

PROLOGUE

I was twenty when, in the back room of the family hairdressing salon, my brother Théo asked me one day, ‘See that telephone, Christie? At 6 p.m. in a few minutes, it’s going to ring. And do you know who’ll be at the other end?’

I waited for the punch-line because Théo was looking at me so intently.

‘Edith Piaf.’

He loved playing tricks on me. It was probably one of his favourite activities. He took advantage of my unconditional love for him to lead me on many a wild goose chase. This time, though, the joke was a bit too big to swallow and I had difficulty believing him.

Edith Piaf...

Even at that time, long before the film starring Marion Cotillard, everyone knew of the entertainer from Belleville, born in poverty, who became a living legend in a manner of speaking the very incarnation of French *chanson*. The Little Sparrow! Not one day went by without *Milord*, *Non, je ne regrette rien* or *L’homme à la moto* being played on the radio. Even her private life was followed by the French public,

who seemed to believe they had an intimate relationship with her. The newspapers had covered in detail her love affair with the entertainer Yves Montand, then with the boxer Marcel Cerdan, who was lost in a plane crash. Marlene Dietrich had been a witness at her wedding to singer Jacques Pills, in 1952, in New York. Her entourage included names famous from the music-hall: Charles Aznavour, Georges Moustaki, Bruno Coquatrix. She had given a memorable series of concerts at Olympia. Her health was said to be fragile and her vulnerable side – an unforgettable voice soaring from a body in pain, ill-treated – elicited even more sympathy from the public.

I repeated, ‘Edith Piaf...?’

Théo, who saw that I was sceptical and read my thoughts like an open book, repeated his prediction. ‘Wait and see. At six o’clock, the telephone will ring. You’re going to answer, pick up the phone, hold it against your ear but without saying anything! You’ll pass it to me straightaway.’

He seemed so serious! Perhaps it was true after all... but if that was so, I couldn’t imagine any reason why the great Edith Piaf, the renowned entertainer, would call my brother Théo at home.

I looked at the clock fixed on the wall. Théo said nothing more. He seemed tense.

Suddenly, the sound of the telephone rose up from the filing tray where our father organised his paperwork. With a nervous gesture, my brother motioned to me to pick it up. I took the phone off the hook, held it to my ear. I heard a deep voice.

‘Hello...’

Quickly, I passed the phone to my brother, who tore it out of my hand and indicated that I should leave.

I went into the garden. I was on pins with curiosity, so much so that my heart was racing. I thought I had indeed recognized the voice of the Little Sparrow down the line.

I waited. Inside, the conversation dragged on forever. I fretted. I wanted to know every last word in this story! My brother finally came out to join me. He was radiant.

‘Well, what did I tell you?’

I had a million questions to ask but he didn’t give me time to figure out how to express the first one.

‘I have to hurry. I’ve been invited over to her place. With all her friends.’

‘You’re invited to Edith Piaf’s?’

This time, I didn’t doubt him. But he wasn’t listening. He’d already turned his back on me, leaving me rooted to the spot, and dashed back into the house. He was in a rush to get changed and charge off to his rendez-vous, completely innocent when it came to how this would change his life – and that of family.

1

I was born in Paris in occupied France on February 4th, 1942, in the middle of the Second World War.

My parents were Greek. My father's family, the Lamboukas, came from the Isle of Marmara in Turkey. My grandmother, who was called Yaya, could never talk about Marmara without shedding a nostalgic tear. I can still hear her describing to me the way a Turkish marriage is carried out the men restricted to the ground floor, the women upstairs, where they were allowed to take off their veils. Yaya loved Turkey and Greece equally, and the war which pitted her two countries against each other drove her to despair. Even more so because the conflict had killed her husband when she was only thirty. They had four children, including my father, Stavros, who was nine at the time.

My grandfather, a sick man, had been discharged from the Turkish army didn't given time to get treatment; soldiers came to sign him up once more, taking him away and beating him up in front of his wife and children. Grandfather had to come home again shortly afterwards, suffering from dysentery.

Yaya begged the doctor to save him. His services always came with the demand for ever more remuneration in gold coins. Finally, he could do no more. And Yaya lost her husband. She was also to lose one of her four children.

