

Gregg

*It is through the eyes love attains the heart
 For the eyes are the scouts of the heart,
 And the eyes go reconnoitering
 For what it would please the heart to possess.
 And when they are in full accord
 And firm, all three, in the one resolve,
 At that time, perfect love is born. . . .*

Guiraut de Bornelh (ca. 1138-1200 AD)

[from the unpublished manuscript, '*Singing Messengers of Love, The Troubadours of the 12th Century*', by Gregory T. Bartoni]

Having finished basic training and after a two week leave at home in Southern California my orders were to report to Fort Devins, Massachusetts, the headquarters of the ASA. The Army Security Agency, a super secret branch of the military and part of the National Security Agency, whose appointed task was to gather communications information from around the world. All foreign governments, even the staunchest allies, were suspect or at least were being constantly monitored. After six months of rigorous study at Fort Devins, there would be a further year's training at the National Defense Language School in Monterey, California.

I arrived at Fort Devins, some sixty miles from Boston, late on Friday afternoon. Reported to Headquarters and began explaining my situation of delayed commercial air flights, due to the severe snowstorms, to the hulking Sergeant behind the desk. Instead of roaring or barking, he smiled, assured me that there was no problem, asked for my papers and then called for a corporal to take me to Building 14-B, where I would be staying.

The sergeant explained, "*Your group is scheduled to begin their classes in three days; and since you'll be starting the second week in March you should finish this phase of your training sometime in early August. Your barracks Sergeant's name is Angelo Castorini and he'll be able to assist you in becoming adjusted to your new surroundings. You'll be assigned to Room 22 and will meet your roommate there. Now let me see.....*" After consulting another paper, "*Yes, Specialist Bartoni has already arrived. Are there any questions?*" Without vocalizing it I wanted to ask what the hell this friendliness was all about. This certainly wasn't the way the Army had operated in Basic Training, although it was pleasant being treated like a human being.

The corporal told me to hop in the Jeep and he would take me over to my living quarters. *'Living quarters'*, God, they even spoke strangely here. There were magnificent large trees and lawns in front of the buildings. Partially covered by remaining traces of a previous snow, but grass nonetheless. Most of the buildings were made of brick and it looked more like a university campus than a military post. The corporal kept up a friendly patter of conversation and naturally talked about the weather. He mentioned it had been spring-like until a few days ago when it had turned cool again and snowed a bit. After he stopped the jeep he even grabbed my two handbags so that I could more easily deal with the unwieldy Duffel Bag. *"Right inside and the Sergeant's quarters will be the first door on the right."* Since the Sergeant wasn't there the corporal tucked a paper, which was obviously my assignment sheet, in his mail slot and then he told me to go up the stairs and my room would be the second on the left. I had noticed that this was certainly not a barracks in the traditional sense since the central hallway had numbered doors leading, obviously, to separate rooms. When the corporal realized he still had my handbags he offered to carry them up and show me exactly where the room was located. At the top of the stairs he sat my bags down, pointed out the room and with a cheery 'so long' disappeared down the stairs.

I was standing in front of the door of room #22 and didn't know whether to knock or just go in. Play it safe and knock. *"Yes, the door's open, come on in"* replied a deep, well modulated voice from inside. As I opened the door I heard the strains of Vivaldi's Mandolin Concerto and saw a body, clad only in BVD briefs—not those usual baggy, olive drab, military issue boxer shorts—on the bed located on the left side of the ample room. He put down his book, jumped up, reached out his hand and introduced himself. *"Hi, I'm Gregg Bartoni. Looks like we're going to be roommates."* I stood there with his hand in mine attempting to access the situation. I was quite obviously dreaming and had been since I began this particular fantasy a few minutes before at the headquarters building. It had little relationship to reality. It just didn't seem like the military.

He was a clean-cut young man with a decidedly athletic body. Masculine in appearance and even in the way he moved; yet there was also a softness that belied the traditional athletic jock. His voice was strong with perfect enunciation and just a slight east coast accent, though I couldn't exactly place it. That was the inconsistency, his voice. Even though his physical appearance was that of the typical locker room athlete, his voice was somehow too refined, too mellow—it lacked the necessary brusqueness.

