

A RAINBOW IN THE DARK

Introduction

"Once upon a time there was..."

These are the words with which fairy tales began when we were children and almost always they resulted in a beautiful and happy ending.

In life of course and in everyone's course within it, tales unfold with a happy ending, tales conclude with a bad ending and many times there are tales that are inexplicable: the latter are the ones that come to an end creating many questions, and most of the time we are unable to decide where to put the full stop.

All this may occur simultaneously and in parallel to our lives. Some tales should make life easier and joyful, others should make it difficult and painful, and others should confuse our discretion in such a way that it results in a multitude of errors.

From all this, of course, a painting is created and an artist within each and every one of us; a painting with rich and perhaps controversial topics on which the final touch determines its definition; the title by which the artist signs.

When young Sophia was born she was given an almost pure white canvas to paint. On it, fate had faintly etched some basic lines, which she had to tone, to change if she could, to paint with natural dyes, such as blood, tears, hope, joy, pain.

The title for this painting and the review will be given by each and every one of us, depending on how we perceive it, how we can feel it in our heart, how we will understand it within our mind.

We shall find items that decorate our own life-painting. Maybe we will empathise with her, we might be happy for her, we might wonder, we might compare.

Each one of us will make their own translation using their own individual dictionary and their own outlook on life, reconstructing thereby a new story.

SOPHIA

CHAPTER 1

‘A painful journey’

Sat on a large white wooden chest, which was well fixed on the ship’s deck, she was holding her mother’s hand tightly.

On that tiny face you could detect sadness and anger. She could see the shoreline drawing away as if on a set of wheels, like the ones she had on her childhood cart when she used to roll it down the huge hill playing with her friends. A torrent of sweet childhood memories, that emerged as if it was yesterday, made her tiny, brown haired head hurt as they rushed into it.

Sweet moments, innocent moments, sprinkled with Grandma’s icing sugar, had a scent of cinnamon that flooded into her mouth as she tried to fit a large handmade candy into it. Every now and then she would place it on her palm, stroke its vibrant pinkish colour and dip it back into her mouth with pleasure.

Two clear small drops appeared on the threshold of her green eyes, but they suddenly flew away among the disorderly hovering of white seagulls. Like formidable fishermen they would dunk impetuously into the froth of the waves formed by the ship in its course.

For a moment she forgot all about the sadness she was feeling, caused by the separation from all the sweet and tender moments she had had the chance to experience in her first childhood years.

She observed the birds that dropped impetuously into the water fishing for their meal and she would squeal ecstatically clapping her hands with every dive they took.

It was from that moment on that her strength of will started to show. She could feel it inside her overflowing like a river, reaching with force up to her dark red lips at the exact moment she would see the seagulls rising triumphantly back up from the waves, holding their prey in their beaks.

Leda’s heart, her mother’s heart, was thrilled with her daughter’s happiness. In the past few days she had really had to fight to explain the rush for this journey. Her child’s mind had immense difficulty understanding this sudden change in her life. It was impossible for her to understand, despite Leda’s explanations, why she was not present at her school’s last celebration like all her classmates.

Not to mention that there was no way she could talk to her about the bitter truth that had suddenly turned their lives upside down, but Sophia’s reaction was really intense. It really affected Leda not seeing her having that beautiful vibrant smile on her face, not having that spark in her green eyes.

And her pain would duplicate; it became unbearable.

Orestes, Sophia's father, stood straight, right next to them. He stared at the two women in his life and clenched his teeth. He had to withstand, to hold out: he was their protector.

The shoreline had long disappeared from their view.

A few grey clouds had started to gather in the sky as if wishing to travel with them. A strong wind stormed in from the horizon with aggressive intentions.

"Come Sophia darling, we need to go inside," he told her and pulled her gently by the hand.

All three of them entered the ship lounge. A few passengers were sitting comfortably on the small blue sofas, examining closely those that entered for the first time.

They picked a sofa to sit on. "Let's sit by the window so that Sophia can stare at the sea," Leda said to Orestes.

Her eyes were filled with very much love for both of them.

She knew deep inside her, she could feel it, that her life's thread was being cut short. She had no idea where the ending was, but the thread had shortened dangerously. She did still have some hope though that she could possibly tie at the end of it a new thread from a healthy, neatly winded skein, but would the knot withstand the weight of all the existing problems? That ate away her soul, and not just Leda's soul, but that of Orestes' too, who felt helpless, unable to do anything to help her.

It was only six months ago, when Leda was making dreams for their life and had decided with Orestes to give Sophia a little brother or sister. And exactly there, within paradise's serenity, a huge ugly thorn started growing. Any way they tried to uproot it, it would prick their fingers. The initial examinations already showed its flesh-eating intentions. Every day it would dig its roots deeper and deeper. 'Malignant tumour' was the diagnosis from the biopsy.

With sharp tools and a fighting spirit they dived, face first, to eradicate it from their lives. They fought with immense pain and toil and believed that they could make it, that they would never again see its horrible dirty flowers with the ominous ability to destroy anything beautiful that had tried to bloom right next to them.

