

Between A Polonaise And A Nocturne

John Bandler

A well-heeled Greek boy meets a Turkish girl in a remote village in strife-torn British-colonial Cyprus in 1956 and asks her for a date.



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by

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Irakles stopped pedaling in Pano Vounaki. Like its sister village Kalopetria, two miles to the east along the mountain, Pano Vounaki ended a sinewy three-mile ascent from the coast.

Beyond the whitewashed dwellings, the single-lane artery frayed into a network of goat paths that soared towards the ragged crest of the Kyrenia Mountains.

He wheeled his bike into a patch of shade. As his heart rate eased, his shirt and khaki shorts began to itch. He pulled out his shirt, peeled it from his chest, and wiped his face on a sleeve. A swim in the sea later, he promised himself.

A door banged.

He turned. A toddler gawked at him. The kid pressed a bundle wrapped in a newspaper to his chest, and hopped off the step. On bare feet that seemed impervious to the sharp-edged stones, the kid streaked across the street.

The windowless little house from which the kid had emerged displayed a hint of forlorn commerce—an off-center Coca-Cola sign. The village grocery shop. Irakles leaned his bike against the wall, licked his gritty lips and entered.

A girl's voice, barely audible over the music from a radio, greeted him with, "*Oriste?*"

The cramped room, a hodgepodge of tins of sardines, jars of olives, and sacks of oregano, reeked of dust and cumin—or was that coriander?

Classical music seemed oddly out of place.

He swept the hair from his eyes. "Coca-Cola?"

The girl pointed. “The ice box. Twenty mils, please.”

He took off his sunglasses and helped himself to a bottle. Her form, behind the desk, backlit from a window, took shape—petite, with black hair pulled back into a pony-tail.

He slapped down a coin. “Chopin?”

The cash drawer creaked open. “Are you a pianist?”

“No, but I can recognize Chopin. Can’t everyone?”

She slid the change towards him.

“A pianist,” he said noting the manicured fingernails behind the change and the sheets of music paper. “And you compose.”

Her hand sprang back. Papers scattered onto the floor.

He picked up the sheets and returned them to her desk. “I sketch and draw,” he said. “Never went far with music, though—don’t have the patience to practice but, I guess, we’re fellow artists anyway.” Her Greek had hardly betrayed a trace of accent, but he asked, “Are you Turkish?”

“You can tell?”

He’d heard about this prodigy, but not what she looked like. “I thought this village was Greek,” he said.

She said nothing.

He shrugged. “Who teaches you piano?”

She fumbled with the cash drawer. Wood groaned against wood as she forced an apparently stiff handle around its retaining screw. “Why do you want to know?”

Why indeed? He’d best clear out. At any moment one of her brothers would show up with the family shotgun. “Just passing the time,” he said. “It’s hot outside. Do you have a bicycle?”

“You *do* ask a lot of questions.”

He pulled on the end of his shirt. He changed his mind, reached into his pocket for a handkerchief, and mopped his face. “Come for a ride with me. Tomorrow.”

He wasn't in London, and this wasn't a Saturday night at the dance-hall. This was his homeland—his *patridha*—a backwater of the British Empire, where ‘dog-Turk’ still escaped even the most genteel of Greek lips, and where an ethnic bullet in the back had become a daily hazard. As he waited for her response, his pulse hammered.

She opened the cash drawer, then banged it shut, rattling the contents. “I don't know you.”

He let out his breath. “My name is Irakles Naxiotis. I'm Greek. I study in England.” He downed the last drops of Coke and approached the desk. “I'm on holiday at my godfather's house in Kyrenia, the Petrino estate. I'm sixteen.”

She shrank back.

“Please,” he said. “Don't say anything now. I'll be down at the junction with the Kyrenia road tomorrow morning at nine o'clock. Don't worry. If you're there, fine. If not, that's okay too. What's your name?”

Twisting her pony-tail around her finger, she whispered, “Fulya.”

Why go on? He could get himself carved up for this. She'd fare worse. “I'll be there, Fulya,” he said, “waiting for you. Nine o'clock. Bring your bathing suit, or come prepared to explain the difference between a polonaise and a nocturne.”

She looked at him in terror and whispered, “We don't *do* these things in Cyprus.”

END

Context: *Between a Polonaise and a Nocturne* by John Bandler is set in Cyprus in 1956 against the guerrilla conflict involving Greek and Turkish Cypriots (as well as Greece and Turkey), and the British occupiers. The island remains divided.

The time intersects that of Lawrence Durrell's *Bitter Lemons*, and likely Durrell's writing of *The Alexandria Quartet*. In 2006, in a session on creative influences, the author John Bandler presented "Bitter Lemons and Barbed Wire" to the biennial International Lawrence Durrell Conference. In 2007, he spoke on "Durrell's Cyprus—Tainted Observations on the Colonial and Postcolonial" at the ACLALS Conference: Literature for Our Times.

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