

SHRIEKING ASHES OVER SMYRNA

By Jerold London

With the Inspiration of Dr. Niki Karavasilis

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SHRIEKING ASHES OVER SMYRNA

TIME AND PLACE

Present. Nighttime, followed by a daytime visit to the Museum of Greek History.
Unfinished.

At the rise, far **stage right**, stands an abandoned, two-story house, on the outside of which is a flight of wooden stairs, leading up to the second floor.

Center stage is Antonía's and Kyros's bedroom.

Stage left is the small theatre and adjacent area of the Museum of Greek History. A screen **upstage** shows the documentary described in Scene 2.

CHARACTERS

ANTONÍA, early 30s, pregnant.

KYROS ("Kris"), Antonía's husband. Early 30s.

Their two Children (non-speaking parts).

A dream MONSTER (non-speaking part). Think Grendel.

GIRL, teenage or early 20s. Essentially a dream character whose voice, like that of a modern 8-year-old, lilts like a spiritual chant.

VOICE OF ANASTASÍA PETRAKIS, narrator of the documentary. In her 80s.

... in the dialogue indicates a thoughtful break.

... // signals the starting point of interrupting (but **not** overlapping) text.

My body, mind and memory retch in flames in Hell.
My tongue, my lungs, my eyes, my skin as well.
Secreting sanity through blistering pustules of pain.
Releasing reason through horrors that bespeak no name.
From gaping mouth and throat too burnt to yell,
my frenzied screams cannot escape my brain.
But Satan and his fire alone exhale upon my breath,
to reek of burning flesh and ring of shrieking death.

– loosely from Arthur Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell, Night in Hell*

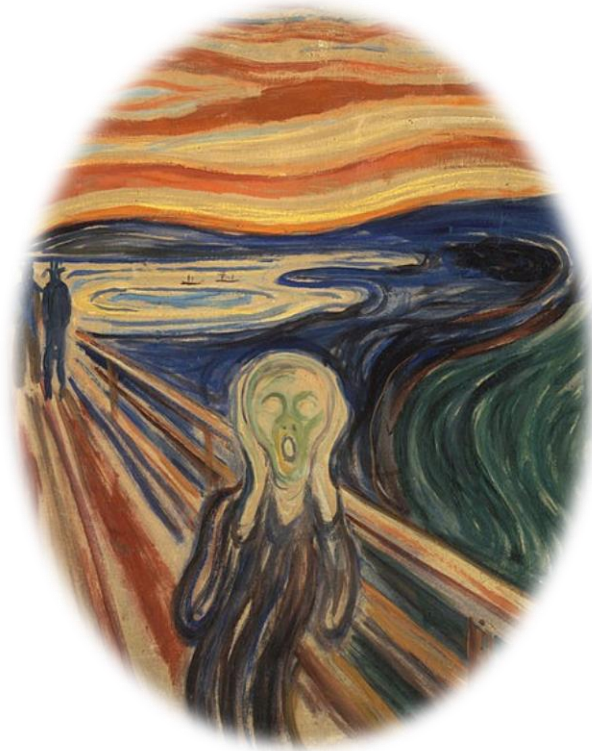


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Hear the loud alarum bells –
Brazen bells!
What a tale of terror, now, their turbulency tells!
In the startled ear of night
How they scream out their affright!
Too much horrified to speak,
They can only shriek, shriek,
Out of tune,

In a clamorous appealing to the mercy of the fire,
In a mad expostulation with the deaf and frantic fire,
Leaping higher, higher, higher,
With a desperate desire,
And a resolute endeavor,
Now – now to sit or never,
By the side of the pale-faced moon.

– from Edgar Allan Poe's *The Bells*

Alas, poor country!
Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot
Be called our mother, but our grave; where nothing,
But who knows nothing, is once seen to smile;
Where sighs and groans and shrieks that rend the air
Are made, not marked; where violent sorrow seems
A modern ecstasy; the dead man's knell.

– from William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

It is a place of shrieks.
It is not happy.
'This is where you will come when you are ready.'
The night lights are flat red moons.
They are dull with blood.
I am not ready for anything to happen.
I should have murdered this, that murders me.

– from Sylvia Plath's *Three Women*

SCENE 1 – A SCREAM IN THE NIGHT

In darkness a spot falls on ANTONÍA, alone in bed **center stage**. A shadow passes through the room, and she sits bolt upright, panting.

ANTONÍA

Who's there?

Silence. She stares out, in fear. Suddenly the shadow bursts upon her, and she shrieks in terror. It grabs her by the foot as she continues screaming and attempts to pull away. The thing catches her other foot and begins pulling her apart, as if to split her up the middle.

ANTONÍA

[screaming] Help! Help! O God! Help me!

The shadow lets out a hideous laugh and then exits. ANTONÍA drops back into sleep again. The spot fades into total darkness. In a few moments, in the darkness:

VOICE OF ANASTASÍA PETRAKIS (offstage)

Nothing annihilates like fire,
just as nothing scorches the soul like rape.
Heaven help us:
We don't know what we don't know.

