

Loty Petrovits-Andrutsopulou

Black Coral in the Pocket

(Original title: *Yoúsouri stin Tsépi*)

Translated by Eva Kaliskami

Athens: Patakis, 1994 -
11th edition 2008. 168 pp.
ISBN: 960-360-204-3

*To Katerina, Tonia, Athena
and the boys who love sea*

1

“Yousouri”^{1.1} ... Penelope^{1.2} had heard that word somewhere before, it seemed familiar to her. However, it was impossible to remember what its meaning was. It must have been something aromatic; otherwise, captain Diokles^{1.2} would not say “the sea is fragrant of yousouri today”... To ask him? No, she did not want to. She was ashamed to do so. A twelve-years-old girl, having finished the primary school this year, and not to know!

She sat up on the small cliff, balanced herself better using her hands, dipped one of her legs into the water and moved it to and fro awkwardly... The sea was shimmering like an azure, well-washed piece of glass. At the shallow waters, the pebbles, covering the seabed from the one to the other side of the endless coast, were discernible one by one. Deeper, the bright blue of the sea was suddenly growing darker. A blue shadow was swallowing the oblong, varicoloured sea carpet, a sign that the waters were abruptly getting deeper.

Plunging far to the deep waters, Penelope thought that her mind might clear up and remember what the meaning of this strange word was. But the water was cold. She could feel her leg freezing. Her father was right. “Do not plunge into the water very early in the morning! The

Corinthian Gulf^{1.3} is deep and it takes long to get warm. Even in July the waters are ice-cold before nine o'clock!" He reminded them of this once more on the phone yesterday. Actually, he had told them the same thing over ten times before the three of them set off –Mano, Phoebe^{1.4} and herself – to this heavenly place, at the North Peloponnese^{1.5}.

"What does yousouri mean?" she decided to ask, awkwardly looking at her toes that seemed bigger as dipped into the water.

Captain Diocles did not seem to be taken aback because of her ignorance. He continued scrubbing the gunnel of his craft –he was calling it "boat"– as it was half-towed out of the water, up to where the shingles were drying and their place was taken by the pebbles, small at first, bigger then.

"Yousouri is sea wood," he answered without looking at her. "Wood made of a sea tree. A tree that has such a name, yousouri, and grows at the bottom of the sea."

"At the bottom of the sea?" -Penelope was intrigued. "What kind of tree is this? An ordinary tree?"

"Hmm... not a so ordinary tree" –his face sobered up strangely. "Yousouri is not like the land-trees. It doesn't have leaves but only a trunk and branches. Moreover, that is alive!"

"Alive?"

Captain Diocles dipped the sponge into the water, wrung it out hard, dipped it again and wrung it out again...

"How can it be alive?" Penelope asked eagerly again.

Now he was involved in washing out the seat of the "boat". He seemed, as he was hesitant to speak.

"You know," he finally said, "it sleeps and wakes up like all the God's creatures. If you want to cut any of its branches, you must catch it napping. If it wakes up, it is dangerous to do so. That's why the sponge-fishers, when they find it, approach it little by little before it wakes up. Otherwise..."

"Otherwise, what?"

“Otherwise, it might grab them by its tentacles and pin them to the bottom of the sea forever.”

She looked at him amazed. A tree that sleeps and wakes up, a tree that grabs people by its tentacles? How can it be?

“And what are they doing with its branches? Why are they cutting them?”

“They sell it as precious wood. In the water, people say, it is luminous and is changing colours all the time. However, as soon as its branches come out in the air, they get darker and darker till they become inky-black, that’s why they called it also black coral. Then, the craftsmen take it and make chaplets, earrings, rings or carve pipes out of it... In the Holy Land^{1.6} in particular, they make crosses and talismans out of it. For yousouri is fragrant and...”

Being hesitant again, he wrung the sponge once more.

“And?”

