

The background of the cover is a bright, sunny photograph of a harbor. In the foreground, several sailboats and motorboats are docked at a pier. Behind them, a row of colorful buildings in shades of orange, pink, and white with blue accents lines the waterfront. The sky is a clear, deep blue with scattered white clouds. The title text is overlaid on the upper portion of the image.

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Uncovering My
Mother's Past
Return

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SOPHIA'S RETURN: UNCOVERING MY MOTHER'S PAST

By Sophia Kouidou-Giles

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“I need to find my mother’s grave,” my voice rang with urgency, “before I leave Greece!” The woman behind the desk sat unwavering at her computer. She didn’t seem to understand. I had just days to locate and visit my mother’s burial site before returning to my home in America. Couldn’t she see the necessity? How important this was? That, after a lifetime of wrestling with the loss of my mother, I’d just gotten a hint that she might not have meant it—that it might not have been her fault. I had to follow whatever paper trail might lead to her grave and trace whatever other clues might still survive along the way.

The clerk, a short, pudgy woman who worked on the second floor of Thessaloniki’s City Hall, did not seem to understand. None of this mattered to her: who we’d been as a family, or who we were today—or who I might be, if I could finally put these pieces of the past back together again. She didn’t even blink as she blithely checked her computer screen once more.

That morning, just as the shops were opening, I had walked again along the familiar, picturesque waterfront and through the park to the modern complex of municipal services that took up a whole city block. Like any other casual visitor, I’d entered through the lobby showered in daylight streaming in from glass walls and

climbed up the stairs to an interior balcony that wrapped around an atrium lined with workstations. My heart seemed to press against my throat as I waited through that slow shuffle—the uncaring pace of bureaucracy, new or old. Watching the woman search through her computer screens, not once but several times, I'd nearly left. Still, I'd waited, breathing as calmly as I could. What cemetery would my enigmatic mother be resting in? What grounds would she be roaming, waiting for her daughter to find her among silent companions and tall cypress trees?

“Sorry.” The woman lifted her head and spoke fast. “There’s no birth or death certificate for Eleni Hadjimichael.”

No certificates? But that was impossible! “My mother lived in this city for nearly sixty-eight years.” My voice came in a rush. My mother had been someone—someone who mattered, at least to me. How could there be no record of her, a whole life erased? “There must be some trace of her here somewhere.” I had lost her in many ways in life, and I was not about to give up on her in death.

My gaze flitted desperately around those sterile offices, but the clerk just shrugged and sent me to another station around the corner. There, a bespectacled man sat at a similar-looking machine. He looked at me blankly as I insisted that my mother’s death certificate must be found. He nodded, though not very convincingly, and I watched his hands press the keys on his keyboard until he finally stopped at one screen. “Here.” He pointed at a document that my father had filed when he’d married my stepmother, declaring that his first wife had no rights to his estate. I took a quick breath, leaning back onto my heels. There it was, a signal of the yet undefined money disputes between them.

“Thank you,” I said, though still it told me nothing of my mother’s burial site, or the rest of the story—so very many years of it. But what if that was it? What if, after all these decades, all this grief, this was all that remained of my mother: just these financial records involving her dowry and divorce? Something in my gut shuddered at the ugly, high stakes of my parents’ divorce that marked the end of the family I had known, the beginning of a second family—and, somehow, the eventual eclipse of the woman who was my mother.

“She was born here,” I told the man. “I know that for a fact.” But he returned a passive look and assured me that there was nothing more he could do.

Now I was coming unhinged. It was time either to turn disagreeable or to give up. Filled with burning anger and the iron will that stemmed from frustration and past failures, I demanded, “I would like to talk to the supervisor.”

The wiry man hesitated, but he finally got up, and I followed him down the hall where he stopped to knock on the supervisor’s door. A woman’s voice answered, “Come in.”

“The lady wants to speak to you,” he said once we were inside a well-lit office dominated by an organized desk with documents piled in a couple of trays and a blonde woman sitting behind it. The man turned toward me and waited.

Persistence has its benefits because the supervisor, a responsive matronly lady, looked at me expectantly. She was short, nearly lost behind the huge desk, a sharp dresser in a light blue suit, and she listened to my explanation sympathetically. When I finished, she nodded, and then she asked the waiting clerk to give me access and time to examine original documents stored somewhere in the complex. I thanked her gratefully, and she returned a warm smile. Then the man escorted me to a room with long wooden tables filled with attorneys peering over papers that they would return to city staff before leaving the room. Another clerk hurriedly carried in and handed me enormous logs, bound in black covers, a series of recorded deaths covering a couple of decades. Entries were handwritten in ink, each line dedicated to one deceased person after another. I ran my trembling finger down the page, tracking names and dates recorded in the customary Greek sequence: day, month, and year. October had been the month of her passing: Iasonidis, Gavriil, Loumis, Mavridou . . . Nothing there. Just in case, I decided that I should check over a period of three, four years to be sure; maybe I had the wrong month. September, October, and November. I took my time. No, still nothing. I shook my head, shut the last tome, and got up, weaving my way disappointedly out of the room, leaving all those useless logs with a clerk. That long morning had ended with copies of my maternal grandparents’ death certificates—but nothing at all about my mother.