Stage left: A GIRL, thin, teenage or early 20s, and clothed in something that looks and fits like a gray sack around her, enters carrying a flashlight and wearing a backpack. She cautiously picks her way across to a two-story abandoned house, stage right, turns on her flashlight, and climbs up a flight of outside wooded stairs to the second floor, where she lets herself in through a window. We can see the light of her flashlight making its way, painfully, to an interior staircase, and

down to the first floor. The house is so crammed with boxes, papers and junk she can barely squeeze through. After a period of time the GIRL emerges, with flashlight but without backpack. She belly-crawls upstage, and there is an explosion which collapses the house. Its wreckage remains onstage.

Darkness.

Lights rise. ANTONÍA is asleep in her bed, center stage. The GIRL has a perch somewhere atop the stage-right wreckage, but the sense of her surroundings is one of being on the top bunk in a jailhouse cell. KYROS enters, stage-left, and stands a moment, looking across at the GIRL.

Silence.

KYROS

[calling] Are you awake?... Girl? Up there... Can you hear me?... Anything?

GIRL

I don't know you. Go away.

KYROS

I called, and told them to tell you I was coming.... To talk to you.

GIRL

Cold. You called cold.

KYROS

I sent my CV, along with a picture.

GIRL

I don't know you.

KYROS

What more do you want?

GIRL

I want you to go away.

KYROS

But I've come all this way.

GIRL

References. Give me references. You gave no references.

KYROS

From whom?

GIRL

From Greeks, of course.

KYROS

Greeks? I'm Greek. What Greeks?

GIRL

Greek martyrs.

KYROS

I don't know any.

GIRL

What good are you then? Without a memory. Just go away and leave me alone.

KYROS takes a step toward the wreckage.

GIRL

Don't come any closer.

KYROS

[stops] As soon as I heard what you did.

At your age.

I knew I had to meet you.

Because I'm desperate for something like what you did.

I'm at a roadblock in my life. Stuck in an attitude.

Because I feel I need to explode. To destroy something. Big.

Like you did.

Which is one hundred percent foreign to what I had believed before.

GIRL

And that matters to me?

KYROS

Why?

GIRL

Why what?

KYROS

Why did you do it?

GIRL

If you don't know, you'll never find out from me.

KYROS

My intentions are honorable, I assure you.

GIRL

What use are honorable intentions in *this* world?

KYROS

I want to learn. I'm willing to learn.

I want to write. I'm willing to write.

I want to change things. I'm willing to change things. Like you did.

Be my guide. Be my eyes. Be my soul a mile.... Please.

GIRL

Go away.

KYROS

Can't we even talk about it?

GIRL

No we can't, Mr. Know-It-All Nose.

KYROS

Please? Please? Please, with a mountain of scrambled eggs and feta cheese?

GIRL

If you must. Mr. Know-It-All Nose.

If that's the only way to shut you up.

KYROS

Can you can hear me all right? Up there?

GIRL

I wish I couldn't.

And don't you dare come any closer.

KYROS

The name's Kyros.... Or Kris, if you like.

The name is Know-It-All Nose. **GIRL**

What was it like? **KYROS**

Where? **GIRL**

In the empty house. When you went in.
Before you blew it up. **KYROS**

I went, a lot. **GIRL**

Why? Why did you go a lot? **KYROS**

It was full. **GIRL**

I thought it was empty. **KYROS**

It wasn't. **GIRL**

It wasn't? There were people in there? **KYROS**

There were voices. Whispering voices. Martyrs' voices. Trapped. **GIRL**

Trapped by what? **KYROS**

Sixteen tons of hoarding. **GIRL**

Hoarding? What's hoarding got to do with fireworks? **KYROS**

You don't know? **GIRL**
Hoarding's everything to some people.

Why?
KYROS

If you don't know, don't ask *me*.
GIRL

Tell me anyway.
KYROS

Why?
GIRL

Because I want to learn.
KYROS

Because you're ignorant.
GIRL

Too ignorant, sadly, before I die.
KYROS

Why?
GIRL

To know why people do the strange things they do, before they die.
KYROS

Why do you need to know?
GIRL

Because it's my testament to tell the world.
KYROS

About hoarding?
Or about leaving behind everything you own, except for one sack?
Or about burning?
GIRL

Hoarding. Boarding. Running through the night.
Shrieking. Freaking. Burning out of sight.
Burning here. Burning there. Burning, take your pick.
Burning Rome. Burning Troy. Burning bodies politic.
KYROS

It was only a second degree burn.
GIRL

What was?
KYROS

Their hoarding.
GIRL

Why? Why was it only second degree?
KYROS

If you have to ask, you'll never understand.
GIRL

Try me.
KYROS

Why?
GIRL

Because I'm here. Because I'm asking. Because I care enough to ask.
KYROS

Because your life depends upon it?
GIRL

Does it?
KYROS

If you think so....
But you don't think do you?
You just watch.
GIRL

I watch. It's what I do.
KYROS

No wonder you're stuck in an attitude.
GIRL

You don't know me.
KYROS

You don't know that.
GIRL

I was born to watch.
KYROS

GIRL

Watch, and not move.
Wait, with your teeth in your mouth and your feet in the sand.
What is it with you, anyway?
Do you like seeing people die? Do you dream about it?

KYROS

What?

GIRL

You haven't tried killing yet, have you?

KYROS

God no!

GIRL

What about dying? Have you tried that?

KYROS

No.

GIRL

Maybe you should....
If you plan to write about it.

KYROS

What?

GIRL

There's a microscope under these ruins. It could help you see.
Do you know what a microscope is?

KYROS

Tell me.

