

Ornament of Asia

Also by Alice Kavounas:

The Invited

Open to the Weather

ALICE KAVOUNAS

Ornament of Asia

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Cover image from an old postcard of Smyrna (modern Izmir)
in the author's collection.

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In memory of my father and mother:
Edmond Apostolos Kavounas
Mary Vergopoulou.

For Fred, in celebration of every day.

Things have different qualities, and the soul different inclinations; for nothing is simple which is presented to the soul, and the soul never presents itself simply to any object. Hence it comes that we weep and laugh at the same thing.

—*Blaise Pascal*

1660 *Pensées*, 'Thoughts on Mind and on Style'
translated by W. F. Trotter

The Road to Ithaca

To deliver his first-born to college
he drove north to Ithaca on icy roads
facing down the one-eyed beams of snow-plows
in our big-toothed, second-hand Buick
that leaked oil, forcing us to stop
every half-hour to top up—
in bitter, wind-chill-factor weather.

Born and raised just south of Troy, amidst
Mediterranean breezes and donkeys,
my Ottoman Greek father's annual trip
must have reminded him of other journeys,
other herculean tasks he'd tackled.
But he was no Trojan warrior, no Greek
hero, just a man trying to hold his own

in America, where no one interferes—
not even when your car lets you down.
Oncoming drivers are as snow-blind as you!
My father's odyssey was repeated
every year, until my brother's graduation.
Now Ithaca has become my metaphor:
breaking down in winter, then journeying on.

This is the Gift My Mother Gave Me

“Act as if a thousand eyes are upon you”
was my mother’s parting shot
every day as I left the house for school.

So I divided those thousand eyes by two—
five hundred people seemed slightly less
intimidating—and guessed that of those
five hundred, at least fifty were far too tired
to notice me. Another fifty
had, I hoped, forgotten their glasses,

and perhaps another fifty were blinded
by worry—about losing their jobs, or
forgetting to lock the door. But that still left
three-hundred fifty, all out there, waiting
for me to put a foot wrong. I figured
that a hundred of them were foreign
and didn’t understand my mother’s dictum.

Which still left two hundred and fifty
eagle-eyed pedestrians peering at me.
I wrote off another fifty by deciding
they were newly-weds, and so in love
they had eyes only for each other.

The last two hundred remained a problem.
I silently assigned them a book to read—
and those in a rush, the newspaper.
On the subway no one glanced at me. See?

Mother was wrong, though I tended to sit up straight, and tried not to snap my chewing gum.

On Seeing the Statue of Liberty for the Second Time

As the tallest girl, I got to play the Statue of Liberty.
On the night, I walked on stage, raised one arm
and stood stock still, crowned, in my sickly green
costume which the teacher called ‘verdigris’,
our old living room curtains actually,
which my mother had sewn and draped just so.
I was proud to be the famous Statue
to hold high the familiar torch—
a flashlight concealed in cardboard.
But after an hour of holding it
straight-elbowed, well above my head
that paper cone had turned to lead.

So when it came round for me to recite:
‘Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled . . .’
I, too, was *yearning*, (a verb I’d just learned),
to be free. At last, I understood the words
which I’d rehearsed. Now I sympathised with
those poor folks who’d entered New York harbour;
who, on seeing the Statue of Liberty,
were about to shed whatever burdens
they’d shouldered in their homeland.
And after their arduous sea journey,
were they ever on the brink of giving up?
Suddenly my co-star, playing Uncle Sam,
broke my train of thought, grabbing me boldly
by the (other) hand to take our bows.

Foreign-looking in that crowd, whispering
in their embarrassing language,
and applauding with the rest, were Mom and Dad.
I smiled, welcoming them to my country.

One Bedroom Apartment

From our grey concrete balcony, I watched
the huge red disc of a sun as it set—
pinned atop the Empire State, stopping
then slipping behind the skyscrapers—
a cinematic view from our one-bedroom apartment
across the East River in Queens.

We tried every combination. Mother and father,
mother and daughter, father and son, sister
and brother—we slept every which way.
Moving ourselves back and forth
from foyer to living room, to the bedroom
and back again, was just like moving furniture.

And that one bedroom, divided:
pink sheets strung along a make-shift pole
prone to collapsing in the middle of the night . . .
My goal? To grow up. Escape.

Mother's black, three-quarter grand piano
was the only stable thing in the place.
Too heavy, thank God, to shift; the centrepiece
we all played under, on and around.

I can still hear her saying—*Again, please,*
as she taught yet another reluctant child
'The Spinning Song', accompanied by
the din of neighbours' broomsticks from below.

The Red Sofa

(A 12-piece suite)

I

A child napping in the afternoon. She is four, perhaps five years old. It's long before the days of sending children to school as soon as they can talk.

Her mother is making the beds, or sitting at the piano, or stirring something in the kitchen. The sun crosses the living room, warming the sleeping child on the velvet sofa. They live six floors up in a small, rented apartment with a view across Queens to the Empire State Building, and the radio is permanently tuned to the classical music station, WQXR.

Her brother is older, and at school.

At eight o'clock each evening their father returns from the office. The children have already eaten; their mother would join them only if her husband were planning to work unusually late. Before supper, their mother reads to them from the Bible for exactly fifteen minutes. She has begun from the very beginning. By the time the little girl is twelve, they will have reached the New Testament.

Peter Pan Diner

Cute cousin Nick—flirting at the till
instead of studying—how my brother and I
envied him and his part-time job. It gets better.
Straight out of high school, cousin Nick
goes and marries his childhood sweetheart
proposing over a cream soda
as he perched on leatherette and she waitressed
in my uncle's all-American (Greek) diner,
where a nickel played you Elvis's latest.

Meanwhile, my brother and I continued
our adolescent journey, book-led,
taking exams, earning qualifications,
visiting the old diner less and less.
Cousin Nick, a local hero now,
was running dealerships, becoming big
in small real estate; moving further
to the right. We were losing touch.

Our aunt and uncle, still working non-stop,
still drinking coffee with the regulars,
listening to their stories, still chain-smoking . . .
We heard that at eighty-two, they divorced;
he lived on 'til ninety-four, she 'til ninety-eight.

Peter Pan lives on, jacked up, trucked
to another state and renamed Betsy's.
Still a teenage hang-out, but with a new jukebox
and fresh leatherette, should you care to propose.
If you stop there, play a song for me.