The room was spacious with a large window; a bookcase partially filled with books—even a couple of pictures hanging on the wall over this other person's bed. There was a desk next to each of the beds, with desk lamps. So, my new roommate's name was Gregg Bartoni. He had a nice phonograph and a number of LP's were on his desk. Everything was very neat and well ordered.

I sort of mumbled my name and that I was from California. Then Gregg asked me if I minded the music. I explained that I liked this particular Vivaldi Mandolin concerto and he seemed to be relieved; and from the look on his face it was evident that he had also mentally taken note that I even knew the specific composition. I sat down on what was obviously my bed and surreptitiously pinched myself as means of making a reality check. I had been here less than an hour and had met a Sergeant who didn't bark and spoke in modulated tones, a friendly, chatty corporal and now this; my roommate

for the next six months. He had obviously arrived with a large number of books and was listening to classical music. Incongruous. Yes, that pinch hurt a little so this must be the real thing.

In the distance I heard Gregg asking how my trip from California had been. He was once again on his bed and seemed to be staring at me over the top of his book. I replied that it was just fine, though I was a bit tired after two long days of delayed flights trying to get here. He explained that most of the guys still hadn't arrived due to the inclement weather. I was immediately aware that he hadn't said "bad" weather, "shitty" weather, "piss-poor" weather or any of the other phenomenally descriptive adjectives that I'd been subjected to since I enlisted in the military. *Inclement* weather it was.

He added that although there were several guys downstairs, so far we were the only ones on this upper level. I asked if it was permissible to smoke inside and he replied in the affirmative and indicated an ashtray on the lower shelf of the book stand. I noticed that the ashtray was clean which gave rise to two possibilities. Either he didn't smoke or he fastidiously cleaned it after each cigarette. No, that latter supposition didn't seem too reasonable. Decided that I didn't really need a cigarette. I began to unpack a few items and put them in the closet. It wasn't one of the usual metal lockers but an actual wooden closet and one side had drawers and additional space for storage. Although he didn't comment, my new roommate seemed to take note when I began to unload my supply of 'necessary' books.

At the same time I began to evaluate the individual on the opposite bed. He was reading a thin, hard cover book of poetry by John Donne. I remembered from my college English Lit course that Donne had been a 17th century poet, contemporary of Shakespeare, relatively unknown outside of English literature classes. An excellent poet and essayist; my college 'Lit.' professor felt he was one of the best of his period. Donne primarily wrote exquisite love poems. My new roommate's last name was Bartoni, which meant that he was undoubtedly Italian. Yes, his skin had that distinguishing bronze Mediterranean color and there was a definite lack of body hair. Muscular, strong body but not overly developed. Wavy dark hair, aristocratic face and intense dark eyes. Nice voice. Super pleasant voice. I considered asking him questions just so I could listen to his voice.

That was it. That was it!

Poor mortal fool, you didn't know that you had just accepted the lure that was to seal your fate. The trap had been carefully baited with his voice. Oh, there were other items in reserve just in case.....even the book of a somewhat obscure English poet was carefully selected. It was the timing of his words and even the length of the vowels, but especially the perfect enunciation and modulation that hypnotized and caught you.

You know that it will be forever don't you?

The Vivaldi was also a nice touch, don't you think? And if you consider the complete picture, the casual pose on the bed with super white BVD's contrasted with his smooth, bronze skin,— yes, this completed the whole. Don't forget the slightly shy smile. And those eyes. Intense, deep round pools of mystery, filled with twinkling secrets, alternately joyful and melancholy. Most important were your eyes, for it was through your vision that you perceived and came to know this fascinating creature.

You might take note that 'it is through the eyes that love attains the heart'. And when you are dealing with Destiny not even the slightest detail is left to chance.

Oh yes, was it mentioned that the time length is forever?

Remember your eternities Gordon?

Well this is it.

Now you will know what an eternity really consists of.

I was aware of the fact that my new roommate was talking, and had been speaking for some time, but there was something else. Almost as if someone or something else had been intruding upon my consciousness at the same time. What was it? I knew it was there but couldn't determine what it was, like trying to locate a specific word, and not being able to find it. It also seemed to be of the utmost importance—something to do with eternity?