The process of uprooting was a painful disaster, but they never gave up and a new battle for recreation began.

New flowers were planted in the place of the old ones. They were taken care of, they were watered with a lot of love and Leda and Orestes waited impatiently for them to bloom, to spread their sweet fragrance, to make their life prettier.

Day by day they grew. Leda and Orestes were proud of their hopes that grew taller and started growing leaves.

Nothing was now reminiscent of the old ugly setting. Everything was covered by their desire to live.

They waited for two full months in anguish of that morning when they would cut off the first flowers of their efforts, filled with joy.

But something was not right. The flowers were there, beautiful, ready to be placed into the basket of hope. But when they approached they were faced with a horror that made them take a step back.

A strong, disgusting and familiar stench was spreading around the beauty that was fighting to balance on a stretched rope.

They searched desperately with their eyes, their hands, their feet, to find the evil that had restarted its destructive deed.

Nothing was left standing alive. All the beauty was trampled, destroyed. It had fallen victim of a desperate search. And there, right in the middle of nowhere, under a few green leaves that were still standing, the sneaky destruction was reborn to finish off its diabolical deed.

A new war, a chemical one this time, was the doctors' proposal. It was their last hope.

With that hope they marched at this time, all three of them, sat in the lounge of the ship that was sailing towards Thessaloniki¹.

They were tied up with the ropes of Destiny that ran ahead, dragging them heartlessly behind her over rough roads, hurting them deeply on their bodies and in their souls.

Sophia Galanou's family was not a rich family. Her father Orestes Galanos was an employee in a private company in Chora, on the beautiful island of Patmos².

Her mother, Leda had a small seasonal shop in Chora with items of folk art that were mainly designed for tourists.

Their everyday life was calm and carefree. That was the life that Sophia did not want taken away from her; she didn't want to be robbed of the sweet mornings with Grandma Sophia, Leda's mother, who was very fond of her and spoiled her... She was the only grandchild and Grandma fulfilled all her wishes. She made her sit on the 'throne of the blue paradise'. That is what Grandma Sophia called her back garden which was filled with colourful geraniums and fluffy basil trees; with concrete mantels and the 'throne' where young Sophia used to sit and gaze over to the sea and the ships that sailed in and out of Scala's pier. Grandma also told her

¹ **Thessaloniki**, also known in English as Thessalonica, Salonika or Salonica, is the second-largest city in Greece and the capital of Greek Macedonia, the administrative region of Central Macedonia and the Decentralized Administration of Macedonia and Thrace.

² **Patmos** is a small Greek island in the Aegean Sea. One of the northernmost islands of the Dodecanese complex.

stories that were real, or fake: it didn't matter to her. For Sophia they were all fairy tales that made her travel far away.

It was just that her first real journey was a bad fairy tale and a much more bitter truth.

Their relentless fight all these months, with the endless hospital visits, led their financial situation to a tragic point. Their tiny savings grew wings very quickly. And now, their last hope was this trip to Thessaloniki and Leda's emergency admission to a specialised hospital for which they had the best references; and hanging off this last hope was also a very painful decision to sell their small house in Chora.

Leda was against it initially. That house was Sophia's inheritance. They had worked so hard to acquire it, but Orestes was uncompromising with his decision.

A horrible air was created in an already tense atmosphere. A prompt solution was given by Grandma Sophia.

Seeing her daughter in this horrible predicament, that no mother would want to find herself in, she found a way to calm Leda down by leaving her own house as an inheritance to young Sophia.

Grandma Sophia never allowed for her tragedy to unfold in front of her daughter's eyes. She always comforted her and gave her hope. Only when she was left alone would she soak her headscarf in tears and pray to God.

The house sold really quickly as time was pressuring them immensely. The result was for a great part of the real value of the house to be lost, but nothing compared to the value of life.

For the final days before their departure to the north they had no choice but to stay at Grandma's. A lot of their things were sold, but most were stuffed and crammed into Grandma's house. Young Sophia was cheering with joy because they were going to stay at the 'blue paradise'. She could not have imagined that those would be her final days on the island where she was born and bred.

It was only on the last day when they started gathering their things into suitcases that she realised that her mother's words, which she had refused to accept deep inside her, came true.

Leda of course never told her the whole truth about the severity of the situation. She wanted to exhaust every possible ray of hope that existed. So she confined to a few words; that she had to undergo a therapy for some time and that after that they would come back.

Sophia, with her green eyes and an examining look, was trying to see through her mother's words, but Leda was hiding her painful secret very well, for her daughter's sake, exactly the same way her mother in her way, of course, was hiding the immense pain that was eating her inside.

CHAPTER 2

‘Stolen moments of happiness’

Sophia put her elbows on the round plastic table and buried her chin in her palms. Leda was looking at her with interest while she was trying to create her own observatory in front of the large ship lounge window.

