

A SUNDAY DRIVE ON THE QUAI

'Mama! Mama! A mouse!'

'A mouse! Where?'

'Look! Over there!'

'Eek! She's right! A mouse! Marghi! Pericles! Constantia! Marghiiii!'

But Mama couldn't wait for the servants to come to her aid. She pulled up her long skirts as high as she could and fled the room screaming, certain that the mouse's only purpose in life was to slink inside those particular skirts that Sunday morning. For a moment, the twins looked at each other. They had been left standing in the large tub, all lathered up and soapy.

'Do you think...?' Maritsa began in a scared voice.

Katinaki thought for a moment.

'No. A mouse wouldn't like the water,' she decided.

'No it wouldn't' Maritsa agreed, relieved.

Now that they were assuredly out of danger, the twins began to splash about in the soapsuds, throwing water at each other, and shouting out like Mama, just for a lark:

'Marghi! Marghiiii!'

They felt no remorse whatsoever for being the cause of all that pandemonium.

It all started in the morning, when Dad left for the shop. It was a Sunday, and you could not make an employee work on a Sunday, but you could not stop the shopkeeper from opening his business either. Konstantia, the cook, was in her

kitchen. Marghi was whispering together with Pericles at some corner. And Mama had nipped out somewhere. This was the twins' opportunity to sneak inside Mama's room and 'play ladies.'

Mama's room was full of treasures for ladies; so many that you wouldn't know where to begin. Oh, the high-heeled shoes! The hats with long feathers! The fox fur with beads for eyes! The twins did not care for the gowns and overcoats - they were too long for them, but oh, for the lace-edged petticoats! Not to mention the treasures on the washstand and on Mama's dressing table. The perfume bottles! The face powders! The rouge pots! The kohl for the eyes!

Maritsa loved smelling nice. Grabbing the large bottle of French cologne that smelled of violets, which Mama wore to soirées, she poured some over herself and some over her sister. Deciding that this wasn't fragrant enough for them, she poured the rest of the contents of the bottle onto their clothes. Soon the whole house smelled like church on the day of the Epitaphios¹. The heady perfume was enough to make one swoon.

When Mama returned home, she was furious. It was impossible to hide the smell from her. She meant to give the twins a good thrashing but there was no time for that, and neither was there time to take them to the bathhouse: Nene had sent a message that she was coming round to take the twins out for a drive on the Quai. Mama decided she would wash the girls herself in the large tub in the laundry room. Mama would get those strange ideas into her head once in a while. She had never washed the girls herself before. She should have told Marghi to do it from the start, and Marghi would have told her that Sunday, being a good day for servants and little girls to go out, was also a suitable day for a mouse outing.

When Constantia the cook entered the laundry room, the twins had been tired of screaming and splashing about. They were now sitting tamely inside the cooling water, towing the scrubbing brush like a little boat between them.

¹ Epitaphios: in the Orthodox church the Epitaphios is the bier of Christ on Good Friday, decorated with flowers.

'Where did you see that mouse and drove your Mama out of her wits?' Constantia said, angry that they had caused distress to Mama, who was her favourite.

'Well, where is that mouse then?' asked Marghi, following after Constantia.

'I saw it! I did!' Katinaki said. 'It was on the ironing counter.'

Marghi looked everywhere. She lifted the box irons and the slugs, she looked inside the washing basket, she even pulled out all the wash tubs. Nothing. The poor mouse, terrified by all the brouhaha, had vanished.

'Tell Pericles to set the mousetrap tonight,' Katinaki offered helpfully.

'Marghi, dry those girls off, they'll catch their death from the cold!' Mama called out from the dining room.

Marghi, finally resigning herself to the fact that she wouldn't ever find that mouse, sent Konstantia for fresh hot water.

'Sit still while I'm trying to rinse and dry you off, you crazy girls you!' she said, smacking their bottoms softly. The twins were Marghi's favourites.

Presently the girls were led into the dining room, all dressed up in their sailor suits and nicely combed, and there was no hint from their morning shenanigans, except for the overpowering fragrance of perfume all over the house and all the way down the street.

Mama was not angry anymore, but she swore that she would never set foot into the laundry room again unless that mouse was caught. She kissed the girls and made them sit quietly on the sofa until Nene arrived. She took a step back and looked at them with pride:

'You look so lovely, my turtledoves!'

The twins were identical like two drops of water. It would be impossible to tell them apart save from the eyes: Katinaki had the softest, warmest brown eyes in all Smyrna, large like a doe's, crying or laughing eyes, according to her moods.

When the girls were born, Nene said nothing about Katinaki. But when she took a good look at Maritsa, who had come into the world just after her and was smaller, Nene could not restrain herself any longer:

'What God was thinking taking away that lovely girl and not this – this midget, I cannot imagine!' she cried. The lovely girl she meant was a five-year-old sister who had died of the measles before the girls were born. And without a God-forgive-me-for-saying-that or any other apology, Nene had picked up her gold-rimmed eyeglasses and her purse and left, in a huff with God, Who had arranged things without consulting her.

