

He waited for Desdemona to come up on deck. When she did, he adjusted his wrap, nodded to his shipmates, and sauntered across the deck to pay his respects.

“He’s smitten!”

“I don’t think so. Type like that, he’s just out for a little fun. That girl better watch it or she’ll have more than that box to carry around.”

My grandparents enjoyed their simulated courtship. When people were within earshot, they engaged in first- or second-date conversations, making up past histories for themselves. “So,” Lefty would ask, “do you have any siblings?”

“I had a brother,” Desdemona replied wistfully. “He ran off with a Turkish girl. My father disowned him.”

“That’s very strict. I think love breaks all taboos. Don’t you?”

Alone, they told each other, “I think it’s working. No one suspects.”

Each time Lefty encountered Desdemona on deck, he pretended he’d only recently met her. He walked up, made small talk, commented on the beauty of the sunset, and then, gallantly, segued into the beauty of her face. Desdemona played her part, too. She was standoffish at first. She withdrew her arm whenever he made an off-color joke. She told him that her mother had warned her about men like him. They passed the voyage playing out this imaginary flirtation and, little by little, they began to believe it. They fabricated memories, improvised fate. (Why did they do it? Why did they go to all that trouble? Couldn’t they have said they were already engaged? Or that their marriage had been arranged years earlier? Yes, of course they could have. But it wasn’t the other travelers they were trying to fool; it was themselves.)

Traveling made it easier. Sailing across the ocean among half a thousand perfect strangers conveyed an anonymity in which my grandparents could re-create themselves. The driving spirit on the *Giulia* was self-transformation. Staring out to sea, tobacco farmers imagined themselves as race car drivers, silk dyers as Wall Street tycoons, millinery girls as fan dancers in the *Ziegfeld Follies*. Gray ocean stretched in all directions. Europe and Asia Minor were dead behind them. Ahead lay America and new horizons.

On the eighth day at sea, Lefty Stephanides, grandly, on one knee, in full view of six hundred and sixty-three steerage passengers, proposed to Desdemona Aristos while she sat on a docking cleat. Young women held their breath. Married men nudged bachelors: “Pay attention and you’ll learn something.” My grandmother, displaying a theatrical flair akin to her hypochondria, registered complex emotions: surprise; initial delight; second thoughts; prudent near refusal; and then, to the applause already starting up, dizzy acceptance.

Jeffrey EUGENIDES, *Middlesex*, 2002.