

# 'Ordinary' Story

## Pages From The Life of a Greek Immigrant Woman

By Maria Tzimas

**M**arch 29, 1967. Athens. Sitting behind my desk I feel rather pleased with myself. Years of study and hard work paid off. I like my work and I can enjoy life. In the evenings we sit in the "old University" sipping a glass of retsina and chewing on a lamb chop, listening to the latest song, discussing the latest book, poem, play. Summer is promising to be very exciting, very stimulating intellectually...

Friday, April 21, 1967. "TO PHOS," the "LIGHT" of Greece, went out. The tanks are roaring through the main streets of Athens. The radio, blaring patriotic music, tells us to "keep calm" — "our brave National Army has taken control of the country." What happened? Why? What is to become of us? The rumors are flying wild... the telephone lines are "open," you get the eerie feeling that someone is listening to your conversation, no one wants to talk on the phone. Slowly we start moving around trying to find out, looking over our shoulders. Fear has shown its ugly head.

Monday, April 23, 1967. Everything is back to normal, or so it seems. There has not been any blood in the streets of Athens after all. We try to recapture our daily routine before the "revolution," but something is not quite right. Some of my friends are not back and I cannot find out what happened to them...

My life is turned upside down in one night: I am not supposed to read this writer, this play is not "in keeping with the spirit of the Revolution," even my wardrobe has to be changed. Mini-skirts are banned and so is long hair for men. The new government knows exactly what is best for me. I am relieved of the burden of thinking.

My work takes me to Cyprus. As I step out of the plane and take a deep breath, an

excitement rushes through my body: it's the FREE AIR I am breathing. I am FREE again. I can think for myself. I can wear whatever I want. I can read my favorite writers and poets once more...

Returning to the mainland was like going to my own funeral. "I have to get out of Greece," I tell myself. "But where will I go?" I put an application in to the University of Illinois. I have family in Chicago and I can spend some time visiting them and "further my studies."

The year goes by quickly — but the "situation" in Greece is the same. I feel free, but hanging in the air. I need some permanency in my life. Words like "immigration" and "immigrant" start making sense, become part of my vocabulary; after all, I am a Displaced Person. I am not part of the USA, I will never become so. Deep down I hold this Government and, to some extent, the people responsible for my displacement.

Canada. I hear it is cold and they talk with an accent, they are bilingual. I can probably fit in there — my accent will not be so noticeable, so maybe I will not have to answer anymore the question "you have an accent — where are you from?" and maybe I can find a home for myself.

March 29, 1969. Malton International Airport. Holding on tight to an envelope marked "confidential" and a small suitcase, I make my way to the small office marked "Immigration." Five minutes later I make my first steps in my new country. Where to start? Where to go? What to do? Is this the end of a life and the beginning of a new one?

I want to turn right back and go where I came from. After all, I have the money for a ticket back to Chicago. Maybe I'll do it tomorrow. Let's give it a chance. Look at the excitement, at the new opportunities, the new horizons, the possibilities for a young woman like me... The initial shock

gone, I have to come to terms with the fact that I am part of a new order, a society different from the one I am used to. Back home I followed the prescribed pattern: four years at University, one year of post-graduate work, one year working as a professional in a responsible position. Now I have to backstep — go back to University, sit through exams, work for people I don't really want to.

Anxious to reach the place in the new society I had before, I worked day and night. I studied people, the way they dress and the way they behave. I try to be calm and collected when I am steaming inside. I try to be brief and efficient — "time is money," you get paid by the hour here, not by the month as we used to be paid back home. I go back to my room every night exhausted, hoping for a better tomorrow.

As the scene becomes more familiar, I can start to relax, take in the finer points in life. I start looking for "culture" and I am pleasantly surprised: I find a whole street in Toronto full of Greek businesses, even the names are in Greek. Further down is an Italian section. There is a "Greek community," only it is not the same as the one I am coming from. I desperately try to pin down the difference, but it eludes me. Maybe it's the different surroundings. The lamb on the spit on Danforth Street simply does not taste the same as the one in Daphni or Spata. Swimming in the lake is totally different from swimming in Vouliagmeni or Varkiza. And when the snow comes and the cold winter makes life miserable, it's time for me to head West. I heard that the West is warmer, even though it rains a lot. "I can put up with the rain," I think to myself and decide to try going west. After all, things are getting better in Greece and I can go back home.

Going across Canada by train was the most beautiful experience of the last two-

and-a-half years of my life. All of a sudden I started thinking: *this a country who wants me, this vast beautiful country can be mine. I can travel forever and never leave this country, my country. I can be free here, I can settle wherever I want and nobody will ever bother me.* And then came the mountains, and then the ocean and then the trip to Vancouver Island. The sun was shining and the water was calm and the islands along the way — although

quite different from Hydra and Spetsai — made me feel comfortable. In Greece it was the rock and the water that reflected in the blue sky; here it was the trees and the water. There is a difference, *une nuance* that is difficult to explain and you can only feel.

Slowly the feeling of travelling between two worlds started to dissipate. I travel back and forth several times 'til the rock and the sun and the red earth — “the

Greek earth” — and the “blue Greek sky” lost the intensity with which they had been calling me back. Now the Rockies and the Ocean and the trees have a hold on me. It is not the same hold that “my blue country” has on me: I will always carry her in my heart. It is a looser connection. It allows me to be me, accepts my transgressions, my past, promises a better tomorrow.

**Lupe Rodriguez**  
*Transitional Series #3, 1987*  
mixed media on rag paper  
Courtesy: Leo Kamen Gallery  
Photo: Toronto Image Works

