

ROCK, CROSS AND CANDLE BY THE SEA

In the audition room, Nikos Manou appeared calm even though he didn't feel calm. This script reading was his chance to play a Greek character and he really was Greek. He was twenty-four years old and had been in Hollywood for three years, struggling, waiting in audition lines, doing interviews and putting forth the aggressive "sell" of himself. Looking him over now the agents were muttering under their breath. He couldn't hear everything but he heard "*the profile is good*" and "*the eyes are right*". Scrutiny of his every feature first was the way things were done...seeing his talent came later. He couldn't afford an agent yet; instead, he was struggling on his own.

"OK," said the Assistant Director, "*We're ready for you to read now.*"

Nikos held the script mentally preparing himself to begin reading. No exact title was decided on for the proposed film. It was just labeled "*A Greek Love Story*" about a young Greek boy and girl who fell in love. Nikos had the Greek gestures and had spent enough time around his Greek uncle's family so he could combine the typical gestures and movements. He read through the script, imagining he was already in the movie while trying to forget the persons watching every move he made and listening to every word. After the reading he was asked to turn around, walk across the room, sit in a chair, run a few strides and then all they said was, "*We will call you*". He had heard that same response many times before and was somewhat disappointed they didn't immediately realize how good he could really act. He decided to take a chance, be bold

and say loudly in Greek “*Ego ime i moni!*” (I am the one). It was something he practiced saying at home to give himself confidence. Not knowing Greek, one of the casting persons asked “*What does that mean?*” Becoming even bolder he replied, “*When you make your decision you will know!*”

Nikos was of Greek descent however had never lived in Greece. His family story was his mother had come to the United States early in her pregnancy to stay with her aunt and uncle who already lived in New York City. His aunt was also his “Nouna” or Godmother when he was baptized in the Greek Orthodox Church which was a very important person during a Greek child’s life. His uncle was like a father who took care of him like his real father would have done. Nikos’ father, had waited back in Greece and was to join them in a few months; however, in the meantime he had passed away in a car accident in Greece shortly before Nikos was born. His mother never seemed to recover from his death. Her aunt and uncle knew of several young Greek men in New York City who would have loved to marry their niece, but she was never interested. She fervently clung to her husband’s memory and couldn’t bear to marry anyone else so she decided to bear her child alone. Nikos had done well in school and after high school decided to attend a Dramatic Arts school in New York. After graduating, he pursued an acting career, was in several plays and later decided to move to Los Angeles to become a movie actor and maybe even a director. His mother was supportive wanting him to follow his dream; perhaps because she had lost her own dream and didn’t want the same thing for her only son.

Early the next morning Nikos phone rang. *“Who could be calling this early?”* he wondered. Here in Hollywood mornings were pretty inactive but afternoons and evenings were when the action started.

“Good morning - Carpe Diem,” (Seize the day!), he answered. .

The voice on the other end said, *“I am the one”*.

“Who is this?”, asked Nikos, *“Besides, that’s my line!”*

The voice answered, *“I am one of the assistant directors who auditioned you yesterday.*

Director Mr. Theo Pappas wants to see you. Be at the studio at 10 a.m.

“I’ll be there”, answered Nikos, leaping out of bed chanting *“Ego ime i moni!”*. (*I am the one!*)

In the morning he got dressed, placed his Greek worry beads in his pocket for luck and crossed himself like a good Greek Orthodox Christian would before any precarious occasion. At the studio he was striding down the hallway becoming the character he had auditioned. By the time he reached the audition room he had mentally transported himself to the beach scene by the sea where his character was asking the young Greek woman to marry him. He could almost hear the ocean waves under the dark sky filled with bright stars. Pappas, the director began to speak.

“I get up very early in the morning”, Pappas said, *“Do you?”*

Nikos answered, *“Not always...only on those mornings when getting up early will make a difference in my life and today is one of those days!”*

Pappas laughed, “*And why do you think today will be one of those days?*”

“*Because this morning will impact the rest of my life since I will be chosen for this part.*”, Nikos said boldly.

“*Oh, “Ego ime i moni!” eh? You threw the casting people for a loop with that.*”

“*It was intentional sir,*”, Nikos admitted.

