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Crete, 1966: a memoir

In a photo I remember, Maria looks straight at the camera. A smile flutters at the corners of her mouth, as if she is hesitant to show her ferocious pride, as if she dares not enjoy this moment, surrounded by her children, lest some jealous god yank it away. She rests her hands on the shoulders of Ireni, who barely comes up to her waist. Somber Ireni, whose eyes are large and unsmiling. Smaragdi and Katina stand at their mother's right, their heads reaching just at and just below her shoulders; Katina, distracted by something, looks off to the side. Yannis, at the left, is barely as tall as Smaragdi, though he is older than his sisters. He stands a little apart from the others, as if, as the only male, he feels a need to dissociate himself from the women.

There is something hopeful in their expressions, in the way they are poised there, their faces curious, expectant, as if they are used to standing on the sidelines watching, waiting for things to happen.

Behind them, the stuccoed wall is yellowish-brown and peeling. It's the wall of my house, the one I occupied for four months, 25 years ago. Theirs, very much like mine, stands directly across the street.

Maria's husband Giorgos is missing from this family portrait, but that is usual. Every morning he left his house at dawn, returned for the noon meal and a few hours rest, then left again. He spent his evenings in one of several tavernas along the waterfront. I seldom saw him at home, though I waved to him whenever I saw him along the old harbor, bringing in his catch. And he would wave back, in front of the other

fishermen, giving a surprised but pleased smile to this young foreign woman. A friend of his wife's.

The *yaya* too, is absent. Maria's mother, all in black, sat at her chair by the front window watching the goings-on. Like all *yayas*, she knew how to stay in the background, to help when there was work to be done, but otherwise, to remain invisible. I feel her hovering behind the photo, silently moving her toothless mouth.

They are all frozen in that moment—yet as I look at the picture, time softens, moves. Maria stands below my window, yelling "See-moan-ay! See-moan-ay!" It is 10:15 a.m., far too late for decent people still to be sleeping, and anyway, she has something to tell me, or she is lonesome and wants some company, or it is the day for making some Greek delicacy, and I must come and watch so I can learn how.



Harbour in Chania, Crete, around 1970.

I am 21. And I am in Chania, on the island of Crete, searching for something. Some truth that keeps eluding me. Some peace I long for. I am fleeing an old grief, trying to lose myself, find myself.

I am not completely alone; I am part of a small group of temporary expatriates—Canadians, Americans, Brits. We all live in the old quarter, in ancient three-storey houses built by the Venetians in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. We live there, instead of in the newer parts of the city where there are flush toilets and running water, because the streets in the old quarter are narrow and picturesque, because the rent is cheap, and because none of us cares about flush toilets and running water. We are all there for our own reasons—we do not ask each other such questions—and together we form a community of sorts. We go to the tavernas at night, dance with the sailors, drink too much, help each other find the way home.

Much of my day life, however, is with Maria. She has "claimed" me. When we walk through the neighborhood she holds my arm and tells the people we meet: "*Apo tin Ameriki.*" I correct her gently: from Canada. She shrugs and laughs. Wherever I am from, it does not matter. She was the first to have me in her house, so now I am known as "Maria's friend."

Come to my house for some *raki*, a woman down the street calls out to me. No, Maria says to her fiercely, she cannot. She is with me. Later, Maria tells me: "That woman is not a good woman." But Athena, as she is called, will not give up so easily. When she sees me coming down the street without Maria, she rushes out to speak. She is thirtyish, a few years younger than Maria, but unmarried. She lives with her sister, also unmarried, and with her mother; occasionally, she goes out with men from the nearby NATO base, and this makes her vaguely disreputable. I am curious about Athena, this loud, persistent woman who dyes her hair red, who hovers on the edge of respectability, but I do not wish to offend Maria, so I decline her invitations.

In the evenings, when I slip out to dance with the sailors on the waterfront, to drink, to behave in a way that is totally unacceptable for Greek women, I wonder what Maria thinks, at home, alone with her children. The rules are different for me; this is part of my appeal. Come with us, I say to her one Saturday evening when the winds are warm and we can smell spring coming. Giorgos never stays home—why should

you? She clicks her tongue and throws her head back. I have proposed something preposterous, impossible. I might as well have proposed that we fly to the moon. She laughs, chides me for being so silly, but she puts on lipstick, and I know she is tempted.