Until that warm October morning, I had been confident—blindly, optimistically, and perhaps now, I could see, foolishly confident—that I would finally accomplish my goal of visiting Mother’s grave. After all, she had lived her whole life in Thessaloniki. Had married, given birth, divorced, and finally died

here. How could it be possible that nothing was left to remember her? But somehow, nothing was. Disheartened, I trudged along the shops and morning traffic on Egnatia Street, carrying the only precious documents I could find, not of my mother's life, but her parents'. Still, I couldn't believe that this was the end of the line. Time endured; people endured. I was still here, and I was still questioning. There had to be something, something else that I could do. How could my mother have disappeared entirely? Blaming the bureaucracy was easy enough, but perhaps some of the fault was my own. Perhaps I'd gone too far afield, waited too long, and now the past—my family's and my own—was escaping me. Having lived abroad all these years, I was truly unfamiliar with the bureaucratic processes of my natal home. How did I know, any more, how history was kept? What was Greece? And who was I? "I need help," I admitted to myself finally, speaking the words aloud so they hung in the air to witness my decision, not at all in my nature, to ask for help—beginning with my first cousin who, as far as I knew, had always lived here.

In the past, I had come back to Greece, my sunny, ancient country of a thousand temples to the Olympians, to spend most of my vacation in Thessaloniki, my birthplace, nestled on the northern shores of the Aegean Sea. North of Athens and an hour from the border with Bulgaria, a large metropolis, famous for its Roman and Byzantine monuments, it is the keeper of my story and home to several members of the Kouidis family. Although I had traveled here many times as an adult, this was my longest journey yet, one that I hoped would shed light on significant questions that still lingered in the shadows of my childhood. Now in my late sixties, I kept coming back, roaming its familiar wide streets, the narrow cobblestone alleys, knocking on doors of family and friends, visiting libraries and offices, and being met with smiles or frowns, all along searching out answers.

Why had my mother left me with my father when I was nearly seven years old? Why had she left at all? From what I had been able to deduce, I knew that my parents' story had been, in truth, an ordinary one in today's terms, even in Greece, though the simple facts of the case had been almost unheard of when I was young: divorce; a second marriage; a cheating husband passing time with women willing to pluck the low-hanging fruit of a failed marriage; and my mother

moving back in with her parents, lost in the shuffle. Then as now, it's a sad story—but at least I had escaped such a stressful destiny, scaffolding a future in America, my new country, where I'd launched into a career in social services after completing studies in psychology and social work. Because of my occupation, I had encountered and understood well the plight of children lost in the mix of broken families and custody battles. Time and again, I had witnessed the children's sense of helplessness and confusion.

The loss of daily contact with the parent who leaves the household often weakens the bond between that parent and their child while the relationship with the custodial parent also suffers. This distancing from parents, the primary people in a child's life, often results in acting-out behaviors or withdrawal for children because they feel insecure, and their world seems chaotic and unpredictable. School performance may suffer too, as the child is grieving and has a hard time focusing on their assignments. The impact on me was to resent the loss, the distance from my mother, and become an introverted child, observant and careful in the world. Although I displayed few acting-out behaviors in my teens, it was evident that I had turned inward, often escaping to the world of literature.

So what, then, was missing? I'd launched my life forward, so why was I still gazing back at the past? Whatever held me there remained nameless, shapeless; I couldn't even tell what it was that was haunting me, but whatever it was, something still eluded me—and I had to sort it out. So here I was, now, inside the soaring ceilings and stone walls of our family's Egypt Street loft, glancing up at the pale moon mocking me as it peered down from the skylight. On a dark, rainy evening, alone in the stillness of the old Koudis Coffee warehouse, I replayed old reels of my childhood years. After six Septembers of seeking out answers about what had caused their divorce, all I knew was that my father had had affairs, and my mother's ineptness in the kitchen had caused my grandmother, Yiayia Sophia, to criticize her brutally. These weren't pleasant conflicts between brides and their mothers in-law, but neither were they unique.