Yaya, born into a shipping family, had a little money: the famous gold coins she kept sewn into her long, black skirt. She was generous not only with her own children, but also with other people's when they were hungry leaving hunks of bread she has baked on the windowsill for them. When there was no bread left beside the window, she used to hear the children calling to her from outside. 'Mia! Give us some bread! Mia! We're starving!' Their stomachs were bloated not because they'd eaten too much, but because there was no food for them.

Yaya's little stash soon melted almost completely away. This prompted my father to think of leaving. Having prepared his small suitcase in secret, he left the house in the middle of the night, leaving a letter to his mother on the dresser. He told her that he was leaving for Paris in the hope of working for his uncle who ran a restaurant there. He promised to send her money.

That same day, my father approached a freighter captain he'd met before. Knowing that the boat made a stop at Marseilles, Papa asked for permission to embark. The captain was reluctant to agree.

'You are very young, Stavros. I don't want comebacks.'

Papa slipped a little money into his hand and the captain let himself be swayed my father could climb

aboard as a stowaway. He spent the whole voyage hidden under a tarpaulin. After a few days, he disembarked at Marseilles heading straight for Saint-Charles Station to catch the train for Paris. At Paris Gare de Lyon, he jumped into a taxi showing the driver the name of his uncle's restaurant, which was well-known. Once there, Papa introduced himself.

'I'm Stavros Lamboukas.'

My uncle put him to work right there and then.

However, Stavros didn't get the chance to send his mother money, because the Turks in Marmara had decided they wanted the Greeks out. Two million of them were duly chased out of Turkey, the country where many were born. Aware of the threat was growing closer and closer, Yaya realised that it was time to leave. She counted the few coins still sewn into the hem of her skirt, organised her affairs and said goodbye to the house which held so many memories, taking her children with her. As a result, Papa soon saw his mother joining him in Paris, along with his sister and brother.

Everyone moved into the same apartment on rue Cadet.

By this time Papa was tired of his uncle's restaurant, where the work was thankless and the pay inadequate. His dream was to become a lawyer, but the training was too expensive and he had no means of paying. He had taken a course in hairdressing and sometimes said he thought there might be a future for him in this line of work, especially because he was always well turned-out, as well as being bold

and intelligent. One day, when he was leafing through the newspapers, he came across a small ad '*Hairdressing school seeks teacher*'. Papa didn't have a diploma. In addition, there was an entry exam. But sometimes fortune does favour the brave. The exam required him to style the hair of a female model. When he started work, everyone in the salon crowded around to admire his way of working. This is how he became a teacher of hairdressing for women!

It became clear that he'd made a good choice, as he soon started to make a decent living. Before long, he was able to buy a new place to live on rue de Provence. The apartment was huge, with two rooms converted into hairdressing salons. His clientèle was made up of women who knew him by word of mouth, because his name was passed round at the big department stores, Printemps and Galeries Lafayette, which were just around the corner. Papa's salon was incredibly successful, but this did not please the Director of the hairdressing school, who proceeded to sue him. Papa hired an advocate to defend him, but the man was so incompetent that my father thanked him and decided to represent himself. By pleading his own cause, he won the lawsuit. Along with its other benefits, this victory allowed him to realise what had long been his most cherished dream to exercise the profession of advocate – albeit temporarily.

In 1934, my Aunt Anna, my father's sister, went to Kavala in the north of Greece on her honeymoon. During this visit, she struck up a friendship with Marika, a young girl of sixteen, to whom she

inevitably spoke at length about her brother, Stavros, at this stage a bachelor in Paris. Marika gave Anna a photo of herself, which was duly shown to Stavros when his sister returned home. Stavros thought the young girl's features were attractive and so more photos were exchanged, as well as letters. Finally, Stavros asked for Marika's hand in marriage. The young woman carefully considered the portrait sent to her. Her suitor was thirteen years older than her but she concluded that she was dealing with a man of integrity, who had made sure the photo showed him bare-headed, so he wouldn't be suspected of hiding grey hairs or a receding hairline. After much thought, Marika headed for Paris to marry Stavros. She would never regret the decision. It's true that she was never *madly* in love with Papa, but she did love him and gave him all of her affection. Her judgement had not let her down: Stavros was trustworthy hard-working, and tidy enough to reassure a woman. Their marriage took place in 1935. The next year, their first child saw the light of day: Théophanis, known as Théo.