As I focused in on his voice again, and what he was saying, I discovered that Gregg was from

nearby Boston, actually a suburb of the city, and had lived there for most of his life, other than for vacation periods in various parts of the East coast and Italy. He mentioned that he had also lived in Greece, although he didn't elaborate. He had been studying English literature at Boston University before entering the military. Prior to that he had been living with his grandmother and an uncle. He, like myself, had decided on joining the Army Security Agency because he didn't relish being shot at, or for that matter shooting at anyone else. He liked all types of music, but mentioned that opera and classical were his favorites. He loved to read and casually mentioned that he probably went through several books a week. He enjoyed writing and even occasionally indulged in writing poetry, though he felt that his meager efforts were still inferior to true poetry. But, as he explained, sometimes the process was as important as the product. Just tapping into that creative muse and letting the words flow from mind to paper was a pleasure. At about this point I began to wonder if he had written this all down, point by point, since it seemed to be so, so — well organized. Almost as if he had prepared for an exam. It was also obvious that once his "ON" button had been pressed the information flowed freely; non-stop it would appear.

I realized that I had been staring at him in utter fascination, hanging on every one of his words as if they were new revelations, direct from some celestial source. Oh God, had my mouth been hanging open? He probably thought I was the village idiot's younger brother.

He then asked if I was hungry and would like to go out for a hamburger or something. "*Hamburger here on the base?*" I inquired. No, it seemed that even though I hadn't yet received a pass for traveling off base, he knew the evening guard at the gate and we could go in his car to the nearby town of Ayer. He suggested that we both wear '*civvies*', regular street clothes, since they were more comfortable and he didn't like to be reminded that he was in the Army. I liked this guy's way of thinking immediately. He suggested going to a newly discovered tavern that had very good food and great draft beer, assuming that I did like beer. He dressed, I changed, and soon we were on our way.

Taverns were a new experience for me since they didn't exist as such on the west coast. Nice comfortable atmosphere. The food at Tommy's Tavern was exceptionally good and so was the beer. And the beer. And more beer. I lost count but continued to listen to that incredible, enchanting voice and several times had to forcibly bring myself back to reality after becoming lost within his shining, intensely dark eyes. Within that period of a few hours we had both briefly outlined our lives and discovered a multitude of mutual interests for later conversation. Perhaps most important was that he had been majoring in English literature, and I had, just a few months before, decided that it would be my chosen field of study.

We began discussing favorite authors and specific books. Though there were many vying for the the number one position, Herman Hesse was right there on top. And of his many excellent novels, we both agreed that "*Siddhartha*" was one of the most beautiful. Gregg added that for him it embraced an entire philosophy of life. In fact he had reread it at least twice a year since first encountering it several years ago. I made a mental note to read it again since, although I had enjoyed it, it certainly hadn't made that profound an impression. Obviously I had missed something.

Gregg reached down to do something; I thought he might be tying a shoelace, then he reached

up and playfully touched my forehead. At the same time he brought his face closer, he very seriously looked at me, at a point above my eyes and said, *"I knew it. Yes, I knew it when you walked in the room this evening. You have 'the mark' on your forehead"*, referring to Hesse's novel *Damian*. Then he dabbed the shoe polish, or maybe it was just dirt, on his own forehead with his thumb and giggled, *"I've got it too, and I'm not talking about Ash Wednesday."* At the moment in which it occurred, and assisted by the effects of the beer, it seemed to be the wittiest, cleverest thing that I'd ever heard.

By this time I was having a bit of trouble focusing visually, but I could still beam in on that hypnotic voice. The music in the tavern was jukebox-popular and sounded great. Unrequited love and love tragedy and pangs of love. But then suddenly, and for no seeming reason, I thought of my cousin George and I wanted more than anything to hear some Chopin. *"Gregg, do you have any Chopin records at the base?"*

"Yes, I have two, one of the Waltzes and I made of special point of bringing the Nocturnes with me too." He seemed to be having a little trouble focusing as well and I wondered if he would be able to drive back. By this time we were began laughing hilariously about something, though neither of us could remember just exactly what, and began heading towards his car.

