

When I was seven

It was all contrasts living in Cyprus. Endless azure skies lay around us covering the island and ribbons of arid dirty roads weaved their way amongst fertile, abundant meadows. Our antiquated diesel bus carried my sister and myself away from school's dusty windows and white plastered walls. The children nearly all golden and dark-skinned except my sister. Her creamy skin, baby blue eyes and deep red curls brought wonder around her. I had wispy wild hair that would frustrate my mother in so many ways and drew no special attention. As for staying clean and tidy! It just did not happen but Kate never found dirt even when she rolled in the golden dust that was our yard. I smile to myself as I thought of my mother's laugh. Frowning because I thought of my father's frustration with me. He worked in the RAF station and came and went perfectly, dressed immaculately and so we pretended to be soldiers marching to his tune when he left in the early morning. Katy and my grubby self finally arrived after our bumpy drive from the city to our outback village. We screamed and laughed and giggled our way off with the other children. Mother was waiting, all perfect and movie star like standing amidst aprons around stout women's waists and dark black hair tied in buns.

As usual mother was talking, a beacon amongst this tradition and the Cypriots absentmindedly touched my sister's hair as we walked by. I didn't mind, I was kind of proud of my little sister and beamed with pleasure. Mother bent down with her perfect smile, speaking softly wonderfully English, announcing every syllable.

"Hello Kate and Jane, did you have a good day at school darlings?"

"Oh, yes mother, we learnt about sea caves and hidden sea spouts and a little french, Ma Mere." I adoringly laughed my basic french.

"I did a drawing mummy of the sea horse and his babies, see and in the back, there is a nasty old octopussy hiding". Kate pokes the picture with her tiny, chubby fingers.

"It is beautiful darling, come on then, let's get you both changed and fed, mummy has lots to do, goodbye, andi'o sas". She turns her Brigitte Bardot smile. Holding our hands tightly she pulls us home, one on each arm. I wistfully look at the jasmine scabbling over the rock walls, lizards darting around, goats bleating their constant voice and craning my neck I spot specks of screeching eagles.

"Oh, Kate I wish you wouldn't do that!"

"Sorry mother but they are so high", I am still craning my neck, the blueness always pulls me in as my imagination and eyes dive up and up into this endless pure colour.

"I know darling, they use the heat to glide up there and they can see for many miles trying to find their food". Mother is now twisting her neck and my little sister is hanging on and leaning far back but nearly falls over mimicking us. It's so funny, mummy picks Kate up and we laugh and run home the last few yards' rush inside where it is so cool and green and dark wooden floors comfort our puffy hot feet.

Every day we get washed, eat, finish our homework whilst mother sings and dances to now iconic records. She disciplines us if we get distracted or perhaps run around too much. Me really, Kate never does things wrong. Mothers blonde curls peep out of her brilliant coloured scarf as she washes the floor and constantly sweeps the dust. Finally, we can play for an hour or so before father gets in.

Piercing white light greets us as we rush outside, heat knocks into our small bodies but we love it. Our friends are waiting with scruffy dogs barking and hanging around waiting for us. One of our friends has a huge rope so we all jump and skip into its rough swing. Kate has a huge floppy hat on and soon gets hot so we all sit under the giant, massive tree in the village center. Old wrinkly men laugh and smile at us and leave our group to play amongst the writhing roots of this mammoth specimen of nature. Poor Kate shouldn't be out in the sun so much but the children bring her large scarlet juicy melon pieces from their homes. The nectar runs freely down her chin onto her blouse. Sitting on an elephant sized branch of that tree with all my friends was one of my most happy moments. Kate is chirping happily with her fledgling friends and outside of the trees canopy, burning sun slowly parches the dusty road.

All too soon our mothers are calling us and Kate and I slowly walk back. Mr Christou our neighbour lifts my squealing happy sister, sneaking in a small chocolate bar to her tiny hands.

“Ah Katy you bring delight to me on a hot day!” He said as he ruffles her hair. “How is dear Jane today?” he smiles to me.

“Mr Christou how do the chit chats (they are the tiny lizards that run over our walls) not get burnt?” This has been on my mind for a while as I watch them with my back gradually burning, scabbling up walls and over crunchy dry grass that was a lawn.

“Ah Jane they are very clever little creatures. You see they move very quickly?”