Stavros, Marika, baby Théo and Grandma Yaya were still living in the same apartment on rue de Provence. My father could never say no to a client and his working days were full to bursting. Maman worked at the salon too. In summer, everyone needed to get away from Paris on Sundays. Their favourite places were in Seine-et-Oise, Herblay and La Frette-sur-Seine. When they realised their savings would enable them to buy a second home, their choice was La Frette, a hilltop village twenty minutes

from the capital. It was especially charming as a place with its little Town Hall, a church, a café where everyone met up with friends over a glass of wine, a patisserie selling enough pastries to keep the children happy, and a tree-lined walk going down to the Seine. It was the ideal backdrop for relaxed family weekends. It was also a meeting-place for artists; many painters set up their easels in the village, in imitation of Monet, who had been inspired by the landscapes around and about.

Yet the spectre of war, which had brought Yaya so much suffering, loomed once more. My brother Théo was only three years old when the Germans occupied France, and my grandmother left Paris to look after him in La Frette. My parents joined them there every weekend.

One day, Papa received a phone call from Yaya when he was at work. She had rushed to the café with Théo and asked to use the phone there.

‘You have to come at once, Stavros! The Germans want to move into the house!’

Stavros and Marika dashed to Saint-Lazare station and jumped on the first train for La Frette. When they arrived, there were indeed soldiers in the act of moving into the house. Judging it better to negotiate, Papa made a suggestion to the officer in charge.

‘Why don’t you take the first floor? We’ll keep the ground floor.’

Papa made himself cough all night. The noise woke Théo, who started crying. In the morning, the Germans came out of their rooms and headed downstairs, where Stavros was waiting.

‘Did you sleep well, gentlemen?’

‘Nein.’

The same charade was repeated every night. After a few days, the officer said to my father, ‘Your house is too noisy.’

The decision was made; they moved out.

At the beginning of 1942, Maman was expecting a baby. In February, she was at work in the hairdressing salon on rue de Provence at the end of the day when she felt the first contractions. As there was a curfew in place at this time in Paris, no-one had the right to leave the house and there were certainly there were no taxis on the roads. It was vital to get to the hospital but how could they manage this? Maman was in pain Papa was thinking aloud. A woman from the apartment block who’d come for a hairdo was there and had a sudden idea.

‘Call the Kommandantur!’

My father looked at her, puzzled.

‘What else? Call the Kommandantur, Monsieur Lamboukas. Tell them that your wife is about to give birth. This is a situation for the big guns, no?’

The argument convinced Papa, who took the phone off the hook and did as his client suggested.

Shortly afterwards, two German officers arrived at the apartment. Their car was parked outside, on rue de Provence in front of the building and they invited Papa and Maman to follow them. Maman felt terrible, doubled up with pain, but she suffered in silence. Papa held her hand the whole journey. The car headed first towards the 15th arrondissement and Necker Hospital, where my brother was born. The

officers went personally to get instructions but came back saying they were sorry; the maternity unit was over its capacity so they would have to go to Hotel-Dieu in the 4th arrondissement. With Maman suffering more and more, the car went back across the Seine.

This was in a different time and during a war; as soon as she'd given birth, Maman left with her baby to recover at home. To get back from the hospital and return to rue de Provence, did Papa call the Kommandantur a second time? No: I began my life with a tour of Paris in a horse-drawn carriage. Apparently, the streets were white with snow. I'd been covered with a blanket and, to keep me warm, Maman hugged me tightly to her.

