

Taxi to America
A Greek Orphan's Adoption Journey



A Memoir

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Chapter 1
Our First Taxi Ride



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Our First Taxi Ride

“How did they get us into the taxi without an explanation?”

Every time we reflect on that grievous February morning in 1958, my sister and I repeat this question.

Mrs. Azat, our landlady back then, had come into the room our family rented from her, in what seemed like the middle of the night. Her voice was soft and gentle, but it sounded urgent. “Stella, Nitsa, wake up, you must get up and dress fast. Your uncle is coming to take you to the village.” I felt the light tapping of her fingers on my shoulder.

If I had heard those words in the morning after a normal night’s sleep, I would have jumped up and down on the bed. I loved our only uncle, Theo (Uncle) Pavlos. I enjoyed spending time with him, whether he was making a brief visit to our home in Thessaloniki, or we were making an extended visit to his village, Kostohori.

Mrs. Azat’s message of “do as you are told” put us on autopilot. For our theo to be fetching us in the middle of the night—the antennas in my head broadcast “danger.” At seven and ten years old, my little sister and I moved like robots, following the instructions to hurry and get dressed. A flutter in my heart signaled that something important was happening.

Growing up in Greece in the 1950s, we often heard these phrases: “Do as you are told.” “Be a good girl.” “Don’t answer back to an adult.” “Wait until your father gets home.” They were used to shape our behavior into what our parents believed was appropriate for children.

Unlike my sister, I complied with the cultural rules. Whenever I pointed out her insubordination, my parents would say, “She’s younger than you are. Don’t concern yourself with that.”

I could not understand why Nitsa blatantly misbehaved and got away with it. She was my shadow, following me around whenever and wherever she could. Why couldn’t she follow the rules? I expected her to behave as I did. I was too young to realize we are all different and

our reactions to the same situation are expressed in our own unique way. And so, because of her age, I accepted her whining and outbursts being forgiven. "You are older," I heard. "Be a good girl so she can emulate you." It never occurred to me to be anything else. I must have been born with something inside of me that guided me and steered me away from conflict.

After Mrs. Azat's orders, I got up first and waited for Nitsa to slide over. We slept head to toe on the single bed we shared. She, being younger, slept on the inside against the wall.

"Here, you pee first." I guided her across the room to use the chamber pot. We stepped down into the kitchen. With the room rental, we had access to the common areas of Mrs. Azat's house. We lived as one family.

Nitsa and I splashed the sleep from our faces at the kitchen sink. When we returned to the bedroom, we took off our nightgowns and presented our shivering naked bodies to Mrs. Azat.

The oil lamp shed enough light for me to notice our landlady's gray hair was disheveled. It touched her shoulders. She always had her hair slicked back into a uniform round bun at the nape of her neck. She wore her oversized black sweater over her long flannel nightgown, which made her slender figure look rotund. Perhaps because I wasn't totally awake, she looked scary.

She nudged me toward our parents' empty bed. Our beds were separated by my mother's cedar trunk. Neatly folded, my clothes waited for me on the double bed. She prodded Nitsa to our bed.

Something in my stomach didn't feel right. *Just do as you're told. Just get dressed. Please don't throw up.* Whatever was going on in my stomach moved to my head. It felt bigger and squirmy. *Hurry and get dressed.* I wondered if Nitsa was feeling the same way. In the past I would have reassured her with a "Bravo, Nitsa, you're doing a good job." If I reassured her that night, it would have been more to ease my anxiety than to comfort her.

I noticed our landlady's gentle movements as she helped my sister. My hands shook as I hurried to dress. I think back and wonder, which dress did I wear? The everyday one or my best dress that I wore on Sundays and on special occasions? I loved the white daisies embroidered around the neckline of the pale-yellow Sunday dress. In the

limited light I could see Nitsa. Her attachment to me came in handy, as she followed my example and dressed without complaint.

Is Mrs. Azat caressing Nitsa's back to comfort her? Or just straightening the dress? She smoothed Nitsa's bangs and handed me the comb. I noticed the sweater she wore over her nightgown; it hung longer on one side. "You are a big girl now, comb your hair," she said. "You can do it."