At first I thought I was merely her trophy—something to show off in this city of few westerners. But Maria remained my friend long after it was expedient or prudent.

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"See-moan-ay! See-moan-ay!" she yells through the front window. It is unshuttered and open because it is a lovely warm day, even in mid-January. Behind her stands Yannis, ready to supply the appropriate English if I do not understand what his mother tells me. He is 11, small and sturdy, with a curious, intelligent face. He is learning English in school, and eager to try out his new words. When his friends invite him to play kickball down the street, he demurs, telling them he can't right now, that his mother needs his help. I understand enough Greek to catch this, and to know that we could manage without him. He looks at me shyly; I am not like Greek young women; I tease him, and he hides his smiles.

Maria's friend Varvara has invited us for coffee. I must come now. Varvara is one of the band of gypsies who winter over every year in Chania. I know this because I have seen her pull her small cart laden with colorful woven blankets and rugs through the narrow streets of the old quarter. She is short and compact like Maria, with dark fierce eyes like hers. But Varvara has a shrewdness about her. I do not trust her. A few weeks ago, I bought a blanket from her; later, I discovered I had paid far too much.

I am surprised to learn that Varvara is Maria's "friend," as the gypsies are not well-liked here. Faces tighten, mouths curl as the gypsies pass. But I do not question this odd alliance. I, too, am an outsider, and I, too, am Maria's friend.

The gypsies are encamped behind the old city wall, a few minutes walk from our street. Yannis may not come, it is only for the women, Maria tells him. Yannis turns away in disappointment. The *yaya's* face appears in Maria's front window. She will watch the children.

It is a beautiful afternoon and as we walk, I tell Maria about the blanket. She throws her head back and laughs. In Greece, anything is fair in business.

The path to the encampment takes us along the top of the old wall, now crowded with tiny, whitewashed shacks. In the 500 years since the wall was built, the inner face has totally disappeared; the town has sloped up to meet it. Only when you stand at the edge and look down, do you realize that you are on a wall, and how high you are. Maria and I stand there for a moment, looking down. In the clearing below, about two dozen tents form a tiny village, complete with rickety-looking wooden wagons, a motley group of horses and donkeys, a few old cars. A trash fire burns on one side, upwind from the tents. A dog barks. It is eerie to see this scene, like something out of time, something from the middle ages. I want to express this observation to Maria, but it is too complicated for my simple Greek vocabulary, so I smile and squeeze her arm, and we follow the path down.

As we approach the camp, we become the focus of attention. I am suddenly aware of my long yellow hair hanging loosely to my waist, my blue eyes. The dark eyes of the men follow me, openly, aggressively. They resemble Greek men in their darkness, in their luxurious mustaches, but their faces are narrower, their cheekbones more pronounced. I hold Maria's arm more tightly. One of them asks us what we want there. Maria tells him in a loud voice that we are looking for Varvara's tent. He points the way. I realize, then, with a sudden twinge of fear, that Maria has never been here before. Is this all some elaborate trap? Has Varvara tricked Maria into bringing me here so that I can be stolen, then sold as a white slave? The youth hostels in Europe were full of such stories.

A man approaches us with a proprietary air. He jerks his head to the right, indicating that we follow him. He spreads his arms out and around us, as if to shield us from the curious eyes of the others. I feel Maria relax a little. Varvara's husband, she tells me.

Their canvas tent, like all the others, is a greyish, stained tan. Through the partly open front flap we see Varvara, who rises to greet us. We take off our shoes before we enter, leaving them with the others in a neat row outside. The inside is both roomy and cosy. Layers of blankets and rugs in patterns of bright blue, green and red pad the floor. Varvara and her

husband exchange a few words in their own language; the husband darts a last look at me, then leaves, pulling the door flap down behind him.

