

## Apples and Oranges

by

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"I now wonder how she coped;

I wonder what she gave up to have a life with him,

this woman who read Simone de Beauvoir in French and English."

— *Maria Katsonis, The Good Greek Girl*<sup>i</sup>

My mother was sitting on her sofa in the living room, streaming a documentary from ERT3 while peeling some oranges. ‘Ela’, she said, ‘eat them and shut up, I’m watching’. The documentary was about Zorz Sari, a Greek author whose books I’d already devoured decades ago as a teenager. I asked her why she was watching so attentively when she already knew everything they were going to show and say about her. ‘I want to see if they will talk about her life during the German Occupation. Her work for the Resistance’, she said and turned the TV up to signal me to be quiet, her eyes fixed on the screen. We sat there in silence, she peeling the oranges and watching TV, I eating them and watching her, observing her every familiar movement.

I watched her hands, the quiet rhythm that had carried over from Greece. It was a rhythm I had never questioned before, but now, as she handed me another piece of orange, I found myself wondering: why didn’t she ever take any for herself? She never stopped giving—always handing

me the fruit, never tasting it herself. It was a small thing, but it felt like something bigger, something deeper.

She had always worked hard. Never asking for anything, never taking for herself. I started thinking of all those years she'd spent; two jobs, sewing in the afternoons after a long shift in the factory, making sure I didn't go without, even when she had nothing left to give. I had never asked her, never really wondered why she did it. But now, I couldn't stop myself thinking. Who was she before? How many other mothers had done the same? How many had come to a new land with dreams they would never fully live out, just to make sure their children had a chance at something they couldn't even imagine? How many had put their own dreams on hold, sacrificing what could've been for what they hoped their children might become?

When my father first decided we'd move to Australia, he spoke of it like a promised land, where they would build something for themselves, and a place where her art could finally be seen. He would tell her of the galleries she would one day show in, of the pottery she would make, of a future where she could create, where she could be known. But when we got here there was nothing. No galleries, no audience for her work. She became invisible, just another face in a crowd, another worker speaking broken English in a sea of migrants. Her hands that had once shaped clay now worked morning shifts at the factory, and sewed people's clothes in the evening as she fed us, kept me from asking questions, sheltered me from what she'd given up. The land beneath her felt foreign, disconnected. It didn't belong to her, and she never truly belonged to it either.

Among the few things she had brought with her from Greece were the pots she had made, glazed in shades of blue, the colour of the sea and sky that had been hers, the life she had left behind.

*Echoes- Issue 14-Echoes from the Antipodes*

They decorated the room where we sat, remnants of a past frozen in time, a past that had never quite made it across the sea. My father would complain, saying how they're just collecting dust, making more work for her in the house. In Greece, she had been educated, passionate about art and history, but here she worked endlessly without a hint of complaint. And in those quiet moments in the kitchen as her hands would sew, she would tell me stories; not only about Greece, but also about the land's original people, about their struggle, their history, stories that were never in our schoolbooks, never mentioned on the news. She'd attended some pottery workshops held at a cultural centre nearby by an old Indigenous woman and her daughters, and there she'd learned all about their love of clay and its cultural and spiritual significance and connection to the land. It was in those small moments she would whisper things about the past, about the history that had been buried under layers of time, layers of displacement. And even as she worked, the land, this land—still felt like it didn't belong to her. It was a land she would never fully understand, and in that, she would never belong.

I watched her hands, offering me the fruit, never tasting it herself. I could see it then, the sacrifices in the way her fingers moved, the way she gave, never took. She had given up everything, her dreams, her voice, her art, just so I could have a chance at something more. She had traded a life she had imagined for one she had never wanted, all for me.

I stood up, slowly with heavy, even guilty thoughts running through my mind. I walked to the kitchen, the apples on the counter catching my eye. I picked up the knife, clumsily peeling, cutting thick uneven slices. When I returned, I didn't speak, I just set the plate down in front of her. She looked up, her eyes tired, unreadable. For a second, I thought she might say something, but she didn't. She just took the plate from me and began to eat.

We ate in silence. The documentary continued to play in the background, the Greek voices rising and falling. In that moment, sitting there with her, it felt like all that had been left unspoken was enough. I hadn't said anything, but somehow, she looked at me and she knew I understood. The oranges, the apples, had come full circle.

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<sup>i</sup> Katsonis, Maria. *The Good Greek Girl: From the Halls of Harvard to the Beds of the Psych Ward*. Jane Curry Publishing, 2015, p. 313.