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Opening Extract from...

The Thread

Written by Victoria Hislop

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The Thread

Victoria
Hislop

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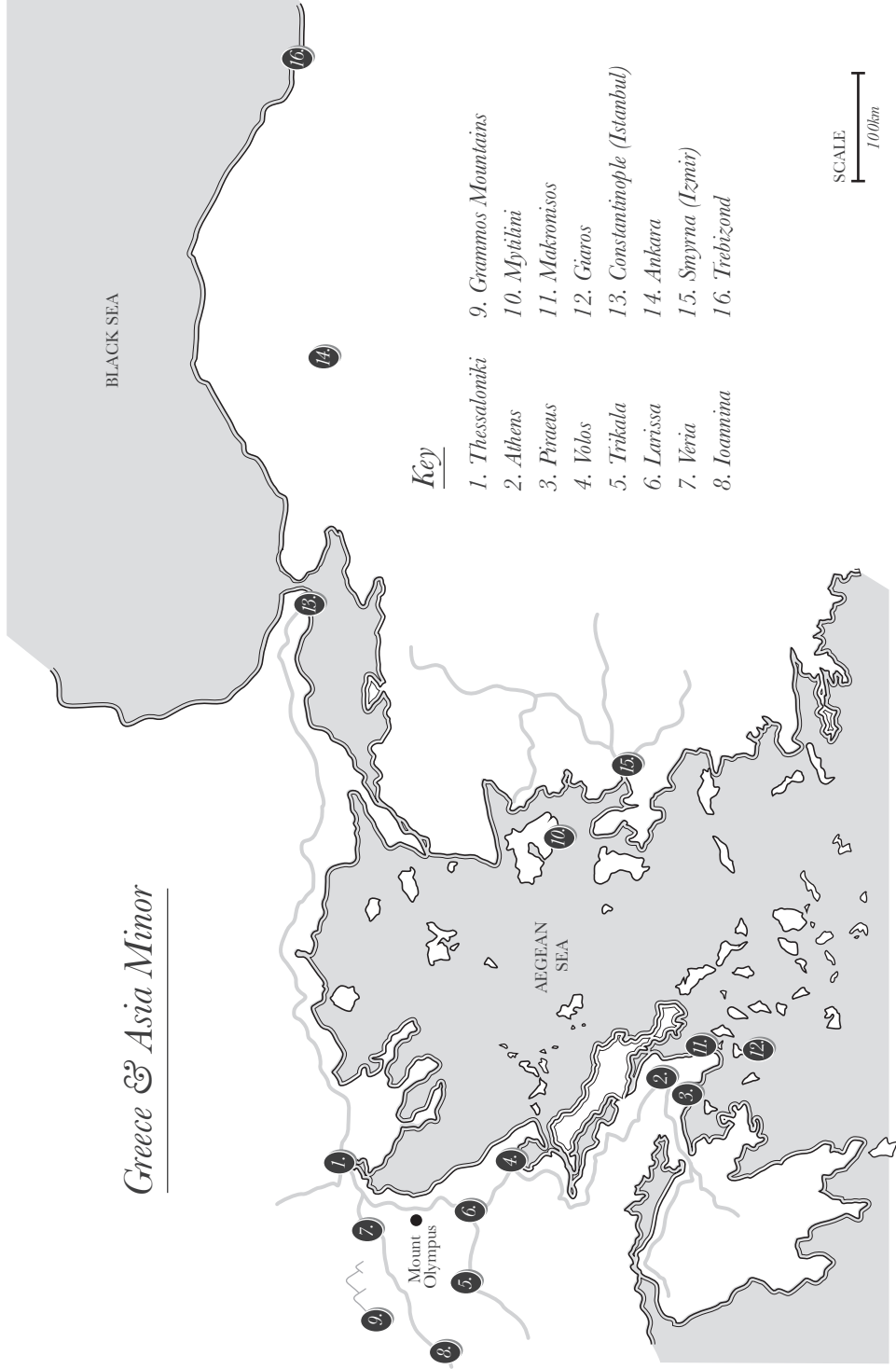
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This story is about Thessaloniki, Greece's second city. In 1917, the population comprised an even mixture of Christians, Muslims and Jews. Within three decades, only Christians remained.