Varvara invites us to sit down on the carpets and we do, forming a circle around a square slab that holds a small stove and a few cooking utensils. I am not sure what to expect from all this, but I suddenly realize that being invited here is a great honor. Maria seems to understand this too, and nods at me solemnly. Varvara lights the stove, a tiny one-burner, fuelled by gas. She takes a handful of coffee beans from a burlap bag, puts them in a flat, long-handled copper pan, and shakes them over the fire for a few minutes. The tent fills with a wonderful burnt-brown smell. While the beans cool, she opens a long brass cylinder and begins to assemble what I see now is a coffee grinder. It's a beautiful thing, obviously very old, the elaborate engraving well worn. I wonder for a moment, how many generations of gypsy women have owned this grinder, how many continents it has travelled.

As Varvara grinds the beans, the tent smells more and more aromatic. I wave my hand in front of my nose and say "*orea*," beautiful, beautiful. Varvara nods at me gravely, but says nothing. She places a few spoonfuls of the powdered coffee with water into a small brass pot, then adds a few large spoonfuls of sugar. When the coffee froths up, she fills three small white cups, paper thin, and hands one each to Maria and me.

Now Varvara smiles. Welcome my friends, she says. We sip our coffee slowly. Varvara inquires about Maria's family; Maria inquires back. She asks me about my health; I ask back. We are formal, ceremonial. Here, in her own element, Varvara is beautiful. She has loosened her hair and it hangs over her back in a thick mantle of glossy black. She looks softer than before, yet at the same time more powerful. I let the strong, sweet liquid linger on my tongue. Though I have had Greek coffee before, this is the best I have ever tasted. I am in a gypsy camp, I say to myself. A gypsy has called me "friend." I forgive Varvara for the blanket.

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You come down through one of the narrow, twisting streets, barely wide enough for a small car, and you come upon it: the old harbor, opening before you like a flower.

A wide paved area separates the buildings from the water, very much like an Italian piazza, which is appropriate, given that this part of the city was built by the Venetians. At the edge of the piazza, the water is deep, and small fishing boats pull right up to the edge to unload their catches. Mid morning they bring in the octopus. Glossy and silvery grey, raw octopus look like the internal organs of extraterrestrials. There is something vaguely obscene about those thick, slimy appendages; cooked up, however, they are an amazing delicacy. The fishermen throw the octopus by the handfuls onto the pavement, then pick them up and throw them down again, beating them like this to release the dark blue inky substance, and to tenderize them. The octopus are then hung on makeshift racks and lines to dry, and the fishermen wash down the pavement with buckets of sea water. Sometimes it's sea urchins they bring in, one or two buckets of them, their greenish grey shells bristling with needle-sharp spines. Inside, flesh the color of smoked salmon. I have never tried them—they are food for the wealthy—though I am told they are wonderful. Mostly though, the boats are full of fish and octopus; and all morning the air is briny and aromatic. By noon, all trace of the fishermen is gone.

Everything around the old harbor is a bit shabby. The facades of some of the buildings have begun to crumble. Old paint peels from walls and woodwork like outgrown skin. Some of the buildings are whitewashed, but most are not, unlike the picture postcards one sees of sparkling white Greek villages. Here the buildings are mostly a drab gold—the color of limestone—or light ochre, or the greyish tan of unpainted cement.

Still, there is something enormously pleasing about it all. The crowded buildings face the water like flowers facing the sun. Roofs of red tile and wide doors painted a glossy blue flash patches of color. Old oil cans grow huge red geraniums. The rounded domes of an ancient mosque, a legacy of the Turkish occupation, shimmer in the sun like white hills. A bright green fishing boat moors on the water. Everything seems harmonious, comforting. On fine days, the restaurants spill out into the plaza. Tables and chairs appear on the pavement, inviting. On weekends, the aroma of roasting meat fills the air.

In the late afternoon, on my way home from the Instituto, I often stop at one of the sweet shops for a *galato-buriko*, or a bowl of rice custard, or a *baklava*, and look out at the harbor water. Sometimes blue,

sometimes black, the water ripples lightly or bristles with foam, depending on its mood. Though the ancient sea wall contains it—a small opening permits the comings and goings of small boats—the harbor water is never totally placid, more like some wild thing, barely domesticated. And it seems emblematic somehow, of all of Crete: hungers surge up, then subside, waiting for their own good time. A thin layer of order overlays rolling chaos, the beautiful and ugly co-exist—Apollo and Dionysus held in delicate balance.