“You know, they say that it is miraculous, that it can cure the ill and the pained.”

“Really?” she looked at him mistrustfully. “It really can?”

The captain gave up the cleaning and bent over the outboard motor, which was lifted up on the stern of the craft.

“They say so,” he said quietly.

Well, if he was not so suntanned and did not have a black moustache and beard, he would remind her of her grandfather even more, as he was before he fell ill; when he was walking her to and from school –the first and the second class– or they were cycling on Sundays up to the White Tower^{1.7} and Mano was shouting after him “oh father, such follies at your age, the whole Thessaloniki^{1.8} is gonna laugh at us!” However, the grandpa did not care. He was just laughing up his sleeve.

Now, the grandpa does not live any more and the bicycle, the follies, the fairy tales and the walks have all gone... Fortunately enough, captain Diocles had happened to be where they came on holiday and tells her stories from his journeys –fantastic sea adventures which are the same as fairy tales and make her laugh most of the times. Besides

that, they often go boating on his own “boat”, which speeds up like a sprint car!

“Will you take me with you where you’re going by your craft tomorrow?” she changed the subject to what bothered her far more than yousouri.

He looked at her seriously.

“Tomorrow? No way. If it is for another day, I can take you with pleasure wherever you wish.”

“But why? Why?” she jumped into the water and got close to him. “You’ve seen it yourself as well. I’ m neither scared nor seasick in the sea.”

“Of course I saw it myself! You, girl, should have been called Odysseus^{1.9} rather than Penelope! But, you can’t come where I’m going, it’s too far.”

“What far? Didn’t you say that you’re going to Rumeli?”^{1.10} Penelope pointed across the seashore.

She said “Rumeli” on purpose, in the hope of moving him. For this is how the captain called the land of Main Greece^{1.11} that was faintly seen towards the North. Like the grandpa called it.

“Rumeli can be seen, but it is not that close, my lady,” he remained unmoved.

“It is. Don’t you remember yesterday that the atmosphere was clear? Couldn’t we make out even the houses on the opposite seashore? Didn’t you show me the lighthouse that was winking near Era...ra...how did you call it?”

“Eratini.^{1.12}”

“So?”

“So what? We discussed that. It is not possible tomorrow.”

Penelope frowned. Not that she had any particular appetite for going across. She was disappointed though because she would stay without company the whole day. For the only one that somebody could not consider as being company was Phoebe. Phoebe did not want them either to race in swimming or to collect big, white pebbles and paint

them, she was bored to play football, she was bored to hire an aquatic bicycle –in a word, her sister was bored to death.

“I’m not a tomboy like you,” she was dropping hints to her from time to time.

And she was doing her hair in front of the mirror for long hours, she was trying clothes all the time, and she was always complaining “I don’t have anything to wear” although she had brought a big, overblown suitcase with her.

“What will you do with so many clothes, girl?” Mano was shouting. “It is just a village where we’re going, we’ll be on the beach the whole day...”

But Phoebe was harping on the same string. And now, she spends hours and hours every morning on deciding which of her three swimsuits to wear and what to put on the top of each one in order to walk for a hundred of meters –a hundred? No more than fifty– from their rooms to the sea. And when she finally arrives, around eleven, she lays a bath mat, lies in the sun, greases herself with a sun cream of a sweet coconut scent, which makes Penelope feel sick, and forgets to set her foot in the sea.

“Phoebe, this is enough, you’ll get burnt, come under the shade!” Mano stops reading from time to time and shouts from the sunshade.

Then, she snoops into the book she reads at that time –she has brought ten with her while her friend Zoe^{1.13}, who lives in the village upwards the shore, also gave her two more. It is because of that friend they came here this summer. She was the one who insisted on phoning and phoning again and saying “come” and “come”, “Trapeza^{1.14} is the most beautiful village of the Peloponnesus”. “Trapeza”, what a name! The captain would surely know why this place is called like that –she should ask him about this at some point. Mano does not, despite reading all those books ceaselessly.