My mother always untangled my hair before braiding it or pulling it into a sleek ponytail. I realized this was not a time to ask for help. The snarled ponytail went unnoticed by Mrs. Azat. My mother would not have been happy with my going out like that.

Our landlady appeared normal as she darted between us and the wardrobe where she had our coats ready to go. In the dim light, I detected nothing peculiar in her expression. We didn't dare ask the obvious questions. "Where are our parents? Why are we going with Theo Pavlos? Why are we going to the village? When are Mamá and Babá coming? Will they come to get us from the village?"

As we finished dressing, Theo Pavlos arrived. He and Mrs. Azat conversed in muted tones.

To my sister and me, he said, "Good morning, all ready?"

I thought, *that's all he's going to say to us?*

The somber expressions on the adults' faces brought back the squirmy tingle in my head. I told myself they were being quiet because it was the middle of the night. I was afraid to ask, "Why are we leaving with Theo Pavlos in the middle of the night?" My gut insisted I be a good girl; do as you are told. Whether we were afraid to hear the truth or just behaved the way they taught us to behave, neither my sister nor I dared to ask these questions. Mrs. Azat and Theo Pavlos ushered us out in our custom-made gabardine coats, the ones we wore only on Sundays or on special occasions.

Our neighbor, Mrs. Ismini, crossed the street and met us by the taxi. I noticed her white nightgown trailing under her black coat, just like I had seen in night scenes at the movies. We stood by the taxi. Mrs. Ismini's somber expression mirrored those of Theo Pavlos and Mrs. Azat. The squirmy feeling filled my head with a million ants. The two women bowed their heads. To Theo Pavlos, my sister and me, they whispered, "God be with you" and made the sign of the cross.

I noticed the black armbands on our coat sleeves. I wondered who slipped them on and why.

When I eased my bottom all the way back into the taxi seat, the strangeness of the moment disappeared. *Wow, I'm riding in a taxi. Too bad it's not daylight so the neighborhood kids could see us riding in a taxi.*

I helped Nitsa settle in the back seat with me. We had never been in a taxi. She smoothed her coat and looked around with a grin on her face. The seats were cushiony like the chairs in the living room. Nitsa poked the side of my thigh and slid away from me to the other side. There was enough light from the corner streetlight to follow Nitsa's finger as she drew an imaginary line down the center of the seat.

"This is my side. You stay on your side."

The heaviness of the previous hour lifted. Both of us had recovered from the morning's harsh awakening and hasty dressing experience.

"Too bad it is so early. I wish our friends were outside to see us in the taxi." Nitsa stood up and put her face against the window.

"Nitsa, don't touch any handles. Oh, look, they are coming in, sit back down."

Theo Pavlos, my adoring uncle, sat in the front passenger seat next to the driver. The two men whispered during the slow and gentle ride down the street. I did not try to eavesdrop on their conversation. I wanted to feel the joy of being in a taxi.

Why did it have to be so dark? No one could see us in the milky gray pre-dawn light just before full daylight brightens the landscape. The light in which as an adult I find solace and appreciation, but that night it unnerved the ten-year-old me.

A few blocks from our house, the taxi made a stop in front of the iron gates of Saint Paraskevi Cemetery. Nitsa and I, engrossed in the euphoria of our first taxi ride, weren't concerned about this unannounced stop. I saw the silhouette of a man open the gates. The driver and Theo Pavlos got out of the taxi. Stooped shoulders replaced the usual erect posture of my uncle's slim, towering figure.

The two men approached the gate. In the eerie silence Nitsa and I looked at each other. I reached for her hand and squeezed it.

"Stella, why did we stop?" she murmured.

"Shish, I don't know."

The cemetery was a familiar place for Nitsa and me, but we sensed

that something strange was going on.

On our way to and from school, we would walk across the street from the cemetery. It ran the entire length of our walk to our house. When the mood struck us, we and our group of friends walked through the cemetery, hoping to see a memorial service over a gravestone.

In the Greek Orthodox tradition, a memorial service is held on a specific timeline following a death and on Saturdays of Souls.