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At the Instituto Americaniko-Helleniki I teach three classes: a group of 12- and 13-year-old boys, a co-ed class of about a dozen high school seniors preparing to take the Cambridge proficiency exams, and a group of seven or eight local merchants.

While the other shopkeepers take their meals at home, sleep with their wives, or do whatever they all do between 1:00 and 4:00 when the shops are closed, these men spend an hour, three afternoons a week, practising their English with me. They range in age from their late 20s to late 40s, and their manner toward me is formal. They call me "Miss," and hold doors open for me, bowing slightly, as if I were a visiting dignitary. I acknowledge their deference with a smile, wondering what their wives would think—their husbands treating a woman this way, while *they* are expected to obey and please.

We spend about half of our hour in general conversation; I gently correct their grammar and pronunciation, and supply words when I can guess the intent. We converse mostly about "Amerika"; they are passionately interested in "Amerika." They have heard there is a sexual revolution going on there, and they are eager to learn how it works. "In America, is it true that a girl can go alone at night with a boy who is not her brother, and her parents do not know his parents?" I am careful with my reply, aware of my position, a single woman about whom there is already too much speculation. And in Chania, the old codes still prevail: a boy who dishonors someone's sister is likely to feel a knife in his back. "It's very different there," I tell them. "Being alone together does not necessarily mean that something shameful will happen." They wrinkle their faces in puzzlement. They would never believe that a man sleeping

alone on the third floor of a house would not sometimes wander at night to the bed of a woman, sleeping alone on the second. They would never believe that a woman who dances the *hasapico* with sailors and sometimes sits on their laps, and drinks with them, and sometimes walks home alone with one and lets him kiss her, does not allow him other things as well. But all that is part of my other life, my life in the old quarter. These men never go to the old quarter.

These men live in the better part of the city, in houses with water heaters, small refrigerators, stoves. Their wives do not carry the Sunday roast to the bakery down the street to be cooked in the public oven for a few *drachma* like Maria does. Their wives wear wool and rayon instead of cotton, their coats have fur collars. And at night, when the tavernas crackle with music and the scent of grilled *brisoles* wafts through the air—when *retsina*, *metaxa*, and *ouzo* flow, when feet fly in dance, plates crash on the floor amid cries of "oopa!"—these men are home with their wives and children.

I know this because I regularly visit such a home. On Saturday mornings I privately tutor the younger sister of one my 13-year-old boys. There are no English classes for 10-year-old girls, and to send her with the boys would not be proper. The father is not among my businessmen, but he could be; he and they are the same. My pupil's house is relatively new. The surfaces are smooth, the corners of the rooms sharp and well-defined, unlike the rooms of the houses in the old quarter. There are plenty of windows, covered with lace curtains and hung with heavy drapes of velvet and brocade. The chairs and sofas are heavy and ornate. Solid looking. In this part of town, you never see bedding flung out over the balcony to air. The mother is attractive in a plump, soft sort of way. She smiles sweetly and greets me graciously in spite of the cheap cotton skirts and shabby tops I wear. She, too, calls me "Miss." I call her "Kyria"—Mrs. Like Maria, she speaks no English and relies on her son to translate. Unlike Maria, she shows no curiosity toward me. Each time I come, she offers me tea in a flowered china cup, then leaves the money for each lesson discreetly on the sideboard, near my coat.

One Friday, the boy says to me after class: "My mother, she say no come tomorrow. Come Sunday, for to go on picnic. Three o'clock. We go to country. You come?"

