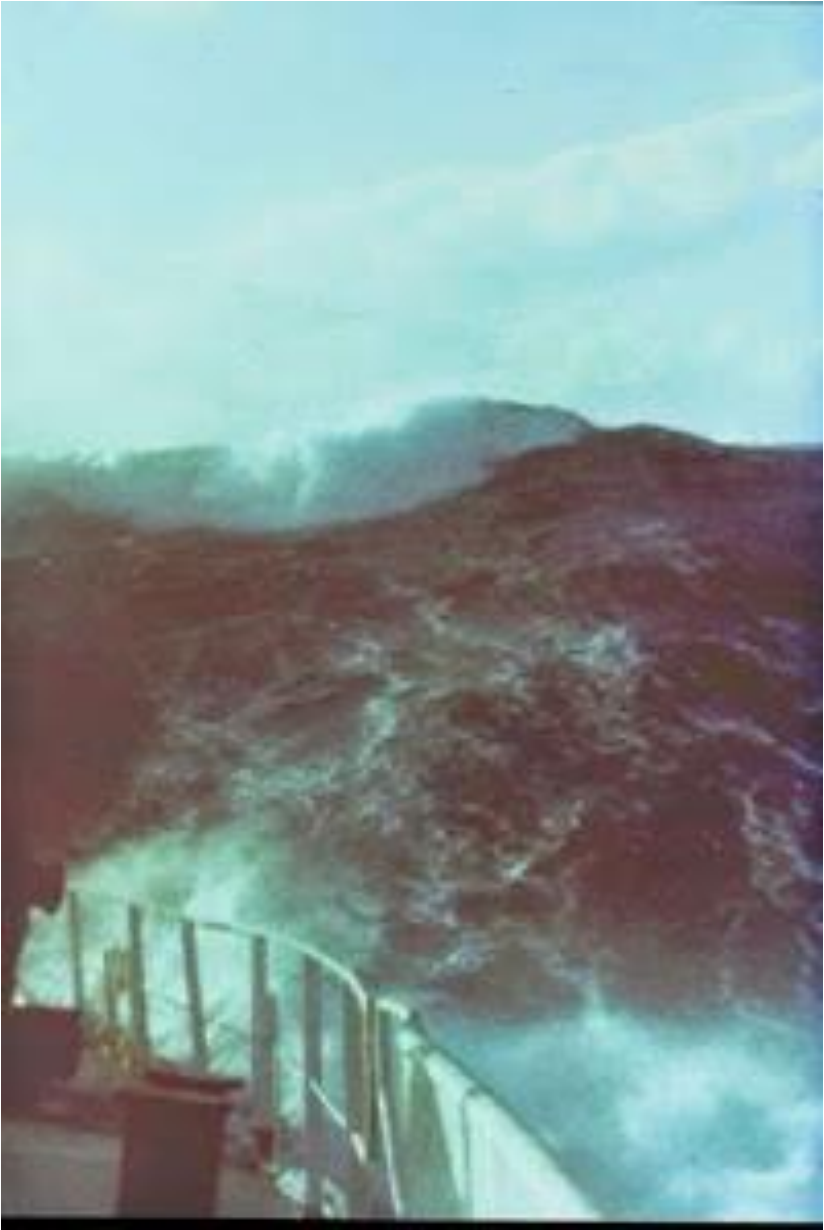
and persist under duress since the nature of their profession involves contending with the wild elements of nature and the sea...

The bow under my feet was incredibly high, many metres above sea level because the ship had its ballast removed and was ready to load crude oil. The sea was motionless like a mirror and reflected the sun while in the water the fish were clearly visible swimming around the ship looking for food.

I turned towards the stern and walked until the middle of the ship where the sailors had placed a rope ladder. I placed one foot on the first rung and hung on. I descended very carefully. The heat was relentless, and any reasonable man would have stayed in the cabin or the cafeteria, but I decided to walk up to the other ship and say "Hi" to the sailor who was tirelessly stripping the steel plates.

With no particular reason, an inexplicable feeling drove me to go and greet him. An unusual premonition pushed me to do it. And so, my steps led me where the sailor was working. I stepped over the low railings and hopped onto the deck. I walked towards him and greeted him loudly so my voice could be heard over the noise of the stripping tool. Startled by the volume of my voice, he abruptly turned towards me. What I saw surprised me, I did not even dare believe it. He was also surprised to see me It was Paschalakis.

And so, a seaman's life is full of surprises, it is unbearable and relentless, sometimes even cruel, full of danger and longing for the country and the people left behind.



THE LARGE WAVE

It was daybreak and I was standing on the stern after finishing my night shift. It had become a habit to come out onto the stern at this time in the morning when everyone except those on shift were asleep. I would sit under the fading stars as daylight broke and would feel the ship under my feet creak and shudder as the propeller met the resistance of the water. I would listen to the rudder under the waterline groan constantly as it tirelessly kept the ship on course. I sensed and felt the immense power of the ship under my feet wrestling with the sea and pushing against it in order to keep going. Leaning on the railings and watching the seawater being churned into white froth by the ship's propeller, I allowed my mind to travel across the grey twilight and take me wherever it wished. On that day and at that time – maybe a coincidence – I was thinking of the great force of the sea and all the unexplained things that lay hidden in its dark and unknown depths when, suddenly and without being sure of when exactly it started happening, I thought I felt the atmosphere's gravity changing and the ship, together with the sea moving downwards, like the water in a lake goes down without actually forming a whirlpool. Startled and horrified, I looked at the sea around us and it seemed that the ship was at the bottom of a huge wave, while its crest was far above us. It was like a gorge between two mountains, all made of water, and the ship was sailing at the lowest point of all this water.

It was a uniquely dangerous situation so inconceivably real, that my brain refused to believe it at first and I felt I

was in a dreamlike state watching this phenomenon unfold from the position of an external observer. I could see the wave's crest touching the sky ready to turn and cap us, and the ship was nothing but a small toy in its shadow. The sea looked like an immense mountain, and we sailed up its side until we reached the top. Then, we descended sailing downwards, and found ourselves floating in calm waters while the large wave left us and disappeared in the distance.

It was a massive wave, something I had never come across before during my travels. A huge wall of water, a gigantic wave over thirty meters high, maybe even over one hundred meters, that had just appeared out of nowhere.

When everything was over, I was not even sure whether the incident was real. I pinched my arm until it hurt, but I could still see the huge wave disappearing in the distance, continuing its path, enormous and terrifying, and it was real. It had really happened, it was a gigantic wave that rolled into our path, passed us, and did not sink us.

During the endless hours of our shifts down in the engine room, we would recount stories, mainly of the sea. Once, an old stoker told me that he heard of a gigantic wave hitting a ship in Mozambique, lifting it upon a mountain of water and then sinking it in the sea trench that followed. He explained however that it was probably a myth because there are no such waves, same as the Gorgon, sister of Alexander the Great, does not exist. I tried to find out more about this huge wave asking old

seamen and also researching in books, but all I found were unconvincing theories because a regular earthquake could not cause turmoil of such an extent in the sea, nor was it a tsunami, as there was no earthquake registered anywhere in the world on that day.

I stood at the end of the ship and watched the wave depart and panic had not taken over yet because my mind had not grasped the huge risk we came across and passed. The sun slowly rose in the sky and there was no other vessel on the horizon. The thought “maybe they were swallowed up by the wave” crossed my mind. The light and cool night breeze disappeared, the wave had taken it away with it, leaving behind a deathly stillness in the atmosphere and there I was, standing still in deep silence, slowly comprehending the strange unnatural phenomenon that had occurred.



PART 4, TRAVELLING ON THE SHIP "EUGENIE"



INTRIGUES ON SHIPS

Instincts and tendencies drive people towards certain human behaviours and reactions. They exist before memory and learning develop and are integral characteristics of our biological species. As cerebral anomalies from birth, they dominate and determine

various human behaviours for dealing with certain situations, through the body's neurons.

Therefore, all passions, whether good or bad, are a result of ancient instincts that drive all biological organisms and turn reaction to action. Unfortunately, people are driven and directed many times by their animalistic instincts and act in a harmful way towards others not only

shamelessly, but with full knowledge that they are causing pain and damage for the simple reason of getting a sick pleasure out of it which they gleefully enjoy. These are evil and bored people who have nothing interesting to do, people who look for entertainment in another person's pain. For their own personal reasons, all deriving from overpowering bad instincts, these people enjoy human misery.

The first time I came across such unpleasantness was in the army, when the older soldiers repressed the younger ones by exercising extreme bullying. I encountered exactly the same on sea-going ships when I was a new recruit in my youth. Solitary people wallowing in the loneliness of endless voyages across the oceans, who manufacture and create situations, undermine younger sailors, especially those whose appearance and demeanour make them appear weaker. This caused some groups of foreign seamen to isolate themselves by hermetically closing themselves in their cabins after their shift.

I was employed on the ship “Eugenie” for some months. We would take on cargo from the port of Ras Tanoura in Saudi Arabia and travel back mainly to European countries. This voyage lasted a long time as the Suez Canal was closed and we had to sail around Africa to reach our destination. I remember we needed about one month to sail the Indian and Atlantic Oceans.

It was not just the long voyage that forced us to find companionship in the sea and sky, but also the fact that at Ras Tanoura we had to remain anchored without access to land sometimes for a number of days.

Therefore, the lonely hours of the sailors were long, and each sailor sought ways to pass the time, ways to feel some enjoyment, sometimes with whatever means. Some worked overtime, others read, some wrote. Many lost themselves in the giddy intoxication of booze, others used substances that made them feel closer to God, narcotics or even chemicals that changed the structure of their brains overstimulating them and making them feel good.

Unfortunately, sometimes people would resort to cruel and inhumane actions to entertain themselves, and, maybe because they had some kind of sick mental disorder, would come up with and create intrigues and conspiracies. They would devise plans to trick their colleagues and create dangerous situations for them, just so they could sit back and watch the consequences unfold and entertain their boring solitude.

Under these circumstances on this ship, and during a voyage lasting over two months, our ship's pump man, who had no work to do since his work was mainly during our stay in ports, organised a whole plan of underhanded action against me, and cunningly tried to implement it.

The pump man is the person in charge of pumping petrol from the ship's tanks into other storage or transportation units. He oversees the smooth operation of the system and is the only one in charge of the piping, filters and valves which allow pumping from the relevant tanks. He is also in charge of spare parts and deck machinery directly connected with the transportation of liquid cargo. During the whole voyage, his only job is to monitor the tanks and keep the cargo at a steady temperature, to prevent it from solidifying, and be ready for pumping at the next port. In such case, he asks the engine room to channel steam which he also uses for other work on the machinery relevant to the ship's tanks. When the ship is in port however, he is on active duty at all times, day and night, as he is needed for the completion of a smooth discharge and subsequent ballasting of the tanks. This job requires great stamina during loading and discharge, but also during the voyage, as during the voyage he remains idle and has to withstand the boredom of not being fully active since he has no duties to carry out.

The pump man was twice my age and seemed serious and heavy going, a modest man of few words. The whole

crew showed him respect. Even the officers, the captain and second officer, were polite when issuing his orders. Whatever he said was properly justified, documented and very polite. In a few words, he was a man of good standing and personality. I respected and admired him, and he reciprocated. In the varied mix of people and nationalities of tough sailors that formed the crew, where most had crude and cruel, sometimes even indifferent, manners of behaviour, the pump man stood out like a good teacher who was loved by his pupils.

We met daily in the cafeteria and chatted. He was a simple man and very approachable, a man you could trust. As time passed, we spoke about a variety of things. I said a lot about the situation in Cyprus as only a little time had passed since the Turkish invasion of the island, and as this tragedy was still fresh, it was an interesting subject for all.

I told him about the situation before the invasion, about EOKA B' and the followers of Makarios, the violence and murders between both factions, about the tragic events that took place on the long-suffering island and that the entire Greek population was embroiled in the battle between the two men. We even spoke about the previous situation and the epic struggle of the first EOKA when the people, with the youth in the forefront, young boys in their teenage years, rose and fought a great struggle and managed to overthrow the British colonialists, without fear of torture and death.

He was very interested to learn about Cyprus and I was happy to talk to him about Cyprus historical and prehistorical times.

When two people are in contact for a length of time, and when a lot of things are said during endless conversations, some of these things are deep secrets that would not have been revealed under other circumstances. So, I revealed to him some things in which I was involved during those difficult times in Cyprus, when brother turned against brother, and when discord had nested and flourished in the souls and hearts of the people because of the propaganda relating to the clash between the two men, Archbishop Makarios and Grivas Dighenis.

Being very young, I trusted and considered the pump man my friend and a person who cared about me. When someone is away from home and especially in a tanker where life is harsh and difficult and sailors form pseudo-friendships as we are cursed with loving the sea and not loving each other, I was relieved and pleased to have the pump man as my friend, brother, father. It was a great joy to feel that there was a person to whom I could confide about my loneliness, nostalgia, fears, to feel I had someone to lean on for both happy times and times of sorrow.

During our long conversations and analyses, he gave me advice, but he also caused me to wonder about various things, behaviours, and mainly the consequences of our actions. Our conversations were mainly about my

activities during the period of discord in Cyprus. Discussions which, in hindsight, I realized were aimed at artfully impregnating my brain with the idea that the English were involved in this discord and that they very successfully applied the “divide and conquer” principle, that they were heinous conquerors and oppressors of weak people. Thus, he slowly filled my young soul with hatred against them.

The wireless operator of the ship was British. He was large, blue-eyed and blonde and had short curly hair. He was ugly and unlikeable, he reminded me of English officers behind desks, coldly issuing harsh orders, he reminded me of the ugly torturers of the EOKA fighters who, without wearing masks and with faces immune to the suffering of their victims, tortured young lads, sometimes even to death. With a little encouragement from my friend the pump man, my soul slowly-slowly filled with dislike and hatred for the “disgusting” wireless operator.

The wireless operator had no contact with anyone, he remained alone, closed in his narrow room with his machinery for company, listening on a 24-hour basis to various messages, unknown voices and languages, messages from other ships and coastal stations with nobody to relieve him as there was no second wireless operator. He would come down to the mess and take his food into his cabin. He seldomly greeted anyone and, whenever we came across each other in the narrow passageways of the ship, we both felt a mutual aversion.

This went on for many days and, as time passed, I understood that our mutual hatred grew and was becoming dangerous.

Surely this situation was worrying, and I naturally discussed it with my friend, the pump man. He reassured me and told me that it was natural for this to be happening as the British never got over their defeat from the Cypriots but assured me not to worry because they were friends, and he would have a word with him.

Time passed and every time we met, I realized he looked at me with a wild look on his face, a look that I took as that of someone who wanted to attack me.