GIRL

It's a miniature of the real thing.
Crushed out windows. Burnt baby photos. Spent orange peels.
Death you can smell....
Can you see out there?
With ashes in your eyes and smoke in your ears?

KYROS

A microcosm.

A what? **GIRL**

You said “microscope.” The word’s “microcosm.” For a miniature world. **KYROS**

Fuck you. **GIRL**

What’s it like? **KYROS**

What is what like? **GIRL**

To kill a child? **KYROS**

How would I know? **GIRL**

You tried to. **KYROS**

I did not. **GIRL**

You’re a child. **KYROS**

I don’t count. **GIRL**

Why not? **KYROS**

I already had no life. **GIRL**

That’s crazy. **KYROS**

GIRL
It was the spirits here ... crazy ... needed release.
All I did was to free some trapped spirits.

KYROS

From the crazies?

GIRL

Too much stuff, stacked everywhere, with no space.
It can drive anything crazy.... Except, maybe, cockroaches and mice.

KYROS

So why did you say you already had no life?

GIRL

Have you ever been raped?
Driven, burnt, raped and battered?

KYROS

No.

GIRL

Then you don't know me.

KYROS

Help me. Help me to understand.

GIRL

Help you to forget.

KYROS

Help me not to forget.

GIRL

Not you.

KYROS

Why? I won't betray what you tell me.

GIRL

[*pause*] I was raped that night. Beaten. And left to die.
Fourteen and raped. More than once.

KYROS

Oh....

GIRL

Spirits lived in this house. After everyone else had left.
They kept me. They kept me alive.

KYROS

How many of them?

GIRL

Five.
And one or two maybe I never met.
Suffocating in all that junk.
They fed me, and I freed them.
And the chairs, too.
Straight-backed. Wood and wicker.
Up, on boxes.
One was painted purple.
I used to get it down and sit in it.
Purple, like the dress I once had.... In Smyrna.

KYROS

You had a purple dress?

GIRL

I imagined it.

KYROS

Did you like it?

GIRL

I liked other chairs better.
My favorite was just my size.
It's where I put the explosives.
Crystal meth and nitroglycerin.

KYROS

What's it like, to kill a child?

GIRL

One of the spirits was a child.
She used to run her fingers over my lips as I sat in my favorite chair.
And there was no better place in the world I'd rather be.
Like this.

The GIRL runs her fingertips over her lips.

KYROS

What's it like, to kill a child?

GIRL

There is no likeness. Hellish black and burns forever.

KYROS

I can imagine.

GIRL

No you can't.

KYROS

I'm a writer.

GIRL

Do you want to hear it?

KYROS

Hear what?

GIRL

What it's like. Do you want to hear what's it's like?

KYROS

You can do that?

GIRL

I have powers you can't imagine.

KYROS

Go ahead then.

The GIRL shrieks in terror.

GIRL

When it's done, it's done.

KYROS

My God! What have you made me see?

KYROS covers his face with his hands.

GIRL

Everything set free.

Spirits. Demons. Death. Life. Cockroaches and spiders.

KYROS

Oh.

GIRL

There *is* no likeness.
I told you.
It turns you into a prawn.

KYROS removes his hands from his face.

GIRL

They say five girls in twenty are molested. And most never talk about it.

KYROS

I can't imagine.

GIRL

There's a screen across life that hides it.
Like hiding the genocide at Smyrna.
That only Hitler watched.
Preparing for his own.

KYROS

No thank you.
I have seen enough.

GIRL

I could kill you, Kyros, with the powers of my mind.

KYROS

How?

GIRL

Show you the other side of darkness.

KYROS

What's it like?

GIRL

There *is* no likeness.
It crushes your skull.
It makes you a ghost.

KYROS

Is that what you are now?

GIRL

A ghost. Yes. Aren't you getting tired of staring at me?

KYROS takes another step toward the wreckage.

GIRL

Don't come any closer. I've warned you.

KYROS

[stops] You don't know me.

GIRL

You're a Frankenstein sewn together from other people's grief.

KYROS

Is that what was in those boxes? Grief?

GIRL

Useless crap. Mostly forgotten. Like grief.

KYROS

Then what was the point?

GIRL

If you need to ask, don't. You'll never understand.

Hoarding's too precious to let things go.

Hoarding's a wall of preciousness against black ashes of the unbearable.

KYROS

And that's what gave you the right to destroy it?

GIRL

There are ones who make this world what it is.

And there are ones who have the guts to blow it away and make it over.

KYROS

I watch.

GIRL

Now watch me this. Now watch me that.

Now watch me whip. Now watch me nay, nay.

This is your last chance, Buddy, before I kill you.

KYROS

If it helps me prove just *one thing* that I can leave behind.

That life without purpose is vanity,

and revenge, even with a purpose, is *sheer* vanity.

GIRL

You're hopeless. Do you know that? Hopeless.
Why even bother with you?
Why even show you men's bloodied hands in the bodies of gutted children?...
There was once a tree. A great tree.
Twenty-seven hundred years old.
Burnt. To the ground.
Only a few limbs remained.
Heavy enough. But still, only limbs.
And now, they're gone as well.
All that's left are the ashes of their weight.

KYROS again covers his face.