So, what was it? Were there more shameful stories, nasty family secrets, and scavengers hiding on the sidelines? Had that tension and mystery been caused by clashing cultures, incompatible personalities, alluring women, or life circumstances that I simply did not know? What, in the end, had sent my mother

away? And what else might have played a role in my parents' break-up? Maybe I had done something to cause their separation? Thumbing through those bureaucratic files in Thessaloniki, I was no longer a naïve youngster, having raised a son and divorced my own husband after a twenty five-year marriage, but some days still made me gasp with uncertainty about my inability to figure it all out, to force that past to reveal itself entirely. Ironic though it was, even someone like me, with forty years of professional experience in child welfare, couldn't seem to unravel the skein of my own story.

Through the unlatched roof window, sunlight peeked over the brow of Mt. Hortiatis and washed the room. A cruise ship's horn signaled its departure from the port, waking me up before the alarm went off. That morning, I would return to the Pacific Northwest, and my cousin was giving me a ride to the airport. He had been my father's favorite nephew, a boy he loved and teased, and a constant support to me who for many years had pummeled me with invitations to his family home whenever I vacationed in Thessaloniki.

We were traveling along the bay, on a dusky sunrise. After a three month stay, my search in the past had netted me very little. Was it possible he had some answers? He had been kind and helpful to me in the past. He would be honest if he decided to share information. I checked his profile—thinning white hair and Roman nose—and decided to finally ask him. "The courts gave my custody to my father instead of my mother—why would they have done that?" He was, after all, older than me by three or so years and might have known more.

His deep brown eyes, a proud mark of the Kouidis clan, shifted to a far point on the road, as his fingers clutched the wheel firmly. Before he even spoke, I knew what he was going to say: "My parents were careful. They did not have such discussions in front of us kids."

Perhaps not, but I was sure he knew more, even though he was also right: My family held tightly onto secrets. He was one who had always been careful and measured with his words. I had done my homework in order to prepare for this quest and had interviewed several family members, taking notes, sharing what I knew, and confirming my own recollections against theirs. It was gratifying to revisit our younger years as it sometimes led us to tearful musings, rolling

laughter, and even pregnant silences. I had missed opportunities that time affords those who stay put to pan more gold about circumstances and their roots because I left Greece right after high school on a Fulbright scholarship for post-secondary studies.

Reviewing the history of Greece in the early twentieth century— besieged by two world wars and a civil war, reeling from the influx of Greeks displaced from Turkey—gave me the historical backdrop of the era my family lived through. Visiting libraries to read old newspaper articles and contacting organizations that had genealogical information about Greeks from Turkey yielded results about the locations where my people had resided. That led me to travel in distant parts of the Middle East, where my father had been born and lived. The stark reality was that records were scarce, since many had been destroyed or were inaccessible because of wars, fires, and the general lackadaisical record-keeping practices of that era. When I sought my own records, in order to establish a passport and Greek identity card, I witnessed how contemporary Greek bureaucracy was just beginning to enter the age of computers and tracking of documentation. The country was in a state of “reconstruction,” attempting to fill in lost and destroyed records of people and landholdings. I also gained a sense of the socioeconomic and social issues of the time and an appreciation of the obstacles and struggles people had to overcome.

What mattered more at this juncture was the fact that I was leaving Greece again, empty-handed. I had not answered my main question about how the custody had been settled. Recently retired from social services, my oversized suitcase filled with research notes about family history loaded into the belly of an airplane, I had no information about the custody question. Divorced and single, I had been struck by how living on two continents and all the years of settling into the United States had made my childhood story impervious to penetration. Sometimes, I wondered why I had not given up the search.

After bidding my cousin goodbye, I walked on Macedonia Airport’s asphalt tarmac and climbed up the passenger loading stairs. On the plane, following the lineup to the economy class section, I stored my carry-on and coat in the overhead compartment and settled into an aisle seat. Clasp the seat belt, I

placed my laptop in the seat pocket in front of me, reached for a magazine, and smiled quickly at the old woman next to me, unwilling to start a conversation.

The crew started broadcasting “Welcome aboard” announcements, and the whirl of jet engines signaled that we would be on our way shortly. I was about to leave Thessaloniki, my multicultural birthplace that sprawls around lazily in an arched coastline at the top of the Thermaikos Gulf of Northern Greece. Leaning into the drone of the plane, I shut my eyes, preparing to cross worlds, and eventually reached for my laptop to begin studying the scanned documents I had collected on this trip. How could I penetrate more deeply into all the available information, the public records and documents held by family and friends? Undoubtedly, there was resistance from certain people when it came to answering all my questions. If the people I knew wouldn’t help me, I needed another approach. Perhaps what I needed was to hire a neutral party, someone outside my family. Yes, that was it. Next time, when I returned in the fall, I would seek a local expert, someone who could finally help me sort out the mysteries of the past.

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