My friend the pump man advised me to be careful because, no matter how many times he spoke to the wireless operator, he was adamant and wicked, fixated like a psychopath, had taken the whole thing as a matter of patriotic pride, and was determined to harm me.

This story lasted a long time. When I later considered matters, the pump man had a lot of comings and goings between us, pretended to both that he was a friend, and created not only hatred and dislike between us but also fear that one was out to harm the other.

One day he called me and told me to be twice as vigilant because he realised that the wireless operator was a schizophrenic and was driven to madness by the hatred he had for me. From what he was saying, he concluded that he was planning to ambush me within the upcoming dark nights and throw me into the sea. I asked him what I should do, should I go to the captain? But he answered

that aboard a ship there are no laws to protect me like those on land and that the captain would probably consider it a joke. Being gullible, I believed him because he was a veteran and I considered him to be my friend.

Things had come to a head. I thought of going to the captain but, by the time he ordered an enquiry, the bad deed would probably be done. I decided that I needed to act first. I should implement on him the plan he had for me. I knew that every night he would descend to the small kitchenette and fill a plate with cheese, salami and bread and take them up to his cabin to eat as he hardly slept during the day and night. In order to reach the small kitchenette, he descended from a higher deck where his cabin was situated, via external stairs.

I would lay in wait under the stairs that night and, using a large wrench taken from the engine room, I would strike him on the head and push him into the sea where he would be lost forever.

This thought terrified me, but I had no more time, the fear inside me for my life was intense, a living hell. It had reached a point where I had become a desperate man, determined to carry out my plan in the belief that it was a case of him or me.

I had finished my 16:00-20:00 shift in the engine room, showered and made myself a frappe coffee. As I did every day during long, endless voyages, until my next shift, I lounged on the couch in my cabin and either read a novel or played my beloved guitar, entertaining myself and my loneliness.

That day, with my frape in hand, I sat on the couch thinking of the difficult decision I had taken and had to carry out. Filled with difficult thoughts I absentmindedly stared at the floor and then at the ceiling. My head was spinning and felt ready to explode as I tried to convince my brain to accept the big decision I had reached. Time was passing but I could not relax. To the contrary, I was getting agitated. It was a very difficult decision and I was deeply troubled. I thought about it, then thought about it again in an attempt to find another solution, but my mind was blocked and in despair.

At some stage, I heard a noise and lifted my head to see the wireless operator standing at my open door. I was startled and afraid and instinctively I jumped to my feet and immediately grabbed the wrench I had hung on my wall a few days ago just in case it was needed. I was ready to attack.

As I stood expecting him to attack me, I saw him suddenly fall to his knees crying pitifully, asking me why I wanted to kill him. Totally taken aback from this turn of events, I immediately realised that all was a nasty game played by the pump man for fun, to amuse himself in this way and satisfy his miserable and callous instincts.

- "Cypriot" said the wireless operator, in a shaky voice, "I'm an Irishman and I love Cypriots because we face the same struggles against the British. I never meant you any harm, why do you want to harm me?"

It immediately dawned on me. This was a

misunderstanding created by the pump man who lied to each one of us in order to make us believe that there was an issue between us. As we both considered him a friend, we gave credibility and believed everything he said.

Realising the nasty and underhanded game played against us by the pump man without us having a clue, and now that everything had cleared, I felt relief and joy, but also great anger against him.

I invited the wireless operator to sit, we started talking and became friends. We explained everything to each other and started thinking how to get back at the pump man who caused us to live for days under fear for our lives.

Yes, we would certainly get back at him. An eye for an eye, especially now that we were two against one. We would let him stew in his own juice for a long time, knowing and fearing that we were definitely going to punish him. It was about time that he lived through a fear similar to the one he managed to plant into our hearts. And, when least expected and when we thought the time was right, we would get him back.



A SHOW OF STRENGTH

Pull-ups on a single bar are one of few exercises that measure the pure strength of an athlete. It is one of the exercises integrated in the training of sports and military academies, as well as in the training of security forces. In order to be successful in exercises on the single bar, the athlete needs to know that he is in for hard, painful and intense training, requiring a lot of work and patience.

Lifting the body over the bar in an upright position with arms stretched downwards for support is a very difficult exercise and one to be achieved only after a lot of practice. This is a very difficult position to maintain and,

apart from practice, the athlete is also required to have a lot of physical strength. I watched a new officer cadet called Makis, if I remember correctly, doing this exercise on the ship and observed many trying to imitate him, without success. At first glance, the exercise seems easy as it looks like an exercise of simply swinging with technique, however, it requires great muscular power and a lot of practice in order to perfect it.

The new cadet was about 35 years old, with rough features and a well-built body, yet he had a kind and gentle demeanour. He formed friendships with the deck crew and almost every day they sat in the corridor outside his cabin and drank whisky until they collapsed. It was their fun and their way out of the interminable loneliness of the ship. He associated mostly with a well-built sailor who said he was a professional weightlifter.

He looked a little stupid, but his body was so solidly built, we called him "The Wall". Just like the Chios islanders would always walk in pairs during the Ottoman occupation, these two muscle-bound strongmen were always together. They formed a powerful unit and using the hot and dry air on the deck over the engine room caused by the steam-producing boilers as an excuse, they walked around half naked, exposing their huge muscles, in a blatant attempt at showing off.

As the new officer cadet and I were colleagues, our cabins were close. Despite this, we didn't form any particular friendship and he kept his distance. When we frequently met in the engine room, he would hang off a

thick rail and execute difficult single bar exercises, wanting in this way to show off his strength and power. I interpreted these moves as his way of giving me the message that he was the sailor's friend and would go against me in case I ever crossed the sailor again. A few weeks previously, I had words with his friend the sailor, and that offended him. This was the reason why the cadet held a grudge against me.

In the engine room of the ship there was an L-shaped rail with a $\frac{3}{4}$ inch diameter. It was next to the console with the control indicators. It started from the deck floor and ended at the base of the evaporator, forming a perfect single bar. This is where I exercised for hours and managed to become very good at pull-ups, having started my regime from the beginning of my commission on this ship and practicing during my night shifts and while everyone was asleep. However, at first, I could not manage this new exercise. Because of our non-verbal conflict however, I needed to succeed. Fortunately, I had not tried it in front of others, so I was the only one who knew my weakness. I felt I definitely needed to achieve this exercise because I knew that there is respect between adversaries when one acknowledges the value of the other. I believed that in this way, managing to execute this difficult exercise, I would prevent the two of them from trying anything against me in the future, due to my previous argument with the sailor.

Showing one's strength sometimes acts like a form of defence and prevents bullying, but most times it is a sick

characteristic of the bullies themselves. Though “bully” was initially synonymous with a strong man admired by everyone, the meaning of the word lost favour and now symbolised a “lad” who had no respect for anything. Bullies are a particular type of person, they are the protagonists of situations and don’t limit themselves to exhibiting their strength, they also exercise a psychological tyranny of terror and, through systematic and unprovoked oppression or even use of force lead their victims, that is to say, the ones who cannot react, into a stressful situation of fear that destroys them psychologically. The ultimate aim of the bully is retaining control, sometimes for the sole purpose of feeling powerful and confident. As most people want to be better than others, don’t have the way or the means to do so and yet still want to stand out, consciously or subconsciously they try to display their strengths and abilities. There are others however who still want to excel yet are noble and socially educated, so they try to do so through honourable competition, succeeding in this way to emerge as champions and prove themselves. These are proud people who do not stoop down to the level of appearing superior to the detriment of other, weaker, individuals. These are the people who have evolved away from the instincts of greed for supremacy, who have earned respect and admiration through their own worth and not through power.

For the next few weeks during my shift and after having gone through the standard inspection of the engine and

auxiliary machinery which did not take me longer than 30 minutes, I exercised hard on the single bar wanting to perfect this exercise. In the beginning of my endeavours, my muscles became stiff and I was in a lot of pain, but I stubbornly continued exercising without resting.

Wanting to make the most from my routine, I exercised hard, and constantly pushed myself thinking that obviously, the harder I exercised, the better I would become. I was not interested in exercising properly, all I cared about was to complete the specific difficult stunt. After a few days, and I remember this as if it was yesterday, I managed to do the first pull-up. I was so happy, but during the next days, sometimes I managed it and sometimes I didn't. Unphased, I continued without paying attention to the third officer who was on shift with me. The poor guy wanted some company to pass the difficult hours of our night shift and constantly tried to make conversation, but I took no notice and stubbornly continued my practice.

I remember some weeks had gone by, we were approaching Rotterdam, and I was almost ready. I was able to carry out some pull-ups with great effort, and this would prove that I was very good on the single bar...

I was on morning shift 08.00-12.00 that day, and the whole crew, both from the engine room and the deck, were on standby to dock. Our movements in the engine room were standard, the first officer overseeing the engine's operation and the stoker either increasing or

decreasing the heat in the boilers, depending on the desired ship's manoeuvres.

We were all in a good mood because we were going ashore after a month at sea. Rotterdam, one of the most multicultural cities in Europe was known not only for having the largest port in the world but also for its drug and sex tourism, as both were legal. In the streets of Katendrecht one could see people strolling without a care in the world holding a spliff, and in shop windows, where other Europeans would advertise their products, in Holland they advertised prostitutes. They were inside the shop windows on display and the passers-by could choose and purchase their services, which were offered behind the windows, in specially designed areas.

So, in the midst of joy and expectation and in the prevailing light-hearted euphoria, all of us, mechanics, cleaners, oilers, cadets, electricians, third, second and first engineers, were teasing each other. A rather short young oiler named Mitsos, who came aboard at the last port, was waiting in earnest to go ashore and buy a plastic doll from a sex-shop, others were eager to buy substances and others to simply walk about and go to the Greek music taverns in town, renowned among the sailors.

I chose this day, while we were all gathered in the engine room around an open space and, with a leap, I grabbed the single bar and started doing pull-ups. I completed my display in a few minutes and with the corner of my eye I

caught my colleague watching me with surprise all over his face. Others applauded and others teased me without realising the difficulty of the exercise, unlike Makis, who understood only too well and watched me full of surprise.

Pleased, and with the hope that he received my message, I leaned on the railings and watched the turbine on the lower deck spinning fast and whistling loudly, then gently, depending on the amount of steam the second engineer was allowing through.

We tied in port and those of us who were not on duty alighted and walked the long dock into the busy city. It was evening and while waiting for the night so we could go to the red-light district, we walked the town looking around or shopping, even registering landmarks to find our way back to the suspicious places we wanted to visit at night to unwind and relax.

The next day, in the afternoon and after we had sailed, I sat in my cabin with the door opened listening to the crazy bunch of seamen outside Makis's cabin clinking glasses and laughing at their own jokes.

In the meantime, I had noticed a change in his stance towards me. He did not avoid me when meeting me previously and even on shore we sat at a pub and exchanged a few sentences. In other words, I had hit bull's eye with what I had set out to achieve by executing the difficult gymnastics on the single bar.

He called me to join their group and have a glass with them, but I refused explaining I was not a drinker. He invited me to stand outside Mitsos's cabin after he came off shift, to have a laugh when he inflated the doll he bought to use as a sex aid.

I liked the idea. In any case Mitsos and I were friends and had great laughs together so I was sure he wouldn't mind.

So, Mitsos came off shift and entered his cabin that was between mine and that of Makis. We calculated the time he needed to begin his task and allowed it to pass, and all of us gathered outside his cabin, taking turns to peep through the keyhole, and listening to the sounds emanating from within. We heard him blowing hard and inflating the doll. There was silence until he drew another breath and then, a loud bang broke the silence. At first, we were startled and stood speechless unable to understand what had happened. Then a sailor shouted:

- "The doll exploded!",

and we all fell about laughing.

Inside the cabin, Mitsos started swearing and shouting, not because he was interrupted half way through his sexual encounter, but because he was cheated and sold a faulty doll.



IERA ODOS – THE SACRED ROAD TO ATHENS

The vessel "EUGENIE" belonged to Stavros Niarchos company and was a seaworthy, 70,000-ton tanker. It sailed the rough waters of the Atlantic without much rolling and pitching because it had full a ballast and the ship sat low in the water and was therefore not at the mercy of the waves and currents. I remember it was a heavy winter and a few days before Christmas. We were travelling from the North Atlantic to the South and then to the Indian Ocean with our destination being the Persian Gulf to take on cargo. The Suez Canal had not opened yet, so we were forced to sail around Africa. We

unexpectedly received orders to sail to the Skaramangas shipyards for minor repairs, mainly to paint the hull of the ship, because the company had no charter for us at that time.

The crew comprised of many races, but most members were Greeks, from Greece. On hearing that we were heading for Greece and they would be able to spend the Christmas holiday with their families, they were very happy and joyful. They welcomed the news with excitement and cheered, their smiling faces beaming. In the afternoon, after break, a big party was set up in the main dining room and, with captain's orders, the second officer took free drinks out of transit and the steward served nuts and lots of goodies, adding to the joy and celebration. The booze was plentiful, but happiness prevented people from getting drunk, everyone was suddenly nostalgic to arrive home. The whole crew, officers, sailors, formed a festive crowd, enjoyed themselves and rejoiced with thoughts of returning home.

- "Cheers!" said the captain,
- "Cheers" answered the deckhand,

and they would clink their glasses.

At some stage, a third Engineer who was Cretan and called Minas, I still remember his name, a polite man and an intellectual, got up and made a long toast. Among other things, he said:

- "Santa Claus brings presents for the children at Christmas but this year he also brought a present for us."

Yes, I thought, a wonderful Christmas miracle for all of us to enjoy. We feel wonderful and everything around us is brilliant, because it is a great and wonderful thing for a seaman to wake up on Christmas day in his home and with his family. It is a joy experienced mainly by people who are forced to live away from their families, especially seamen whose profession has them spending many festive seasons away from their loved ones.

We were sailing with the Atlantic Ocean at starboard and the Gibraltar Straits at port when we received the message for our new destination. We turned to port and entered the Mediterranean Sea, the largest enclosed sea in the world, contained by three continents, Europe, Asia and Africa. We sailed the straits accompanied by dolphins and seagulls. We passed Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia and finally Malta, left them behind and entered the Ionian Sea.

The Skaramangas shipyard is the largest and oldest modern shipyard facility in Greece and was founded in 1958 by shipowner Stavros Niarchos, our employer, for the building and maintenance of his ships but also for repairing the second-hand ships purchased by his shipping company. It was close to Athens And Piraeus so our access to both cities was easy.

We entered the harbour of Skaramangas and we tied on the pier until one of the drydocks became vacant for us to enter. Drydocks are big narrow tanks inside which large vessels just fit, supported by big cranes. When the vessel enters, locks are sealed, and the water is drained. Thus, the ship remains suspended and secured so that engineers may work on its outer parts without water getting in their way.