“Yes, they do but sometimes they just stop but I never see them burn! “I laugh but then he told me that they run because it is so hot and this way they cannot burn so I love this and run around and around trying not to get any more burnt. Well until mother calls me. Kate is sitting on Mr Christou strong worker’s knees looking inside a sky-blue flower happy on our front veranda.

“Oh, Jane what are you doing? You are filthy!” “I am a chit chat! ” I will run and run and not get burnt!” I giggle and swing my gangly arms about. Both grownups chuckle and talk and then it’s time for us to go in and baths and bed but father is not home yet and Katy cries. So, Mother reads another story and yes he turns the door handle and we scream our delight and run through the long hall into his waiting arms. But he is not there and has turned into the sitting room, already pouring a drink.

“Children, say goodnight to your father and off to bed now, he is tired”. They stand and look at each other, I know he is not happy but Kate just rushes headlong into him. Still, he picks her up, pecks her head and I grab her hand and quietly we walk to bed down the dark wooden hall.

In the morning, our routine starts over again but there is a box of puppies on our veranda for Katy, she is always being giving gifts. Mother says it is something to do with her hair colour, this poppy seaweed red she has. It reminds the Cypriots of Aphrodite their goddess of love. So, they give us gifts all the time and mother gets baskets of fruit and eggs. There is no one like Kate in our village.

Scrawny cockerels wake me up alongside those bleating goats and their tinkling bells. School is over and today we go to the beach. I love the sea and the golden sparkling sand but Kate must sit under a colourful umbrella and play with her dolls which I think is not fair but she turns red so quickly. Mother stays and laughs with her so it cannot be that bad.

“Come on Jane who is going to be first in the sea!” Dad declares.

“Me, me, me!” I run as fast as my skinny legs allow racing him to the warm soft sea. Splashing and laughing we tumble into its soft embrace and soon he swims perfectly into its deeper depths. He has been teaching me every Saturday so I try my best to catch him up. Curling seaweed plays with my legs and my mouth fills up with salty water but oblivious I keep swimming out to him excited of my achievement. Finally, he stops and waits for me. I am gasping but so happy and we lay in cooler darker water watching the sun sparkle off the slowly rolling waves. Mother and Kate are so tiny back on the beach waving their hands.

Father asks me if I could swim around the bay because there is a cave there.

“Yes, oh please can we go” I scream to him. It was a hard swim I remember; the water is getting colder stronger and soon I am tired but then we see the cave and its gaping hole inviting us in. With wobbly legs, I crawl out of the rough fluffy surf and look around me. Rosy red crystals stick in chunks of rocks and sparkling pieces move back and forth with the water. Father says its quartz and was made my volcanic heat a very long time ago but I just love the way it sparkles.

“Time to go Jane.... umm now!” Father told me. I turn around and my beautiful cave is now small and full of sea water with large furious waves crashing in front of me. We walk forward into the water that is pushing me further back and is higher than my whole body. I am scared so I follow bravely kicking my legs furiously but I never seem to get further. The sea which I love that was light blue is sapphire and forest green, grabbing my

legs and weighing me down. Strong hands grab my arms and father throws me out of the water onto his back. We sink further down. The sea is over our heads and father is spluttering amidst bubbles and frothy white foam. Yet dad swims up and out and his powerful legs pump up and down and his arms arc out in strong swings and I feel us moving slowly out into the sun that beckons with its warmth and safety. Gradually he manages to swim out on top of large angry waves and into the deep bobbing sea, he swims us around the threatening rocks and soon I see the golden sandy beach stretching out like a warm inviting blanket. Father somehow manages to get us to our haven and we splutter and shakily climb out of the surf. Dad falls to the ground looks up to the sky with his chest heaving but mother runs over crying and laughing and falls on top of him telling him off but kissing him too. I do not understand and wait for my kisses. Then we are all sitting on our orange blanket with Kate eating sticks of meat and cucumber salad watching the burnt orange sun slowly fall over the distant flat sea. I remember being picked up from a deep sleep and gently placed inside our small car, tucked in bed with my mother's hand stroking my tangled hair.

Our life was simple, school or not school. Playing with friends, goats, chit chats, dancing on the beach in the front of tavernas, exploring lush meadows high in the mountains or visiting ancient amphitheatres left to erode in the scorching heat and whistling winds. We were happy and mum and dad had many friends who we played and listened to music with and all was blue sky, golden grasses, stretching beaches and dusty plains. Then one day when father came home they began to argue and we had to go to bed early. Mother was crying but father went out. He must have gone to our neighbour who came in and we heard them talking quietly. Kate was asleep but I could not hear what they were saying.

