

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

Sozou-Kyrkou Konstantina
The Nail Varnish

'YOU SHOULD SEE ALL THE NAIL VARNISHES SHE'S GOT. Dozens of them!' I turn the handle of my parents' bedroom door and invite Glykeria in. The room smells of powder and nail polish. I go over to the reddish cherry tree dressing table with the big oval mirror hanging on the wall. When I slide the aluminium shutters of the window open the small daisies curved along the mirror frame make an appearance.

'Awesome!' Glykeria gasps. She runs the tips of her chubby fingers along the small nail polish bottles, with their bold, fancy colours and their shiny, silver necks, lined along the dresser like colourful Christmas tree light bulbs. She then moves her fingers along the black, silver and gold tubes of lipstick.

'They're all different shades of red. *Mana* is infatuated with red,' I say. Glykeria opens a tube and rolls the crimson lipstick up.

'Shall I try it?'

'Yes, do. Careful not to crack it.'

Glykeria slides the lipstick over her thin lips, rubs them together, and peers into the mirror. 'Fancy me? I bet I could make Nikos's head turn with these fleshy, sexy lips, eh?' she pouts. 'What's in here?' she points to a dark wooden chest box with two white doves kissing painted on the round top and two red roses flanking the metallic lock at the front. 'Is it for jewellery?'

'Oh, no. *Mana* hates jewels. She doesn't even wear her gold wedding ring. They're weighing her down, she says. She puts lipsticks there.'

'Can I open it?'

'Sure.'

'There's something written on the inside of the lid. *To the most beautiful woman on earth*. Wow! It's from your *pateras*, eh?'

'Oh, no. He never gives presents. Only money.'

'Even better,' Glykeria bobs her head.

I press the lid down. 'It's from my aunt Stella, from Lefkada, you know her. She gave it to her last summer when *Mana* and I were there on holiday.'

'Really?' her eyebrows meet. 'She must love her very much.'

'She does.'

Glykeria wipes her mouth clean with her sleeve and picks another lipstick from the chest box. 'Did your parents marry for love?'

'*Mana* says it was an arranged marriage. They hardly knew each other before tying the knot.'

'Same as my parents.'

'Come and see *Mana's* swimsuits. You'll be stunned,' I lead her to the

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

wooden wardrobe opposite the double bed and drag a drawer open. I pinch one swimsuit after the other, all kinds of colours of bikinis and demonstrate them by fitting each top onto my breasts.

'Your *mana* has still got a nice figure.'

'Yeah, she's gorgeous.'

'Mine only wears a one piece swimsuit, the same blue one every year. You can still see her tummy wobble through it, like a water balloon,' she blows her cheeks and waddles like a duck. 'What does she need all these for?' she points to the bikinis. 'You don't go to the beach very often, do you? The travel there is such a drag. I always fall asleep in the car.'

'She bought them when she was at Lefkada. Oh, you should've seen the beaches there. Turquoise, clear water you want to swallow it. And the pines up the mountains scent the place so sweetly! *Mana* was in love with the place. She says she wants us to leave the mountain and live there forever but *Pateras* says he wants to live and die in the same village his parents and his grandparents did.'

Glykeria opens another drawer where knickers and bras are. 'Look at these!' she picks up a red bra with an elaborate lace along its cups. 'Awesome! I wish I had one of these. *Mana* told me to go ask *Pateras* when I said I wanted to buy a bra. Couldn't possibly look him in the eye and ask for such a thing! It's not a book, for god's sake!'

'I've got many bras. And my breasts are not as big as yours. Look like puberty pimples full of pus, *Mana* says, but she still buys me one when I ask for it. I can give you one of my own, if you want to. Though I doubt it'll fit you.'

'Can you?' Glykeria claps her hands and jumps on her toes excitedly. 'Thanks Fani. You're a real friend,' she pats me on the shoulder. 'That's why we should become sisters in law. Why don't you think it over, eh?'

'About your brother?'

'Yeah. I can fix you up with him any time you tell me. He's nuts about you. A great guy! He'll do whatever you tell him to do.'

Giannis is a nice boy but all he does when I talk to him is bend his head and answer to all my questions with a frail yes or no, his face blotched with blushes. I don't want to upset Glykeria but he's not my type. He's so boring. 'I don't think... He's a bit... You know, shy.'

'He'll change. When you know him better, you'll see he's not that dull. You'll discover new, interesting things about him.'

'Maybe, but, anyway, I'm in love.'

'Not with that macho guy...' she screws her face up.