GIRL

Potatoes, stuffed in boxes, in the darkness, think they're in dirt.
They start to grow sprouts out of their eyeballs that suck at nothing,
shrivel and die.
People in boxes are like that too. They become inhuman.
They become like a plague upon their own species.
They breed blood, and flesh, and death, and revenge.
They creep from the grave, and ooze from sewer to sewer.
They cover the pavement. Nothing can wash things clean.
Savage men, drunk with savage fury, committing the ultimate acts of savagery.

KYROS

Savage waste.

Removes his hand from his face.

GIRL

I was a child of my mother, and bits of a fallen star that pierced her heart one night.

KYROS

Oh?

GIRL

And she could not save me to save herself.

KYROS

Did she die?...
If she did, tell me what death is.
Tell me what death knows.

GIRL

Death knows nothing.
It sends some to Heaven, they think. It sends others to Hell, they think.
But in neither place is there peace from the unbearable truth of abomination.
Death's as ignorant as spiders that know nothing of the future.

KYROS

Death must know *something*.
Like ... at least ... when it is.
Death surely must know that.

GIRL

You're dead when you know you're dead.

KYROS

How? How will I know?

GIRL

When lightning strikes over your left shoulder, with no sound.
When you have no reflection in a mirror.
When your whole life feels like a dream.
Or like a cat.
When your whole life feels like the *déjà vu* of a cat.

I could kill you, Kyros, you're so stupid. And I think I will.

Lightning strikes. There is no sound.

The GIRL screams again.

Darkness.

**ANTONÍA wakes up abruptly in her bed,
center stage, accompanied by KYROS,
asleep beside her. She shakes him.**

ANTONÍA

O my God! Kris.
Wake up!
I just had the most awful dream.
It was about you.

KYROS

[*waking*] What?

ANTONÍA

You met this young girl.
And she was going to kill you.

KYROS

What?... Why?... Where?

ANTONÍA

Because she'd blown up this building....
It might have been in Smyrna. I don't know.
And you were asking her why.
And she thought you were stupid.

KYROS

You have your museum trip on your mind. That's all.
And your grandmother.

ANTONÍA

My *great* grandmother.
Anastasía Petrakis.
But I don't think that was it.

KYROS

Do you want to tell me?

ANTONÍA

It was because you wouldn't believe her.
Nobody would.
About Smyrna.
And she was going to show you.
Men's bloody hands in the bodies of gutted children.
Our children.
And it would drive you insane, she said....
It would me.

KYROS

Smyrna was a monster. I know. Retching in flames.

ANTONÍA

[*beat*] O my God! O my God! Kris.
There was another.
I had another dream, I almost forgot.
I screamed. And screamed.
Didn't you hear me?

KYROS

No....
But maybe the kids did.
I thought I heard one of them cry last night.
Just a bad dream, I figured.
And only for ... less than a minute.
And then they went right back to sleep.

ANTONÍA

It was the most horrible nightmare of my life.
And real.
Horribly real.
Something I couldn't begin to describe.
Like a gorilla, maybe, only larger.
And more ugly. And more hairy. And dark.
Unspeakably ugly, and hairy, and dark.
An apelike face with teeth like a saw.
And it howled, with teeth like razors that ate children and people.
It was so strong it could tear the head right off of a man's neck.
It could crush a man's skull like a tomato.
I doubt if Satan is any stronger.
It grabbed me in the middle of the night.
One foot in each hand.
And began ripping me in half.
Up the middle.
And I bled....
Did I bleed?
I must have.

KYROS

You're pregnant. Remember?

ANTONÍA

I could hear his belly growling.
Mindless for the taste of blood. My blood.
Insane. But not.
Like a crazed animal.
And people were wailing.
I heard people wailing outside.
And I shrieked.
I know I did.
How could you not hear me?

KYROS

What do you want me to say?
If I'd heard you, I'd have woken you up.

ANTONÍA

And saved me?

KYROS

And saved you.
Of course.

ANTONÍA

[*beat*] When he let go of my feet.
For no reason.
Laughing at me. Hideously. Wild.
And clawing at his flesh.
I looked into his eyes.
They were burning red.
And in them I saw what looked like a Viking mead hall.
Medieval. In the moonlight.
With blood everywhere on the ground around it.
Red with blood and bloody, headless corpses.
And I saw myself.
A rat.
Nothing but a wiggling rat in his eyes.
He made a vision of myself for me in his eyes without a seam.



Photo from [Wikimedia](#)

ANTONÍA

When he left, I felt cold come all over me.
As cold as an abandoned astronaut in space.
And as blind as a raisin.
It was as though he could see into the future, and let me live....
I don't understand.
If you can see into the future, that doesn't make you make the future, does it?
I mean, why did he let *me* live when he'd killed so many others?

KYROS

I don't know, Love.
Maybe it's like, if you study and understand the past,
will that really make you able to avoid the same mistakes in the future?
Hitler didn't stop the world from Rwanda, did it?

ANTONÍA

[*beat*] Maybe I shouldn't be going today.

KYROS

It's a once in a lifetime experience, Antonía.
Finding that tape she made the year she died.
Your *great* grandmother.
And their splicing it together with those vintage newsreels they found.
You may never have the chance to share this with our children again.
After this exhibit ... who knows?

ANTONÍA

But it might frighten them. And that frightens me.

KYROS

And it might give them something they'll treasure the rest of their lives.
They're Greek, you know. Like us.
And they deserve to know. Smyrna is part of their heritage.
Knowing what the Turks did to the Greeks there is part of their birthright.
Whether it changes their lives knowing it or not.
It's part of *everyone's* birthright to know.