The Thread is the tale of two people who lived through the most turbulent period of the city's history, when it was battered almost beyond recognition by a sequence of political and human catastrophes.

The characters and many of the streets and places they inhabit are entirely fictional, but the historical events all took place. Greece still carries their legacy today.

Greece & Asia Minor



Key

- | | |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Thessaloníki | 9. Grammos Mountains |
| 2. Athens | 10. Mytilíni |
| 3. Piraeus | 11. Makronísos |
| 4. Vólos | 12. Gíaros |
| 5. Tríkala | 13. Constantinople (Istanbul) |
| 6. Larissa | 14. Ankara |
| 7. Veria | 15. Smyrna (Izmir) |
| 8. Ioannina | 16. Trebizond |

SCALE
100km

Thessaloniki



- | | |
|----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Irimi Street | 5. Synagogue |
| 2. Filipou Street | 6. Komninos Mansion |
| 3. Sokratous Street | 7. Komninos Warehouse |
| 4. Komninos Showroom | |

‘What I would like you to do, my dear, is to imagine you are a child again. I hope it won’t be difficult, but you need to get the style right. I want you to embroider one picture that says “Kalimera” in big letters – you know the sort of thing, with the sun rising and a bird or a butterfly or some such creature in the sky. And then, a second one with “Kalispera”.’

‘With the moon and the stars?’

‘Yes! Exactly that. But don’t make them look like the work of a clumsy-fingered child,’ she said smilingly. ‘I’ve got to live with them on my walls!’

Katerina had done very similar pictures many years ago, under her mother’s instruction, and the memory came back sharply.

Her Kalimera was filled in with big loopy stitches, in a glossy, yellow thread, and Kalispera was in midnight blue. She enjoyed the simplicity of the task and smiled at the result. No one would be suspicious of something that was found on the wall of every Greek home. Even if they got stripped out of the frame, the precious pages they had to conceal would be encased inside a calico backing. It was normal to hide the untidy mess on the reverse side of the stitching.

Although there were a dozen people in this small house, there was uncanny silence. Their concentration was absolute, their clandestine activity urgent. They were saving the treasures that connected them with their past.

Prologue

May 2007

IT WAS SEVEN thirty in the morning. The city was never more tranquil than at this hour. Over the bay hung a silvery mist and the water beneath it, as opaque as mercury, lapped quietly against the sea wall. There was no colour in the sky and the atmosphere was thick with salt. For some, it was the tail end of the night before, for others it was a new day. Bedraggled students were taking a last coffee and cigarette alongside neatly dressed, elderly couples who had come out for their early morning constitutional.

With the lifting haze, Mount Olympus gradually emerged far away across the Thermaic Gulf and the restful blues of sea and sky shrugged off their pale shroud. Idle tankers lay like basking sharks offshore, their dark shapes silhouetted against the sky. One or two smaller boats moved across the horizon.

Along the marble-paved promenade, which followed the huge curve of the bay, there was a constant stream of ladies with lap dogs, youths with mongrels, joggers, rollerbladers, cyclists and mothers with prams. Between the sea, the esplanade and the row of cafés, cars moved at a crawl to get into the city, and drivers, inscrutable behind their shades, mouthed the words of the latest hits.

Holding a slow but steady path along the water's edge after a late night of dancing and drinking, a slim, silky-haired boy in expensively frayed jeans ambled along. His tanned face was stubbled from two days without shaving, but his chocolate eyes were bright and youthful. His relaxed gait was of someone at ease with himself and the world, and he hummed quietly as he walked.

On the opposite side of the road, in the narrow space between the little table and the kerb, an elderly couple walked slowly to their usual café. The man set the pace with his careful steps, leaning heavily on his stick. Perhaps in their nineties, and both no more than five foot four, they were tidily dressed, he in a crisply ironed, short-sleeved shirt and pale slacks, she in a simple floral cotton frock with buttons from neck to hem, and a belt around her middle, a style of dress that she had worn for perhaps five decades.