“*Well,*” responded Pappas, “*it seemed to work...they agreed you were very good and I am one Greek actually born in Greece who can tell if that’s true.*”

“*Thank you, sir. They are correct!*”

“*OK*”, said Pappas, “*Let me see you do this scene.*” and handed him a page of the script. It was the scene where the young Greek man is distraught after learning his girlfriend disappeared from the town. No one seemed to know what happened to her and her parents wouldn’t even talk to him. Nikos was glad it was this scene, because it was full of emotion, body movements and gestures which he could do. He imagined the dark narrow streets of the small Greek town, the quaint ocean side cafe where the young man sat afterwards drinking and filled with anguish. Pappas stopped talking, stared at Nikos’ teary eyes and said “*OK, you have the part!*”

“*Thank you, Mr. Pappas, for making a difference in my life today.*”

“*We start next Monday morning, 8 o’clock sharp!*” replied Pappas.

“*I’ll be here.*” said Nikos.

Nikos left the studio feeling certain his time had come. He whispered to himself “*Ego ime i moni!*”. Each morning Nikos showed up at the filming location filled with a zest for the part. The first scene was filmed as if it was in Greece even though it really was on the California coast, complete with waves and rocky shores. With computerization of films, the background could be filled in with actual scenes of Greece. Nikos and the actress seemed to play their lines off one another with realistic enthusiasm. Both had been able to pick up some Greek dance steps, so could perform dancing in the moonlit sand well. Pappas seemed pleased. However, once when Nikos happened to glance over at Pappas, he noticed his eyes were full of tears. Nikos wondered if he was always so emotional over his films. Pappas then yelled “*cut*”, walked off and stared across into the ocean before returning to his director’s chair. Nikos thought maybe this filming brought back Pappas’ early childhood memories of Greece.

When a Greek Orthodox church was found to use in the film, they shot scenes of the boy and girl meeting behind the church. Later came scenes of the couple talking to the priest about marriage in spite of the girl’s father refusing to give permission and the priest’s refusal to perform the marriage without the parents’ consent. The next scenes were emotionally charged with the young couple confronting the girl’s father. Pappas was very quiet when the scene began, but soon appeared to become restless getting in and out of his chair and pacing back and forth. Nikos was concerned he and the actress were not acting well, otherwise, why would Pappas behave this way? He decided to approach Pappas about this.

“*Excuse me, Mr. Pappas*”, said Nikos, “*Is there any special way you would like us to enhance this scene?*”

Pappas turned to face the two actors replying *“Understand you two are as one person and love each other more than anything else on earth. You are pleading with the father for your life with each other! There is nothing which can destroy your life as badly as not being allowed to marry this girl and you would rather throw yourself into the ocean instead of being separated. It is necessary to convince the father of this. This moment you have never felt before with so much mental pain and anguish it is almost difficult to speak.”*

Nikos felt stunned hearing Pappas speak with such intense feeling and wondered if he was always like this when filming. Pappas yelled *“cut”* and Nikos thought he heard him say under his breath, *“Ego ime i moni!”*

A second time the crew went back to the coastline to film the scene of the pretense of a marriage ceremony. The couple spoke wedding vows to each other and Nikos lit a tall white candle, dripped wax on the large rock and placed the candle into it. Then he and the actress were to remove the symbolic gold crosses around their necks, intertwine them and lay them next to the candle. Then they each crossed themselves and walked around the rock three times as if it was a church altar. Nikos then placed the fake gold ring with the inscription inside *‘Se Agapo’* (I Love You) on the girl’s finger, kissed her passionately, while both picked up their crosses and placed them around each other’s necks.

Next was the scene of making love on the moonlit beach. Then Pappas called *“cut”*, but much quieter this time and said *“Go home.”* to the actors and crew, *“We will begin again tomorrow”*. Everyone left except Pappas who sat quietly for a moment, then walked slowly and stood beside the rock staring at the ocean. After everyone was gone, he still remained. Most

directors would film like-scenes together, such as the beach and church and then piecing them together later. Nikos noticed for some reason Pappas wasn't doing this. He seemed to be filming in exact sequence of the script.