During the liberation of Paris, Maman took me to the Orthodox Church on rue Georges-Bizet, where she had married my father Théo had been baptised there. I was three years old and it was my turn now. It was a hot day and the air was heavy with incense. At that time, the priest said mass in ancient Greek. My parents lifted me up to kiss the icons. Then Maman and my godmother took off my clothes. Was I going to be examined by a doctor? No, it was the priest who took me in his arms and immersed me three times in the copper font before he anointed me with oils. All my mother had to do then was to dress me again in my pretty white dress. While the family was leaving the church, we came across some Americans, who asked Papa for permission to take photos of our lively, happy group. Two officers asked Papa to photograph them while one of them

held me in his arms. My parents always said they felt honoured by the incident: their daughter photographed in the arms of the soldiers who'd come to liberate Europe.

The baptism celebration included many residents of La Frette. My parents liked well-dressed tables and the guests were brought together for lunch in the living-room, complete a white tablecloth, crystal glasses, silver place settings and Limoges china. The celebration of the baptism was enhanced by joy at being at peace once more. It goes without saying that Papa was generous with wine and champagne!

The meal was supposed to be followed by some entertainment, organised by Théo, who, at nine years old, was inclined to put on shows. We used the entrance to the house for the performance and the French windows which separated it from the lounge turned it into the perfect stage. Accompanied by my cousin, I sang the song made famous by Georges Ulmer that Théo had made us rehearse endlessly:

*Quand allons-nous marier, nous marier, nous marier,
Quand allons-nous marier, nous marier, mon Cowboy
adoré ?*

*(When will the wedding be, the wedding be, the
wedding be,
When will the wedding be, my beloved Cowboy?)*

Warm applause. However, at the end of the performance, conversations about the war started up again; the conflict might well have been over, but it was still in everyone's head.

A bit later, a client of my father's gave him the use of a house she owned in Normandy. I still remember that journey as a happy occasion uniting two families: my parents, my grandmother, my brother Théo, my uncle, my aunt, my cousins. I can still see Saint-Lazare station as if it were yesterday: the vendors rooth sandwiches and drinks; the train with compartments and net racks to store your luggage; the slow starting motion of the steam locomotive as the echoes of the whistle faded. It was all so different from the suburban trains that we were accustomed to catching! Suddenly, I felt like I was really heading off on a big adventure. Our destination was Caen. The town had been decimated by bombardments, like so much of Normandy. A bus carried us to Ouistreham and Riva Bella, where the famous house was waiting for us. To our surprise, it had been badly damaged by the war the windows were smashed and it had been ransacked. In fact, only the walls and roof were still standing. In the surrounding region, many families were living in a similar way in partly destroyed houses. Papa inspected the place, then turned to us children and asked, 'What do you want to do? Go back to Paris?'

'No! No way!'

'Then it looks like we're camping.'

And we rushed off straight away to the sea-side, which I saw that day for the first time. We ran on the fine sands, played in the wartime blockhouse, bathed in the sea and came out shivering, to wrap ourselves in the towels our parents held out to us. From then on, we all took the train for Normandy every

summer. We were accompanied by Yaya, who, from old habit, kept her money tucked into her bra, secured with a safety-pin. However, my parents were always careful after that summer to rent a house in good condition. They even ended up buying one!

We also spent part of the summer at La Frette, where we made the most of a garden planted with lime trees. Papa, who always rose early, watered the flowers and the vegetable patch. When we woke up, Théo and I went outside in our pyjamas to run on the grass and nibble on a tomato. We would then go back into the house, where the smell of coffee – Greek coffee, obviously – wafted past. Maman would make toast; slices of day-old bread browned under the grill. Yaya made jam with plums from the garden. But sometimes before breakfast, Théo and I would be ‘entitled’ to a large spoonful of cod-liver oil! We had to pinch our noses to cope with the stench!

At La Frette, the garden played a very important rôle in our lives. Mealtimes, for the most part, took place outside. On summer evenings, after dinner, Papa would take up his guitar, for which he only knew one chord, and he would accompany Maman’s singing. She had a lovely voice. All the while, Yaya would nod her head with a nostalgic expression on her face. Their repertoire was Greek and French. No doubt these moments of harmony played their rôle in Théo’s future vocation, and mine too.

After a moment, I would say, ‘Where is Théo?’

‘Hiding in a lime tree,’ my mother would reply. ‘But hush, don’t say anything. He doesn’t think we can see him.’