When we walked, we would spread out, but within viewing distance of each other. It was easy to spot a priest. They all wore long black robes and high black hats with a veil draped halfway down their back. On a Saturday of Souls, there were as many as six to ten priests in the cemetery.

When one of us spotted a priest, she signaled the others to follow him to the gravestone where relatives of the deceased had gathered. We would stand close enough to be noticed, but not so close as to be annoying. While I watched the service, my mouth would salivate at the prospect of eating the memorial wheat berry, the *koliva*, the traditional sweetened offering commemorating the dead. The wheat symbolizes life and regeneration. As with wheat seeds, we bury the body to have a new life. The combination of granulated sugar, confectioners' sugar, toasted sesame seeds, walnuts, and raisins mixed with the wheat is still a favorite of mine.

Although we were used to being in the cemetery without fear, something felt different that early morning.

We waited in silence. As we always did whenever we were frightened, my sister and I reached across the invisible line and held hands. We squeezed our fingers so hard into our palms that our nails dug into the flesh.

"Where are they? It's almost morning."

I didn't want her to be frightened. "Let's just be quiet, they'll be back soon."

I was pulling her over to my side when something heavy plopped into the trunk of the taxi. We had not noticed any movement. The sound startled us, and its movement jolted us up against the back of the seat and out of our morning stupor. The memory of those few minutes still gives me goosebumps. We said nothing to each other

about the weirdness of it. I put an arm around Nitsa and held her close, like I had done in the past when she was frightened. Were we that well behaved? I had just turned ten and my sister was six months short of her eighth birthday. Why were we reluctant to question what was happening? It was especially unusual for Nitsa not to pester me with a million questions.

She would normally have demanded, “Where are we going?” and expected an answer and comfort from her older sister. She would have badgered me: “Ask Theo Pavlos, he will tell you.” But why were two little girls being so well behaved, frightened, and frozen in place? I imagined Nitsa’s insides were churning like mine. Were we too scared to know the truth? What truth could we even have imagined? Why didn’t we ask the obvious question: “Why are we at the cemetery?”

We sensed that something significant was happening. In our world, the use of a taxi was a luxury reserved for adults. We were envious whenever we saw a family with children in a taxi. After a taxi drove by us, we kids discussed how we would behave when we grew up and had money to hire a taxi. “I am going to take all the kids in the neighborhood to the park and buy them ice cream.” “I am going to take all my cousins to the biggest toy store and buy them whatever they want.” “I am going to ride in one all day long.” On and on we dreamed. That early morning, we had felt excited, happy, and special to be in the back seat of one.

But we contained our excitement because of our startling awakening and the somber look on our theo’s face, so unlike him. Even the taxi driver had a solemn and empathetic expression. By the time we reached the old national road, a two-lane divided highway connecting all the major cities from Athens in the south to Thessaloniki in the north, buildings and other vehicles became visible in the early morning sunshine. Soon we were driving through familiar towns on our way to Veria and on to Kostohori. But this time we sat in the back seat of a taxi, not on a bus like the other times, and it was heavenly.

The route reminded me of the times I went to visit Yiayia at Kostohori. Always on a bus with the nauseating smell of diesel fumes, which made me dizzy and brought the contents of my stomach up. That thought was enough to return me to the moment and sit back and savor the taxi ride. Nitsa and I had not exchanged any words from

the moment we left the cemetery.

The passengers in buses and cars traveling in the opposite direction looked at us in a peculiar way. *They must be envious of us because we are in a taxi*, I thought. Nitsa had moved back to her side. Another peculiar thing was that pedestrians out on their morning routines came to a halt as our taxi passed through the villages. I noticed two grandmother types make the sign of the cross. Sometime Greeks did that when they couldn't believe what they saw or when they wished for someone to be in God's keeping. Several men sitting at a cafe stood up. I locked eyes with one of them. I believed they, too, were envious of us. But my imagination did not come close to what had happened. How could I have known their behavior was out of respect to the partially exposed cargo in the taxi's trunk? Their respectful demeanor was the customary way to show reverence to a passing funeral procession. Unbeknown to us, the cargo in the taxi's trunk was a coffin.