ANTONÍA

I just don't know.

KYROS

You'll make the right decision, when the time comes.
I trust you.

SCENE 2 – VISIT TO THE MUSEUM OF GREEK HISTORY

Mid morning. ANTONÍA (expecting) and her two young children have seen KYROS off to work, and are getting ready themselves for a day trip to the Museum of Greek History. Dressing. Teasing. Childish pranks and all. A home that more than whispers of a well-to-do Greek life. The car trip (in a Mercedes). Seeing a school bus along the way, filled with laughing children. Music.

In the museum they seek out its small theatre, enter, and take seats. The film is just beginning – silent – narrated by ANASTASÍA PETRAKIS, a survivor. Its subject: The rape and burning of Smyrna – recorded footage of Smyrna before the massacre, and its destruction by the Turks in September, 1922. As the recorded voice of ANASTASÍA PETRAKIS plays, the film recounts the facts.

ANTONÍA

[*in a hushed tone*] This is your great, great grandmother's story.
Her name was Anastasía ... Anastasía Petrakis.
Your megáli, megáli yiayiá.
Your great, great grandmother.
She was born in December, just like you, Nikolas.
And she recorded this almost thirty years ago.
The year when I was two and she went to heaven.

VOICE OF ANASTASÍA PETRAKIS

We came from a world of outcast truth and assassination,
to bear our children into a world of outcast truth and assassination.
Why?
Why are you here, if not to hear the truth of my ghosts?
I have ghosts enough to last ten lifetimes. All Greek.
And memories.
I remember springtime, in Smyrna, after the War.
It was 1919. The best time of our lives.
The happiest time of *my life*.
I wish it had never ended.
Mama and Papa. Our beautiful home. My brothers and sister.
All my beautiful clothes. And the purple dress I once had in Smyrna.
I can remember, to this day,
thinking how happiness is the most important thing in the world to me.
The smell of jasmine. All over the city. And laurel. And mimosa. And oleander.
People kept bringing armfuls of flowers to their doorsteps. For good luck.

**The sound of Greek stringed dance
music.**

VOICE OF ANASTASÍA PETRAKIS

I remember how people danced. And sang. So perfectly.
And the soft breezes, just the right temperature, that hugged us on the quay.
And the brasseries, and coffee houses, and restaurants.
They all looked so big to me then.
And how the cobblestones glittered like diamonds under our feet.
And the music.
Everything was so beautiful and happy then.
All of us were so happy.
Walking, and watching.
I was eleven.
Alexander was thirteen. We called him Zan.
Niko was nine.
And Sofie, she was seven.
We were the Petrakis family. Everyone knew us. Life was important.

The music stops.

VOICE OF ANASTASÍA PETRAKIS

Our house was like a palace. Marble columns and staircases.
At the top of a hill. Cypress trees all around.
From our living room we could easily see the quay and the port.
There was a large iron gate at the front.
And along the drive up to the house were rosebushes and magnolias and violets.
I loved our house. It was the Petrakis house. Everybody knew it.
In the back, behind the house, were trees. All kinds:
Peach, almond, apple, pear, olive, orange, and lemon.
And vines that grew the best grapes, for Papa to make the best wine in Smyrna.
Inside, by the entrance hall, was a huge statue of Alexander the Great.
It was bronze. I remember that. He protected us, Papa said.
Zan was named for him.
And a crystal chandelier. Mama called it Baccarat.
We had a dining room with a long marble table, and a tablecloth, and chairs.
Mama called them Louis Quatorze.
And china that Mama called Wedgwood.
A library. And a ballroom with golden walls and mirrors.
Upstairs, where were eight bedrooms with wooden shutters and Persian rugs.
Red, velvety drapes.
Five pink marble bathrooms with toilets and bathtubs all the way from Italy.

VOICE OF ANASTASÍA PETRAKIS

Mama and Papa had parties she called elegant.
All the important people in Smyrna came.

Greek Admirals and Majors, too.
And some foreigners whom Mama called dignitaries.
Ladies would wear the most beautiful gowns and necklaces, rings and bracelets.
Men wore tuxedos and uniforms.
She and Papa loved their parties like I loved my clothes....
Like I loved the secret presents Papa would sometimes bring me.
It was magnificent.
That I remember.

And the food.
And the music.
Those were the most wonderful times.
There was work.
There was school.
There was play.
And there was happiness

And there was envy, too.
The Turks envied our wealth.
Maybe we didn't know how much they hated the way we lived.
And our churches.
We outnumbered them.
More than two to one in Smyrna.
Even though in the rest of the country they outnumbered us.

From the best of times came Hell.
Three years later paradise was lost.
The Turkish army came into Smyrna, along with savage bands of men.
We had to stay locked in our house.
They caught Bishop Chrysostomos and dragged him through the streets.
Stripped off his robes.
Pulled his beard out.
Gouged his eyes out.
Cut off his ears. His nose. And his hands.
When he died, they hung his body up on a tree.
Two days later the Army came and arrested Papa.
They took him down to the quay and marched him away, with other Greek men.
To be a slave of the Turks, hundreds of miles away.
Mama screamed. We all screamed.

VOICE OF ANASTASÍA PETRAKIS

I can still feel them, the Turks. The assassins.
The screams and the anger in my stomach, and down my neck and back.

