The Mystery of Zitrou Street
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Flora and Christos, who owned the small apartment building in Zitrou Street where Sergei and Lola were tenants, and Kyrios Panayiotis, Flora’s brother, were up in arms. The entrance to Number 10 had of late been singled out for attention by a mystery visitor that struck in hit-and-run fashion, under cover of darkness.

Every night, Sergei and Lola observed Kyrios Panayiotis checking his five cars before going to bed. The cars were parked on the street because there was nowhere else to leave them, and he seemed perpetually agitated at the prospect of finding fingerprints, cats’ paw prints and signs of other transgressions that didn’t bear thinking about. He always hosed the vehicles down between midnight and two a.m., before retiring, whether he detected any visible marks or not. He even hosed down the hulk parked permanently under Sergei's and Lola's ground-floor window. In fact, he often spent longer on that than the other four combined. Not that it made any difference. By morning, the street's population of feline strays had left their version of graffiti all over the paintwork, in the form of dusty or muddy paw prints, while in the course of each day the pigeons added their trademarks. As if to circumvent this practice, Kyrios Panayiotis would sometimes return from work for lunch, the traditional siesta time, to exchange one car for another, but he was fighting a losing battle, outnumbered by insolent pigeons and alley-cats who had nothing to do but dirty his duco.

Every night, after inspecting and hosing down his cars and reparking them a few times, then standing back to admire the final effect, Kyrios Panayiotis scanned the narrow street. He had a clear view from end to end, and there was never a creature stirring. In the scenarios Sergei and Lola invented to account for his eccentricity, they imagined him lying in bed, straining his ears, his poodle, Pele, at the ready. Nobody and nothing could escape Pele’s attention. Such an alert, perceptive, vigilant animal! It was during the couple of hours when Kyrios Panayiotis succumbed to sleep that the deed was done. There on the marble doorstep each morning the Romanian cleaning
lady would find the mark of the miscreant. It was provocative, to say the least. At first the offended parties assumed it was a dog. Well, probably a dog, although with Athens going to the dogs, as it were, who could be sure? With the place overrun with refugees and illegal immigrants, anything was possible. Whoever or whatever the culprit, they were affronted then incensed that they should become the object of such flagrant disrespect.

Flora and Christos and Kyrios Panayiotis held family conferences and sought advice. Sergei and Lola, whose apartment was nearest the front door, were taken aside and warned to be especially vigilant, and to report anything suspicious. Various remedies and deterrents were suggested to the perplexed landlords, to no avail. So it was that the tenants came home to crushed mothballs as a welcome mat. This message apparently made no impression on the nocturnal visitor, and again the cleaner found the offensive offering, garnished with crushed mothballs, in precisely the same spot. The next innovation was to smother the front steps in powdered pepper. The tenants fell about in sneezing fits, but the saboteur was undeterred. Access to other folk wisdom resulted in the porch being covered in steel wool. This was brushed aside, and the inevitable remained as proof that folk wisdom is not infallible.

Powders and gels were applied in the hope that pawprints or footprints would help to identify the culprit, or at least the species. Morning brought the usual unpleasant reminder, but no other trace. The creature revealed no further clue to its identity, just another pathetic little coil of body waste. Kyrios Panayiotis was beside himself. He ranted at Sergei and Lola as he passed them in the lobby. How dare it/he/she! Such insolence! It had to be a foreigner, or at least a foreign animal! Little did he realise how close he was to the truth.

In a frenzy of frustration, he had wet concrete laid all around the porch. He might as well not have bothered, for all the difference it made. Every morning the cleaner doused the marble steps with ammonia. Every night the importunate caller left the usual evidence of trespass.

The situation had become intolerable. Another family conference was called, only this time it took the form of a council of war. In the midst of these grave proceedings,
Sergei knocked at the upstairs door to pay the rent. Flora and Kyrios Panayiotis fell on him excitedly.

‘This is the plan,’ they said. ‘We have hired a private detective to spend the night on the roof of the building opposite. Once we identify the culprit, we shall confront its owner with the evidence, and that will be the end of it!’ They were as jubilant as children on a spree.

The next day, a crestfallen Flora passed Sergei in the lobby, and informed him in subdued tones that, according to the private detective, the nocturnal visitor was actually not a dog, but a small monkey! Sergei, who loved animals, found it difficult to assume a suitably scandalised expression, and could hardly wait to share this latest revelation with Lola. In the meantime, he developed his own hypothesis to account for the monkey’s presence in Zitrou Street.