Once he got behind the wheel he seemed have no difficulty maintaining perfect control. As we neared the base he told me to take out my Army ID and a driver's license or something to show the guard. My inebriated and befuddled condition momentarily abated and was replaced by sheer panic. *"I thought you said you knew the guard"*, my speech sounded, even to me, slightly slurred. *"Well,"* he replied with an enormous grin, *"sometimes I do and sometimes I don't. After all I've only been here two days."* Although that seemed to explain everything, I was still dealing with my momentary panic. As we stopped at the guard house, Gregg flashed a big smile, and said, "Hi George." We both flashed our Army ID cards, though they certainly weren't passes for going off the base, but it worked. Evidently when he had first brought his car on base he had been given a Fort Devins window sticker and that was no doubt the most important identifying feature for entry.

The barracks was quiet, though I could hear several muted conversations on the lower level. It looked like the Sergeant might be gone for the weekend since he still hadn't returned. We finally reached the room and when I turned on the overhead light Gregg immediately turned it off and walked over to turn on one of the desk lamps, explaining that his eyes were sensitive to light after midnight. Somehow, at the time and in my slightly groggy condition, it seemed to make perfect sense. Even before I had completely closed the door Gregg had begun to remove his clothes so he could paddle around in his BVDs. It appeared he was most comfortable when he had the least on.

Gregg immediately found the recording of Chopin's Nocturnes. I wanted to hear the entire record but asked if he could first put on the Nocturne in F minor. He remarked that the F minor was also his one of his favorites and without looking at the label knew that it was on the second side and was band number 7. With that first familiar note my mood changed; I was transported back in time and once again I was with my cousin George. I could see his hands on the keyboard and his tall lean body sitting at the piano. It was more than two years ago that one of the most magical moments of my life had occurred. It had continued to imprint my life.

Unplanned and unbidden though it was, and though I valiantly tried not to, my eyes began to well with tears. Then, seeking liberation, they flowed. I began to silently sob and then weep. Gregg came over, sat down next to me on my bed, and then put his arm around my shoulder. *"Bad memories?"* he sympathetically inquired. I replied that my cousin, who was now dead, used to play this particular Nocturne. *"You must have been very close,"* he remarked. I replied that George had been one of the the most important people in my life.

Gregg's hand squeezed my shoulder and said that it was good to cry and release the pain, that I shouldn't be ashamed of doing so. As the Nocturne ended he got up and put on a record of music in French. Soft ballads sung by a woman with an incredible, soothing voice who was singing "Parlez vous d'emour' – Speak to me of Love. He continued talking softly, *"Release it, let it go, but also know that love offered or accepted can never die, it will always be a part of you."*

He suggested I go to bed and even helped to initiate the process by gently pulling off my shoes. As I crawled into bed he said that if I wanted he could sit next to me for a bit. Receiving no reply he sat down on the edge of my bed, leaned over and gently squeezed my shoulder. He obviously understood my need for comfort, something to help fill the void, which had enveloped my being for so long. He tenderly stroked my hand and assured me that everything would be better tomorrow. *"Things are always better after we have learned to release them — even love."* I heard his voice as if it were coming from another dimension. With his nearness and his comforting words I began to drift off to sleep. I felt a pat on my forehead, on that invisible mark which he alone had seen and made visible, then he got up and went over to his own bed.

Although I consciously didn't know it then, his tenderness and compassion and that deep embracing love of friendship, had captured me completely — at that particular moment in time and it would continue to be with me for the rest of my life.

When I woke up I remembered the previous night and, staring fixedly at the ceiling, began to wait for the first stabbing pain of a hangover to assault my head, my body. Nothing. I felt great and surprisingly remembered with near perfect detail the entire evening—well, almost everything. I turned over and looked at my new roommate, whose face was illuminated by the first rays of daylight streaming in the window. Last night I thought that his hair was black, but now I could see that it was a deep, rich brown, lavishly tinged with a mellow auburn. It really was a most handsome face and was graced with a perfect, gentle smile. Was he awake? No, evidently he smiled even in his sleep. I remembered his tenderness from the previous night and comforted, drifted once again into the waiting embrace of Morpheus. When I awoke for the second time I saw that Gregg, clad in his ever-present BVD's, was bustling around the room. I noticed, for the first time, that there was a clock on his desk and it was nearing ten o'clock in the morning.