All the seats in every café that lined the promenade on Niki Street faced out towards the sea so that customers could sit and watch the constantly animated landscape of people and cars and the ships that glided noiselessly in and out of the dockyard.

Dimitri and Katerina Komninos were greeted by the owner of the Assos café and they exchanged a few words concerning the day's general strike. With a huge percentage of the working population effectively having a day's holiday, the café would have more business so the owner was not complaining. Industrial action was something they were all used to.

There was no need for them to order. They always drank their coffee in the same way and sipped at the sweetened, muddy-textured liquid with a triangle of sweet pastry, *kataifi*, between them.

The old man was deep into his perusal of the day's newspaper headlines when his wife patted him urgently on the arm.

'Look – look, *agapi mou!* There's Dimitri!'

'Where, my sweet?'

'Mitsos! Mitsos!' she called out, using the diminutive of the name shared by her husband and their grandson, but the boy could not hear above the trumpeting horns of impatient cars and revving engines as they roared away from the traffic lights.

Mitsos chose that moment to look up from his reverie and glimpsed the frantic waves of his grandmother through the traffic. He darted between moving cars to reach her.

'*Yiyia!*' he said, throwing his arms around her, before taking his grandfather's extended hand and planting a kiss on his forehead. 'How are you? What a nice surprise . . . I was coming to see you today!'

His grandmother's face broke into a broad smile. Both she and her husband adored their only grandson with passion, and he in turn bathed in their affection.

'Let's order you something!' said his grandmother with excitement.

'Really, no, I'm fine. I don't need anything.'

'You must need something – have a coffee, an ice cream . . .'

'Katerina, I'm sure he doesn't want an ice cream!'

The waiter had reappeared.

'I'll just have a glass of water, please.'

'Is that all? Are you sure?' fussed his grandmother. 'What about breakfast?'

The waiter had already moved away. The old man leaned forward and touched his grandson's arm.

'So, no lectures again today, I suppose?' he said.

'Sadly not,' responded Mitsos. 'I'm used to that now.'

The young man was spending a year at Thessaloniki University, studying for an MA, but the lecturers were on strike that day, along with every other civil servant in the country, so for Mitsos it was a holiday of sorts. After a long night in the bars on Proxenou Koromila, he was making his way home to sleep.

He had grown up in London but every summer Mitsos had visited his paternal grandparents in Greece, and each Saturday, from the age of five, he had attended Greek school. His year in the university was almost at an end now and though strikes had often meant missed lectures, he was totally fluent in what he thought of as his 'father' tongue.

In spite of his grandparents' pressing invitation, Mitsos was living in student accommodation, but made regular weekend visits to their apartment close to the sea where they almost overwhelmed him with the fierce devotion that is the duty of the Greek grandparent.

'There's been more industrial action than ever this year,' said his grandfather. 'We just have to put up with it though, Mitsos. And hope that things get better.'

As well as the teachers and the doctors, the garbage men were

striking and, as usual, there was no public transport. The holes in the roads and cracks in the pavement would remain unrepaired for many months more. Life at the best of times was tough for the old couple and Mitsos was suddenly aware of their frailty as he glimpsed his grandmother's badly scarred arm and his grandfather's twisted, arthritic hands.

At the same moment he noticed a man making his way along the pavement towards them, tapping a white stick in front of him. His route was an obstacle course: cars illegally parked half on the pavement, uneven verges, random bollards and café tables, all of which needed to be negotiated. Mitsos leaped to his feet as he saw the man hesitate, finally baffled by a café sign that had been planted right in the centre of the pavement.

'Let me help you,' he said. 'Where is it that you want to go?'

He looked into a face that was younger than his own and with almost translucent sightless eyes. The skin was pale, and across one eyelid zigzagged a clumsily sewn scar.

The blind man smiled in Mitsos' direction.