Then came the scenes about the moments when the young girl's mother starts to notice her daughter is sometimes sick in the morning and has a different look about her. Her mother, knowing the signs of pregnancy, confronts her daughter who admits she does believe she is pregnant. The mother feels obligated to tell her husband who is outraged and feels the daughter has shamed the family, but still refuses to allow the two to marry. He cannot condone an abortion because he doesn't believe in that. Instead, he insists his daughter be sent to the United States as soon as possible to live with his brother and wife in New York City. He also demands his daughter change her last name to a shortened version to avoid anyone knowing who she really is. Her parents seem to feel since the baby will be born in America it will have better life anyway. The father is willing to sacrifice not seeing the child or his daughter for a very long time to avoid the shame caused in this small Greek town. The daughter is kept at home for the next few days while secret arrangements are made to fly her to New York City. She is not allowed to see her lover again and forbidden to mention his name nor let it be known to him or anyone that she is pregnant. The father hoped his brother in New York would know several nice young Greek men who would be interested in marrying his daughter soon so they could start a new life without much difficulty. The girl is taken to the airport in the middle of the night and sped off to America. Her lover becomes upset, and argues with the girl's parents, but they will not divulge

where she was being sent or why. He has a heavy heart over the next years and carries his memories of the girl with him vowing never to marry or fall in love again.

Nikos watched as more scenes were filmed and noticed Pappas' face mysteriously turn slowly from sadness to outright anger. Was he taking this story line so serious and behaving this way? Maybe he was just doing that for effect. Or was he?

Now it was time for Nikos to bring anguish into play for his character. This next scene was the one which got him the part and caused Pappas get tears in his eyes. Nikos felt confident and put everything he could muster into these scenes, but Pappas never seemed satisfied. He toughly told Nikos, "*I, myself, must feel your anguish.*" Then he would ask for more takes. Nikos was getting emotionally exhausted and nervous; he was ready to ask for a break, but when he reached that point, he seemed to do his best and it was the last take. Afterwards he looked at Pappas who had tears in his eyes.

"*Good. Very good!*", said Pappas" *You see I wanted you to force me to feel your anguish and you did. That's all for today.*"

The next few times were somewhat less emotional. Nikos would be filming the symbolic historical scenes of the young man getting into Greece's film business, becoming a director of Greek documentaries and other films and eventually moving to Hollywood and becoming a film director. It seemed evident to Nikos this story line maybe was personal for Pappas. Was he playing the part of a future director---like Pappas? He decided to try to find out when he was

alone with Pappas. He certainly didn't want to invade Pappas' privacy and take a chance on jeopardizing his own acting career.

The next week Nikos received an upsetting phone call from his aunt in New York telling him his mother had passed away from a sudden heart attack and he needed to come back immediately for the funeral. Feeling shocked and upset, he realized he may have to sacrifice his work for a short time. He would speak to Pappas hoping he would understand.

Pappas was understanding and said of course he should go. They would suspend filming. Nikos flew to New York with sadness in his heart about his mother's passing. After the funeral and dinner at the church they returned to the aunt and uncle's apartment which was next to Nikos' mother's apartment. Nikos now felt so alone in that apartment. His aunt came and knocked on Nikos door carrying a small carved wooden box. "*Nikos.*", she said with tears in her eyes, "*I have spent many years, stirring around in my mind something I should tell you. The time has come, before I too leave this earth. I must talk with you about who you really are.*" Nikos was puzzled but ready to listen, thinking she was going to talk to him about moving back to New York. He would let her speak while he listened because he respected her, but he couldn't possibly think of moving back to New York and giving up acting in Hollywood...not when he was just getting his first big break.

"I am about to speak to you not just with my voice, but also with my heart.", she began. "*This box traveled all the way from Greece where your mother Maria lived. She brought it with her when she came here before you were born. It holds something from the past which belongs to*

you. When your mother was ill, she gave me this box and told me to give it to you when I felt the time was right, but not until after she passed away. Because if you felt hurt by it she didn't want to be here. She couldn't bear to cause you any pain, because she loved you so very much. At her wish we have kept her secret all these years because your uncle and I loved you very much also. I feel now it is time you should know these things."

Nikos took the box and stared at the cover with a beautiful Greek church icon etched into it. The box was truly old and from Greece, but he had never seen this box before. He thought it strange his mother had never shown this to him and when he opened it he saw a letter. As he began reading, his face turned from curiosity to disbelief. It was a letter written many years ago addressed to him and he began to read it.