Obviously he had seen my eyes open and after a lyrical *"Buon giorno"* he added, *"Kalimera"* and asked how I was feeling. Without waiting for a response he came over, gently patted me on the head, like someone would caress a small puppy, and said, *"I know exactly what you need, some nice, fresh coffee. Everyone needs coffee in the morning."* From somewhere he had magically produced a

small electric pot which contained hot water, which he poured into a cup and then added some instant espresso. *'Espresso first thing in the morning, he's got to be kidding,'* I thought to myself. But then as I took my first few sips I didn't know how I had gone through life thus far without espresso in the morning. It was perfect. Then he motioned for the cup, since there was obviously only one, and took a drink, his dark eyes sparkling.

Gregg had gone to the bathroom and it gave me an opportunity to look at the books that he had brought with him. I remembered that my mother had mentioned that much could be known about a person by the books that surrounded them. Thoreau, Whitman, Robert Frost, Steinbeck, Hesse... *Collected Poems* by Emily Dickinson, with a cover that was well worn from frequent use. A book in Greek—it appeared to be poetry. Several books of French poetry by Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Verlaine. Many had copious notes and annotations so they obviously weren't just for the sake of appearance. He used them. A very thick book—*A Guide To Opera*. Several books by authors I had never heard of. *Psychology and Religion* by Carl Jung. Then the most curious of all, *Why I Am Not A Christian* by Bertrand Russell. Two thick folders of monographs by a Professor Campbell. About the only thing I could gather from looking at his books was that number one, he was obviously very literate and number two, more enigmatic than I had previously supposed.

Gregg returned and with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes said that what this place needed was a little culture and turning on the phonograph he proceeded to look for a particular L.P.. Suddenly the entire barracks was filled with Puccini. It was a record of selections from the opera *Tosca* and as Mario began to sing his aria *Recondita armonia* Gregg burst forth in the most beautiful tenor voice I had ever heard. The singer on the record, Giuseppe di Stefano was world renown and had an incredible voice, but in my opinion it couldn't compare to the sounds and emotional phrasing that were coming out this young man's voice. It was confusing and a bit incongruous. Here was an individual who looked like he should be outside swinging a baseball bat or playing football, but instead was inside an Army barracks singing opera.

When the aria finished he picked up the arm of the phonograph and put on another record. The lilting sounds of a magnificent soprano voice began singing *Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore*. Gregg sat on his bunk, suddenly having been transported into yet another world. He wasn't listening to the music, he was absorbing it with his entire being. The near constant smile on his face had changed into one of reflection and passion; he stared off into the distance, not focusing, but feeling and devouring each musical note. Since I had upon occasion had somewhat this same experience I knew what was happening. It certainly wasn't anything that I could verbalize or explain to someone else, it had to be personally encountered. What I heard was not the technically pure vocalization of a soprano, but the emotion of the music made substantial and real. When the aria finished, I asked who that incredible creature was. She had a voice like velvet; yet filled with such emotion that I could hardly believe what I had heard.

Gregg explained that she was a relatively new soprano by the name of Maria Callas, born in New York of Greek immigrant parents. He mentioned that her family's name had originally been Kalogeropoulous, the sound of which flowed from his tongue with an obvious pride of his own Greek heritage. He explained that for professional reasons she had changed it to Callas. Two years previously he had visited Italy with his uncle Paolo and they had gone to the San Carlos Opera House

in Naples when she was performing in Verdi's *Il Trovatore*. Although she hadn't recorded a large number of records, evidently Gregg had obtained all that were currently available.

Then he jumped up and said, *"It's time for us to start moving. What we both need is take a shower and then I think that..... LET'S GO TO BOSTON!"* It was pronounced like a proper Bostonian and came sounding Bahston. I asked if he thought that it would be possible to get passes and he responded that there wouldn't be any problem. I thought back to last night's *'Oh, I know the guard'* and wondered what I was getting myself into with this wild, effervescent creature.