The whole crew hurriedly donned their best clothes and rushed to go ashore and run to their families, some close and others further away. The captain had arranged that only a few necessary crew members were to return to the ship the next day, in order to place it in the drydock. After this we would carry out a “blackout” and abandon ship.

As we still needed to carry out some maneuvers the next day in order to place the ship in drydock, the engine room remained operational. Being a Cypriot with my home far away, I was chosen to carry out the night shift together with a stoker. A sailor was chosen the same way to watch the deck and bridge. The rest of the crew went ashore with the families of some waiting for them at the bottom of the long steps as they were informed and had come to welcome their loved ones.

The next morning the captain returned with the second officer, the boatswain and the first and second engineers.

Under the guidance of the shipyard's pilot and the assistance of a tug and some light movements of the engine, we placed the ship in drydock. We then begun to carry out a blackout, that is to say, turn off all machinery and the power generator. The ship was now a dark, lifeless corpse, and we left it there. We were going to visit the offices of the company on Miaoulis street in Piraeus to be paid for our service. Those of us wishing to continue their contract would be sent to other ships or could wait for completion of repairs on the "EUGENIE" in order to continue their commission there.

Since nobody was waiting for me, I was not in a hurry to leave. I wanted to watch the process of draining the water from the drydock and see the ship on which I lived for almost one year standing out of the water, in its full size and in all its glory.

When the water drained and the entire ship appeared, the sight of it was impressive and a little daunting. Standing almost at its base and looking up its immense height, the whole sight was awesome. A magnificent monster, more than 300 meters long and about 10 meters high to deck level, and more up to bridge level.

I stood there quite a while admiring it and watched the workers starting to use machinery of the latest technology to inspect and work on the thick plates that spent years in salty water and had started rusting and needing debridement and a few coats of paint.

After a while I got tired and went over to a little hill opposite and sat at a table outside one of the shipyard canteens on a veranda and watched the huge shipyard under my feet buzzing with life and the workers and engineers working like bees.

Midday passed, afternoon was upon us, and I was still sitting there alone, with a wonderful feeling of standing on sturdy dry land without being rocked by the movement of the sea, sipping my fourth beer, with my mind a little dizzy from the brew, gently travelling on thoughts of the future and what was meant to be.

I asked the proprietor to call me a taxi and I headed to Piraeus. The “Voskopoula” was on a street off Akti Miaouli, a few meters up and was a coffee shop frequented only by seamen. It was the meeting place of all Cypriots working on ships and when I was on shore, I always lounged there in the hope of meeting someone I knew, or, at least, get some news about Cyprus as things on the unfortunate island after the Turkish invasion were difficult.

It was dark and people were walking fast, the locals wanting to leave the area before nightfall, as it filled with foreigners and people of the night, with Troumba street, the infamous area full of cabarets and shady pimps

lurking around corners looking for prey, being parallel to Akti Miaouli.

I entered “Voskopoula” and had a look around but didn’t see anyone I knew. I sat at a table and ordered a large cool mahallepi desert with sugar, rose cordial and plenty of aromatic rosewater.

While enjoying this tasty Cypriot sweet, I observed those around me. After such a long time the Cypriot dialect echoed pleasantly in my ears, a sound so melodic and full of poetic rhymes, a language historians claim is a unique ancient dialect still alive today.

People were going in and out and I just watched. I had all of God’s time, I was in no hurry. I saw many different types going in and out, young boys and middle-aged men, some well-dressed and others shabby, some smiling and others looking morose. Each having a mix of feelings, each having his own set of problems, some were happy because they were ashore, and others were sad because they were about to set sail on long voyages. Tough faces, soft faces, faces sculpted by sun and salt, or pale from the misty air of the engine room. I was observant and I enjoyed crowd watching.

I sat like that for quite a while when suddenly at the door I saw my uncle Nicholis, my father’s youngest brother. Surprised, I called him, and he, knowing I was working on ships, was not too surprised to see me. I was,

however, because I didn't know he was abroad. He came and sat with me.

We sat and talked for some time and we caught up. Our conversation was endless, and so were the questions. He told me his news and I told him mine.

Due to the war, work on the island was scarce. He was a good builder and his profession was well sought after because the government was building housing for the refugees, the pay, however, was very low. So, he decided to sail as a deckhand on a small ship that smuggled cigarettes in the Mediterranean. This was a dangerous job because, if caught, he would be thrown in jail for many years. He was a risk taker however, so he took the risk. He was tall, a fully trained army commando expert at body to body combat, with or without weapons. During an occurrence on the ship when an Arab tried to stab the captain, he got in the middle, grabbed the blade in his bare hand, immobilized and arrested the dangerous criminal.

This type of ship employed all sorts as a crew, any criminal and lawless persons were welcome. Life was dangerous and many vanished in the deep sea without a trace.

The captain was a hardened man, inhumane and cruel, and this behaviour exposed him to danger. He immediately hired my uncle as his bodyguard and

promoted him to first officer, with a fat salary to match the position.

I envied his good fortune because I had served for two years on Stavros Niarchos' ships and I was still a cadet. This company did not usually promote seamen who trained on the job because they had their own shipping school that trained all levels of expertise. So, hearing how easily Nicholis was promoted to officer, I decided to ask the personnel manager of the company to promote me, otherwise I would switch company.

The sky over Piraeus was cloudy and dark without stars. Maybe it was getting ready to rain, but Akti Miaouli and its side streets were brightly illuminated under the neon signs of the countless shops and large streetlights on top of the electricity grid's poles.

Nicholis and I left Voskopoula coffeeshop and headed towards Pasalimani to visit one of his friends who worked there. The plan was to meet him after work, and he was going to take us to a nightclub on Iera Odos. He was a frequent patron and he bragged that we were in for a good time.

Pasalimani, or, as it is known otherwise, the port of Zea, was a cosmopolitan part of Piraeus. The view towards the open sea takes the visitors on wonderful imaginary journeys. The entire coastal zone of Pasalimani is taken over by restaurants, taverns, cafeterias and all sorts of

establishments where one can sit and enjoy Greek and Mediterranean delicacies washing them down with choice Greek wines and Ouzo, while enjoying the wonderful view of ships, yachts and sailboats tied at the marina or sailing on the calm waters.

When we arrived, it was late at night, but the little harbour was brightly lit and buzzing with life. My uncle's friend worked in a fast food joint which mainly sold roast chickens and he delivered on a small motorbike. It was a tiny shop right on the pier which barely held the roasting oven and just managed to cook and sell the chickens. It also had two small tables on the pavement with two chairs each. It was a one-way street and immediately after was the sea. In this idyllic location and in order to pass the time until our friend got off work, we sat at one of the tables and ordered a whole chicken, just plain chicken with no sides, and a bottle of retsina. We ate and drank, talking and enjoying the beautiful view of the port of Zea, the renowned Pasalimani. Time passed pleasantly and I was very happy that after so long, I came across one of my own, one of my relatives.

Iera Odos is the oldest road in Greece, the national route that connected Athens with Northern Greece and Epirus. It still exists to this day and is well known, especially because of the antiquities found alongside it, but also for the best nightclubs of Athens. At the time, the 70's, there

were many seedy places and joints set up in prefabricated and makeshift structures, and Iera Odos was famous for them.

The seedy nightclubs known in Greece as “skyladika” existed during those decades but are no longer. The golden age of this type of club has passed and the youth of today don’t have first-hand knowledge of what a “skyladiko” represented in older days. This one word described a nightclub where the customer could find whatever he wished in terms of entertainment, female company, drugs, pleasure, enjoyment, joy.

It was late and my new friend finished work. He washed a little and soaked his hair with oil to make it shine. He had a thin moustache, just a line of hair on his upper lip, and he was the spitting image of Clark Gable.

The taxi let us outside a dark door with no sign. This was an indication that the joint was frequented only by the people who knew about it. It was passed midnight and, as the door opened, I saw a long room with empty walls and no decorations. It was practically derelict. In the back, a band was playing a soulful song and the bosses and staff were all sitting at one table. As soon as we entered, one of them approached accompanied by one of the heavies and greeted us wholeheartedly, as if he had known us for years. He obviously knew our new friend however, because he greeted him by name. He arranged

for us to sit in a darkened corner and they served us graciously. Soon, the songstress of the place came to greet us, and we invited her to sit at our table. We ordered a large bottle of Johnny Walker whisky and filled our glasses. We were in the mood to get drunk and intended to go off the rails.

I noticed my uncle's friend getting up and walking to the opposite wall, pushing a door that was not visible in the semi-darkness and had no sign over it, like "toilet" for instance. Despite this, I assumed he went to answer the call of nature. Time passed and he did not return, so I realized that he had gone to get high.

My uncle was immersed in a close conversation with the singer, so I was left alone to listen to the music and observe the place.

As time passed, the singer performed some songs from our table without getting up, while my uncle Nicholis ordered a second bottle, plenty of flowers and a few bottles of champagne...

At some stage the entrance door opened and a girl with a beautiful body entered. She walked with a limp as one of her legs was shorter than the other. She quickly walked to the table where the boss was sitting, and they exchanged some words. She then turned around and came to our table. I was not surprised because I understood that she was one of the girls used by the establishment to encourage the consumption of drinks,

something like a shot girl. What surprised me however was her bold move as soon as she sat next to me.

It was a move I remember to this day exactly as it happened, as if it happened yesterday. Just as she bent her body to sit on the chair next to me, she leaned towards me and with a sudden movement revealed her breasts stuffing a nipple in my mouth. Startled, I remained motionless, not knowing what to do. I remember the soft skin of her breast, a plump breast, one of the most beautiful breasts I have ever kissed in my life. It seemed magical, sweet tasting and soft. I was mesmerised, spellbound, befuddled, I don't know. What I do know however is that I remained motionless with my face buried in her cleavage. I liked it and responded to her touch, I thought that I was about to have a very good night. Listening to the sad melody of the bouzouki and the bittersweet lyrics of the song, with alcohol freely flowing while making out with the girl sitting next to me, I didn't care how much we spent. I didn't care, my uncle having an equally good time next to me didn't care either, we had hit the jackpot and, as far as we were concerned, they could take everything we had.

Time passed, and we were still having a good time. The bill was increasing, and we gave no notice to the fact that our friend was still missing.

- "Leave him", said my uncle, "he must be lying somewhere inside, high on drugs".

As time was passing, the girls succeeded in making us spend more and more.

"This is the meaning of a "skyladiko"", I thought, "Just a few customers, yet the bills are getting higher and higher."

At the same time however, I was also thinking "what if our money is not enough, what will happen to us in foreign country, inside a "skyladiko"?"

The police got us out of the tight spot. In the early hours, members of the police force raided the place and stood us all against the wall. We were all frightened, so nobody protested, the customers, the musicians, the bosses, us, nobody. At the time, the police force in Greece could do anything they wanted without being accountable and without being under an obligation to justify their actions. The arrested people as they liked and jailed them in holding cells for questioning. A slight suspicion is all it took. They justified their actions by claiming they wanted to reduce criminality that was on the rise and had reached great heights. Many were arrested and tortured, some had even disappeared without a trace. The circumstances prevailing at the time were chaotic, it was

the time a little before the handing over of power by the Junta to the politicians.

After we were searched, we were led out into the yard and were ordered to get into the paddy wagon parked outside. They had also dragged our friend out with us. He was fully doped up and they laid him down on the pavement, unconscious.

- "God help us, we are going to suffer", I thought.

I had heard stories about the behaviour of policemen against prisoners and I was overwhelmed with dread. My uncle Nickolis, however, was more cool-headed and asked to speak to the officer in charge.

- "I have a brother who is an officer in the Cyprus Army" he said, "we are on your side, we are your brothers and we support you and your government".

I was happy to see the officer give attention to my uncle, asking for his brother's name.

- "Kokos Tapakoudes, he's a second lieutenant", he answered.

The officer in charge walked away, holding a walkie-talkie to his ear. He soon returned and told us that it was okay, we and our friend could leave.

They gathered all the rest into the paddy-wagon, and we were left with our unconscious friend alone and free, in the night.

The next day I went to the company's offices and asked for a promotion, otherwise, I explained, I would leave to be employed by another company. The man in charge looked at my file and after reading all the information about me, looked at me with satisfaction.

- "You have a good record", he said. "But, as you know, we have our own shipping school and our policy is to only promote our cadets. In your case, I will make an exception. If you are able to ship out immediately on the same ship which is leaving in two-three days, I will recruit you with the rank of Junior Engineer".

Junior Engineer means exactly that, a junior engineer, it was the rank of a sub-officer who executed the duties of third Engineer. Of course, I accepted with great pleasure because the salary and overtimes would be higher than previously but also because my ego was greatly flattered. The company had its own school, but my promotion was something I achieved by myself.



IN HOLLAND

I got off the bus and headed towards the shipyard where the "EUGENIE" was docked, looking new after her fresh paint job. She was, once more, ready to sail and as the company had offered me a new contract for the same ship, I did not refuse. So, I climbed the tall steps and presented myself to the captain and after to the first engineer. All formalities being completed, I stowed my belongings in my old cabin and went on deck on the side of the pier, leaned on the railings, and started watching the new seamen who were arriving one by one to crew the ship. The entire crew was new except for me and one

sailor. He was the weight-lifting muscle-bound guy with the square body, the one we called The Wall because his body was as thick as a thick wall.

The ship was ready to sail, we just needed some more stores which we were to pick up on our way from the St. Nicholas port in Crete.

In the evening, all engineers, with the first engineer in charge, commenced the process of making the entire engine room fully operational. We started the electricity generator, the auxiliary machinery, the boilers, the evaporators and so on. In a few hours the whole engine room was in full operation, supplying the entire ship with energy, water, refrigeration, air conditioning. Everything was double-checked, and the engine was on standby.

At dawn, we sailed for our next long voyage with the engines on "slow".

We arrived at St. Nicholas and anchored to take on board our remaining stores. The day started out with clouds and rain. The pump man, boatswain and a few sailors were on the deck preparing the winch to load while waiting for the launch, and they were commenting on the rain falling gently, washing the deck. Next to them, the second in command was listening while focusing his attention on the launch.

While the ship was anchored the rest of the seamen were watching the traffic in the port and the town of St.

Nicholas from under the covered stern deck. Those of us not on shift stood looking at the beautiful small Cretan cove of St. Nicholas, a tiny but renowned fishing village.

- "It's a lovely morning", I heard the officer say, "we will get our stores, then head to Kharg Island and take on cargo for Holland. These are our instructions for the next charter, the wireless operator just got a telegram".

Usually, we took on cargo without knowing our precise destination and received our instructions from the company's office after the ship was loaded and ready to sail for any long voyage. This time we knew our destination before even sailing for the Persian Gulf.