"Dear Nikos, my beloved son,

This is your story which I have kept from you to protect you from any hurt or sadness because I loved you so much. I had this letter hidden away so you would only see it when God takes me from you. Years ago, in my small town in Greece, I fell in love with a wonderful man and we wished to get married. My parents were so unhappy about this and the man I had chosen, not because he was a bad person, but because he was poor and there was no hope of changing his circumstances. They demanded I stop seeing him immediately and never have anything else to do with him. We talked to our priest but he wouldn't marry us without my parent's permission. We were so much in love and this was like a death sentence to us. Our hearts were broken! We could not stand to be apart, so we decided to see each other in spite of our parent's wishes. I know this was terribly wrong, but some day you will know what a strong force true love is...and

how difficult it is to push away someone who means so much to you. A certain place in our small village at the edge of the sea behind the church became our meeting place. We lit a single white candle from the church, took our gold crosses, intertwined them and pledged our love forever in front of God's eyes! He gave me this gold ring which says "Se Agapo" "I Love You" as a symbol to our love. We could not help ourselves and that night there on the beach was when you were conceived with such love. After I discovered I was with child and told my mother, but I was so afraid to tell my father. My mother told him and he became very upset! He insisted on sending me to America to live with your uncle and aunt, in New York City. My parents insisted I change my last name to Manou which is shortened from our real name Manousaki, and not tell anyone in Greece where I had traveled. Months later you were born in New York City and I could never bring myself to give you up for adoption. The thought of marrying anyone else was never something I wanted to do. My family refused to tell your father where I went or that I had borne his child. I never tried to contact your father in Greece, because it would bring so much shame on his family and mine. Your father's name was Theo Pappadopoulos and I am sure, had he known of you, he would have loved you as much as I did. I hid the gold ring in the box right after you were born. I could not bear to wear it because I needed to keep our secret. Later I replaced it with an ordinary silver ring to wear while you were growing up. I am so sorry I could not tell you this until now but I did not want to bring any shame upon you.

Love, Maria, Your mother

As Nikos stared at the letter, his hand began to shake, the envelope dropped to the floor and out fell a gold ring. Picking up the ring, he looked at the inscription inside which said "Se

Agapo”---“*I Love You*” in Greek. Nikos was stunned! How can this be? Pappas’ film is so much like his own mother’s story. Then it suddenly struck him of the possibility that his birthfather had somehow told this story to Pappas in Greece and now the director was making a movie about it. But who could it have been? Only his mother’s and father’s family had known all this. Then a looming question entered his mind. Could Pappas could be his real father? The name Pappas could have been shortened from the name Pappadopoulos which was very common in Greece, especially when Greeks come to America. Would Pappas be filming his own story? With tears in his eyes, he hugged and thanked his aunt for bringing this possible realization of his mother’s true story.

A million thoughts raced in his mind on the way back to Los Angeles. Should he approach Pappas with his questions? Would he dare tell Pappas what he had discovered? How could he bring this up and find out the truth? If this was true, should he reveal what he knows and question Pappas now or wait until the end of the filming or never even tell him? He decided it would be best to wait and get closer to finishing the film before deciding what to do. Nikos returned and seemed to have such a feel for the film now which made his acting overwhelmingly excellent. Surprisingly Pappas chose to end the film as an epic without a happy ending. Unanswered questions loomed at the end as if it was an unsolvable mystery about what really happened to the couple. With this ending Nikos was now convinced it could be possible that Pappas was his true father. Then Nikos decided to work feverishly in his spare time to write a different ending himself; one which he felt was a truthful ending; one which showed the son was miraculously found.

On the last week of filming Nikos asked Pappas to join him for dinner in a Greek restaurant of Pappas choosing. Nikos insisted it would be his honor to pay the tab. After arriving at the restaurant Nikos asked the hostess for a table for two in a rather private area. The hostess and the staff seemed to know Pappas well, greeting him with a smile and a friendly hug. They were led to a wonderfully set table filled with typical Greek cheese and olives. A beautiful photo on the wall above their table caught Nikos' s eye. It was a picture of the sea with a large rock on the shore and a small church in the background on a hill. It looked like an exceptional artist had painted this one. Nikos found himself staring at this photo. Pappas asked, *“Do you like that picture?”*

“Yes”, answered Nikos, “It is beautiful.....do you know that place?” Pappas didn't answer right away and then said, *“Yes, I do. I had an artist paint it for me. I used to have it hanging in my home but it was difficult to look at it every day. I gave it to my friend who owns this restaurant. Then I can look at it here. It is a place from my past in Greece.”* Nikos noticed tears were appearing in Pappas' eyes just like when they were filming. If he could get Pappas to tell him more, he could maybe break the news about what he had learned. The meal was a myriad of Greek foods. It made Nikos rather homesick for the times his mother, uncle and aunt sat around the table all talking at once, laughing and devouring all the fantastic Greek food.