'I'm OK,' he replied. 'I come this way every day. But there's always something new to deal with . . .'

Cars thundered past on the brief stretch of road that took them to the next set of lights, almost drowning out Mitsos' next words.

'Well, let me take you across the road at least.'

He took the blind man's arm and they walked together to the other side, though Mitsos could feel his confidence and determination, and was almost embarrassed to have helped him.

As they stepped onto the pavement opposite, he loosened his hold on the man's arm. Now their eyes seemed to meet.

'Thank you.'

Mitsos realised there was a new danger for the blind man on this side of the road. Close by was a sheer drop into the sea.

'You know the sea is right there, don't you?'

'Of course I do. I walk here every day.'

Promenaders seemed lost inside their own worlds, or immersed in their privately pounding music, and were oblivious to the man's

vulnerability. Several times his white stick caught their eye in the fraction of a second before a potential collision.

‘Wouldn’t it be safer, less crowded, to go elsewhere?’ Mitsos asked him.

‘It would, but then I’d be missing all of this . . .’ he replied.

He indicated with a sweep of his arm the sea around him and the curving bay that stretched in a satisfying semicircle before them, and then pointed dead ahead, to the snow-capped mountains that lay a hundred kilometres away across the sea.

‘Mount Olympus. This ever-changing sea. The tankers. The fishing vessels. I know you think I can’t see them, but I could once. I know they are there, I still have them in my mind’s eye, and I always will have. And it’s not just what you are looking at, is it? Just close your eyes.’

The young man took Mitsos’ hand and held on to it. Mitsos was surprised by the smooth, marble coolness of his fine fingers and was grateful for the physical reassurance that he was not alone. He realised what it would be like to be standing there in the dark, a solitary, vulnerable figure on this busy esplanade.

And in that moment, as his world went black, Mitsos felt his senses heighten. Noises that were loud became a deafening roar, and the heat of the sun on his head almost made him swoon.

‘Stay like this,’ urged the blind man as Mitsos felt a momentary withdrawal from his grip. ‘Just for a few minutes more.’

‘Of course,’ he replied, ‘it’s shocking how intense everything feels. I’m just trying to get used to it. I feel so exposed in this crowded place.’

Without opening his eyes, Mitsos could tell from the tone of the response that the man was smiling.

‘Just another moment. And then you will feel so much more . . .’

He was right.

The strong smell of the sea, the dampness of the air on his skin, the rhythmic lap of the waves against the sea wall were all magnified.

‘And you realise it’s different every day? Every . . . single . . . day. In the summer the air is so still, and the water so flat – like

oil, and I know the mountains disappear in the haze. The heat bounces off these stones and I feel it through the soles of my shoes.'

Both men stood facing out to sea. It could not be described as a typical Thessaloniki morning. As the man had said, no two days were ever the same, but there was one constant in the sweeping view laid out in front of them: a sense of both history and timelessness.

'I feel people around me. Not just people like you who are in the present, but others too. This place is crowded with the past, teeming with people – and they are as real as you. I can see them neither more nor less clearly. Does that make sense?'

'Yes, it does, of course it does.'

Mitsos did not want to turn his back and walk away, even though this young man would not see it. Just in those few moments with him, he felt his senses had been stirred. Philosophy classes had taught him that the things you see are not necessarily the most real, but this was a new experience of it.

'My name's Pavlos,' the blind man said.

'And mine is Dimitri or Mitsos.'

'I love this place,' Pavlos said. His words were heartfelt. 'There are probably easier places for a blind person to live, but I wouldn't want to be anywhere else.'

'No, I see . . . I mean, I can understand that. It's a beau—, I mean an amazing city.' Mitsos quickly corrected himself, annoyed by his own carelessness. 'Look . . . I'd better get back to my grandparents,' he said. 'But it's been great to meet you.'

'It was good to meet you too. And thanks for helping me across.'

