

ELLI PEONIDOU
(Oi sirines tou Manhattan)
THE SIRENS OF MANHATTAN

Ναυτιλ
(Αποσκευές)

Chapter 5
New York

Captain Spyros watched them from the deck. Manolis and Georgis had come out with very few things, so as not to raise any suspicion. Manolis was wearing his father's suit and underneath he had put on as many clothes as possible. Two sets of underwear, two pairs of socks, two shirts and Grandma Maria's pullover. He resembled a stuffed turkey. So did Georgis whose idea it had been. Fortunately it was still bitterly cold for spring. In his pocket, Manolis squeezed the handkerchief, containing Captain Spyros's dollar bills.

They showed their passes. A line of policemen examined them, took their passports and asked them a thousand and one questions: where they had come from, what time the ship would be leaving, and so on.

As soon as they were some distance from the port, they began to run. The ship would remain docked in New York for about twenty hours and would then set off for Argentina. They had plenty of time to get as far away as they could. Captain Spyros would cover for them until the ship raised anchor. When the captain finally discovered that they were missing it would be too late. Every day there was so much going on in port that two missing sailors was neither here nor there. Of course, the police would be on the lookout for them, but try finding anyone in a city of so many millions of people. As for the Company, it had not even paid them their full wages so it had nothing to lose. Manolis only felt sorry for poor old Captain Spyros. As if he didn't have enough on his hands with having to tell the police about Laslo, he now had to cover for them too.

It was already late afternoon. A wind was raging.

A police car sped past at breakneck speed, sirens blazing. Manolis was startled.

"Don't worry," Georgis laughed. "Those are the sirens of Manhattan. They're not like our kind, the ones that Odysseus heard."

New York appeared otherworldly. Manolis got a crick in his neck from staring up at the skyscrapers. It was one thing to see them in photographs and

another to see the real thing. But they had no time to waste. Georgis led him to a park and they took out their maps.

"We're going to take the subway to Astoria," said Georgis. "There are lots of Greeks there. We'll find a job somewhere."

First of all, Manolis wanted to pass by the Company offices, which were not far away, to see if he had any letters. Sure enough, a thick envelope was waiting for him.

"It's from my sister," he said, eagerly opening the envelope but Georgis grabbed him by the arm.

"You can read it on the train," he whispered. "Let's get out of here."

They ran to the underground station. Captain Spyros's dollar bills were a blessing. They bought two tickets to the end of the line.

Manolis looked at the people in the subway. It was the first time in his life that he had seen them in so many colours. White, black, yellow. A black man approached them with a cardboard cup in his hand. Manolis didn't understand. His English wasn't good enough.

"He's begging," Georgis whispered. "Pretend you haven't seen him. Sometimes they are drug addicts and they need their fix. If you don't give them something, they can get nasty. On the other hand, if you do give them something they might grab your wallet. The best thing is to act dumb. In this country, your death is my life. Besides, what have we, poor devils got to give?"

Georgis was right, of course but Manolis felt himself rebelling inside. At home, for all the poverty, he had learned to share everything. Whenever Grandma Eleftheria did the cooking she always put more food than necessary in the pot. "Let's keep it in there. You never know when a visitor or some needy person might turn up," she would say.

They found seats and sat down. Manolis opened the envelope. His sister's rounded, clear letters, like tiny living people, filled him with tenderness. It was as if a close friend or family member had sat down next to him in the train. He remembered when Maria was first learning to write. He would sit with her (he was two years older) and show her. "Look," he would say, "the 'o' is like a doughnut. You put a stick next to it and it becomes an 'a'." The same words that his own mother had used before he went to school and they would sit together and read. Everything was like a game back then, before his brothers and sisters came along, one after the other. Mom was a little girl too; she played with him. She would sing, tell stories, read verses from the calendar, act out different roles and he would burst out laughing. It was as if she was playing with her doll. She often forgot to do the housework, forgot to cook. Her husband would come home exhausted, but he never complained, not even once. Without a word, he would smile, put on an apron and in no time he would cook an omelet or make a salad. That was what he taught his children too:

"Children, don't bother your Mom, she's not feeling well. Let her sleep, she's tired."

Sometimes on a Sunday he heard him making tea and taking it to her in bed. How she must miss his affection and the way he took care of her! And now that he too had left, her Manolis, her protector as she always called him...

"My dear brother Manolis, hello.

We are all well and we hope you are too. I received your two letters and you made us very happy. We have read them ten times, maybe more. Mother has put them in the cupboard, in the box with the papers. She says not to touch them but I go every so often and read them again. What lovely places you are seeing Manolis. I found them all on the map at school. Don't you feel dizzy on the ship? I am writing this at five o'clock in the afternoon. Stellakis is pulling the paper away and saying "Manolis, Manolis". Mother has just finished work and is lying down to rest for a while. She asked me to send you her love and to tell you to be careful at sea. She will write to you later."

Manolis told himself that Maria would definitely become a teacher. Perhaps a writer. When she described things it was as if you could see them right there in front of you.

"Come on, you can finish it later. We'll be getting off in two stops. Before you know it, you're there on these trains."