The monkey, he surmised, was a refugee, just as he himself had been. It had been captured in Africa or Java, and sold to the Ambassador of Spain. The Spaniard had brought the little monkey to Athens, where it became an unwilling inmate of the embassy residence, only one block away from Number 10. There it had spent its days dreaming of escape, longing to find its way back to Africa, or Java. Then one day, when a servant had left a window open, the little monkey had made a run for it.

Now it – actually, she: Sergei was sure it was a she – was hiding out in a derelict house a few doors up the street, marked for demolition since the recent earthquake had sent shock waves across the entire city. And, since monkeys are fastidious creatures, she did not foul her own abode, but sought a convenient place nearby for the necessary purposes. Being too terrified to show herself by day, as Sergei himself had once been, she waited until no creature stirred in Zitrou Street, and then crept out and quickly attended to her needs. What she lived on was a mystery, but probably she snatched food scraps dropped daily in the street, and found pieces of fruit lying outside the greengrocer’s. She must feel so alone and confused, as he could remember feeling when he first arrived in this city, but he didn’t yet have any idea how to help her. The best thing would be for her to somehow be united with other monkey escapees in the public gardens. He resolved to think of a plan to rescue her, as he could well imagine her fear and her bewilderment.

Although Lola, who had initially flown in from Australia with the assurance of a work permit – a very different experience from Sergei’s – warmed to his story, she was inclined to think the monkey’s arrival on their doorstep was somehow connected with the earthquake, which seemed to have sent everyone a little queer. Kyrios Panayiotis, for example, had recently taken to sleeping on the back seat of his car-hulk under their bedroom window, and they couldn't decide whether it was because he'd fallen out with his wife (in which case you'd think he'd be more comfortable in the spare bedroom of his own apartment), or because he was afraid to be caught indoors by the next earthquake, or because he thought someone might steal one of his other four cars. Perhaps he was lying in wait for a glimpse of the monkey. Nor did these speculations exhaust the topic. It could be that he was simply lonely. His wife was a hard-looking, smart-looking woman, and seemed the type who would care more for her own appearance than other people's feelings, so perhaps pot-bellied, soulful-eyed, dishevelled-looking Kyrios Panayiotis was nothing more to her than that sought-after commodity and valuable asset, the Good Provider.

As for the monkey, she'd almost certainly been frightened out of her wits by the earthquake, and, fleeing into the street with her owners when the quake struck, had ended up taking refuge in one of several crumbling nineteenth-century houses a few doors from Number 10. Zitrou Street would probably appeal to a monkey refugee, being too narrow for traffic to flow through. The buildings were mostly old two-storeyed mansions with walled gardens sequestering fruit trees – pomegranates, olives, lemons. The street boasted a bakery and a greengrocer. Certainly Zitrou’s permanent residents thought there was no better place to be.

Before Sergei could intervene with a plan to save the monkey, Kyrios Panayiotis proposed a somewhat different strategy. One evening, bristling with purpose, he approached Sergei, and in a quite peremptory fashion said he would trap the monkey by dangling a mango with a large fish-hook concealed inside it out of Sergei’s and Lola’s bedroom window. Suppressing his sense of outrage on behalf of the persecuted animal, Sergei coldly refused, pointing out that theirs was not the only room on the ground floor facing Zitrou Street.
The following night when Sergei returned home late after his habitual stroll, which helped fill in time until Lola returned from the newspaper where she worked, he was mildly surprised to find the entrance in darkness. As he stepped across the threshold, something lurking there let out a strangled howl as it leapt at him and enveloped him. There was a moan and a muffled crash, a shriek as the lights came on. Sergei peered through the net that enmeshed him, to make out the rotund object at his feet, which turned out to be Kyrios Panayiotis, bruised and sheepish, lying at the foot of the three steps just inside the front door. Flora stood farther back, her hands to her cheeks, giggling and blushing.

‘I tell you,’ said Sergei, ‘it wasn’t me!’
Expecting a jocular response, he encountered speculation in their eyes, and then suspicion, as if a new idea had just occurred to them.

Later the same night, Sergei and Lola started up in bed as blood-curdling howls rent the somnolence of Zitrou Street. It was Pele, howling as if he’d been stung, which proved close to the case. Kyrios Panayiotis had tethered a protesting Pele at the entrance, where they had heard him fretting and yelping before they went to sleep.