All the women and children screaming and crying.
To see our men taken away from us.
After that we stayed hidden in our house.
For two weeks, before the Turks broke in.
They whipped Mama with a whip.
Two of them, on horses, rode away with Niko and Sofie.
We didn't know where.
Others doused our house with gasoline, and set it on fire.
We got out with what we were wearing. That's all.
And our lives.
Mama could barely walk, she was cut and bleeding so bad by the whip.
There were fires everywhere.
All over the neighborhood.
The Turks were going house to house, burning down the entire Greek Quarter.
Everything was burned.
All we owned. All our clothes. Everything.
Everyone was crying, and screaming, and running in circles.
We ran toward the quay.
It seemed the only safe place.
Zan and I held Mama's hands, crying all the way.
There must have been a hundred thousand Greeks fleeing burning homes.
And the heat. Some people caught on fire, rushing to the waterfront.
Greeks and Armenians.
With Turks, on horses, cutting people they could reach with their swords.
Cutting them on their backs, and necks, and faces, and heads.
Mama said it was a massacre.
By savages.
Some ran into St. Fotini's Cathedral.
Its bells were ringing.
But the Turks set it on fire too.
Killing everyone they could as they ran out.
But most were trapped inside and burned to death.
A few got out safely, and hid in the tombs of the cemetery.
When the Turks found them they cut off their heads and hands.
Right before the eyes of their mothers.
Right before the eyes of their children.
We got to the quay, and covered ourselves in a dark corner.
Mama, Zan, and I. And waited, cold and wet, silent and praying.

VOICE OF ANASTASÍA PETRAKIS

We were the lucky ones, you could say.
Because we survived.

Even though I was raped. Three times.
But I survived.
So many were butchered by Turks who came to the quay to rob and kill.
I saw some strip people naked for their clothes.
And then beat them to death with rods and rocks.
Or rape them first.
I saw men's bloodied hands in the bodies of gutted children.
Once Mama pulled us up,
close to her on the ground, and whispered to stay silent. Play dead.
Two Turks came up.
They thought we *were* dead.
Mama's blood, all over her back and clothes. And on us, too.
Instead they went up to the woman sleeping next to us, demanding what she had.
"I have nothing," she said in Greek, holding up an empty hand.
Her baby, she was holding with her other hand.
They chopped off her hand, and then took her baby and threw it into the water.
She jumped in, after it.
They drowned. They both drowned.
Must have. We never saw them again.

The harbor was choked with dead bodies floating in the water,
glowing red in the flames of the city burning down.
Some people swam out to the ships at anchor.
But when they tried to climb the ropes and chains to get aboard,
the sailors poured buckets of hot water on them,
or drove them off by slashing their hands.
We, on the quay, were beggars for bread and safe places to sleep.
Dead bodies lay swollen, rotting at our feet around us.
And in the parks along the quay.
Some bodies had their insides hanging out, and were covered with flies.
The smell gagged me so bad I could barely breathe.

By some miracle, Mama finally got us aboard an American ship.
The Simpson.
She got papers at the American Embassy.
Some people recognized her from parties they had gone to. At our house.
The papers said we were Americans, so an American ship would take us on.
We had to change our name. It became Peters. And we escaped.
With Papa ... and Niko ... and Sofie lost.

VOICE OF ANASTASÍA PETRAKIS

When the Simpson lifted anchor, we looked back.
Smoke covered everything .

What used to be our home, and our hill.
And the survivors, crouched along the edge of the water with flames approaching.
Praying to be saved.
Or jumping into the water.
I heard someone say he was ashamed that day to be part of the human race.
And I heard Mama whisper,
“Please, dear God, take care of my Christopher, and my Niko, and my Sofie.
If I never see them again, take care of them.”
And my heart bled. And I made a vow, to myself ...
Zan and I made vows to ourselves we would never forget.

Nothing annihilates like fire,
just as nothing scorches the soul like rape.
Heaven help us:
We don't know what we don't know.

It was terrible.
But even more terrible that people forget.
People have forgotten us from Smyrna.
Turkish crimes, seventy years old now.
But the crime of forgetting is every day.

Before the genocide, Smyrna was the gem of Asia Minor.
On the Aegean coast. Close to where Troy once was.
A star of the Middle East.
The pearl of the Mediterranean.
A Greek city, going back twenty-seven hundred years.
In the Bible. Before Jesus. Long before it became “Turkey.”
The home of poets and artists.
Homer. Alexander the Great. Marcus Aurelius.
Strabo called Smyrna the first and finest city of Asia.
The Book of Revelations named her one of the seven churches of Asia.
She was among the most culturally advanced cities in the world.
The most cosmopolitan city of the Middle East. And the wealthiest.
Pride of Greeks, Armenians, Jews, and Europeans alike.
I was there....
To be so savaged.
She's a silent, fallen star, now. Ashes.
Silent and dead are the Greek bell ringers of Smyrna.

VOICE OF ANASTASÍA PETRAKIS

Greek and Armenian Quarters, burnt to the ground.

Burnt to shrieking ashes.
And the people.
Mothers, jumping into water to save their children, only to be drowned.
Young girls screaming, crying, being raped.
Greeks and Armenians, butchered in the streets.
Families separated from each other in the massacre.