- "There's the launch, it's coming" said the engine cleaner standing next to me and pointed at a large boat coming towards us.

As it approached, it reduced speed, stuck to our side and put its engine on idle. At the stern of the launch stood a man looking towards us in earnest.

- "He looks like my friend Antoneskos", I thought to myself.

I stood watching him, surprised by the amazing resemblance, I was sure it wasn't him since my childhood

friend of twenty years, my lifelong friend, my friend from the same village and the same neighbourhood should not be here. I knew he was studying in Piraeus. I got the impression that the man was also looking at me but did not seem to recognize me. When he eventually came on board and stood next to me, it was with great surprise that yes! I did recognize my childhood friend Antoneskos! It was him, he had requested and got a job in the same company and the same ship as me. He wanted to surprise me, so he arrived without warning. My surprise was big, but my joy was even bigger, so I welcomed him with great pleasure. I helped him with his luggage and then took him to the captain's office to report for duty.

So, in foreign lands and on the high seas I came across my friend and this made me very happy. I would have a companion and friend among the unknown members of the crew whose hearts usually turned hard and morose because people on tankers became cold and distant due to their great loneliness. In such surroundings and circumstances, it is a big deal to have a true friend because true friendship is a huge help when trying to deal with your troubles. Friends share joys and sorrows and in difficult times, one becomes the support of the other. Now, among Greek and sailors from foreign countries and different cultures, my friend and I will be companions and support each other.

From St. Nicholas in Crete, we sailed the tranquil waters of the Mediterranean Sea and through the straits of Gibraltar we entered the angry seas of the Atlantic. We sailed around Africa and after many, many days, we arrived at Kharg Island and tied at a platform to load our cargo. The return trip was not to be the same, it would be shorter. We would sail up the Red Sea and through the Suez Canal which, at long last, had been cleared of mines and sailing it was now allowed.

In a few days we were sailing through the Suez Canal and those of us not on duty were out on the deck observing the route.

The Suez Canal is one of the most important shipping routes of the planet. It is a manmade waterway, the largest in the world, traversing the Suez Isthmus and connecting the Mediterranean Sea with the Red Sea. It starts from Port Said in Egypt on the Mediterranean, the city of Ismailia known as the city of beauty and Charm is approximately half way and it ends at the port of Suez, in the Gulf of the Red Sea.

We sailed the Mediterranean and passed through the Gibraltar straits. We then sailed along the coast of Portugal, through the Bay of Biscay and along the coast of France, and entered the English Channel where, somewhere near Dover, we anchored and discharged part of our cargo via a pipeline. Rotterdam was close,

and in a few hours, we had arrived and tied at the large Dutch port.

At the time, Holland was a country at the centre of the worldwide news reports because it was trying a groundbreaking system in relation to the use of drugs. The government imposed a policy which received a lot of criticism and was widely discussed. We had also read about these measures in the Greek newspapers, and within the narrow and strict confines of Greek and Cypriot culture, we thought it was very advanced and unheard of.

Because Rotterdam was a large port through which millions of people and containers from all over the world passed and which, after the war, became one of the biggest centres for drug trafficking and drug use, Holland, being a very tolerant country, prepared to listen to new ideas, applied a very daring drug policy. Having in mind to fight crime that emanated from drug smuggling, the government allowed the sale of small amounts of hashish in the renowned “coffee shops” of Rotterdam and other Dutch towns, under strict regulation. This policy led to the increase of criminality around these coffee shops and the street of Katendrecht was flooded by drug addicts and everything that accompanies them. It acquired the international reputation of being a bad neighbourhood. Bars and cafeterias opened and filled with every Tom, Dick and

Harry. Suspicious contraband was rife, while pimps watched their prostitutes and dealers watched their runners from afar. In other areas, small groups of people would get together possibly planning small or big illegal operations or even robberies.

It was the afternoon, my shift in the engine room had finished, and with my mate Antoneskos, we descended the long stairs of the ship and headed towards the city of Rotterdam which was located near the harbour, the first thing on our minds being the procurement of prostitutes.

The town seemed deserted on that day, with very few people and cars on the roads. Many of the shop signs were written in Greek. Restaurants, bars, places where one could hear the “rebetika” songs, and many other establishments. It was like every other port, Greece was everywhere. The Greek immigrants made their presence felt and were the owners of many shops where seamen liked to shop. The Greek merchant fleet was, at that time, the largest in the world, and Greeks crowded every port.

It was the 70's and nowhere, apart from America and maybe Germany, were there shop windows advertising live prostitutes. They were lined up, showing their wares and beckoning to passersby to enter and enjoy special treatments. Touts stood outside trying to describe their saucy offerings. As we were accustomed from previous

ports, we listened to them and continued walking and looking for something of interest to us.

We entered a cinema advertising porn and inside, instead of seats, there were individual stands covered in hard carpet, where viewers could sit or lie and watch the risqué films. The service was excellent, beautiful girls made sure that each customer was having a good time, and there were also bouncers standing discretely in dark corners with their arms crossed, watching. They were the guards who made sure everything was as it should, without diversions from the predetermined allowed game.

In the semi-dark cinema screening porn, the viewers could not touch the partially dressed girls. Only the girls could touch the viewers wherever they wished, only the girls had the initiative. That was how the game was played and everything depended on viewers' tips and stamina.

So, we passed the day and the night found us walking in Katendrecht, the infamous neighbourhood with its renowned "coffeeshops" and usual suspects. It was like a festival buzzing with people, hippies with large bellbottomed trousers, just like fashion required, walking lazily up and down, sweeping the streets as they passed. In the distance, where Katendrecht street ended, there was a sign over a door which read "Hellas Bar". We

entered and were joyfully greeted by the Greek clientele and proprietors who eagerly asked for news of the motherland.

We had a good time there, with cold drinks, loud music and beautiful girls to keep us company and look after us. We spent the rest of the night there until our shift approached and we had to return to the ship. Satisfied, we started walking back. For days on end we would have a lot to say and discuss about our experiences in Katendrecht, during our breaks and during long nights, sitting under the cover on the stern deck, on long voyages over oceans and seas.



THE IDIOT

The crew of a tanker consists of the deck crew, engine crew and general services crew.

The deck crew includes the captain, the officers, the sub-officers (boatswain and pump man), sailors and cadets.

The engine crew includes the officers, oilers, stokers and cleaners. Finally, the general services crew includes the wireless operator, the steward, cook, cabin boys and waiters.

In the "EUGENIE", the cabins of mechanics and sailors were on the first deck above the engine. The deck level housed the kitchen and dining rooms, the next held the officers' cabins and above those were the cabins of the captain, the first officer and the wireless operator.

In the beginning, as a trainee engineer, I slept in a cabin on the same level as the mechanics and lower crew, but after my promotion, I moved on the officers' level.

There were two dining rooms for our meals, one on either side of the ship. They were big and roomy so that the crew could use them during their free time as cafeterias. The starboard dining room was used by the officers, and the port dining room by everyone else. Out of habit from my past as a trainee engineer and now as a junior engineer, I used both dining rooms, but I mostly used the second one because my childhood friend Antonoskos was a trainee engineer on this trip and he ate there.

It was a roomy area with air conditioning and a huge radio that would catch plenty of frequencies in the middle of the sea, so we always had it turned on to keep us company during our break.

The boatswain, pump man and the pump man's assistant, a huge sailor with a square muscular body and a broken nose with a stupid face to match and who was

also on our last crew, were buddies and played backgammon for hours.

The boatswain was short and red-skinned, with blue eyes and a permanent frown and I wondered how he managed to satisfy the criteria for his position. The pump man looked like an innocent peasant, a bit rough around the edges, but kind. Finally, the sailor looked like a modern-day strongman. He epitomized the phenomenon of super human strength reflected in a powerful body with obvious muscle power. As a young man he worked in construction and got involved with the sport of weightlifting by going to the gym every night after he got off work. He trained as a weightlifter during his formative years, so the constant training and exercise sculpted his body to resemble that of a strong-man.

They were all good players and from playing with each other for countless hours, their game became stereotypical. The square sailor was a good-enough player, but not as good as his companions who were more masterful. The rest of us were very interested in watching their games.

I, and I believe most of us, considered the square sailor as a personality that fell somewhere between a simple mind and an idiot, or even a moron. His square body and his physical strength compelled everyone to be friendly towards him and, with most crew members treating him in this manner, he became addicted to power and strength, and, as most people would, enjoyed it.

No idiot considers himself stupid and, while intelligent people realise their mistakes and try to correct them, idiots do not, and that results in them thinking and acting even more stupidly. When things do not turn out as they expect, they become angry and react with aggression. A skillful and intelligent person may find a way to advise and make them think more intelligently. Of course, a truly intelligent person when realizing just how deep their stupidity really lies, tries to avoid them because, at the end of the day, idiots only succeed in bringing destruction to those around them, and, indeed, without a morsel of regret. I didn't like him because he was an imbecile, but I maintained a distance to avoid making him angry but also to avoid having any dealings with him.

My friend Andreas once made a comment on a mistake during a game and he took it wrongly, they had a bad argument and the rest of us had a very difficult task preventing him from harming Andreas. The comments were not a good reason for a fight, but the sailor's idiocy made a big deal out of nothing.

In my opinion, a person is considered an idiot when he creates problems out of nothing thus becoming, at times, dangerous. The only way to avoid these consequences is to actually avoid these people, just as I was doing.

The sailor's stupidity and arrogance didn't allow him to consider the incident resolved then and there. He began a campaign of bullying and intimidation against my friend. He kept staring at him provocatively and making

comments with innuendos, and this happened on a daily basis. As the days passed, instead of the situation being defused, it became more volatile, and the results were not going to be good. The tension increased and my friend was hanging on tender hooks, while, from his position of being the one with the mightier physical power, the sailor enjoyed the terrible bullying he exercised upon a person with a weaker physique...

This was a situation that needed to end. Even though we believed that two of us against one of him would still be difficult, we felt that, nevertheless, we needed to act because the situation was worsening as the days passed.

When I was present, he avoided provoking, possibly thinking that it would not be easy fighting two persons, so we agreed to challenge him and act fast before he had the time to react. We needed to act in a way that showed him to be at fault so that we would not suffer any consequences because we planned to cause him a lot of injury in order to give him the message that we meant business and that he should stop acting like a bully.

One stormy day while the crew were in their cabins, we cornered him in the cafeteria. Andreas went in first and, upon seeing the sailor's sarcastic smile, he responded with profanities against his mother. The sailor was momentarily taken aback and could not believe what he was hearing. He sprang out of his chair and, feeling cocky against my friend, moved aggressively towards him.

I immediately jumped in from behind and with a strong hold immobilised his arms behind him. Andreas was ready with two knuckle dusters we had made for this purpose in the engine room and started punching him with rage. He hit him with such unforeseen hatred and would not stop. All the frustration he felt had turned into hatred and was now manifesting itself through his fists with immense fury. He struck him relentlessly, his arms moving like pistons.

The sailor did not manage to withstand the attack and fell unconscious into my arms. My friend however could not stop because he had suffered abuse every day for so long and his suppressed anger was now spilling over.

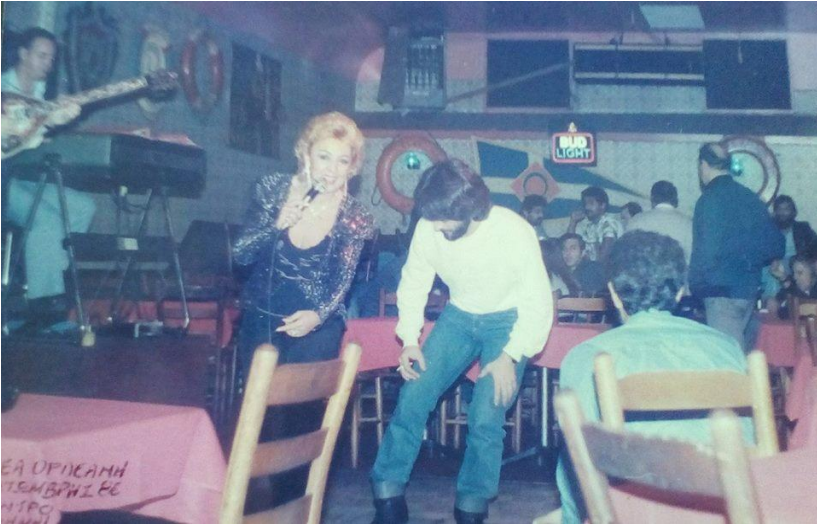
I let go of the sailor and tried to hold my friend back, but he had so much hatred inside him, he grabbed a heavy chair and smashed it over the unconscious body of the sailor. Seeing him motionless on the floor, with no reaction and no movement, he stopped and looked at him, great satisfaction spreading over his face.

We stood for a while looking at him until he started moving and groaning slightly. We looked out into the corridor and did not see anyone. Nobody saw us, nobody heard a thing. So, we decided to leave him lying there and flee, thinking that he would be too embarrassed to name us as his attackers.

We went to my cabin feeling pleased with the result and started talking and planning what to say in case the sailor eventually reported us. We were not particularly worried

because the captain, at most, would impose a fine upon us, or expel us from the ship.

Hours passed, the whole night passed, and the next morning arrived. At lunch time, we went to the dining room to eat, but the sailor was nowhere to be seen. As soon as we entered, all eyes were upon us because everybody had realized what happened and nobody believed the sailor's story about falling down some steps. At the next port, the sailor left the ship.



MISSISSIPPI, NEW ORLEANS

I visited New Orleans many times in 1977. Because of the Greek sailors visiting its large port at the time, there were many Greek shops there, even a bouzoukia night club. It is a beautiful area with a mild climate, a lot of greenery and many sights. Visitors fall in love with the town as soon as they set eyes on it and wish they could live there. New Orleans is built on the banks of the Mississippi, the largest river of the country. Its waters flow for many kilometres until reaching the sea, and the wild natural beauty with old trees, colourful birds, beavers and endless swamps constitute a huge wetland ecosystem with hundreds of living creatures, alligators, reptiles and other amphibians.

Winter is mild and does not last long, while the summers are hot and rainy.

It is inhabited by people of many races with most of the population being of African descent. It was established as a French colony during the sixteenth century and its name was linked to the slave trade, riverboats and Jazz. The city of New Orleans boasts the famous French Market, the museum with the famous wax sculptures of famous persons and the Tremé Quarter where Jazz was born and developed, as well as the famous French Quarter and Bourbon Street, the former overflowing with jazz music culture and the latter overrun by houses of ill repute and criminality everywhere, out in the streets and behind bright lights where suspicious night activities coexist with carnal lust and other pleasures.