When I arrive, slightly before three, they are all waiting. The children are happy to see me and the mother looks both pleased and relieved, as if she had feared that I wouldn't show. The *kyrios*, her husband, acknowledges me with a slight nod. This is only the second time I have seen him. On the day of my first lesson with his daughter, he nodded at me on his way out. I suspect he had stayed behind to catch a glimpse of me, to make sure I was "safe," and to give his approval. A *yaya* appears from one of the back rooms. I have not seen her before and wonder whose widowed mother she is—his or hers. It's impossible to tell. She is dressed all in black with a black wool kerchief pulled over her head like the *yayas* in the old quarter. She is the one link between those two worlds. She is not introduced.

A big black Mercedes waits out front, theirs. The *yaya* sits in the front with the man and woman, near the door. I sit in the back between the two children. The girl, who is still very much a beginner in English, holds my hand and looks at me adoringly. The boy keeps smiling, as if he can't believe I am really there, his English teacher, on an outing with his family. The adults sit stiffly, silently, in the front. I wonder briefly whose idea it was to invite me. The children's? The mother's?

Kyria says something in Greek to the boy, gesticulating with her head that he should tell me. "My mother she say to tell you that the orchards will be beautiful today." I smile at her: "I'm looking forward to seeing them. I am very happy that you invited me to come." She nods as I speak. She understands more English than she lets on. She translates my words to her husband and returns her eyes to the road. He glances at me through the rearview mirror. He seems aware of me, but not aware; I am part of the women's world with which he need not concern himself.

His wife, however, pulses with awareness. Throughout the ride I feel her controlled attention. Though she speaks mostly to her husband or looks out at the countryside, she is acutely aware of what is going on in the back seat. If we all do not have a wonderful time, she will blame herself. This is my first encounter with upper middle-class Greek life, and I am carefully taking it all in, noting how different this woman is from Maria, how different they all are from the villagers I have met, and from the people in the old quarter. Maria and I would be singing by now. Laughing out loud. Exclaiming over the beauty of the hills. She would be teaching me the Greek names of things.

The girl beside me squeezes my hand. "Is good day, yes?"

There is a tacit understanding that I speak only English, so that makes it difficult to communicate with the adults. The school is total immersion, and we teachers are discouraged from admitting to any knowledge of Greek. I suspect I have been invited along to give the children a chance to practice their English. Why else? Kyrios and Kyria do not ask me about life in "Amerika," or my life here or what I think about things. And yet I feel they are studying me, discreetly.

The country house is utterly charming—whitewashed stucco and surrounded by a low stone wall. It is grander than any of the houses I saw in my wanderings around the island, though it is still relatively simple. Kyria points to the small outhouse, apologizing profusely for the lack of an indoor toilet. This strikes me as very funny, given my own living conditions, but I hold my smile. Wide windows look out over row upon row of orange trees.

Huge baskets are unloaded from the trunk of the Mercedes and there is a flutter of activity. The women will not let me help and shoo me out of the kitchen. The children hover around me like bees.

"My father say to come and see the orchard," the boy says.

Kyrios stands at the door fingering his worry beads. The children and I follow him out. The day is glorious, the air dazzling in its sweetness, and I want to jump into the air and shout with joy. But I control myself, as seems to be required, and smile demurely. Two donkeys, tied to a stake by a shed stare at us with comic faces. I have a particular fondness for donkeys, and rush over to stroke their necks and ears. Kyrios gestures for me to get on one of them. It's the first time he has addressed me directly. The children shriek with glee when I swing my leg up over the donkey's back. They quickly climb on to the other one.

Their father takes the reins of my donkey and leads us down the rows of the orange grove. The trees are much smaller than I ever imagined they could be, with enormous bright fruit hanging heavily from the branches. Kyrios pulls down an orange the size of a cannonball and slices it open with a knife he pulls from his waist. Then he presents it to me with a little bow. I am reminded again of how everything in Greece seems fuller, riper, bursting with life force. Even the oranges are unrestrained, glorious in their hugeness, their sweetness, their intense color. By now I have lost all reserve and exclaim aloud at the beauty of

everything. "It's all so lovely! Lovely!" I tell them. "I feel like a queen!" The children find everything I say and do amusing, and laugh and laugh.