Now the monkey had struck with a vengeance, defecating defiantly on its chosen spot on the porch, and giving Pele a nasty nip on the neck before running away. Kyrios Panayiotis was seething. This meant full-scale war. First his porch (in a manner of speaking), and now his pooh. It was too much. By the end of the following day he had erected such a formidable barricade around the front porch that some of the timider tenants feared to enter. There were strange smells and chicken wire, barbed wire and nets, alarms and, most probably, concealed booby traps.

That night, even the monkey’s suspicions must have been aroused, since she transferred her activities to the dentist’s porch across the street. Flora and Kyrios Panayiotis could scarcely contain their elation, and waylaid Sergei to regale him with news of the latest development. Christos, Flora’s husband, had apparently long since lost interest.

There was no further mention of the monkey, until one evening the dentist came rushing into the building, blood trickling onto his white collar from his neck. He was bleating in pained surprise, and simultaneously cursing. It seemed that he had...
somehow managed to capture the monkey, which had become bolder in her sallies, or perhaps developed more pressing needs. Just as he had been about to anaesthetise her with an injection, she had turned and nipped him on the neck, then fled. And there on Number 10’s porch was a fresh symbol of defiance.

Now the tactics changed again. A thin blue gel was applied to the white marble porch each night, making it a perilous operation for residents to enter and exit. No explanation was offered as to its name or composition. Several evenings passed with the predictable retaliation, and then the monkey seemed to disappear. Nobody said anything. Night and morning, the porch remained bare and clean. If Flora and Kyrios Panayiotis had cause for jubilation, they didn’t show it.

Some months later, while Sergei and Lola were spending a few days on Santorini, something in a corner of the museum caught Lola's eye. It was a fresco of some little blue monkeys.

‘Look, Sergei,’ said Lola. ‘She might have been a Minoan monkey. Perhaps she escaped from a wall-painting, not from the Spanish ambassador’s residence. And now she’s back with the other blue monkeys, safe again. Maybe the blue gel helped her make the transformation. Do you remember? It was the same Egyptian blue.’

‘Maybe,’ said Sergei, entering into Lola's fiction. Surrealism appealed to him, although art had never been anywhere near as surreal as life, in his experience. ‘But I think it is something to do with earthquake. Big earthquake destroyed Minoan city where blue monkeys live. Maybe they are her ancestors, yes? And she has phobia from them. So she panics when big quake comes, like everyone, and runs away when all the people run out in the street. She gets confused, and runs some more, and finds herself on Flora's porch… But still I wonder how she is, and where. And I wish we could know this story, why she came to Zitrou Street…’

Obliquely, Lola, too, was contemplating the fate of a small, frightened, homeless monkey in a hostile environment, among people who could seemingly turn into territorial maniacs at the drop of – well, something messier than a hat, admittedly, but hardly life-threatening. She still felt shaken when she thought of the way their hitherto
benevolent landlords had reacted. ‘Seismic country, seismic people,’ she had told
Sergei, trying to shrug it off, but disquieting implications kept sneaking back like the
much-maligned monkey. She kept them at bay by reminding herself how easy it
would be for people in Sergei's and her position to succumb to paranoia.

They were both foreigners, here on sufferance, their situation precarious at
best. But this was the only place that had so far accepted them both. Although
‘acceptance’ was not exactly the right word, either. They were quasi-legal residents
on a temporary basis. She realised that, by current world standards, this represented a
generous degree of accommodation. It was probably the best they could hope for, in
fact. She would probably not be allowed into Sergei's country, nor he into hers. It was
not a good time for migration. It seemed no country on earth wanted more
immigrants. Even little monkeys could be demonised for arriving uninvited and
unwittingly breaching local etiquette.

Realising that Sergei was still waiting for her response to his comments, she
said brightly: ‘I've changed my mind about the recent earthquake theory. I think she
has to be Minoan. I wonder if anyone noticed she went missing from the fresco for a
couple of months?’

Sergei stood behind her, looking at their reflection in the glass of a museum
case. ‘No, Lola,’ he said, his tone sober. ‘No use to pretend. Monkey is like us, and
we are like monkey. Her turn today, our turn tomorrow. We want people to tolerate
us, but they don't really want us here. Next earthquake is very big. I feel it coming.’