Bourbon Street, a name linked with prostitution and drugs. The street with countless establishments hosting hell and paradise, prostitution and exploitation, suspicious transactions between the lawless and big contraband behind closed doors. A busy street with vibrant and strong colours in the shop windows, yellows, greens and purples.

The passersby were mostly of mixed race, walking to the rhythm of jazz. The women were big, juicy and jaunty, showing off their big breasts and provocative behinds. They were negro, mixed race and creole, all beautiful and desirable with a firm step that made their firm buttocks wobble. I thought that, maybe, Paradise was right here, on the famous and infamous Bourbon street.

The shipowner Stavros Niarchos named the tanker that carried us to New Orleans "EUGENIE", after his wife Eugenia. To reach our destination we sailed up the Mississippi, the largest river of North America, considered in the past as the boundary of the "Wild West" flowing down the country over a distance of six thousand kilometres and washing into the bay of Mexico, the largest ocean lagoon in the world. They call it the "great river" and is an essential transportation artery as it is navigable almost to its source. It is a wild river that man never managed to tame. When it floods, its waters cover vast territories. Various projects aiming to harness its great force always fail before its power.

On the ship I worked as a junior engineer and carried out the duties of third engineer. These were duties assigned to me by the first engineer because the third engineer of the ship had no idea about engines. Because of this, I carried out my shifts with him, as his equal. I was a good mechanic and deserved my promotion. The third engineer was a man from the island of Chios and he was recruited without having a diploma or knowledge of engineering but simply because he was a relative of the chief engineer of the company fleet.

He was from Chios and came along with his cousin, a stoker. They were inseparable, they stayed together in the same cabin, they ate together, they worked their shifts together exactly like the old story that says, "people from Chios always walk in twos", and all this, in breach of the regulations because on ships, there needs to be a

separation between officers and lower-ranking crew. The third engineer was an officer while the stoker was just crew. In ships there are separate dining and recreation areas for lower-ranking crew and higher-ranking crew in order to keep the necessary distance which is conducive for discipline. In their case however, an exception was made, by orders that came from the higher echelons of the company.

The Islanders of Chios were mainly fishermen, a low-income profession as it depended not only on hard and dangerous work but also on the weather which usually renders the sea rough and wild. Therefore, they considered seamen as rich and aristocratic because they received a steady salary, and all wished to become seamen. Those who could, were recruited on ships.

One will therefore find many Chios islanders on ships in agreement with the well-known saying of "people from Chios always walk in twos". The Chios people acquired this habit for mutual support, and even though it is misunderstood by many, it actually shows their intelligence. This support for each other became well known because, during the Ottoman occupation, a Turk in Chios had the right to ask a Greek on the street to lift him on his back and carry him. The Chios islanders could not accept this and, instead, loaded one of their own on their back to carry, so they would not be forced to carry a Turk.

The two men from Chios were friendly and very likeable. Their extreme kindness was etched on their faces and no

bad words ever came out of their lips. For days and nights, we carried out endless shifts together, and we really got on well. Many years passed since then and they are of the few that I can still remember their names. Mikes and Stamatis. Mikes was simple and thickset, just like the strong and thick trunk of an oak and his strong arms could bend steel. Stamatis was slight and pretended to be devious without being very clever in reality, but this bothered nobody, as they all saw his kind side. In any case, nobody would dare mess with him as his cousin was always next to him, standing like a brick wall. As our shifts coincided, so did our shore leaves. Before our first shore leave in New Orleans, we mainly talked about the sinful Bourbon street we were going to visit and how it was filled with shops stocking all types of pornographic material, sexual services for sale and all kinds of sex toys and accessories, enhancing substances and all sorts of secrets on straight or gay carnal pleasure. This is where all the clubs were located and where the famous naked go-go girls danced seductively and sensually, lifting the libido of the audience. In those days, it was fashionable to have go-go girls in bars. These were beautiful young girls who danced practically naked on poles and stages a little higher than the customers, for their enjoyment, but the customers were not allowed to touch them. They danced slow routines, alone and held the male population spellbound. They only wore a tiny string and that was the only place where customers were allowed to touch in order to hang

dollars as payment for the wonderful shows they were staging. Any other contact was strictly prohibited and for this reason there was discreet surveillance of every customer's movements by bouncers, for the prevention of any unauthorized contact. God help anyone who dared breach the bar code. Immediately, countless bodyguards would appear out of nowhere and savagely beat the culprit.

We reached the infamous street and followed the call of one of the many touts outside the bars, into an empty bar. A very beautiful and petite dancer was gyrating on the stage and beckoned us to enter. As soon as her eyes fell on the stoker, she stood right above him, possibly considering that he was an easy target being so slight and kind-looking.

Stamatis was wearing a brand-new suit that matched his tie. He was freshly shaven and bathed and was doused in fragrant cologne. He looked like a well-paid merchant marine officer and, in comparison, wearing our plain clothes, we looked like his subordinates.

So, the little dancer zeroed on the well-paid, in her opinion, officer, considering him to be a good customer. She probably thought that she was going to get good tips from him.

We sat near the stage and enjoyed the view she offered with her dancing, but she was gyrating over the stoker as if we did not exist, and she was not going to leave him.

The minutes ticked away, but the stoker did not offer any tips. The girl, annoyed, was getting closer to him,

thrusting her pelvis into his face and making him heave with desire. We thought, and, most probably, so did the stripper, that he was doing this to pretend that he is a tough little man but would pay eventually. He had placed his cigarettes and gold lighter on the stage and had devoted himself completely on watching the beautiful girl. By now, she was dancing angrily, indicating to him that he should hang money on the thin thread that held her flimsy underwear together. In the end, having received no response, she stopped dancing and vociferously demanded her payment. The damned stoker, however, proved to be stingy and refused so the young girl grabbed his gold lighter and moved away from us. He was about to go after her, but I realized that we were going to get into trouble and grabbed him by the arm to stop him. I explained to him that if we made a fuss in these places of ill repute abroad, we would disappear without a trace. The stoker was very upset because his lighter was gold and therefore expensive and he said that he was going to make a fuss to get it back, even if this meant he was going to get a beating.

Seeing that we were not going to get out of this situation, I told him to wait and give me a chance to think. I came up with the idea of grabbing the lighter from her when she least expected us to do so, since she was alone in the little room, and immediately running away fast so that the bouncers of the club standing behind the screens could not catch us.

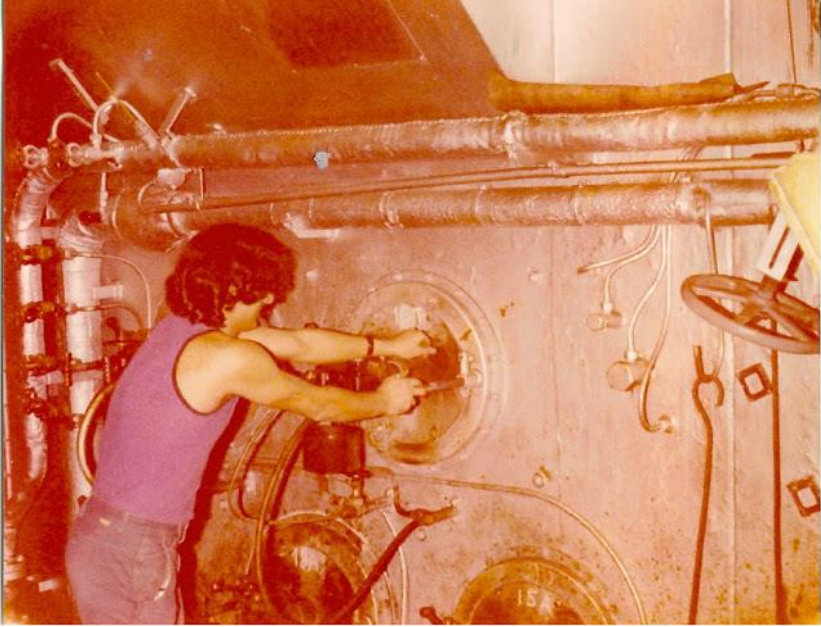
It was a difficult moment, we had taken a big decision, but we were forced to do it because the stoker was going to make a fuss anyway. I knew that we were in a dangerous place, protected by tough and dangerous people of the criminal world who would surely rush out upon hearing the slightest noise.

So, we put our plan to action, the stoker grabbed the lighter from the girl's hands, and we ran. I still have flashbacks of their terrifying voices swearing while chasing us.

I don't know how many there were, nobody looked back, but we ran at great speed. I am sure that, had we run the 100 metre sprint that night, we would have come first.

Our sprint led us to a narrow street, and we saw the boatswain of the ship standing in a lit doorway with some sailors. We stopped there feeling that in the company of our own people, we would not be in danger. And, indeed, we realised that we were no longer chased, and our hearts went back to their normal beat.

The bright door was the entrance to a Greek night club. Above the door there was a sign that read "ATHENS, Greek Bouzoukia". We went up the stairs and found all the crew that was not on shift sitting and having fun the Greek way, with the sound of bouzouki music playing Angelopoulos's song "I am a refugee".



THE GLOW OF THE SEA

I served as a trainee mechanic and Junior Engineer on four tankers belonging to the Stavros Niarchos company. The "Southern Union", the "Eugenie", the "Eugenie S. Niarchos" and the "World Knowledge".

We usually took cargo on board from the Persian Gulf and mainly from Ras Tanura. During one of our voyages to this port, we remained anchored for two months. It was difficult times for tankers and, until the ship owning companies entered into the next charter, a lot of ships remained anchored and waiting outside ports. It was the first and only time we needed to wait for so long.

After loading our cargo, we set sail for Cape Town, a voyage that was quite long and lasted one month because the ship was using economy speed. In Ras Tanura we usually loaded from platforms that were at a distance from the shore. That long voyage, together with remaining anchored and waiting, kept us at sea for three continuous months. In my nautical career, this was the longest period I stayed on a ship without setting foot on dry land.

The long voyages, as well as the short time tankers were required to stay in port because discharging the cargo did not take too long, drove many seamen to choose cargo or passenger ships for work.

Tankers are dangerous ships because they carry liquid cargoes that are unstable. They sink and break in two more easily. The seamen working on these ships are men with stamina who have courage and patience and who can withstand a life full of danger and seclusion. A voyage on a tanker is an unsurpassable magical experience because the seaman lives between the sky and the sea for a long period of time, alone, with only his solitude and lonely thoughts as company, surrounded by the elements of nature.

During this voyage, we came across many storms, large and small. Others against us and others behind us, pushing us along and, depending on their force, we either sailed along or against them. One storm during that voyage really caused us trouble and frightened us more than any other. The waves were immense, they grabbed the large ship and lifted it onto their crest as if it was a

walnut shell ready to break. As it rose, it creaked with a horrendous slow sound, like from another world. All of us on shifts in the engine room and the helm, but the others also, who were on standby and alert, counted the seconds it took the wave to lift us holding our breath. We breathed out only when we felt that we were descending the wave. We brought to the forefront of our thoughts what we should do in case the ship broke. Would we have time to get out onto the deck and lower the lifeboats? Would the pull of the ship drag us down or would we have time to distance ourselves?

There were also lovely days, and nights with a full moon and calm seas. On those nights, when the sea is like a milk pond and the moon is full, we would get the chance while on deck to be carried away, reminisce and feel nostalgic.

One night, I finished my shift in the engine room and came out of the hot steam onto the deck to breathe some fresh air. It was a night with no stars and no moon, the sky was dark and ink black, yet the sea glowed white and reflective, a vast expanse up to where the eye could see, a strange and inexplicable phenomenon, a beautiful and enigmatic spectacle that caused awe and admiration. Charmed and ecstatic, I stood and observed the limitless phosphorescent glow without being able to explain it. I was looking at it trying to understand it but had no answer.

We had a sixty-year-old stoker on board, from the island of Chios. He had retired and went ashore to live out his remaining days but could not tolerate the tranquility of

land life and went back on the ships without even thinking of his advanced age.

Anyone talking with older people always learns new things. However, he didn't have an explanation for the phosphorescent glow of the sea, all he knew was the story of the Fairy from an island, who surfaces from the bottom of the sea and walks on the waves to meet her beloved Captain Giorkis. This is when the phenomenon occurs, the sea goes white and the rest of creation falls into darkness....

It is a story, an old myth, about a worker in the shipyard who didn't like building caiques but instead loved sailing in them. He longed for adventures on the waves. He loved the sea, it was as if the sirens and sea fairies beckoned him. So, he sailed, the years passed and, as a Captain, he travelled distant and dangerous seas. The Fairy cove however, was his haven, his anchorage, his home. He travelled extensively, voyages were his whole life, but he always returned to his haven. There, he had his home and his wife who always waited for him scanning the horizon. She adored him greatly, he was her captain, and she was his beautiful wife. Everyone was envious of the Captain and his good luck...

But, one damned and dark night, Giorkis' caique disappeared during a storm. The villagers waited for days to hear news but there was only silence. Those who knew about travels and sailing could not offer any hope for survival. His wife did not want to believe it and mourned him for many days, until she could no longer withstand

the loss and lost her mind. Nobody could find her at home, she was always at the seaside gazing and waiting, and crying unconsolably. Until one day she heard the Fairies of the sea calling her. With her hair loose and a smile on her face she walked into the waves and was lost in the depths of the sea in search of her beloved Captain. Since then, every time there is no moon or stars, the sky is dark and the sea is calm, a white majestic phosphorescent light emanates from the deep, and some people see the Fairy walking on the waves and disappearing beneath them.

This is a story of local Greek folklore, a legend, maybe a true story, showing the pain of those left behind.

During this voyage, I saw beautiful places, I saw the sea full of little boats with fishermen far from the shore, fishing in deep waters with no engines on their boats, with just a small sail on a small mast. I saw the sea brimming with fish, I saw her change colours, I saw her phosphorescent in the night and emerald in the morning, I saw her take the best of all the colours of the rainbow, an exquisite and beautiful vision, a balsam to our souls and our hearts.

I saw many more things, but the stories of the old stoker filled my mind and took over my thoughts, casting a shadow over the beauty of the new seas as they caressed the feet of the tall ridges on the shores far away on the horizon.



TRAVELLING ON THE SHIP "EUGENIE S. NIARCHOS"



THE SANDSTORM

Life on a tanker proved to be very hard, more so than I had imagined. Despite this, I gritted my teeth and decided to persevere. I didn't have that many options anyway.

We arrived in Saudi Arabia and anchored waiting in queue for an order from the port authority allowing us to tie at the platform and load our cargo.

The days were passing, and we received no message. Those were hard times because there was a financial crisis and therefore difficulties in closing deals for the transportation of petrol. So, out of necessity, we waited for almost a whole month.