At least, lately Mano is taking a few breathers from reading. She puts off her glasses –or better she pulls and lets them fall on the front, as she has them passed round her neck by a fine chain– and falls into

chats with the people sitting next to her. They set up their sunshades somewhere around as well, on the west edge of the seashore, in front of the long and narrow house with the many rooms that Mr. Panos rents for the summer period. And, of course, most of the time she chats with Zoe, who also started coming down for swimming every morning. And she says from time to time:

“I shouldn’t have let you rent rooms on the seashore, there was enough space to stay with me upwards.”

Upwards, that is in the village, would have been far better for sure. Not because of the “marvelous view” from up there, as Mano says, but because there is no doubt that Penelope would find local children to join their company. A week had passed since they came here, at the seaside, and it was only adults and babies she found to spend their summer in this place. Thank God she had found captain Diocles and his “boat”. It was only that he would leave both himself and his “boat”.

“Come on, don’t sulk!” the captain smiled at her. “It is only one day that I’ll be away. You’ll find me here again on Monday. Moreover – how can you know? – it’s Sunday tomorrow, you may have a good time.”

“What a nice Sunday!” she pulled a long face. “Not to have somebody to talk with.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll see what is gonna happen in a few days. When July comes quite well swarms of kids are all over the beach. And then –remember my words– you won’t say not even a single good morning to me.”

“No way! I don’t...”

An abrupt “splash” made her leave her phrase unfinished.

She looked round the sea surprised. A few meters away, a boy had plunged into the water in high speed.

2

“Ares^{2.1}, not so deep!” a woman’s voice was heard.

On the turnpike, which was extended from the one to the other edge of the seashore and separated it from the trees, the reeds and the offshore houses, Zoe’s small car had stopped –she was calling it “flivver”. A young woman, whom Penelope had never seen before, came out of the car holding bath towels and flippers. A girl of five years old showed up next to her and started running towards the sea. Zoe, stooping at the back of the car, was getting a colourful sunshade off it.

“New faces!” the captain said lowly. “Didn’t I tell you?”

Penelope curled her lips.

“Zoe isn’t a new face,” she murmured. “The lady who brought with her is too old and the girl is actually a baby.”

“The boy isn’t though!” he smiled.

By quick reaches, the boy who rippled the calm of the sea and was called Ares reached up to where the waters were becoming darker. He stood there, fixed the water mask better on his face, and then, he dived headlong and disappeared below the surface of the water.

“He also knows how to take headers!” the captain admired him.

“Big deal!” Penelope threw in a remark and looked away to the land.

Zoe carried the sunshade near the sea, nodded “good morning” from afar and then opened it, thrust it into the pebbles, fixed it well and laid two bath mats under it.

“Come on, Anna!” she called out to the woman who was still standing near the car. “Come and sit under the shade. I’m gonna call Theano^{2.2}.”

Theano was Mano - that was her real name. Mum and Theano had become Mano^{2.3} when Penelope spoke for the first time in her life. And since then, everybody was calling her like that –and Phoebe, and herself and dad sometimes.

But nobody was needed to call Theano-Mano. She was already coming out from the wrought iron gate, ready to swim, and, for the first time, without holding neither a book nor glasses hanging round her neck by the chain.

“But where is that child?” the captain muttered –so that Penelope could hardly hear him. “Diving is nice, but not like that!”

He had left the outboard motor where it was; he shaded his eyes and was looking around the sea. The boy did not show anywhere. Only two buoys were discernible inside, to the dark waters, and a small boat with a white sail even further.

“Penelope! Come here for a moment!” Mano’s voice was heard. “Good morning, captain Diocles! How is it going with the craft?”

The captain answered with a movement of his hand meaning both “ok” and “good morning” at the same time.

“Let’s go, the madams are waiting for you,” she said to Penelope in a low voice. “See you later, captain!”