Since we were still the only ones on the upstairs level we had the entire bathroom to ourselves. We turned on adjoining showers. I had my eyes closed and was completely absorbed in the cascading warm water. I finished showering and as I was stepping out I became aware that he had turned off his hot water and was now being engulfed in icy cold water and had begun to sing. It was lyrical, in Italian and undoubtedly an Italian folk song, one which I had never heard. As I began to dry off I saw that his skin was covered with goose bumps from the cold water, but, eyes closed, he continued singing. I presumed that the water didn't go off until the song was over. Was it possible I had become involved with a raving maniac?

We dressed, once again in 'civies' and went downstairs. The barracks sergeant opened his door and in greeting said, *"Oh, Specialist Bartoni. What do you need?"* Gregg responded with, *"Hi Angelo"* (not Sergeant or Sergeant Castorini, but just "Angelo" like he was greeting an old friend, cousin or next door neighbor), *"what are the chances of getting us a two day pass so we can go into Boston?"* Without waiting for a response, he continued, *"My cousin's getting married today and well, you know how Italian weddings are...."* Sergeant Castorini frowned slightly, and wrinkled his brow. He appeared to be quite young, probably no more than 25 or 26 years old and handsome in a rugged sort of way. The seconds passed and he seemed to be internally debating the request. Evidently Gregg had hit a tender spot, probably with the words 'Italian wedding'. Then Sergeant Castorini explained that no one was supposed to have a pass until the following week, after the entire group had arrived — a long pause — *"but since you guys have arrived early and since most of the others probably won't arrive until the last thing tomorrow night I don't see any reason why you shouldn't have some fun and go to the wedding. But you gotta be back by 6:00 pm on Sunday. 'Capice'?"*

Then I introduced myself, since up to that point I hadn't spoken a single word. The sergeant inquired about where I was from, where I'd taken Basic Training, a couple of other questions and then went back into his room. He filled out the passes and said they would also have to be signed by the desk clerk at headquarters. Then the Sergeant added, *"Oh, Bartoni maybe in the future you should keep the volume on your phonograph down a bit. Probably some of the guys don't like opera as much as we 'wops' do. By the way, it was a great way to wake up!"* As he entered his room he was singing, softly, *'Vesti la giubba'....."* He also had a beautiful tenor voice and I was beginning to wonder if perhaps it was a genetic trait.

A friendly, understanding, smiling, opera-singing barracks sergeant; I was having trouble with reality again. As we left the barracks I could hear Sergeant Castorini launch into another lyrical song. Gregg explained that it was *'E lucevan le stelle'*, another exquisite aria from *Tosca*. We had both

noticed that the passes were valid until 21:00 Sunday night [9:00 pm].

I was impressed by my new-found friend's ability to seemingly construct reality around his personal needs and desires. He was as extroverted as I was introverted and I was beginning to weigh the advantages of perhaps adopting a bit more extroversion. As we were leaving the Headquarters building, having received the necessary signature, I asked about the wedding. "*Wedding, what wedding? You don't think I'd subject to that crowd of clowns do you?*" It appeared his story to the Sergeant, was only partially true; it wasn't his cousin, but a friend, actually not even a close friend, that was getting married, but he had no intention of our attending. He had decided to show me around Boston during the day and then, eyes twinkling, promised that he had planned something very special for the evening.

First he wanted to go by his house and decided to call and advise his grandmother. After a short phone conversation which was primarily in Italian with, it seemed, English used for emphasis, he hung up with that same mischievous grin that I had seen several times in the last few hours. "Fantastic," he beamed, "we've got the house to ourselves since my grandmother and uncle were just going out the door and are going to spend the weekend with my aunt Francesca, who lives down in Connecticut. Now we can *really* listen to some music!"

It was now mid afternoon and driving into Boston we stopped at a small Italian restaurant and had some magnificent Zuppa de vongole (clam chowder) and shared a large mixed green salad with some robust Chianti wine. At first I thought that he had chosen the restaurant at random, but as we entered the owner came over, threw her abundant arms around him and cried, "*Gregori, com' è sta?*" With the passage of time I came to believe that he probably knew at least half of the people in the state of Massachusetts.