[*pause*] It's how my body connects my mind to the memories, sometimes.
Sometimes. Sometimes it won't disconnect. No matter *what* the therapy.
The sex. The rapes. The torture and the routine.
And we can never grow out of it.
Not even ripe in our eighties.
It's time I take ownership.
It's why I'm here, I suppose, recording this.
Mama never knew. I never told her. Zan never told her.
How three of them raped me, when I was fourteen,
and Mama was getting our papers.
Zan couldn't save me, or die himself.
And I bled. And kept it a secret. Zan and I did. And we survived.

[*beat*] What looked like a lifeless ribbon of black at water's edge,
stretching for miles along the quay and docks, was a line of Greeks.
And Armenians. Praying for rescue from the flames and the Turks.
Some took a chance, and jumped into the water, hoping the ships would help.
But they were under orders to rescue only their own nationals.
And they drove Greeks and Armenians away.
Some choked to death from the ashes and smoke. The older ones. And babies.
And seagulls. Screeching in the air, wings catching fire.

Smyrna was no more. Not the city it had been.
Nowhere in the world had East and West mingled in such a spectacular way.
Before 1922 more Greeks were living in Smyrna than in Athens.
After the Massacre, none lived there.
It was the first genocide of the twentieth century. Greeks and Armenians.
Three and a half million Christians, purged from Muslim country.
Papa, Niko, and Sofie had disappeared.
Our life was abandoned for a new life.
Our home. Our city. Our friends. Our neighbors. Our school.
Papa's business.
Everybody and everything, lost.

VOICE OF ANASTASÍA PETRAKIS

We were refugees without a coin to our name.

And our name was no longer Petrakis.
We become Peters to escape.
But we survived.
The Simpson brought us to the port of Piraeus.
From there we were taken into Athens,
where charity kept us alive for three years.
Other ships brought more refugees.
Tens of thousands, cramming Athens,
huddled in tents pieced together with burlap bags.
Or sleeping on the streets, or in parks, or in the ruins of buildings.
Shoes were made by refugees out of discarded tires.
Dresses, out of flour sacks.
Plates were tin cans.
Spoons and forks were hands and fingers.
Sickness was rampant, and hunger was everywhere.
But Mama protected us.
I call her soul to be blessed in front of my icons every night.
She found work, helping a Greek family doing household chores.
And they helped us have decent meals most of the time.
Mama went regularly to the American Embassy,
protesting that we were Greek-American, with relatives in the United States.
At last ... well, as she used to tell it, they asked her where our relatives lived.
The only city Papa had ever mentioned that she remembered was Chicago.
And she made up the name, "Stephan Peters."
Father *did* have a friend Stephan there.
And God was on our side.
The Americans couldn't find any record of Stephan Peters in Chicago,
but they let us come to America, anyway.
We got American passports. Each of us. And we sailed.
Mama wore a secondhand suit, given her by the family she worked for.
And a new pair of shoes.
She was beautiful.
But not the beauty she'd been in Smyrna.
Not the most beautiful woman in Smyrna.
Not with her old, high-spirited face.
Instead, a hollow-cheeked face of determination.
Zan and I wore new clothes given us by the American Red Cross.
And new shoes.
And in fifteen days we saw the majestic lady, with her blazing torch and promise.

VOICE OF ANASTASÍA PETRAKIS

There is no place in the world like America.

I was seventeen in 1925 when we arrived.
With nothing from the past but memories and longings.
And Mama, her gold ring Papa had given her before the Massacre.
With six diamonds. One for each of us in the family.
That she never, and would never, take off her finger....
We were the lucky ones.
We had a mother with a will of steel.
And a heart that was breaking every night, that she never let us see.

[*pause*] I had a friend tell me once:
Every story that's worth telling begins with a woman.
I believe that.
We lived in New York for four years.
Mama worked in a shoe store.
I got a job in a restaurant.
Then a friend helped us move down to Jacksonville,
where many Greeks were living.
Some, survivors of Smyrna.
It was a new Smyrna for us.
And we were thankful. Very thankful. Thankful for America.
I still am. I am every day.
But sad, too, missing Papa, and Niko, and Sofie.
Not knowing if they were alive, or dead.
Mama and I started working in a Greek restaurant.
Zan found work fixing cars.
When
O, don't let this old lady get ahead of herself now, please.
[*beat*] When we moved to Florida, it was 1929.
On Easter Sunday, 1936, God gave us three miracles at once....
No, four miracles at once.
Jesus. Risen.
Papa.
Niko.
And Sofie.
All in church. All at one time.
All wrapped up, in one package.

ANTONÍA

O, my God! How??

I never heard this before.

VOICE OF ANASTASÍA PETRAKIS

From whenever we started going to St. John's in Jacksonville.