Then one day when we came home mother was not talking to the women of our village but standing alone, almost lost looking and my stomach churned inside. We all got off amid the dust of our bus and quietly as if we knew something was wrong to our respective mothers. After our homework, I begged to go outside and took Kates hand and off we went to play. Our friends came towards us in a little scraggly group but instead of laughing they picked up small rocks from the pot holed road and started to throw them at us. I shouted at them to stop but one rock hit me in the side of my face and it hurt so much. I did try to be brave and say that hurt and to stop, why were they doing this? Then another group of our friends rushed into the street and screamed at them and soon they were all fighting and kicking each other. The mothers ran over soon after and everyone was shouting and pushing and grabbing. One of our older friends pushed Kate to the ground hard and another friend punched my face. I was so scared and started to cry sat on the hard, rocky ground with my much loved, little sister who was now screaming and sobbing as I held her in my scrawny arms. Suddenly fathers, shop keepers, friends surrounded us and the children were scolded and slapped and mother was there picking us up and Mr Christou was picking me up and soon they ran us back to the house. He came in and helped mother clean and wash us, all the time muttering about the shame of it, the horror of it and that mother should leave soon.

"No I cried, I love it here, I want to stay" but they did not listen talking about it not being safe anymore and other grown up things I did not understand. That night when father came in very late I again heard them talking and shouting but I was so scared and tired I soon fell asleep.

In the morning father went to work and we were getting ready for school when we heard a loud rumbling further down our street. Small popping sounds peppered amid gangling bells and chickens clucking. Distant screams drifted inside our home. We followed mother outside. I ran into the road to see what this new piercing, booming sound was. My heart jumped in my chest freezing my legs. I stood still as my mind took in the far end of the street where men with white veils over their faces and long machine guns fired into the air and into our screaming friends and neighbours who were running towards us. Behind them a large dark tank rumbled and crushed its way over stone walls and rambling figs. Overhanging clothes were tangled on its grey ominous turret pointing our way. The noise intensified as dogs barked, goats bleated as they ran terrified past. People with wide eyes flew by me as I stood petrified in the road. A man pointed a gun at me and started to let off rounds, whistling sounds screamed by me. Crazy manic eyes stared at me with hatred in their depths. Then Mr Christou picked me up and ran me back to our house. Mother was crying and shaking and Kate was screaming so loud. I hated the noise, the confusion as dust and plaster sprinkled on us. Sounds of bangs, screams, bleats and pops. Then suddenly holes appeared along our hall, mother and Mr Christou threw us to

the ground. Dust filled sunlight streamed in to these ragged holes and the screams continued outside. Mother tried grabbing us to pull us back down the hall. The back door exploded open and screaming and shouting veiled men stormed their way through. I pulled myself and Katy into mother. Mothers body was shaking and sobbing. It soon became clear that they wanted Mr Christou and dragged him away, leaving us alone. He was struggling and screaming in fear. Those sounds pierced my young heart. We must have stood there for a long time until it all went quiet. I tried to hear anything, dogs, goats, people but only whispering wind whistled its way through our home.

Later, mother had our suitcases packed amid a torrent of tears and half explanations. She told us that we were leaving when daddy came home. We all cried and cried and I wondered about Mr Christou and where those men had taken him but mummy would let me leave and shouted at me to stay in the house. I grabbed my teddy, my marbles and books and mummy placed them inside our suitcase. Father came home late after I had fallen asleep and woke us all up. Mothers face was filled with worry, her makeup blurred down in darkened streams on her beautiful face. Father looked older, worried too as he picked Katy up. Outside were Army men standing with guns pointing out into the street where I lived. A large armoured vehicle was parked outside with land rovers in front and back. We walked out of the front door, its holes glaring at us. I looked over and saw Mr Christou hanging by a rope from his veranda. His bruised face with his tongue blue and his eyes no more laughing. I screamed and the soldiers barked orders and we were hurriedly placed inside the grey vehicle.

We stayed on a RAF camp for a couple of weeks, where large grey bombers with hustling soldiers marched about. Golden grasses and tiny flowers were trampled beneath their large black boots. We were finally taken to a large military plane with the other children and mothers. All of them were crying as we took off. I looked outside and saw my father amongst the others all waving as they became smaller and smaller, until only the island was left.

TERRIESA TORODE