The rest of the afternoon was spent becoming accustomed to experiencing the history of the United States first hand. At times I was speechless, though my friend Gregg certainly wasn't. Here in front of me were the countless elements and components of many of the historical events I had read about in my high school history classes. Gregg was enthusiastic about explaining and sharing his city with me and I was lost in a cloud of admiration for my new friend. He never faltered in giving names, dates and specific information. I knew that my father, who had taught history, would have enjoyed knowing this fascinating, brilliant young man. The sun was bright but there was still a slight chill in the air, though the hint of the coming spring could be seen as well as felt. Then as the sun began to sink on the horizon we headed to another section of the city, toward that special something that Gregg wanted to share with me. My curiosity was gnawing in anticipation and I wondered if it would be a person, a place or perhaps even a thing.

It never once crossed my mind that it might be an entire culture. When he finally parked and we started walking I suddenly realized that the language which I heard from the doorways and passing people had changed. The fragrance in the air was different. There was music everywhere and the signs were advertising unknown things — all in Greek. I had been briefly introduced to his paternal heritage and now it was time for the maternal side.

We passed open front stores with enormous black olives, wrinkled olives, brown olives, green olives, and not in little jars but large open tubs. Boxes and packages that contained mysterious, unknown substances, even vegetables I'd never seen before. Bakeries—from which wafted such incredible fragrances that they almost forcefully beckoned the passerby to enter. Several times he greeted people in passing. Then after several blocks of walking we finally arrived at the destination. Upon entering I didn't know if it was a restaurant, night club or just what, but it was an enormously large area. There were countless tables with a number of people either eating or just chatting and drinking. In the center there was what appeared to be a dance floor and then an area behind it with a slightly raised stage.

He was immediately greeted by name by at least half of the employees as well as the owner. I also noticed, at least when he was speaking English and I understood the conversation, that I was always introduced as 'a buddy from California' or as 'a friend visiting from California'. Military buddy, or friend from the military was never mentioned. When questioned he explained that he didn't especially mind being in the army, but at heart he was a normal human being and once outside the precincts of the military's domain he sort of forgot that they existed. I remembered that he had made a similar comment the night before. Maybe it was another key to the way he individually constructed reality. I'd already begun to assign almost magical, superhuman powers to this incredible young man.

He ordered some Spanakopita and bottle of Metaxa with coke on the side. I had often used the expression "*it's all Greek to me*", and in this particular instance it really was. The waiter with the Metaxa, a Greek brandy, arrived and asked me if I had some identification. Gregg started to say something to the him, but I responded in the affirmative and whipped out my California Driver's license. According to my fake ID I was already 22 years old. Gregg was suitably impressed since I had previously told him that I was only 19. He then explained that it would be a sin to mix the Metaxa with anything, but sometimes he enjoyed drinking the coke between sips of the brandy. At nineteen years of age I certainly was no connoisseur of fine liquors but first my nose and then my taste buds confirmed that this was probably the finest beverage ever conceived by man. Evidently the brandy was cured in casks which had the inside covered with conifer resin, which gave it a delicious earthy taste.

An enormous platter of the Spanakopita arrived, which he had ordered as an hors d'oeuvre. "*A little snack while we work up an appetite and we can eat later*" was the way he explained it. Exquisite! Thin layers of flaky pastry dough with a filling of spinach, onions, feta cheese and spices—baked to perfection. I would have been quite content to have expired and gone to the great hereafter at that moment since I had just sampled two of the most perfect savory delights in the entire world. Or so I thought, but that was just the beginning!

Then a friend of Gregg's, by the name of Alekos, showed up carrying what appeared to be a pregnant guitar, which I learned was a bouzouki. He sat down to chat and I noted that he was as effervescent as Gregg. Probably out of deference to me they conversed primarily in English with only an occasional phrase or word in Greek. Gregg asked Alekos something in Greek and he began to play a beautiful ballad on that unique instrument. At that moment Alekos' sister, Elena, arrived and after giving Gregg an embrace, sat down. Alekos continued to play and Elena began to sing one of the most lyrical and beautiful songs I had ever heard, and although I couldn't understand a word it wasn't necessary. Her voice was crystalline in its purity. Gradually other people began to sing, Gregg of

course had been one of the first, and before long nearly everyone in the large room had joined in. With each passing moment the evening seemed to become more enchanting and magically beautiful.