Nobody would ever know how bored of all these “nice to meet you” Penelope always feels. Dragging her feet on the pebbles, she set off...

The truth is that she did not feel so bored this time. Anna, the kids’ mother, seemed to be an openhearted person like Zoe. It was only that she did not resemble her at all. She was chestnut-haired and not black-haired like Zoe. And she was shorter and much thinner as well. The little girl was called Elli^{2.4}. As it was said, they had rented the lower floor of the house where Zoe lived. Just for some weeks.

“Where is Phoebe? She’ll have a great time with Ares” - Zoe smiled confidently. “He finished the second class of the junior high school this year as well –isn’t it like this, Anna?”

Ares' mother did not respond. Now, really alarmed, she was looking at the sea, like the captain before.

"But, what happened to Ares?" she said as if she was asking herself.

Everybody turned round and looked for him –to the deep...to the shallows...up to the other edge of the shore... Nothing! The boy had disappeared.

Noise from a motor was heard. It was the captain's "boat". He had pushed it to the water without delay; he switched the outboard motor on and shouted to them making his hands a funnel:

"I'm gonna have a quick look towards the cliffs!"

The cliffs were springing up giant-like at the roots of the steep wooded hillside that was streaming the same as a green torrent from upwards, from the village, and stretching as far down as blocking the left edge of the shore, where the captain was anchoring his craft. Then, the big cliffs were becoming a crop of smaller ones, as if a giant had smashed them up with a huge hammer. They were scattered as far as the inside of the sea and were spread to the west. It was towards where the captain was usually heading for.

There was a sullen silence under the sunshade. Zoe started revolving the keys between her fingers nervously. Mano was standing perplexed. The little girl was trying to put on her flippers being silent. And her mother was anxiously looking at the craft that was leaving snow-white dead water behind it.

"Don't worry," Zoe finally spoke. "He surely went to the cliffs. All children are going there when they are wearing their water mask and want to browse the seabed."

"Good morning!" Phoebe's voice was heard sleepily behind them. Worrying was forgotten for a while, and Zoe was ready to start with the introductions again...

Penelope rushed into the sea. She was not in the mood of listening to the same things again.

“Which class do you attend at school?” the kid^{2.5} came close to her quickly, puddling with her flippers.

“I just finished the primary school,” she mumbled. “I’m attending the Junior high School this year.”

“I’m in the kindergarten, and I’ve got another brother except Ares, and my other brother is far older, he’s attending the senior high school, you’ll meet him, he’ll come tonight with my father, because he’s attending tutorials,” she said without a break. “And when my father finds out that Ares went so far, he’ll be angry and shout at him.”

Let find him first Penelope thought and felt terrified with her thought itself. Is it possible? Is it really possible that something has happened to him? She did not know that boy at all, she hardly had the time to see him, but what crossed her mind caught her breath.

She put out to the deep, to be able to see beyond the cliffs, on the chance captain Diocles was coming back. Nothing! She felt freezing, the water was really cold. She swam even further. This was the first time she was frightened by the dark colour of the waters there. She took a breath... The sea was sending off a smell of freshness and saltiness and a subtle flavour that reminded you of wood... Imagine if there was any yousouri down, at the bottom. How can you know though? It was so deep there that you could not distinguish anything.

She looked towards the land to encourage herself, to forget the dark seabed and the bad thoughts. The village upwards seemed as if it was built on a stone balcony. And behind it a green-clad mountain was rising up, the same as a hairy wild beast that quieted down and fell asleep. She turned and looked at the cliffs. No, it cannot happen! In such peacefulness, so much light, so much beauty, nothing bad can ever happen, just like this, all of a sudden.

And then, the bow of the “boat” seemed to show up from afar. Penelope felt a leap, her heart jumped strangely. She started swimming towards there as quicker as possible. However, she could not distinguish whether there was one or two in...