The train was now travelling above ground over a bridge. Behind them Manhattan and its skyscrapers looked as if they might fall over into the water at any moment. Before putting the letter away, Manolis looked for his mother's handwriting. There it was, in just three lines:

"Dear Manolis, my son and protector,
I received your letter and I am happy you are in good health. Take care not to catch cold, son. And eat well so you don't fall ill. My love is with you always. Make sure that all the wonderful places you are seeing don't make you forget your home.
Love and kisses, from your mother, Marina."

"Come on Manolis, this is our stop."

Manolis gave a deep sigh and put the letter in his pocket, next to the wad of notes. They got off the train with a crowd of people. Astoria was more like his home town. There were no skyscrapers, no broad avenues or big stores. Many of the signs were in Greek. Greek greengrocers, confectioners, restaurants. Familiar smells excited their noses and bellies. Darkness was already falling. They were hungry. They entered a Greek kebab shop and ordered a doner

kebab. The owner had an enormous moustache and wore a white cap. On the walls were pictures of the heroes of the 1821 Greek revolution: And in the centre a smiling King Paul and Queen Frederika.

Do you know anyone around here who needs workers?" asked Georgis.

"What can you do?"

"Anything, preferably waiting tables."

"Everyone prefers waiting tables," replied the restaurant owner. "My brother needs dishwashers. Not here in Astoria, his place is in Manhattan. Are you up for it?"

"It's a deal," said Georgis with a swagger. "We're also looking for a place to stay."

"I see. Illegals. I thought you were students looking for some extra money. Forget it. We don't want any trouble with the police."

"Oh come on pal, didn't you yourself get here that way?"

"No, I came with a proper invitation. My brother brought me over and our uncle brought him."

"And how did your uncle end up here? Wasn't the first one an illegal?"

"Kid, I haven't got time to waste. The police come by every day and carry out checks. Especially when they think Greeks are involved, then they really put the screws on us. I'm at risk just by talking to you like this. They can come by any moment. Off you go. I won't tell on you."

They took their kebabs and left. Georgis was not about to give up.

"Lesson One," he said. "Don't ask the same person for two things at the same time. First let's go and find a place to sleep and there's always tomorrow."

They wandered around for some time before finally finding a room. The landlady was Italian and she rented out rooms in her own home. When they paid her a month in advance, she asked no more questions. The room had a double bed which made Georgis laugh and say it was like a bed for newly-weds, but to Manolis, who was used to sleeping on the floor with two others, it looked regal. They went to bed and slept soundly. After a couple of hours Manolis woke up. In his sleep he remembered that he had not finished reading his sister's letter. He turned on the light and opened the envelope.

"The other day it was our father's six month memorial service. You won't believe it. Grandma Maria came to church. She sends you her best and says you must write to your Granddad because only rocks stay around for ever. She brought a nice knitted jacket for our Photinoulla and socks in the same colour, pink. And a gold cross. You know that it's her christening on Sunday. Uncle Yiannis will be the godfather. Grandma Efthymia is going to cook rabbit stew and roast meat and honey balls and everyone will come back to our house. Uncle Yiannis and Uncle Lucas, Aunt Terpsa with the children, Aunt Calliope and Aunt Maro and family. We're going to get chairs from Nicos's mother Elpiniki and plates too, I think. We'll have to see how to fit everyone in. If it's a nice day we'll sit out in the garden. Grandma wanted us to go to the village but Mom gets carsick, remember?"

"Your friends came and I read them your letter. Mom didn't want us to take the letter outside the house, so she didn't let me go to them to read it. I gave Andreas the letter you sent him and he said he's going to write to you. Our Antonis isn't doing so well at school. He tells Mom every day that he's going to come and find you and that makes her cry. On April 1st he and his friends skipped school and they went around the neighbourhood telling fibs for April Fools Day. Grandma Efthymia got her rolling pin – the one she uses for her pastries – and smacked him with it. Mom says I shouldn't tell you all this stuff so that you don't feel sad, but you told me to tell you everything, good and bad."

Manolis skimmed over all these details. He wanted to reach the part that really interested him. There it was, at the end of the letter, like a postscript just as he had written in his own letter: a mention of the name Eleni.

"Yesterday I went to get 'Madam's' medicine. Eleni, the pharmacist's daughter, sends you best wishes."

That was all, nothing more. "Eleni sends you best wishes." Yet it was enough to make him feel as if he had wings on his back. He could not sleep now. He opened the 'Ship's diary' and wrote three simple poems. One, the least obvious, he copied onto the letter that he wrote to his sister immediately afterwards:

*Though you are in our homeland and I'm on foreign shores
I have yet to come across eyes as sweet as yours.*

Underneath he wrote their new address.

"From now on, dear sister, you will write to my new home in New York. I've become an American. But don't give this address to anyone, OK? Whoever wants to write to me can give the letter to you to post. And if anyone from Company asks you, you'll say that you don't know where I am."

It was almost daybreak when he lay down again. His sleep was sweet and full of dreams. In the morning Georgis had to pull him by the legs to wake him up.