That was Nene. Her name was Xanthippe, and she was very much like her ancient namesake, the shrewish wife of Socrates. She would not only tyrannise her husband, but also her own children, and her daughters- and sons-in-law. Especially the sons-in-law!

She never knew how or where her youngest daughter met Manolis, but when she found out about them, the windowpanes in the Great House rattled!

'My daughter to marry that - that - beggar!'

For Nene, anyone who did not belong to Grandpapa's club or was not a regular at her soirées and balls at the Great House was a beggar.

'But he comes from a good family,' Grandpapa said. 'His father of blessed memory was the most honest merchant in the Bezesteni². And he owns his shop, you now. His is a good business, too, and not encumbered with a partner, even though he is so young. He has eight girls sewing shirts, from the best European materials, mind, and they can hardly keep up with the orders. He seems to be a nice young man, too, soft-spoken, educated, and respectful like a girl. I spoke with him. I've given this affair much thought, Xanthippe. Let her have him, since she loves him.'

'Never!'

² Bezesteni: the covered market in Ottoman Turkish cities.

Poor Grandpapa! Nene made his life a misery about it, until, disgusted, he said:

'Oh, well, have it your own way then. Anything to stop your fussing!'

Nene tried to terrorise Mama into submission, as she was wont to do, but without any result. She then tried to sweeten her up. Still no results.

In the end, Nene began to worry. *Suppose she decides to elope and make a laughingstock of us!* she thought, and send the girl to Volos, Greece, to her other daughter, already married there, for a change of air. Her secret hope was that the girl would forget him there.

But Mama could be as obstinate as Nene. Letters kept flying secretly from Smyrna to Volos and back again. In the end, other family members, Grandpapa's brother, and even the bishop himself had to intervene on Manolis's behalf.

'For shame, Xanthippe! The man is not a gambler. He's not a womanizer. He's an honest, decent man. It's a sin to keep them apart like this.'

What could Nene do?

'Oh, have him then,' she conceded. 'But don't you dare come back to me to complain later!'

So Mama and Papa got married, and Mama never went back to Nene to complain, and neither did Nene change her haughty demeanour. Only once did the girls see her tearful and defeated. That was when Uncle Amphilos fell ill.

Uncle Amphilos lived with them, and what laughs, what larks they had at first!

'Come, Uncle, do tell us *that story!*' the girls would beg him, and amid many whispers and giggles – for they should not be overheard – he would tell the girls *that story*, the funniest story they shared with him, the story of the 'family shame.'

It was a very funny story indeed, and neither nieces nor uncle could understand why the rest of the family would only speak of it in obviously flustered whispers, accompanied by 'tsk... tsk...' sounds. Needless to say it was totally forbidden for the children to know anything about it.

'Well, dear girls, you see, I meant to be a doctor, honest, and that's why I went to Paris. But Paris! Ah, Paris! Evenings, charmed evenings, swimming in the river mist! ... And the girls, so beautiful, with laughing eyes just like yours! Once I saw a girl whose eyes were exactly like yours, Katinaki. On nights like those it would be a sin to be shut up inside one's room and study. Imagine, being imprisoned in a room, reading, and the girls outside laughing and shouting "Amphiloss! Amphiloss!" in their lovely French accents! So I think to myself, to the deuce with books and with medicine! Smyrna is full of doctors and pharmacists. Let's have one less!'

At that point Uncle Amphilos's narrative became a little tangled. He never made it clear what happened and after all that fun and the girls and the music he ended up penniless in Marseilles and finally a stowaway on a boat carrying a cargo of coal. He arrived at Smyrna dirty, wretched, a disgrace. And this is where *that story* begins.

The customs officers got aboard the boat. Amphilos told them who he was, but they would not believe him, he was completely unrecognizable. So Uncle Amphilos takes down his trousers and shows them his pants, marked with the family crest! The chief customs officer almost fainted. Nene fainted, too, when she was told, and Grandpapa almost had a stroke. They sent Papa to spirit Amphilos away in a hired coach and bring him home, but not before dispensing a few golden coins around to stop people from talking. Uncle Amphilos remained unperturbed all through that kerfuffle.

"Well, what could I do since they wouldn't believe me?" Uncle said and burst out laughing.

The girls adored Uncle Amphilos. They had such a great time with him! But then he fell ill, and there was no more laughter or fun. Mama would not let them go near him or even enter his room. Once they sneaked in there secretly, because they had missed *that story* terribly, but he sent them away so brusquely that they both sat in a corner and burst into tears.