Pavlos turned and walked away, resuming the rapid tapping of his spindly white stick. Mitsos stood and watched him for a while. He was quite sure that he could feel the warmth of his eyes on his back. He hoped so and suppressed the urge to rush towards him, to share his walk along the sea, to continue talking to him. Perhaps another day . . .

I love this place – the words seemed to echo around him.

He returned to the café table, visibly affected by this encounter.

‘That was nice of you to give him a hand,’ said his grandfather. ‘We see him most days when we are out and he has had a few near misses on this road. People just don’t care.’

‘Are you all right, Mitsos?’ asked his grandmother. ‘You seem a bit quiet.’

‘I’m fine. I’m just thinking about something he said . . .’ he replied. ‘He loves this city so much, even though it must be really hard for him.’

‘We can sympathise with that, can’t we, Katerina?’ responded his grandfather. ‘These uneven pavements are difficult for us and nobody seems to be doing anything about it, in spite of election promises.’

‘So why do you stay?’ asked Mitsos. ‘You know that Mum and Dad really wish you would come and live with us in London. Life would be so much easier for you there.’

The nonagenarians had open invitations from their son, who lived in leafy Highgate, and also from their daughter who lived in the States, in a wealthy Boston suburb, but something kept them from choosing an easier life. Mitsos had often overheard his parents discussing this.

Katerina shot the briefest glance at her husband.

‘Even if we were given as many diamonds as there are drops in that ocean, there is nothing that would induce us to leave!’ she said, leaning close to her grandson and gripping his hand. ‘We will stay in Thessaloniki until we *die*.’

The strength of the words took the boy completely by surprise. For a moment, her eyes blazed and then they welled up but not in the way that old eyes sometimes seem to water for no apparent reason. These were tears of passion that rolled down her cheeks.

They sat there for a while in silence, Mitsos absolutely still, aware only of his grandmother’s firm grip on his hand. No one spoke or moved. He looked into his grandmother’s eyes, seeking more explanation. He would never have guessed that she was capable of such an outburst, having never thought of her as anything other than a kind elderly lady with a gentle disposition. Like most Greek women of her age, she usually let her husband speak first.

Eventually his grandfather broke the silence.

‘We encouraged our children to go elsewhere for their education,’ he said. ‘It was the right thing to do at the time, but we assumed that they would eventually return. Instead, they stayed away for good.’

‘I didn’t realise . . .’ Mitsos said, squeezing his grandmother’s hand. ‘I didn’t realise how you felt. Dad did once talk a bit about why you sent him and Aunt Olga away, but I don’t know the full story. Something to do with a civil war?’

‘Yes, that was part of it,’ said his grandfather. ‘Perhaps it’s time we told you more. If you are interested, that is . . .?’

‘Of course I’m interested!’ said Mitsos. ‘I’ve spent my whole life half-knowing things about my father’s background and not being given answers. I think I’m old enough now, aren’t I?’

His grandparents looked at each other.

‘What do you think, Katerina?’ asked the old man.

‘I think he should help us carry some vegetables back home, so that I can cook his favourite *gemista* for lunch,’ said Katerina brightly. ‘How about that, Mitsos?’

They took the street that led away from the sea, and found a shortcut through some of the narrow old streets towards the Kapani Market.

‘Careful, *Yiayia*,’ Mitsos said as they found themselves in front of the stalls, where the road was carpeted with pieces of rotten fruit and stray vegetables.

They shopped for shiny crimson peppers, ruby-coloured tomatoes as spherical as tennis balls, dense white onions and dark purple aubergines. On top of the shopping bag, the vendor laid a bunch of coriander, and its fragrance seemed to fill the street. All these ingredients looked good enough to eat raw, but Mitsos knew that his grandmother would transform them into the rich, savoury stuffed vegetables that had been his favourite dish as long as he could remember coming to Greece. His stomach began to rumble.

In the area where meat was sold, the floor was slimy with blood that had dripped from the cutting blocks. They were greeted like

family by their usual butcher, and Katerina was quickly served with one of the sheep's heads that stared at them from a bucket.

'Why are you buying that, *Yiayia*?'