During this stressful wait and a few days before receiving a message from the company that it had secured a charter, I was standing with the handyman on the ship's deck. It was a summer day, hazy due to the hot air coming off the sea mixing with the vapours created by the scorching sun evaporating the water, and we were looking at the yellow sand stretching beyond the shore at a distance of approximately half a kilometre from us. The endless sand covered the country of Saudi Arabia, creating a lifeless scenery with no vegetation.

The desert of Arabia is a dry area but every now and then, and quite rarely, it is beaten by gale force winds and heavy rain. It is a vast uncultivated area with a lot of sunshine and permanently parched soil, inhabited by tanned, dark-skinned people.

Despite all this, in its endless desolation, in certain locations there are small oases, that is to say, places with greenery, mainly palm trees, and water wells. In the old days, these were stations for the merchants' caravans crossing the desert transporting wares from one city to the other and from one country to the other. They were places of rest, replenishment and shelter from monsoons and sandstorms. The winds blowing over the desert are quite strong and very often create whirlwinds that

change the terrain of the desert forming wavy valleys and tall sand dunes, sometimes huge and artfully sculpted, like works of art.

These were my thoughts as I stood under the shade of the stern gazing at the great expanse of the desert shore. We were about half a kilometre away and the hazy atmosphere created a shimmer that formed strange and savage shapes floating over the ground.

My mind had recalled bad thoughts. As we know, when something sinister comes to our attention, our mind races to equally sinister thoughts. Subconsciously and for no reason, just by looking at the shimmering air creating all sorts of incorporeal shapes, my mind took me to evil yellow images of hell and apocalypse.

Knowing that malevolent and strange monsters come from the sea and the sand, I suddenly saw, or thought I saw, the beast of the apocalypse taking shape in the scorching haze and leaping from the sand into the air, filling the sky with its huge body. And immediately I brought to mind the words of John the Evangelist "then I saw a beast with ten horns and seven heads rising out of the sand and sea...". And, as I watched, the huge shadows of the sand transformed and changed shape, becoming a beast with horns and many heads.

Suddenly, the beast turned its head towards us, and with a mighty whirl flipped its whole body, and attacked us.

It was a whirlwind, a desert storm, and in fractions of a second, from one moment to the next, we were cloaked in yellow sand with shards of sand mercilessly beating us

and scratching our faces before we even managed to seek refuge inside the ship.

With our eyes bleary from the sand we entered the safety of the ship and stood at the port hole watching the rabid wind forcefully carrying the heavy sand that beat the bulkheads and whistled eerily, deafening and scaring us. It was a phenomenon I had never seen before but had read about it in books. I had never imagined what an uncontrollable force and fury sand could be when swept by the wind. It savagely beat the thick panels of the ship making a terrible noise that pierced our ears and made our eardrums hurt, frightened our hearts and caused us to panic.

With our senses numbed by the stress of watching the magnificent show, I watched this natural phenomenon in all its glory. Hoping that nature's fury would quickly die down and the strong wind would abate so that the beast of the desert passes us by, I watched dumbfounded and without being sure within myself whether I had fear or admiration for the majestic phenomenon taking place before my eyes.

And the beast left, just as it had appeared. Suddenly. It disappeared into the horizon, leaving behind a total silence, without the slightest of sounds. As if time had stopped and stalled life itself. The deck was covered in sand. Whole mounds had gathered in the ship's remotest crevices. I noticed that the panels of the ship had changed colour. The force of the wind carrying the sand was such that it stripped the paint and revealed the thick

undercoat in many parts of the ship. "The sailors will have a lot of work in the coming days", I thought.

At the bow I saw the metal door of the bridge open and the second officer climbing down the steps. I knew he was going to call the boatswain and order him to clean the sand and dust off the ship. At the same time, I saw the stern deck door opening and the boatswain coming out to meet the second officer, sure, as he knew his job well, that the latter would be looking for him.

I also headed towards the engine room because I too knew my job well. I knew that any minute now the telephone in the engine room would ring and we would receive an order from the bridge to commence the sanitary, that being the pump that sent seawater to the deck where the sailors, using hoses, would wash the whole ship of the dust and sand.



NAGASAKI OF THE SAMURAI

A little before the twentieth century, a group of Samurai warriors wiped out a whole family, butchering them with their famous swords. This was a crime that needed to be punished in order to restore justice. The administrative authorities however recognized that the Samourai were executing orders issued by their master so, instead of convicting them and bringing them shame, they allowed them to carry out hara-kiri and die honourably in accordance with their standards, as honourable warriors, since the laws of the Samurai dictated that they obey their masters blindly, without question nor resistance.

This was an incident that shows the Japanese way of life before World War II when many things changed, and the Japanese started to lead a way of life closer to western standards.

Nagasaki is a Japanese city known through history as the city of the Shogun and the Samurai.

Shoguns were the senior military leaders and masters of the Samurai during the middle ages and the Samurai were armies of the great Feudal Lords with a mission to guard their property. Their culture was founded on the quintessence of a warrior of great ability and high level of training. Their main dogma was honour defiance of death, they fought bravely for their master and preferred an honourable death than the shame of being defeated. The tradition of hara-kiri, a ritualistic way of suicide as the only permitted way out in case of defeat or dishonour, emanated from this defiance of death.

As a people, Japanese culture differed from that of the Europeans. Generally, their way of life and behaviour was very different. The noblemen belonging to a higher social class used the masses as tools to serve their needs.

During the centuries, this way of life remained the same with the only changes being those in who possessed the power. The traditions and beliefs were not changed. Even the architectural building principles remained, to a great extent, unchanged, the main changes being just in decorative details, while during the passing of the various dynasties, they were subjected to just small influences from extrinsic factors. Their architecture

basically adhered to its own elements and managed not to be influenced by European architecture.

Nagasaki is built on a long and narrow cove that forming a natural harbour. We were relieved when we entered the harbour and prayed to thank St. Nicholas who helped us to safely navigate the wild Indian ocean. Voyages on this ocean were very difficult at times, due to the monsoons blowing in alternating directions and creating different surface currents and large waves.

We had endured a long voyage that caused us hardship as the sea was rough and with winds high up on the beaufort scale making sailing difficult. The waves swept over the ship for the duration of the voyage and the sailors on the bridge as well as the engineers in the engine room put up a big battle. We were tossed about more than other times because the waves and currents were against us. We were forced to sail slightly parallel to the weather to reduce our risk, and that resulted in our voyage lasting longer.

Following the long voyage, we returned to the Persian Gulf. After remaining anchored waiting for the company to secure a charter, we sailed for Japan.

We loaded our cargo at Ras Tanura, one of the main energy sources of the modern world. They named petrol the "black gold" and they were right, as it's uses are unlimited since ancient times, before it was even discovered.

A long time ago, petrol leaked on the surface of the land, and in japan and elsewhere, it was used as naphtha and

bitumen. When natural gas leaked, it was used by high priests and sorcerers as a force sent by the Gods.

Nowadays, after the World War, access to petrol was easy as huge reserves were discovered mainly in the Middle East, and it was transported to various countries with tankers.

Our cargo holds were loaded with tens of thousands of tons of mazut destined for the needs of the ancient city of Nagasaki, a modern city that during the last years, had developed into a large industrial centre.

We entered the safe harbour and tied at the dock. The sailors of the ship and the port workers worked like bees and in just a short time, the engine room pumps were ready to begin pumping the valuable liquid cargo on shore. It was a little after noon. I had finished my shift and had eight hours to kill until the next one, and for sure, I was going to use these hours to tour the new country I was visiting, the land of the rising sun.

Japan is an East Asian country. It is comprised of four large islands, Kyushu, where Nagasaki was built, Honshu, Shikoku and Hokkaido, as well as around seven thousand other islands sprinkled over the Japanese Archipelago. I was eager to experience the Japanese culture and the behaviour of the local population. At the time karate films starring Bruce Lee as well as adventures of the invincible Samurai battling with their swords against the rifles and machine guns of westerners were very much very much in vogue.

I wanted to walk around the shops with the famous Seiko watches and the cheap, superior technology electronics. I wanted to taste sushi and get to know Geishas and their story. Sushi is a traditional food based on vinegary rice combined with seafood and sauces with exquisite flavours. Geishas were educated women with special training in the arts of dance, music, singing and poetry and used to serve in the large feudal courts of the middle ages.

Nagasaki has a history starting thousands of years ago. During the middle ages the city had become a centre of European influence and became known as the second city after Hiroshima that was hit during World War II by an atomic bomb. It was totally annihilated as if hit by a gigantic meteorite. It was a total catastrophe caused by splitting the atom in an attempt by man to replicate the might of God. Everything turned into fire and people burned and melted like candles. Corpses were strewn everywhere and the dying, like mummies without eyes, staggered before succumbing to death. Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in just seconds, ceased to exist and were reduced to dead, smoking, hollow cities. Shapeless piles of rubble were reduced to their molecular composition and covered the areas where once stood the buildings that formed the cities.

....And after this total destruction, people rebuilt their city. They gave it a new look, modern and European. High skyscrapers and sprawling building complexes were built from scratch and the fast development of high-

end electronic industries made the city rich and prosperous. People worked at a fast pace, like ants in a state of complete discipline. Everything was orderly and programmed.

I expected to come across different things, similar to the things I read in books when I was a boy. I expected to recognize the culture and ancient history of the powerful feudal lords and emperors protected by vast armies of Shoguns and Samurai. I expected to meet women in kimonos and men in modern clothes piled into buses going to work. But I met nothing remotely reminiscent of those things. Everything was in absolute order and wealth was evident everywhere. Shops with expensive jewelry and electronic goods that had not even been imported yet in other countries, well-dressed people in expensive suits walking without staring curiously at us because we were different, and streets full of only locally manufactured cars. It was a rich and developed city, more so than other cities of modern Europe.



AN ICY CHRISTMAS AT SEA

Even in winter, the sea is beautiful. When the gentle splash becomes a roar that frightens all your tranquil senses, even this fear has a beauty. When the sea gets rough and shows her anger, when the blue water turns white and murky, when ships and shores vanish under the sea's currents and mighty drag, when waves rise into the air and dissipate moisture filling the atmosphere with salt one can taste and smell, one realises the grandeur held and hidden by the sea, how strong she really is.

Many times, the issue is how one looks upon the sea. A wild sea in a cove, waves crashing angrily on the shore or savagely eating away at the coast, or, even from afar, looking at her from the top of a hill, enjoying the whole view in all its glory, without, however, having all one's senses experience her true dimension since the sea's roar

cannot be heard nor can her great strength be felt when violently stirring the waters.

I have felt and I have faced her might in the middle of the sea, in angry and rough waters, when travelling in seafaring ships across dangerous oceans from one country to the other, far away, at the ends of the Earth. We faced extreme cold, snow and ice that froze the drinking water in the ship's tanks. We travelled in sub-zero temperatures that cooled the exterior sides of the boilers in the engine room which we touched with pleasure in order to warm ourselves. On long voyages we had never done before, in places where the sea froze over, and the waves remained suspended like solidified liquid sculptures.

I remember it being Christmas on one of these long and endless voyages. The wind was icy and the fog covering the sea was lethal.

On board, sailors and engineers were thinking of our loved ones at home and with frozen hands we would light a cigarette in the hope that the smoke would warm our innards and our cold hearts. We walked on the stairs and in the corridors in an attempt to get warm. The wind was so cold it burned like fire and the extreme cold penetrated the hermetically sealed metal doors and froze our bodies' extremities, causing frostbite.

I wondered; is there really a Hell, or did God create it upon this Earth? Is it possible that fiery Hell be worse than the merciless weather that burns us with such frost?

I shook my head thinking this to myself while huddled next to the boiler to get warm. Next to me, the old stoker, Gasfikis, said that never in his long sailing career did he ever come across such freezing weather. He said that he never before celebrated Christmas in such unbearable cold.

The sailors in the dining room were feeling even colder and ecstatically watched the portholes freezing over while, outside, the wind howled, appearing to have taken solid form as it froze the sea vapours in midair.

Festivities, and particularly religious celebrations at sea and away from loved ones bring upon us a feeling of sadness. The loneliness and nostalgia of Christmas saddens sailors and their thoughts are with the people they love, and they are immersed in dark thoughts, reminiscing about wonderful festive family gatherings at home. It makes no difference how well they have come to terms with the loneliness of isolation, away from their people, especially at Christmas their thoughts are inundated by memories of adored voices from past Christmases and their nostalgia increases.

And so, Christmas day passes, and so do all other festive days on seafaring ships travelling for days with just sea in the horizon, in every direction. Those who decide to follow this profession, know how lonely isolation can be. However, during this voyage, our sad thoughts of home were compounded by the cold weather that froze us to the bone and numbed our bodies, the large waves that

shook the ship, and the freezing wind that frosted our breath and caused us pain from the intolerable cold.

This was weather that neither I nor the other sailors on that ship had come across before on the seas we had travelled. It was freezing conditions before Christmas with a wind so cold it burned like fire, and the extreme frost went right through us causing us immense pain.



PART 7, TRAVELLING WITH "WORLD KNOWLEDGE"



WILD WEATHER

The engine was groaning and struggling to propel the ship against the waves and currents. It needed a lot of horse power to move because it was a huge tanker of 350 tons, but the engine was strong and modern and we continued to sail without concern and worry in our minds about the wild weather that raged outside, in an unprecedented expression of anger.

The “World Knowledge”, the huge tanker which, in 1978, was the third largest in the world, could sail under the most adverse conditions. It was constructed to withstand the roughest seas without sinking. This is how it was designed in theory and on paper, and we hoped it was made the same way.

What man-made thing however can withstand God’s fury? How could science surpass the Creator? The forces of nature are unsurpassable and only fools dare to stand against them.

During this voyage through gale force weather and very rough seas, the waves became stronger and larger, reaching the dark sky and becoming one with the frightening angry weather. The sky was as black as bitumen, just like the fear that nestles in the hearts of seamen when witnessing the extreme deterioration of the weather and the viciousness of the waves as they become stronger and beat against anything they come across. Lightning brightened the darkness and the thunder covered the roar of the sea. The currents combined forces with the waves and the strong winds, in an unforeseen catastrophic force making our huge ship look like a nutshell swirling in a maelstrom of nature's forces.

Despite all of this, we felt reassured having in mind the good specifications of the ship and the only thing that worried us was the possibility that such a large ship could be broken in two when lifted onto its crest by a big wave.

One of the biggest seaman's fears during bad weather, are the squalls and storms that put the safety of the ship at risk.

Many seamen who cross the oceans in tankers and cargo ships have stories to tell about unbelievable and surreal yet true occurrences and events they witnessed with their own eyes. Things and situations they experienced on board ships when nature violently unleashed her elements in a wild magnificence, dragging ships and drowning seamen in their wake.