Right away, actually.
The priest there always had survivors of Smyrna identify themselves.
Early in the service. For us to see newcomers, and maybe recognize somebody.
Or find out, later, if someone knew anything about lost loved ones.
That Sunday.
Easter Sunday.
The church was packed.
Of course.
The altar was decorated with the most beautiful fresh roses.
I didn't know it, when I got up that morning,
that it would be the most joyful day of my life.
People were lighting candles when the survivors were called to raise their hands.
Zan said he knew.
But I knew *instantly*.
At the back, standing, were Papa, Niko, and Sofie, with their hands raised high.
My heart nearly fainted it was pounding so.
My nerves ran crazy wild inside me.
I could barely see, when I cried out,
“*Pateroúlis!*”
Everyone looked at me.
And he saw me. And Zan. Standing there. And whispered, “Princess.”
Prinkipissa.
Just a whisper, but I heard it anyway.
I never wanted Our Lord raised faster than I did that Sunday.
Dear Lord, I never lost faith.
But, O God have mercy on me, part of me came back to church that day that
had been missing for fourteen years.
When the priest finally announced, Christos Anesti, we couldn't wait any longer.
We rushed into each other's arms, like water over Niagara Falls.
All five of us.
Papa, Niko, Sofie, Zan, and me.
There wasn't a moment's hesitation.
We all knew.
“But, where's my Darling One?” Papa was asking, through his tears.
Such joy, mixed with such anguish.
“O Bampás, she's just next door. In the reception hall.
Helping to prepare the Easter party.”
That's when we made our plan.
We had to have a plan.

VOICE OF ANASTASÍA PETRAKIS

Mama seeing her lost husband, *and* lost daughter, *and* lost son?

All at one time?
She'd die of a heart attack.
So, I walked him in.
And found her.
And said I had someone for her to meet.
Someone important.
She saw the tears in my eyes, and turned around.
Her hair was white then. But still so good-looking.
Her eyes sparkled, to welcome the stranger.
No one said a word.
Until she gasped, "Christopher? Agápi mou?"
She was wearing the gold ring she always wore.
With the six diamonds, for the six of us.
"Petaloúda mou," he said, softly.
Her name was Antonía.
Like my great granddaughter. My first. Born two years ago.
Only Papa would call her "Butterfly."
They embraced as only us Greeks can.
As only two hearts lost forever and fourteen years can. And then the scream.
The scream that was heard throughout the reception hall.
"It's a miracle! It's a miracle!"
Niko and Sofie came in at that point.
And Mother did faint. Right on the spot.
After crying, "O, my dear God! My precious, lost children."
But she came 'round, soon enough.

[pause] I thought I could never cry that happy again.
I was wrong.
God had other plans for me. For all of us.
Papa was one of the few who survived the Turkish death march.
And when peace was declared with the Turks, he made it to Greece.
As a displaced person.
He lived in Salonica for nine years, searching to find his missing family.
In 1932 he got his Greek passport, and went to Lucerne, Switzerland.
Over the years, before the Massacre, he had traveled to Switzerland many times,
to deposit money into a Swiss bank account. A lot of money.
And when he got there, they still knew him.
It took a couple more years, but he traced Sofie to Samos where she was living.
She'd escaped her abductor.

VOICE OF ANASTASÍA PETRAKIS

Somehow the bastard got shot dead.

Too bad. Too bad when any Turkish abductor dies.
Another family escaping Smyrna took her in. Mr. and Mrs. Kastellanos.
Who lived only a few blocks away from where we grew up, on the top of the hill.
They rubbed ashes on Sofie's face, hands, and feet,
and disguised her to look like a sick, old woman; and they made it to Greece.
Sofie later got married, and moved to Samos where Papa found her.
And her new husband. And their son, Petros.
Two years later, almost, Papa found Niko.
It was through a Muslim friend of Papa's who still lived in Smyrna. Izmir.
He was Papa's right hand man in the jewelry store,
and he told Papa to go to Harvard. In Boston. Cambridge, actually.
Massachusetts.
And see a professor teaching there, on sabbatical from the University of Istanbul.
Long story short, because I'm about to the end of this tape,
that professor was actually my brother, Niko.
He'd been taken to Turkish army barracks, and raised by the Turks as Muslim.
With a Muslim name.
And with the Koran they forced him to memorize.
Later on he attended the University of Istanbul,
graduated with a degree in history, and became a professor there.
But he told me often that he never surrendered his faith in Jesus Christ.
When Papa went to see him, the whole story unraveled.
After two hours listening to our father pouring his heart out,
my brother admitted to being my brother.
Niko could be a real smart ass, sometimes.
That day Papa wired Sofie, to tell her about finding Niko,
and to tell her he was buying them all tickets to come to Boston.
They arrived the week before Easter.
And, on invitation from Papa's friend Stephan, from Chicago I told you,
who had retired and moved to St. Augustine, they came south.
And for Easter service, they all went up to Jacksonville.
And the rest is God's story.

And now I need to find another tape. This one's ended.

END

Thirteen books to read, to further your understanding of the Smyrna Massacre:

The Whispering Voices of Smyrna, by Dr. Niki Karavasilis

Paradise Lost: Smyrna, 1922, by Giles Milton

The Greek Genocide in American Naval War Diaries

Flames on the Water, by Con Aroney

Smyrna of Smyrnians, by Giorgos T. Katramopoulos

Smyrna 1922: The Destruction of a City, by Marjorie Housepian Dobkin

The Great Fire, by Lou Ureneck

Certain Samaritans, by Esther Pohl Lovejoy

Not Even My Name, by Thea Halo

Ships of Mercy: The True Story of the Rescue of the Greeks, Smyrna, September 1922, by Christos Papoutsy

Smyrna's Ashes: Humanitarianism, Genocide, and the Birth of the Middle East, by Michelle Tusan

The Genocide of the Ottoman Greeks, by Tessa Hofmann, Matthias Bjornlund and Vasileios Meichanetsidis

Before The Silence, by Sofia Kontogeorge Kostos