'Yes, Makis is my dream boy.'

'But he smokes and he's got a new girlfriend every week.'

'So what? All boys in the third year smoke and he still hasn't met me, has he? He'll change. We'll go steady and...'

'Dreams. Don't fool yourself. He's never noticed you anyway.'

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

'I'll make him notice me. I'll give him my phone number one day and you'll see.'

'Your parents will kill you.'

'They won't know.'

Glykeria shrugs. 'Well, do what you want. I won't stop you but mind my words, you'll put your foot in it.' She points to a dozen shoes lined up in a corner of the room and says, 'Awesome! All these high heeled shoes! And such bright colours! Does your *pateras* make them?'

'No, my *pateras* doesn't make shoes. He just mends them. He's a cobbler.'

'I guess you've never run out of shoes in this house, eh?'

I nod. 'Let's go downstairs. They'll be coming home soon.' We put the swimsuits and the bras back into the drawers and trot down the stairs and into the kitchen. *Yiayia* is busy making *glyko tou koutaliou*. The kitchen is warm and smells of syrup. A casserole where water and sugar are boiling is on the hob and *Yiayia* has just cut the quinces into small parallelograms and trapezoids and she's pouring them into the bubbling water.

'How are my girls?' she smiles, stirring.

'Fine, thank you,' Glykeria says. 'My *mana* makes quince spoon sweet every autumn too. We gulp it down within a week.'

'I bet you do,' *Yiayia* wipes her hand on her brown apron.

'*Yiayia* locks the jars with the sweet in the dresser. Look but do not touch, like the exhibits in a museum. She says they're for visitors only,' I drag the "only" a bit, aiming at *Yiayia*. Glykeria frowns. 'Only *Mana* and *Yiayia* have got the key.'

'Fani! What will the girl think about us? We give you some whenever you ask for it, don't we? If we left it open, it'd have gone in a flash,' she cocks her head to one side knowingly.

'Maybe'. I go over to the window and look out. The sun has started its slow descent behind the mountain, the deep red semi-circle colouring the clouds there peach-orange. 'When are they back, do you know *Yiayia*?'

'When your *mana* decides so. When she's fed up with gossiping and talking about hairdos, nail polish and lipsticks.'

Glykeria goggles at me and breathes into my ear, 'She doesn't like her much, does she?' I nod. *Yiayia* always makes a fuss about *Mana*'s lack of housewifely skills. She says she lets us eat our spaghetti without cheese because if she grates some, her nail polish will scrape off. And she wouldn't mind feeding us re-heated lentils for days on end.

'She has let me finish off with the sweet and then clean and fry the fish for dinner. No respect for old age these days,' she sniffs into her sleeve. At that moment the door clicks open and my parents walk into the room.

'How are you girls?' *Mana* hangs her leather bag on the wooden stand next to the door. *Pateras* smiles at us and slumps into an armchair in the living room with a sigh. He looks weary, his back arched, the result of all

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

these hours daily mending shoes in the workshop, his hands calloused from all the beating and nailing, the skin smelling of leather and rusty iron.

'How was school?' *Pateras* asks.

'Thank God, over until Monday,' I say.

'Oh, you lazybones!' *Mana* mock slaps me on the nape of my neck. Her breath smells of cinnamon. She always chews a candy after a meal out, when she can't brush her teeth. 'Are you staying for dinner?' she asks *Glykeria*.

'Oh, no, thank you. *Mana* is waiting for me. So, have a nice evening everyone,' *Glykeria* walks out and I dip myself into the flowery sofa.

Yiayia comes and sits on the sofa across from *Pateras*. 'What took you so long?' she says through clenched false teeth, her wet hands resting on her lap.

'She wouldn't budge,' *Pateras* says. 'I was beginning to think they'd soon ask us to leave. You should've seen their faces,' he chuckles.

'Oh, no. They just hated the fact that I beat them at poker, that's all.' *Mana* pats her blond curls at the back of her head into tighter coils.

'In my time,' she raises her index finger while looking at *Mana* sideways, 'all your father-in-law had to do was roll his eyes once and everyone in the family would rise in a flash, bags in hands, and rush to the door. No second nod was needed. The first one was an order enough.'

'Those days are gone for good,' *Mana* says. *Yiayia* grunts for an answer.

Pateras takes out his right moccasin and rubs his foot on top, which is dappled with varicose veins, like a lamb's small intestines, the tattered shoe looking like a scarred face yowling.

'You need new shoes, son,' *Yiayia* says.

'What am I here for?' *Pateras* says. 'I'll mend them.'