Seamen also say that, when the sea becomes so rough, nothing stays as it was before, neither the sea nor the shore, and that Noah's deluge was nothing more than an outburst of the sea's rage.

Some sailors say that they encountered waves as high as 30 metres and that this is a secret of the sea kept for many centuries and that science is not aware of them since the highest waves ever recorded are up to 10 metres. Many, therefore, question seamen when they describe the existence of gigantic waves and doubt what they say. Despite this, some seamen insist that they really exist and that they embrace ships they meet and lift them to extreme heights, then drop them into the chasms of the sea. Rarely has a ship survived an encounter with such wave and not often will one hear a seaman talk about them, since usually nobody survives to tell the tale.

Such waves may appear suddenly from nowhere but may also be created by extremely bad weather and excessively rough seas. While there is a chance for a ship to withstand the former as they are high but roll smoothly creating even peaks, nobody survives the latter because they are ruthless and as they move, they form maelstroms and currents.

During that long voyage, the sea and the sky created a surreal setting with the waves reaching the sky and the dull horizon reaching the ends of the Earth fiercely beau-

tiful and terrifying, filling our hearts with fear and causing worrying thoughts. The salty water from the waves crashing on the ship was carried by the wind and hit the thick plates of the ship generating a screeching and hair-raising sound that pierced our ears while the spray created by the aftermath clouded the port holes as salty water left its mark on the glass.

The view was frightening and nightmarish on the one hand but, on the other, our fear was somewhat set aside by the magnificence of the raging weather.

An artist experiencing such vision would be greatly inspired. Arion would write dithyrambs and Euripides tragic and sad poetry.

Many land dwellers would like to experience the sea at its angriest at some stage of their life, but they would like to do this from a position of safety, either through a film or the narration of a seaman, or by reading descriptions of storms and rough seas.

There are also many who are afraid of her and do not even want to see her rough, influenced by many writers who have praised her beauty but also interpreted her fury in its correct dimensions, and who have described how easily she sank and swallowed ships and people.

The sea is very charming for those who have lived and loved her, but she also inspires fear and true horror for most that have not had the chance to become acquainted with her. Many do not even dare to board a ship no matter how big and safe it is, and prefer never to travel and

never feel the amazing feeling of a traveler, never get to know other amazing and beautiful places apart from their own country, maintaining at the same time the feeling that their own homeland is the whole world.

The sea is strange, magical, beautiful. She is a seductress more so than a woman, and dangerous like fire. When she is calm, she is like a sleeping lover, not complaining, nor moaning, but when she is enraged, she raises waves and forms strong currents, both dangerous and deadly. In her depths she hides unnamed secrets and tragic stories of drowned men and ships that disappeared in the mist, lost forever. Kelp as big as trees and other flora grow in valleys and gorges that host beautiful fish but also fairytale dragons that cannot fit in the imagination of man. Unexplored mysteries human knowledge has never investigated and will never discover. She rages at a whim and raises huge waves that darken the sky.

The seas and the oceans are the children of Gaea and Uranus, the first Titan of the Earth that created all the bodies of water now existing on Earth.

The blue sea, the grey sea, the murky sea, the sea of so many colours that change according to the wind that blows, the currents formed and the atmospheric pressure and gravity.

The sea that is sprawled to all corners of the Earth and covers the largest part of Earth's surface, that spreads over the horizon and blends with the sky, a union so perfect, two elements creating one majestic vision, an unfathomable and amazing picture.

The sea is beautiful and magical, whether she is calm, rough, asleep or raging. She is mysterious, dangerous and frightening, but she is also well-loved. In her body she hides unknown, lost and sunken shipwrecks; she hides the entire history of the world that is around her, since the beginning of time and the creation of the Earth. Thousands of shipwrecks sit at the bottom of the sea and myriads of flora and fauna specimen live in the oceans.

The large ship tore through the big waves with the propeller steadily spinning against the resistance of the currents. The high waves carried us to their crests exposing the bow and the stern, both hanging in the void. And we would hear the screeching sound of the plates balancing the weight of the ship without the support of the water and the metal hull crackling hollowly and hair-raisingly, and then we would hear the sound of the ship crashing back and sinking into the water.

But the "World Knowledge" was an enormous tanker, the third biggest in the world and could sail through the worst weather conditions as it was built to withstand the biggest tempests without sinking. This was the design of

the ship in theory and on paper, and this was how well it was made, to carry us safely. And, as seamen, so we hoped.



THE BERMUDA TRIANGLE

The sea has many unseen secrets, well hidden under bottomless and unknown waters. An area with the most mysteries is the Bermuda Triangle. It is situated in the western part of the North Atlantic and is designated by Bermuda, Miami and San Juan of Puerto Rico. Aircraft and ships are said to have been mysteriously lost in this area. They did not sink but disappeared and were transported to another dimension.

Stories and myths have attributed these disappearances to paranormal activity, and this is the reason why many scientists claim that this is a myth because, after investigations, no evidence of paranormal activity was found.

However, the incidents that took place are many and unexplained and for this reason this location is also known as the Devil's Triangle.

There are countless theories about the mysterious disappearances, some relating to natural and others to paranormal phenomena.

The inhabitants of this area have their own stories about the mysterious disappearances, their own versions about the Bermuda Triangle and call it the witches' place because of strange evidence that was found in the sea. The wreck of a metal ship that went down with all hands aboard stands at 300 metres depth unaffected and in the same good condition, sitting for many decades on the bottom of the sea in an unnatural position, and scientists cannot explain why it remains unchanged by the passage of time and the wear and tear in salt water. Many stories are being told and, because the instances of disappearances in the area are countless and increasing, the infamy of the Triangle relating to passed shipwrecks and mysterious disappearances are starting to be analysed under the light of myth and paradox.

The crew of the ship had a discussion regarding the surreal and paradoxical stories of events that happened as told by many seamen. During this time the shipping company of Stavros Niarchos, my employer, had entered into a contract to carry out a number of routes for the transportation of petrol from Libya to Freeport in America.

I had finished my service on the ship "Eurenie S. Niarchos" and was immediately recruited on my fourth ship of the same company. It was the "World Knowledge", a huge tanker both in size and tonnage, the third largest in the world. It could take 350 thousand tons and was over 500 metres long. Because it was too big to tie up in ports it usually anchored in deep waters and loaded and unloaded from platforms. This was the ship I happened to be working on at the time.

Our route started from the terminal in Libya and after sailing the Mediterranean, we entered the Atlantic Ocean. With the Bahamas as our destination, we passed through the dangerous waters of the Bermuda Triangle and arrived in Freeport to discharge our cargo.

On official maps the area of the Bermuda Triangle is not mentioned as such nor is it recognised, it is simply mentioned orally as an imaginary area created by people. Despite this, the mystery around this area is real, and so are the aircraft and ships that were lost.

It was a quiet winter night, the sea was calm and the sky was covered in stars. There were no clouds covering their brightness.

The only thing reminiscent of winter was the sharp cold and all of us who were not on shift gathered early in the warm sitting area to watch a film the reels of which we had secured at the previous port. It was a documentary about the dangerous waters of the Bermuda Triangle, precisely where our ship was sailing at that very moment.

It was a very interesting documentary with quite a mysterious theme, covering the strange and inexplicable things that happened in this sea, and it made our imagination run away with us, allowing a feeling of fear and unease to take over. Strange thoughts entered my mind and as I was very young, I was easily influenced and fell into a spiral of fear and paranormal theories on the strange phenomena taking place in this sea. I started thinking that maybe it would be our luck and the same would happen to us, if not during this voyage, maybe during the next, or the one after that, or another, since the ship was to carry out several voyages through this sea.

With worrying thoughts swirling in my head but also a lot of curiosity, after the film was over I went out onto the stern deck to see the notorious Devil's sea where so many inexplicable things had happened and upon which it was our fate to be sailing at that very moment.

I saw the sea all black and dark, the stars unable to light it with even a little reflection of their brightness. It looked like bitumen, exactly as it would be if it were the Devil's. Even the waters churned by the propeller were not white but also remained dark. I thought it was weird and unnatural that, under the bright light of the stars shining in the sky, the sea remained so incredibly dark. Something did not seem normal, something seemed to be in the atmosphere, something paranormal, something out of this world. Something that was probably only in my

thoughts, but which affected my imagination and caused me to have worryingly scary thoughts.

I looked intensely towards the length of the horizon trying to distinguish something there apart from the absolute darkness, even if just a shadow. I needed to pacify my affected thoughts and convince myself that we were not sailing over an unnatural sea in another dimension to which we were possibly transported by paranormal phenomena happening in this damned sea of the triangle.

I looked up at the stars in the sky and I was taken over by an even bigger worry because I saw some of them fade slowly and unhurriedly, gradually becoming extinguished and dark, allowing the solid darkness to take their place. The whole ship was immersed in darkness and the only indication of light was the sliver of brightness shining through the crack of the metal door leading inside the ship.

There was no indication of any natural threat emanating from the sea, it was just a deep feeling of fear within myself that was born from stories told by people who claimed these had happened, weird and disturbing stories that upset my subconscious and caused phobias to grow within my conscious mind.

I leaned on the railings and stood immobile like a statue, feeling a threat permeating the atmosphere. My imagina-

tion was galloping out of control and bringing to the surface of my memory stories about this place that I had watched previously in the documentary. I shivered with the fear that I felt was slowly going through me. I tried to convince myself that the impregnable darkness that had just enveloped us was not due to unnatural or paranormal phenomena taking place in the area but was probably due to the weather and that fog and cloud had covered the stars and the sea creating this absolute darkness, this bottomless, black colour of the night which suddenly covered us and brought terrible thoughts to my mind that, like the ancient Furies, upset my whole existence.... I am not aware of how much time passed, but my bad thoughts had caused me to stay immobile for a while, until at some stage I was made aware that the darkness was fading and was being replaced by the rosy light of dawn, while the black colour of the sea also started turning blue, the natural colour of water and sky. It was the beginning of a new day, an ordinary day like so many others and, as the light disbursed my dark, bad thoughts, I realised with relief that they were most possibly creations of my mind.



ENGINE REPAIR IN ROUGH SEAS

Since ancient times liquid cargo, mainly oil, wine and grains, was transported from one country to the other in amphorae and later barrels. This lasted until World War

I. As man progressed, his needs increased, so easier solutions needed to be found.

The Greek captains and ship owners thought, “why load products in barrels onto the ships and not build ships like barrels, with tanks in their cargo holds?”

And so, the Greeks were the first to build tanker cargo ships. Firstly, they were small but later became much larger.

During the reign of Onassis and Niarchos, beyond all logic, they built tankers exceeding a 350 thousand tonnage.

The “World Knowledge” was a 350-thousand-ton ship and it was carrying us across the Pacific to our destination, Korea. The sea was rough, but the huge ship tore through it with ease.

I thought it was going to be an easy voyage without problems and without any serious incident in the engine room as the ship was quite new and all machinery was automatic and of the latest technology.

We were heading to the port of Seoul and a few days into the voyage we entered the Yellow Sea of China where we found rough seas that were worsening fast.

The Yellow Sea took its name from the colour of silt and sand carried down into the sea by rivers. It takes on a yellow colour during the strong storms that frequently

hit it. So, the sea was yellow, and the atmosphere had changed. The wind picked up and the day became darker.

As if the deterioration of the weather and the yellow sand from the deserts of China in the atmosphere were not enough, one of the engine's pistons decided to break.

The engine had eight huge pistons that moved the propeller. It was not easy for it to move with only seven, because this would cause even more damage. We needed to anchor and change the broken piston. The ship carried all the necessary spare parts and the senior engineer officers had good knowledge on how to proceed with the repair of the engine. Had we been in port, we would receive assistance from shore but as we were in the middle of the sea and in a raging storm, all the hard work needed to be carried out by us. The problem we were facing was the roughness of the sea that was getting worse by the minute and a ship, without a working engine, is out of control and at the mercy of the weather.

We anchored and got to work. It was a difficult job, and dangerous, because the ship was rolling and pitching, and this did not allow us to work. The broken piston was huge, so huge that, when we removed it, we hung into the cylinder where we fitted with ease and started polishing it. It was an arduous task that exhausted us, and the constant rolling and pitching kept changing our

direction of gravity. While hanging in the cylinder, we needed to maintain a steady position and balance, with our knees resting on the walls, in order to have the necessary strength to scrape the petrified soot caused by burning fuel.

There were only a few members of engine crew because the ship was state of the art and automated.

Everything was operated from a control room within the engine room which was a huge room with consoles, boards and panels covered in all necessary indicators and switches which, with the correct handling, gave the relevant message to the engine and auxiliary machinery. All of us, even the First Engineer, got down to work. The risks were high, the sea was getting worse and, in case the current turned us against the weather, and we were hit by a large wave from the side, we could sink.

Three days and nights, we all worked very hard without sleep or rest. Others were rubbing the heads with emery powder and others were preparing the new piston that was stowed for a long time next to the engine. It took a lot of work to clean, polish and prepare it. However, the difficult work was carried out in the cylinder. We waited for hours until it cooled down, and then we had to remove huge amounts of petrified soot that were attached to the walls because of the damage. Only one man fitted inside at a time, so we took it in turns to hang,

and using scrapers and cutters, we first scraped and then polished well, without leaving any trace of any substance on the interior metal.

The first engineer was a really cool guy, a man with an imposing personality who did not use yelling and anger but only good manners. He had a foreign sounding name, Gatagas. It's the only first engineer's name from my entire nautical career I still remember today, after so many years, because we never called the first engineer by his name as it was customary to address him with the English term "Chief". He was always polite and approachable and was highly appreciated by the entire crew, and especially us, the engineers.

He summoned us all in the control room and calmly described our situation. He explained that shutting down the engine in such rough seas was a great risk, but we could not do otherwise. For this reason, we needed to surpass ourselves and work without rest in order to change the piston as fast as possible before a big wave took us under.

