

KSANTHIA

by Jan

"Ksanthia " by Jan Toulon

As a fifteen year old student who wore a uniform while attending a all-girls' private school, I rarely visited a "beauty parlor" as we used to say back in the 1950s. In fact, I often cut my own hair and wore it fastened with bobby pins into what was known as a "French twist". No one thought of makeup other than as touch of lipstick and possibly some mascara for special occasions, and applying streaks or highlighting were beyond our imagination. Most of the girls I knew wore smooth page boy bobs held in place by a simple barrette or a pony tail lifted at the back of their heads and attached with an elastic band or a silk scarf. We thought we were quite the rage if we wore a shirtwaist bouffant dress with a white pique" Peter Pan" collar, paired with a cashmere cardigan, and decorated with a silver circle pin. White Bobby socks and saddle shoes or white suede bucks were the footwear of choice, and because we wore a blue and white checked cotton gingham dress as a school uniform, our only chance to personalize our appearance was to wear a uniquely individual belt. Colorful woven Mexican sashes or studded leather cowboy brown leather belts with turquoise-studded buckles were popular choices. All-in-all we schoolgirls were the picture of innocence or the epitome of the image of an all-American wholesome teenager.

Shortly before the end of the school year of 1959, I received a telegram. At that time, telegrams always heralded momentous news, often a life event as a birth or a death. I unfolded the creased blue letter and read with great trepidation. I saw that the sender a dispatch officer at the American Field Service office located in New York City. A white message band separated sentences with the word "stop", and it said "Have home in Greece if Jan will accept, please wire". This short message that would be the harbinger of future adventures with memories to last a life time. Ten days later, I boarded a TWA propeller plane for New York on the first day of a 3 month trip to Greece. After a day of indoctrination with other exchange students, a group of us left for Athens on an Overseas National Airways flight to Athens, which flew for 24 hours with stops in Gander, Newfoundland and Shannon, Ireland en route. When I wasn't sleeping, I read a small book called "Modern Greek" to learn as much as I could before landing, as there were not many persons who spoke English in my assigned families in Thessaloniki, in the region of Macedonia and in then in Iraklion on the island of Crete.

Soon I could see the turquoise shallows and the clear dark blue depths of the Aegean Sea beneath the clouds and the sun created a shimmering effect with the summer heat as we landed on the tarmac in Athens. In a few hours we arrived at Thessaloniki in the region of Macedonia, and I timidly shook hands with my new adopted family while muttering a very American version of the words I had memorized earlier that day. "Hieretay, Ti kanete ? Eimay Kala" ("Hello, How are you? I'm fine"). Everyone smiled broadly, and I felt at home among friends. A door opened upon a new and glorious adventure that day, and I experienced a summer of wondrous discovery.

The days went by too quickly, as if life were a dream, a tapestry of the senses woven in multicolored hues. I immersed myself in learning a new culture and language in this fascinating country where the customs of Europe and Asia met

and intertwined. From the northern mountains to the Marathon plain, then Athens and the Peloponnese and on to the Island of Crete, I marveled at every sight in this fabled land of Homer, where ancient history becomes alive.

A few days before my departure, my Greek adopted sister gave me a gift of an afternoon at the local hair salon. I was excited to go there all by myself and to have my limp mousy brown hair styled. Upon arrival in front of a small beauty shop, I gazed in awe at the framed portraits that lined the entrance windows. Young men with fierce mustaches wore dark precisely parted hair slicked down flat with oily Brilliantine, and nearby, young women were shown with tightly curled hair in marcelled waves that hung down over one eye or stood out in the form of a pyramid. I pushed back the multicolored strings or wooden beads that were hung in the doorway in an attempt to prevent unwanted flies from entering, and I was greeted by a phalanx of attendants dressed in matching aqua smocks with kerchiefs on the heads tightly pinned behind their ears. This was the moment of truth for me, as I had to speak Greek in order to explain what I wanted. I remembered the word for blond hair "mallia ksanthia", so I took a deep breath and said "Leego Ksanthia, Parakalo" (A little more blond please) while I moved my fingers in a cutting motion to indicate I wanted a trim as well.

An enthusiastic "Ne, endaxi, thavma!" ("Yes, of course, great!") by one of the hairdressers confirmed my request, and I was led to a gleaming row of white marble basins for a shampoo, which was actually the word "Champooing" in Greek. It was interesting to see that a dark amber beer bottle labeled with a single word "Fix" was the conditioner of choice, much to my amusement. I thought that this was going quite well at this point, and I happily sat down in the stylist's chair while being pinned into a black drape. The next hour or two I relaxed and even closed my eyes as expert fingers alternately massaged my scalp, applied various treatments and cut and styled my hair . When I was eventually unveiled, I heard the words " Po. po. po po, poli aurea! " (my, my, my, very beautiful!), and when I turned toward the ornate oval mirror in anticipation. I stared in amazement, for I was totally transformed. My hair was cut very short around my ears and high on the nape of my neck in a pixy cut and it was a bleached platinum white blond totally devoid of any vestiges of my former shade of brown! I looked like a cross between Jean Seberg and Jean Harlowe! I thought of my parents' future reaction and the words hussy and harlot came to mind.

That day my life changed forever in a small hair salon in downtown Iraklion, I felt as though I had crossed a bridge from being a shy schoolgirl to becoming a more confident young woman. Instantly, my new daring look had given me a greater independence and later , as I prepared to step off the plane in San Francisco, I tilted a black velvet beret over my ear , traced a swath of metallic green eye color over my eyelids, and applied a generous coat of shocking pink lipstick before waving jauntily to my parents . I felt beautiful for the first time," Efharisto Hellada! ("Thank you Greece")