As the hours progressed more and more people arrived as well as a small group of musicians of which Alekos was a part. People were dancing, singing, eating, drinking, visiting and it was difficult for me to believe that I hadn't actually been transported to Greece. Gregg spent a lot of time dancing and I was entranced by his graceful, liquid movements. At one point he returned to the table and began to take off his shoes *"so I can feel the music"*. I momentarily flinched, wondering if he was about to do another of his BVD numbers, but he stopped at his shoes and socks. I asked him about his having lived in Greece and learned that when he was fourteen he, his aunt and uncle had gone there to spend the summer visiting relatives. Evidently when it was time to return he had decided to stay for an additional year.

We ate, drank a lot, ate some more, laughed, sang, drank some more and I completely lost track of time. I met and talked with countless beautiful women and handsome men, young and old, all of them incredibly friendly. We could have been there for a few hours or it could have been an entire lifetime. The passage of time had ceased to have any meaningful significance. I knew that I could mark this as one of those milestones which had occurred in my life. My world had expanded and enveloped something, which though new, seemed so very familiar and comfortable. In just a little more than twenty-four hours my previously limited world had increased to include marvels and joys I'd never before known. Little did I know, as these thoughts swirled through my head, that this was just the tip of the iceberg.

Gregg was driving through the maze of streets that led to the suburbs of Boston and the community of Quincy where his grandmother's house was located. He seemed to be in perfect control, though I found that difficult to believe taking into consideration the amount of Metaxa the two of us had consumed. But then we had also consumed a mountain of food, and he had been in near constant movement, which I knew helped to mitigate the effects of the alcohol. Naturally he was still singing, though now more softly, and primarily soothing ballads. Occasionally he would reach over to gently touch my shoulder and ask how I was doing—almost as if to assure himself that I was still there. At some point I began to drift off to sleep, with sights and sounds spinning in my head. Just before I became unconscious I knew that I wanted to tell Gregg how much his friendship meant to me, but it seemed incongruous and unnecessary. Instead I settled for mumbling about how much I had enjoyed the evening. But it also seemed like I had known, and loved, him forever. It was confusing to say the very least and before I could logically examine everything that was rushing through my head I was fast asleep.

Gregg was gently shaking my shoulder. We had reached the house; he was physically helping me out of the car. As we walked to the house, the crisp night air assisted in clearing my slightly fuzzy head. Once inside he quickly showed me around the downstairs and then we went upstairs where three bedrooms were located, at the same time he explained that nonna, his grandmother had a downstairs bedroom, *"Since she's not as agile as she used to be, though her mouth is just as mobile"*. There was a guest room, his uncle's room and then Gregg's room. Each had a large double bed and beautiful, tasteful furniture, all of which appeared to be antique. The bathroom was located between his room and that of his uncle. Gregg's room was an immediate reflection of his character—lots of books, a large

number of records, and the walls was covered with pleasant paintings which appeared to be originals. And of course a large, framed poster with Maria Callas in the role of Norma, from La Scala in Rome.

Gregg said that I could sleep in the guest room, and then hesitantly added that if I wanted I could sleep with him. It would be nice to have me close so we could talk, and probably a little warmer since his grandmother had turned off the heat before leaving and it would take a while for the house to warm up. At that point he was standing slightly behind me and probably for the first time in my life I summoned up a bit of extrovert courage and said, "Well, it really is cool in here, and if you want to have me close why don't you do it right now." There was no hesitation and suddenly the two of us had become one as our lips met for the first time. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was in love with this magnificent person, who within a period of twenty-four hours had completely changed my life. It was nothing less than a complete psychological explosion.

It was a night of joy, of passion and release, of driftings and awakenings, tender words, of gentleness. There are experiences which all the vocabularies of all the languages of the world cannot adequately describe. Profound and based on that which comes from the realm of the spiritual, they resist all attempts at verbalization. This, for me, was that unique experience. It was one of complete and unconditional love. Love mutually offered and accepted. A bond which would defy the inexorable passage of time.

At one point during the night, I was in that marvelous state between drifting and sleep when I felt, rather than heard, something softly tweak at my mind:

*Oh yes, you do remember that the time length on this relationship is forever.
Not a few weeks, several years, or even a single lifetime.*

It is an eternity of mutual love and all that implies . . .