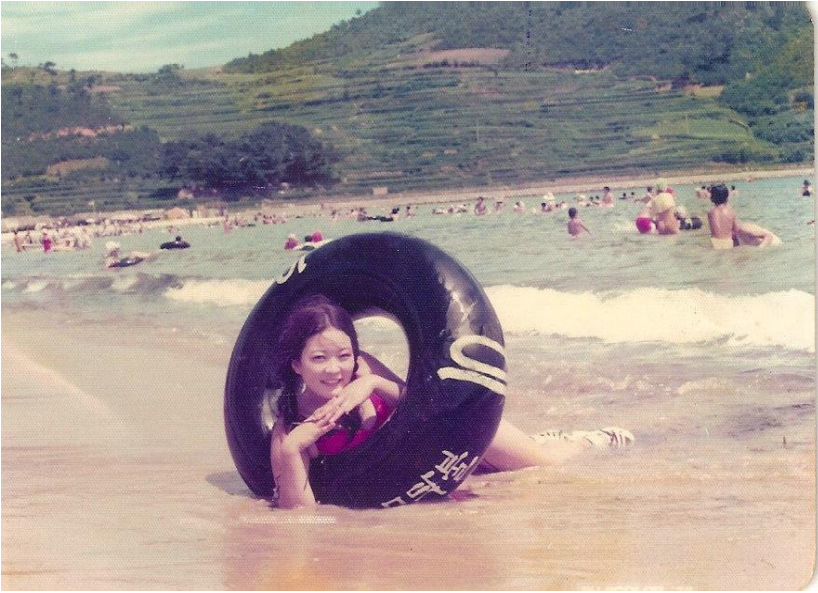
With the threat of imminent danger and with great responsibility we all set to work under the guidance of our first officer. The second and third engineers, the junior engineer (me), oilers and cleaner, we threw ourselves into the hard battle against time to beat the weather.

The day passed, and so did the first night. We held out well and withstood. We ate on the go, we practically forgot what coffee was, and did not even stop for a smoke.

The second night came upon us and we had not yet finished. Our worry increased because the weather was getting worse and fatigue started leaving its mark upon us. When we entered the cool air of the control room for a coffee, no matter how hard we tried not to fall asleep on the chair, our eyes would close on their own accord. I remember it like it was yesterday; I would force my eyes to remain open with my fingers. I remember well that I allowed one to close and rest, and then the other, while with my fingers I held on to my eyelids, in a desperate attempt not to sleep. Despite the effort, however, I remember that for a few seconds, Morpheus would get the better of me and would throw me into a few seconds of sleep, full of disturbed dreams, some nightmarish and some pleasing. In split seconds I had glimpses of dreams containing real and imaginary events, parading in front of me as if real, like a cinematographic film in fast forward mode. I saw us teetering on the crest of a wave and then diving into deep darkness, I saw us immersed in murky waters unable to breathe, and, as if moonstruck, would jerk awake trying to catch my breath. I even saw us floating in calm waters under a blue sky with low flying seagulls, a good omen, a sign that we were approaching our destination. And me, standing

against the railings and gazing into the horizon trying to catch a glimpse of dry land.

The second night passed, dawn was upon us and at last, we finished. We tightened the last bolt and made a final general check. The First Engineer informed the captain and received an order for "ahead slow". Crossing himself, he pushed the parallel control and started the big engine. Everything was OK, we slowly picked up speed and at the same time we felt the ship steadying itself and the pitching and rolling reduced. The mighty engine was turning the axel effortlessly and the propeller pushed the water back and thrusted us forward, hurriedly leaving behind the rough sea in anticipation of entering the safe harbour of Seoul.



IN SEOUL

Since long ago and until today, sailors' lives have been harder than those of land dwellers. The hardship of isolation away from dry land and people, and existing in an infinite expanse of water, lead to the development of various mentalities and ways of thinking.

Man has the charisma of adapting to the difficulties he faces, by acquiring abilities, and developing particular behaviours and habits that he incorporates in his way of living as a means to make his life easier.

Therefore, when a sailor spends most of his life on ships, when he mingles with a handful of people, namely his colleagues, his range of interests remains limited. When he lives away from his family for a long time, his desire

to return causes nostalgia and sadness. So, it is natural to invent ways of breaking the monotony of his everyday life, ways that a land dweller would not turn to because of having alternative solutions that are unavailable to a seaman. Some seamen, while battling with the unworldly elements of the sea, acquire boundless knowledge because, as they sail all the seas on Earth, they become omniscient philosophers, and with wisdom though experience, pass onto others, knowledge about things and undiscovered wonders that are hidden in the oceans' depths.

Oceangoing ships undertake voyages that take many days and their crews anticipate the few hours when they tie in a port somewhere, and desperately seek means to entertain themselves and let off steam.

So, at each port there are places for the entertainment of seamen. Knowing the intense wish of their customers to let off steam and freely spend their money, some clever businessmen have adapted entertainment to fit the needs of sailors, and in particular, Greek sailors, as in those days most of the ships were Greek. In many countries with big ports with a capacity for many ships, there were Greek entertainment establishments. Cape Town, New Orleans, Costanza, Rotterdam, everywhere.

The monster tanker "World Knowledge", my last ship, tied up in the port of Seoul during the early hours of the morning. By then, I was on the ship for about ten months. Life on this ship was good, it had every comfort. There was a large library with all sorts of books and a beautiful

area to relax, where I sat during my endless off duty hours, leafing through and reading books. During the voyage to Seoul, I looked up Korea and was informed of the country's history.

Seoul is the capital and the largest city of South Korea. The city served as the capital during old dynasties and after the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948, became the capital once more and was considered the main city of the nation. It is one of the most densely populated cities in the world.

Korea had been taken over by Japan in 1895. The Japanese occupation was brutal, it forced the population into forced labour and the women into obligatory prostitution for the needs of the occupation armies.

A little before the fall of Japan, Russian and American troops invaded the country and agreed on its division.

The Communists settled in the North of the country and the western forces settled in the South. In 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea starting a civil war that lasted three years in which Greek troops also participated, as allies of the USA.

The war ended after three years with a treaty, basically leaving things in the same place as they were when it had started, without victors, but having been a terrible tragedy with many victims and no benefit to either side.

Since then, there is a cold war in progress between the two sides, an unproclaimed hidden war of provocation and altercation.

At the time of my voyage to the country, America was more dominant in the world than the Soviet Union, but this did not give us a great feeling of security because Russia was still the super power that supported the dictatorial and unpredictable regime of North Korea.

Therefore, as we were advised by the Captain, we ventured into the town cautiously, looking to do some shopping and have some fun. While the city is one of the most densely populated cities of the world, there was little traffic on the streets. The shops were meagre and had no wares of interest to us. We walked the streets without finding anything of interest. We passed a hair dressing salon two-three times and the two girls inside smiled at us. On our third time, the electrician and I decided to go in. We had just shaved on the ship, but since they were inviting us in such a nice way, and since they were also beautiful girls, we went in.

Immediately the little hairdressers welcomed us and sat us down on the chairs. They spoke very little English, so understanding each other was difficult. I was young and hardly had a beard and while aboard the ship I only shaved every now and then when we were in port. During this voyage, my only blade turned out to be blunt and this resulted in me scraping my skin and I was now in pain. However, the young girl was very good at her job. She first applied cream and then compresses to soothe the skin and lessen the pain. Afterwards, with great care she cut the hairs one by one with an old

fashioned and very sharp blade, with her soft and skilful fingers and hands.

The shop was not busy, and our treatment lasted quite a while. We felt we were in good hands and relaxed. They treated our face, our hair, the nails on our fingers and toes, they even gave us a light massage with their experienced hands. We really enjoyed the treatment.

With their little English and mostly with sign language, we managed to understand each other and when we asked them out on a date, they happily agreed.

It was the afternoon and the young girls were coming off work in a few hours. To pass the time we walked around the city and at the agreed time, I met my date at a café-restaurant on the same street.

A young man with long hair, most probably a hippy, was strumming an electric guitar and sang popular songs of the time. Next to him he had a classical guitar and I thought that he was probably a classic guitarist who, due to popular demand, also played an electric guitar.

We had planned to eat, relax and listen to music and then, whatever the night brought.

The food on the menu was different to the European food I was accustomed to, and so I ordered crab as a starter,

and then a steak with a strange name in the menu, food I thought I knew. My new friend ordered her own, and, while waiting to be served, we continued getting to know each other.

I was presented with a giant boiled crab in a huge plate. The taste was exquisite and gave me an appetite for more. After a while, the chef came out of the kitchen with two assistants and stood at our table. One of the assistants held a small frying pan brimming with hot oil that was still sizzling from too much heat and he placed it on a counter, inside a big plate. The chef picked up a monstrous raw beef steak and put it in the overheated oil and cracked two eggs on top. With grandiose movements, he then proceeded to serve me, wishing me Bonne Appetit.

I watched the whole procedure incredulously but being in a foreign country I decided not to express any doubt. The eggs were cooked but the steak merely changed colour; when I sliced into it, it oozed live blood.

So, I ate the eggs and left the steak untouched, as I preferred my meat well done, and not practically raw. In a foreign country where the Captain had advised we be careful, I decided to stay silent and not protest. In any case, I felt sure that this is how the Koreans ate their food.

The crab and the eggs proved to be a full meal and my hunger was well sated. I ordered two brandy cokes and we leaned back in the comfortable chairs to enjoy the guitarist's music. At some point, he started playing a Greek nostalgic song by Xatzidakis which left me listening ecstatically. The musician understood this and played another, then another and I was overjoyed, sang along with him and applauded enthusiastically.

The musician was pleased to have found an audience and leaned over to pick up one of the score books scattered on the floor beside him. He picked up a thick one and placed it on the stand. He continued playing Greek Xatzidakis and Theodorakis music and the exquisite melodies filled the place. There were a few customers, but they also focused on the notes filling the atmosphere, a true sign that they were enjoying the lovely Greek music.

The musician had abandoned his electric guitar and took the classic guitar in his hands, strummed it softly and beautifully as he played. I had never heard music being played so amazingly. He gave the songs such colour and his unprecedented execution together with the equally amazing Greek melodies bewitched our ears.

The classic guitar is not necessarily a particular musical instrument. The term classic simply indicates an artistic creation that has a time defying and ecumenical value.

The artist I came across in this faraway country was a brilliant virtuoso and as I listened, I was ecstatic and enjoyed the sweet melodies floating in the atmosphere. I dedicated myself to listening to him and ignored my date a little, but she also showed the same attention to the heavenly music.

Greek music has a special place in all countries of the world, and I love it. Countless songs have been translated and sung in the most unlikely languages. Here as well, our virtuoso guitarist, mostly playing but also singing just a little, sang songs of Greek giants Hatzidakis and Theodorakis in his language.

The hours slipped by and, while enjoying the music and with the help of some alcoholic beverages, as “wine gladdens the heart”, I reached a happy and pleasant state and told myself I wished daybreak would never come. It satisfied and lifted my soul which brought some feeling of relief to my immeasurable nostalgia for my country as I had been away from Cyprus for over four years.

The kind musician did not stop playing at all, responding to the happiness that he saw spreading all over my face. He played Greek songs by the two composers non-stop until, oh no, the time reached twelve o’clock. It was his time to stop, but for me, he continued playing. With good will, I wanted to actively thank him, so I put my hand in

my pocket. I had 200 Euro and I offered half to him as a tip. He didn't want to accept it, but nobody says no to money, so with a little insistence from me, he accepted it with many thanks.

And this is a seaman's life, adapted to fit into the conditions imposed by life at sea, sometimes bitter and sometimes sweet.



ΜΕΡΟΣ 7, EPILOGUE

THE SEA IS OUR MOTHER, OUR DESTINY, OUR LOVER

It was the vastness of the sea that accompanied me together with memories from dry land, fairy tales and stories I heard about pirates and drowned seamen in the holds of their ships. It was that I survived great storms and fished huge fish, monsters of the sea. That I witnessed weddings of colleagues in foreign lands and new customs, morals and cultures. That I got to have different experiences in every port of the world, in heavens of depravity, enjoyment, excess and delinquency behind curtains offering anything the mind could wish for, as well as dangerous adventures for those who wished to seek them.

It was my memories as a seaman that may seem unbelievable and cause incredulity, it was a period in my life that scarred me permanently and left upon me an indelible mark. Those who have experienced these difficult but sweet situations know. And yet, they continue to love the sea and fight it daily, saluting her mockingly and showing no fear.

These however were not the only things that marked me, but my observation of the seaman's life when, sailing on large tankers with the sea and the sky as their only companions for two, three months, they no longer had regular behaviour, but wanted to break their monotonous days that followed identical days containing the same boring, usual things, by creating intrigues and then sitting back to watch them and have something new

to do. It was that I always had to be careful with what I believed, that I should never trust anybody, maybe it was a Law of the seamen that they should not love each other but only love the sea. So, I loved the sea and I was dragged by an invisible force to be near her.

I sailed on my first ship without loving the sea, she tortured me at first in a small ship sailing the Black Sea, the same sea sailed by people in historic times, where the shores were crowded by ancient civilisations and modern cities, and where under the surface, in her bowels, opposing currents clashed and swirled causing currents that rocked the little ship and messed with my stomach causing me to spill my innards.

Despite the difficulties however, the pull of the sea is great and whoever lives with her falls in love and cannot live without her.

I sailed continuously for five years and, when I came ashore the thought of abandoning life at sea started to torture my mind. I decided to marry an old love and decided to become a home body and land dweller. At first, everything was good, and I was happy, there was love, I was in love, everything I ever wished for. After a while however, the love of the sea that was not extinguished within me, made me long for and reminisce the endless nights of total solitude on deck, the heavy thud of the ship's engine in the engine room, the endless shifts where a cup of coffee in my hand, drinking it sip by sip, was enough until I was relieved and another came on shift.

Until one night, at the small coffee shop of the village, I met an old seaman from the village who had just come ashore, we sat and drank, and talked about the sea and the ports. I felt the pull of the sea once more, I felt that my life ashore had no meaning. I knew that if I remained on dry land, I would be miserable, I realised that I would not manage to survive. With my memory running wildly to those times, nostalgia choked me, and I was taken over by sorrow. And under the influence of drink, I felt my longing becoming a sharp nail piercing my chest.

So, in the stupor of alcohol, I took the decision to sail again. I knew it was not easy, that everyone would try to stop me. So, I would sneak off like a thief, I would tell nobody, and would let them all know once I was far away.....

But I never took the big decision and remained a land dweller forever. The years passed, but I cannot forget the sea, I stand on the beach, gaze at the horizon and wonder whether I regret not sailing again, but I have no answer. The only thing I know is that the Sea is a song, an experience, a mother, our destiny and our lover. Those who love her and stay away from her miss her lullabies and her immense love.



Kyriakos Tapakoudes was born in Chloraka, a village kissed by the waters of the Mediterranean Sea. The sea is usually rough in Chloraka, angrily eating away at the shore, but these shores are made of resilient rock and cannot be worn. He lived on the outskirts of the village and had the soothing sounds of the



waves, the rumbling sea and the howling winds as his lullaby, all these sounds together creating a roar that whispered angry songs of the Furies, an omen of unseen secrets hiding in the deep waters of Chloraka.

During violent storms he walked on the shore, allowing the spray of the mighty waves as they crashed into a maelstrom on the ragged rocks to wash over him. He stood on the edge of the sea and gazed into the horizon where it met with the grey sky and formed a perfect, infinite circle, the shape of the Earth. He was pleased to see this and standing there he dreamed and planned to grow up and travel to the ends of the Earth.