'For stock,' she replied.

'And a kilo of tripe, please.'

She would be making *patsas* later. For a few euros she could feed all of them for days. Nothing was wasted here.

'It's a guaranteed cure for hangovers, Mitsos!' said his grandfather, winking at his grandson. 'So your grandmother has your best interest at heart!'

A ten-minute walk through the dilapidated streets of old Thessaloniki brought them to where his grandparents lived. Just outside the entrance, on the corner, they stopped to greet Dimitri's best friend, his *koumbaros*, at the periptero. The two men had known each other for more than seventy years and no day went by without a heated discussion on the latest news. Sitting in his kiosk all day, surrounded by the papers, Lefteris was better informed about the city's politics than anyone else in Thessaloniki.

The apartment building was an ugly four-storey block built during the 1950s. The communal hall was bright enough, with yellow walls and a row of fourteen lock-up boxes for post, one for each apartment. The pale stone floor, speckled like a hen's egg, had been freshly cleaned with strongly smelling disinfectant, and Mitsos held his breath as they slowly climbed the flight of stairs that led to his grandparents' door.

The stairwell was brightly lit compared with the apartment itself. Whenever they went out, the shutters were always closed but Katerina would throw them open on her return to try and let in the breeze. The net curtains across the windows allowed little light to penetrate. It was always dusk here, but this was how Katerina and Dimitri liked it. Direct sunlight made all the fabrics fade and bleached their wooden furniture, so they preferred to live with pale light filtered through gauze and the dim glow of low-wattage bulbs to guide them around their home.

Mitsos placed the shopping bag on the kitchen table, and his grandmother quickly unpacked their purchases and began

chopping and slicing. Her grandson sat watching, mesmerised by the neatness of the tiny cubes of onion and the evenness of the aubergine slices. Having performed these same tasks ten thousand times, Katerina was as accurate as a machine. Not one shred of onion strayed from her board onto the flowery plastic table cloth. To the last atom they travelled without wastage into the frying pan where steam rose into the air as they met the oil. She had the dexterity of a woman half her age when she cooked, moving with the speed and nimbleness of a dancer around the kitchen. She glided about on the vinyl flooring, moving between an ancient fridge that regularly rattled and back again to her electric cooker, whose ill-fitting door had to be banged hard to make it shut.

Mitsos was completely absorbed, but when he looked up he saw his grandfather standing in the doorway.

‘Are you nearly done, my sweet?’

‘Five more minutes, and everything will be cooking,’ replied Katerina. ‘The boy has to eat!’

‘Of course he does. Come, Mitsos, leave your grandmother a moment.’

The young man followed his grandfather into the gloomy living room and sat down opposite him on an upholstered wooden-framed seat. Every chair had an embroidered antimacassar, and every other surface was dressed with a white crocheted cloth. In front of the electric fire was a small screen on which was a finely applied vase of flowers. All his life, Mitsos had been watching his grandmother sew, and he knew that every item was a product of her handiwork. The only sound was the low rhythmic thud of the ticking clock.

On the shelf behind his grandfather there was a row of framed photographs. Most of them were of himself, or his cousins in America, but there were also wedding pictures – his parents’, and his aunt and uncle’s too. And one other framed photograph, a very formal portrait of his grandparents. It was impossible to tell how old they had been when it was taken.

‘We must wait for your grandmother before we begin,’ Dimitri said.

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‘Yes, of course. It’s *yiayia* who would forego a sack of diamonds to live here, isn’t it? She seemed so angry at the thought of ever leaving. I didn’t mean to offend her!’

‘You didn’t offend her,’ said his grandfather. ‘She just feels very strongly, that’s all.’

Soon enough Katerina came into the room, suffused with the aroma of the slowly baking vegetables. Removing her apron she sat down on the sofa and smiled at both her Dimitris.

‘You have waited for me, haven’t you?’

‘Of course,’ replied her husband lovingly. ‘It’s your story as much as mine.’

And in the low light of the apartment, where it could have been dawn or dusk, they began.