When we get back to the house we find a beautiful meal laid out on a long rectangular table in a shaded area outside—feta cheese, black olives, bread, *dolmathes*, *taramasalata*, two kinds of beans, several plates of things I don't recognize, and a huge bottle of *retsina*. We are all more relaxed now, more comfortable with each other. Even the *yaya* nods and smiles. The sun beats down, waves of fragrance waft in from the orange grove. After a few glasses of *retsina*, Kyrios raises his glass and sings a few lines of a song: "*Ego tha kopso to krassi, Ya sena agapi mou chrisi. . .*" His wife throws him a disapproving glance and mutters something, but too late. I clap my hands, delighted. A drinking song! This is the first sign of passion I've seen in these upper middle-class Greeks.

I insist on learning the song, and sing it over and over, a bit tipsy myself by this time. My pupils and their father sing it with me. Kyria sings a few lines herself, though she looks uncomfortable, as if she is doing something vaguely improper.

It's a wonderful afternoon, and I am sorry when it ends.

On the way home we are again subdued, polite. They ask where I live so that they can deliver me to my house. I protest that the streets are too narrow for their car, and ask to be let out by the old harbor, saying that I will walk the rest of the way. I do not want them to see where I live. I do not want them anywhere near my life there.

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My class of 12- and 13-year olds was my favorite. A teasing, affectionate relationship existed between us. They found me endlessly amusing, and I was charmed by their small compact bodies, their dark curious eyes. Once when I came into the classroom and turned on the light switch, nothing happened. I flipped it off and on several times while the boys watched me. Nothing. Things often didn't work in Greece, so I shrugged and said, "I guess we'll just have to have class in the dark today." They all burst out laughing. One of the boys then climbed up on his desk and turned the light bulb; another flicked on the switch and the room filled with light. We all laughed together. I had enjoyed this trick as much as they had, so when I walk into the classroom the day after my

visit to the orange groves and feel an expectant tension in the air, I figure something is up.

One of the boys has just finished writing something in Greek on the blackboard and is hurrying back to his seat. All 16 of them are watching me, suppressing grins.

"Aha," I say, going along with it. "Someone left me a message. Help me translate it." Titters all over the room. "It's nothing," the boy whose sister I tutor says. "I'll erase it for you." He gets up and approaches the board. But something in his face makes me want to know what the words say.

"No, let's figure it out. It'll be good practice. Let's see, the first word is. . . ." I squint at the Greek letters and sound out "Ego . . ." Someone from the back row calls out boldly: "*Ego tha kopso to krassi.*" General laughter. I glance quickly at my friend in the front row who hangs his head sheepishly. Obviously, he has told his friends about our excursion, and they have seized on the part they found most interesting.

"Oh yes, the song I learned yesterday," I say, feeling a bit chilled, the private made a bit too public. "I like Greek songs. I'd like to learn a lot of them." The boys are restless, whispering things to each other, their eyes flashing a kind of wildness. One of them calls out something in Greek that I don't understand, and they all laugh again. The laughter has a new, aggressive edge.

"What did you say?" I ask him. He is silent. "Someone tell me what he said." No one answers, and a thick tension hangs in the air. Finally, I look at my friend in the front row. He, after all, started this whole thing. I ask him evenly, "Please tell me what your friend said."

He swallows hard and says, "He said that perhaps you would like to learn, um . . . *krevata marmura.*"

"And what, exactly, is that?"

He looks exceedingly uncomfortable, as does the rest of the class. But I persist.

"I don't know how to say in English, but it means the things a man and woman say to each other when they are in bed."

The boys are absolutely still, studying my reaction. The air crackles with danger.

"I see," I say. "Thank you for your translation." Then I turn to the rest of the class. "Take out your homework now, and let's see how well

you've done on the exercises for today." I go on with the class as usual, though I smile less and make no joking asides as I usually do. Something between us has changed.

On my way home, I try to figure it out. A single woman drinking wine and singing—did this somehow mean sexual availability in the minds of these 12- and 13-year old boys? The harbor water is greenish black today; two small boats, moored in the protected area, rock gently in the lapping tongues of water. Beyond the seawall, the water is deep blue; whitecaps surge and break. It's the same water; only the seawall separates it, only the seawall tames it. How easily things can turn, I think, how easily things can careen out of control.