Then they heard Mama order Marghi to burn the big carpet in the drawing room as well as the tapestry on the wall, the one with the pink flowers and the birds. Marghi protested.

'Please, Ma'am, it would be such a shame to burn them. It's only two drops. I can give them a good cleaning, and throw some white spirit on top. It'd be a shame to burn them for just two little-'

'No! Do as I tell you and burn them. I've got small children, don't you understand?'

Marghi did not seem to understand, but the girls understood very clearly: *that story* about the 'family shame' was over, and another, sad story had begun, 'poor Uncle Amphilos'. And then the story changed to 'Uncle Amphilos is gone' and became a long-forgotten story, like a scar from an old wound which does not hurt any more but is only there as a reminder that you were wounded once...

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The best thing about the Sunday drive on the Quai with Nene was the coach and Kyr-Panayotis, the coachman. The coach had green velvet seats with yellow tassels, and Kyr-Panayotis had thick pink cheeks and a large grey moustache which was constantly twitching; he reminded them of Cinderella's Cat transformed into a coachman by the Fairy Godmother to take Cinderella to the Prince's Ball.

Kyr-Panayotis called them his beauties; he called his horse his beauty too. Thankfully there were two of them and the horse only one; otherwise they wouldn't be able to tell whether he was speaking to them or to his horse.

'Welcome aboard, my beauties!' he said as soon as he saw them. Then with his enormous hands he lifted them up and placed them on the seat just behind his back. Nene was seated in the seat opposite them. She scrutinized them carefully, top to toe, with her gold-rimmed eyeglasses, and when she had decided they were fit to be seen, she flicked her parasol open.

"Let's go, Kyr-Panayoti!"

The twins sat side by side, behaving as well brought up girls like themselves were expected to behave. They had no choice but to entertain themselves silently, by gazing at the crowd on the street, whizzing by in the opposite direction, or by making up stories in their heads about Kyr-Panayotis the Cat, which they would tell one another at bedtime.

This way the coach would go all the way up and down the Quai. Then they would stop at Café Poseidon, at the end of the promenade, where they would drink ginger-ale and Nene would meet her friends. Those ladies would saunter up to their table and exclaim:

"Oooh, look at those girls, how they've grown! May you have joy in them, Xanthippe dear! My, my, how pretty they've become! They look like living dolls!"

Some of Nene's friends had their own 'living dolls' along with them. Chryssa, Eurydice, Violetta. But the twins' favourite was Leuteritsa, possibly because her grandmother was Nene's best friend, or, more likely, because Leuteritsa had secretly told them once that she believed their coachman was the spitting image of Cinderella's Cat. So she had noticed too!

The ladies would take leave of each other endlessly:

“We’re meeting tonight at Eleni’s soirée. Don’t you dare tell me you are not coming! Oh, she’ll be devastated if you don’t!

And on and on they went until the girls, utterly bored by now, were lifted by Kyr-Panayotis on the reverse-looking seat; and long before the night-watchman was out to light the gas-lamps, they had arrived home.

But the promenade with Papa was a different story altogether. First of all, they never got a coach – theirs was rented by the month. Papa would take them by the hand, one on the right, one on the left, and there was no toyshop or pastry cooks’ they would pass without stopping.

They would mingle with the jolly crowds promenading on the Quai, and although they never stopped chattering – a big no-no for well brought up little girls – Papa never noticed. And if he did, he thought it was a good joke! Just like that one Sunday when he had taken Maritsa to the shop with him. He sat her upon the counter with her dollies, and she had kept on chattering to them like a bird all morning, when the money-changer next door popped round and said with a laugh:

“My dear Manolis, when your daughter is a grown woman, she won’t have anything left to say – I think she’s spoken herself dry this morning!”

Papa laughed, too, and looked proud of his chatterbox daughter. Even Mama laughed when Papa told her the story that night.

Ah, a promenade with Papa was such a treat! And when the night-watchman lit up the gas-lamps on the street, only then would they return home, laden with sweets and flowers, and so filled with all things good and tasty that all they wanted was to kiss Mama good-night hastily and slip into bed. If they had not been so tired, they would have had a million stories to tell her!

But when Nene took them to the Quai, nothing noteworthy ever happened. Still, the twins would remember so many details from that particular Sunday, the day that had begun with the mouse. They would remember that they wore their sailor suits, and that Marghi had tied a white ribbon and bow atop their curly heads.

They would even remember the Armenian lady selling violets at the dursekaki³ just before taking the turn for the Quai, and the horse-drawn tram, and the tram driver, a big man with a pitch-black moustache, and a lady dragging along a fluffy white dog, and the sun glinting on Nene's gold-rimmed glasses...

They would remember everything, because the following morning everything was about to change. Slowly at first, then faster, until nothing would ever be the same again ...

³ Dursekaki; lane, narrow street.