“Have you ever been to Greece, Nikos?”, Pappas asked.

Nikos answered, *“No sir, I have always wanted to. I suppose I will go someday after I make my first million in your movies.!”* he laughingly stated.

Pappas asked, *“How do you know you will be in more of my movies?”*

“Because I am the one, remember?” and they both laughed.

“Greece is a beautiful, but painful place for me,” spoke Pappas, *“It hurts to go there and it hurts to leave.”*

“Why is that, sir?” asked Nikos, *“if you do not mind telling me.”*

“Why are you interested?”, said Pappas.

“Because” (This was going to be tricky and he needed to be tactful in handling this conversation.) *“I think this movie is much more than just a fictional story. I think it tugs at your soul as well as mine when we are filming. I also think it may be a true story and you may know this story deep in your heart even without any script.”*

Pappas looked at him strangely, *“Why would you think that?”*, he asked nervously.

*“Because I see you making this movie from your heart. At times it seems it is extremely painful for you and I see you showing a lot of emotion when you watch us;, especially when you turn your back and go off into the distance to be alone for a few minutes. To you this is more than just a movie. It seems to be hard for you to let go of each scene. I see **you** in this movie.”*

Pappas stared at Nikos. Then he asked, *“How do you have so much perception, Nikos?”*

“I think I inherited it,” answered Nikos. *“And you would be surprised from where?”* They continued to eat their meal, making light conversation. When they finished, Pappas settled back in his chair as if he was ready to start a long conversation. Nikos hoped Pappas would get into his life story which would make it easier for Nikos to reveal what he knew.

“Do you know why I am making this movie, Nikos?”

Nikos had to think quickly. Should he go ahead and confess he might really know or should he allow Pappas to tell him first?

“I would like to hear you tell me.” replied Nikos.

Pappas began. *“You are right. This movie is both a sweet and bittersweet part of my life. When I was very young in my town by the sea in Greece, I fell in love with a beautiful young girl. Never would I have thought later I would lose the most important and beautiful person in my life and that loss would be with me forever stagnating in my heart. I’ve never been able to forget her. For some reason which I have never known, her family decided suddenly to send her away without giving me any explanation....she just disappeared. The rumor was her parents sent her to the United States, but no one would tell me why. We wanted to marry but I was from a poor family and her parents would not allow her to marry me. They probably thought I was not good enough for her, not educated and poor. She left me but in my heart she remains. I will always love her and wanted to find her but I didn’t know even where to begin. I’ve always wanted to make this movie, the story of our love and terrible loss. It has been one of the most difficult movies I have ever made. I thought maybe then I could put that part of my life aside and forget.”* His voice trailed off, his eyes became distant and filled with tears. *“You are Greek yourself.”*, continued Pappas, trying to make the conversation lighter, *“You know we Greeks get very emotional.”*

After eating Nikos decided to bring up that he had written an alternate ending to the movie and asked Pappas if he would mind reading it. Pappas frowned and had a questionable look on his face but agreed. Nikos watched as Pappas finished reading and looked surprised when he put down the script and saw an envelope lying on the table in front of him. *“How did you come up with this ending?”* Pappas asked *“and what is this envelope?”*

“Please open the envelope.” Nikos said softly with tears in his eyes. Pappas opened the envelope, gazing at the gold ring contained in it.

“Why is this here?” says Pappas. *“What is the meaning of this?”*

Nikos said softly *“Please look at the inscription inside the ring.”*

Pappas eyes widened even more as he read out loud *“Se Agapo”*---*“I Love You”* in Greek. He then shouted, *“Where did you get this? How did you get this?”*

“It was my mothers. She received it from a wonderful young Greek man many years ago.” said Nikos. *“Theo Pappas...you are my father and I am your son. My mother’s name was Maria Manousakis.”* As tears ran down both men’s faces, they hugged each other. The rest of the evening was spent with Nikos talking about his mother’s and his life in New York City. From that moment on they were connected for the rest of their lives and Nikos soon moved into Pappas large Hollywood home. The making of the film was completed and titled ***“Rock, Cross and Candle by the Sea”***. The film became a raging success and won many awards. Nikos continued to work hard as an actor and gained a wonderful reputation with his father encouraging him in every way. Many happy years lay ahead for these two men who were now happily blessed with

each other's presence. It was just the beginning of a wonderful journey of sharing their lives at last.

~~~~~