Outside the weather was getting wild. Thick drops of rain began to pound on the glass window. The sea had turned into a dark pencil colour and the foaming waves painted a dull canvas with white touches. A grey curtain of rain spread from one side of the window to the other. Small rivers started flowing on the outside of the glass window that lost its clarity and started looking like viscous gelatine. Like a cat that gets stimulated when watching a mouse passing in front of her, Sophia stood up happily from her observatory and approached the window, setting aside the light blue and yellow curtain that seemed to bother her. She had finally found a game to defuse her bloated childish energy. With her eyes fixed on the creeks that flowed endlessly like tiny snakes, she walked by the table, carelessly giving it a nudge. Leda hastily stretched out her hand to protect a can of juice that was about to dive onto the blue carpet of the ship lounge.

“Watch out darling, nothing is going away, do not rush...” she remarked sweetly.

Sophia did not even hear her what she said as she had already reached the window. She stretched the index finger of her right hand and following the water sliding down, she pretended to draw while she played with inexhaustible imagination.

Orestes placed his hand on Leda’s shoulders and embraced her tenderly.

“Did you give Maria a call?” he asked.

“Yes, I called her and she is waiting for us. My cousin Maria is such a gem, but that woman has been so unlucky in her life. As much as she loved children she was never able to have a family. Now she lives alone and her only companion is Lucy, her little dog... Lucy is her only company”.

"Everyone has his mishaps Leda dear," he said while sighing, bearing in mind their own wounds.

Sophia came back to them grouching, protesting that her game had to come to an end. The rain stopped abruptly and the small rivers dried up like water evaporating on those hot summer days.

She sat in her spot reluctantly, exploring around for something worthy of her attention. At the end of her exploration her attention was drawn to a boy, about the same age as her, who was

sitting with his parents at the next table. She stood up impatiently and started searching into Leda's handbag for her electronic game huffing, puffing, and muttering.

"Don't search in vain, it is in the suitcase that we left in the berth," Leda explained cutting off her rush.

Sophia crooked her face, but decided to attack without any ammunition. She got up and approached the table right next to them. Her eyes quickly became glued on a board game that was left on the couch, next to the youngest boy of the family.

She had figured out a point of contact. A smile filled with confidence appeared on her lips as she leaned over offering to play a few rounds with him.

The hours went by relatively quietly, except for some cries of victory every now and then from the battlefield of the board game.

Orestes and Leda were so engrossed in their conversation and did not realise that dinner time had approached. Sophia, however, although exhausted by countless game rounds, reminded them openly, feeling cheerful about her score.

The restaurant in the ship was full when they got there. They contemplated coming back later, but with some good luck a table at the back of the dining room had just emptied.

While Leda and Sophia sat at the table, Orestes took off to take a look at the trays of cooked food that were arrayed one next to the other along the buffet.

The elders' preference was something light for dinner, but not Sophia who placed in front of her a plate of spaghetti with red sauce and lots of cheese, and then began to move it into her stomach. The new apartment however proved much smaller than what her gluttony had made her believe. She ate enough, but most of it she left there and decorated the white plate making pink nests.

When they finished their meal and got up ready to leave, young Sophia rushed into the ship lounge having other things on her mind... But Orestes cut her run short, grabbing her by the arm and saying to her: "Mommy is quite tired for us to sit in the lounge any longer. I think you too must be tired my little one," and he looked at her smiling. "We had better go to our cabin" he insisted politely.

Her eyes turned to her mother, and with the manners of an obedient puppy she grabbed her mother's hand.

Leda's troubled health did not allow her much sturdiness.

The sweet lullaby from the restless rumbling engines of the ship quickly plunged all of them into a life-reviving sleep.

Several hours later, the deep sound of the ship's horn ceased the engines' rhythmic work as well as, what turned out to be, Orestes' restless sleep.

He pulled aside the small valance slightly to see outside. The drops of the sea on the outer side of the window did not allow him to see clearly. It was barely the crack of dawn and darkness and a few lights far away on the shoreline were all he could see. The sound he heard however was not something created by his imagination. It was their first notification that the ship was approaching the port. He touched Leda gently on the back.

"Leda, I think we are almost there," he whispered.

She opened her eyes slightly. The sweet light of the lamp on the bedside table created a peaceful atmosphere.

"If I could, I would not get up all morning," she said to him visibly rested as she stretched out her hands towards the partitions of the cabin.

He sat beside her on the bunk and embraced her tenderly.

"I know sweetheart, you still have some time to rest... enjoy it..." he said quietly.

He did not want to wake up Sophia yet. Her vitality was explosive and most of the time Leda needed calm as much as possible.

The second roar of the great beast that was carrying them in her belly forced them to give it proper attention.

"Girls, enough with the snoozing," Orestes said in a supposedly strict manner to the mother and daughter, who were giving hugs and kisses to each other on Leda's bed.

He rejoiced every time he saw them embracing. He feared so much the moment they would be forced to part from one another. It drove him crazy when he had that thought, because Orestes did think of that too: be prepared for the worst possible outcome. Doctors were sparing with their forecasts. They did not discuss it much with his wife, but they both knew deep inside them; they could see it in each other's eyes.