'There's nothing there to be mended. Their days are numbered,' *Mana* says scornfully and heads to the stairs. 'Going to change.' *Yiayia* gets up with a groan, rolls up her sleeves and shuffles to the sink.

It's Saturday morning. *Pateras* is at work and *Yiayia* has gone to our field just outside the village to collect greens. *Mana* is in the kitchen with *Georgia* making almond chocolates. It's one of the few times *Mana* is making sweets but it's my name day in a couple of days and she wants to have a treat for anyone who visits. The kitchen smells of chocolate and roasted almonds. I open the fridge and take some goat milk out. The almonds are in a baking dish on a mat on the kitchen table. I can hear crackling sounds as they're cooling out. It's as if they're birds chirping and chatting to each other and they still haven't stopped creaking by the time I take my empty glass of milk to the sink. *Georgia* is taking sips of her Greek coffee, red lipstick smudging the rim of her white cup. She and *Mana* must be the only women in the village who always wear lipstick and nail polish whenever they make a visit, even to the baker or the grocer. They say a woman must respect herself and that there's no excuse for her to appear in public

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

slovenly or dirty. *Mana* is stirring some plain chocolate in a small pan on the hob. She holds the spoon from the top of its handle and cradles it like a straw over her frappe. Her right little finger is stretched away from the others, as if refusing to do its bit.

'How long does it take?' *Mana* asks Georgia.

'Well, until it melts really. Let me see,' she stands up and puts her nose over the pan. 'It's ready now,' she grabs the pan by the handle and places it onto a folded kitchen towel on the table. She then pours the almonds into the pan and stirs. 'There, now place spoonfuls into the baking dish, a bit far from each other so they don't stick together and let them cool in the fridge.'

I sit there, elbows on the table, holding my cheeks with both hands, staring at the pan and drooling over the melted, aromatic chocolate smeared all over its walls. *Mana* reads my mind and says, 'You can scrape off the chocolate with a spoon,' and hands me the pan. My spoon shrieks its way all over the remains of the dark chocolate, the taste bittersweet on my tongue.

'Why don't you go watch some TV,' *Mana* tells me as soon as she sees that I have abandoned the spoon and started dabbing my index finger onto the chocolate coated pan and then lick it, smacking my lips. It's time they had their grown up talk and I have to disappear from the scene. I put the pan in the sink and wash my hands and face. Go over to the sitting room and turn on the TV. There's nothing interesting on but I keep zapping until something appears when I hear *Mana* say,

'Once a month, if I'm lucky.'

'Really?' Georgia says.

'Like a cold stone, I'm telling you. No matter what I do, he's never, you know...'

'I know. Poor thing!'

'I'm tired Georgia. No surprises there. Nothing.'

Are they talking about *Pateras*? What's wrong with *Mana*? He's been so kind to us. He's always been a simple man. Why does that bother her now?

'What about the other one?' Georgia says. I prick my ears to hear some more but then suddenly *Mana* closes the kitchen door and everything is turned into a muffled murmur.

Monday is the happiest day of my life. *Makis* smiled at me when I slipped a piece of paper with my phone number into his palm at the break. He even winked. I'm so happy. The boy of my dreams is going to call me. After school I practically fly home, my heart banging against my chest, the phone insistently, joyfully ringing in my head. I open the main door of the house and throw my rucksack onto the tiles in the corridor. There's something wrong. The house is dark, damp, the curtains closely drawn. I can hear *Yiayia* saying with a gruff voice from somewhere in the sitting room,

'You should've put your foot down earlier. You should've seen it com-

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

ing. She never appreciated all you've given her. Leaving like that... I've told you...'

'Oh, for God's sake!' *Pateras* growls and then I hear him sob. I feel my knees crumble. I've never heard *Pateras* cry before. Only once, when grandpa died. I've seen him moved but never cry out, never weep like that. In the sitting room *Yiayia* is sitting on the sofa, left arm resting over her stomach, right hand cupping her mouth. *Pateras* has sunk into an armchair, his face shielded with both hands, shrunken like a featherless, newly born bird that's dropped from the nest. They don't see me as I shuffle into the living room when I catch sight of the wood dresser. The glass door of the upper shelves is open, the key still in the keyhole. On display there are jars with silver, round caps, red quince, green aubergines, orange kumquat and bitter orange preserved in syrup, like bottles of various colours of nail polish, the pieces of quince edgy and sharp like roughly cut nails swimming in bright red nail varnish, fancy red, bold red, so bold it makes my eyes smart.