

Mais toi, t'es le dernier,

Mais toi, t'es le premier!

(A quoi ça sert, l'amour)

It's you, who are the last one,

And it's you, who are the first!

(What's the point of love)

Prologue

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

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. However, this time, the joke was a bit too big to swallow and I had difficulty believing him.

Edith Piaf...

Already 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 have an intimate relationship with her. The newspapers had covered in detail her love affair with entertainer Yves Montand, then with the boxer Marcel Cerdan, who was lost in a plane crash. Marlene Dietrich had been 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 straight away.'

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 telephone sounded from the filing tray where Father organised his paperwork. With a nervous gesture, my brother motioned me to pick up. I took the phone off the hook, held it to my ear. A deep voice reached me.

'Hello...'

Quickly, I passed the phone to my brother, who tore it out of my hands 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 the 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. He left me rooted there and dashed back into the house. He was in a rush to get changed and charge off to a rendez-vous, in all innocence of how this would change his life – and our family's.

1.

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

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, women upstairs, where they were allowed to take off their veils. Yaya loved both 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 but the Turkish army didn't give him time to get treatment; soldiers came to sign him up once more. They took him away, 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 to a shipping family, had a little money: the famous gold coins which 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. She baked the bread herself and left hunks 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 melted almost completely away. Which 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 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 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. He headed straight for Saint-Charles Station to catch the train for Paris. At Paris Gare de Lyon, he jumped into a taxi. He showed the driver the name of his uncle's restaurant, a well-known place. 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 in Marmara the Turks had decided they wanted the Greeks out. Two million Greeks were duly chased out of Turkey, the country where many of them were born. Aware of the threat that grew 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 in 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 would be 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 given that he was always well turned-out, as well as being bold and intelligent. One day, when he was leafing through the papers, 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 him 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 started to make a good living. Before long, he was able to buy a new place to live in 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 stood just round the corner. Papa's salon was incredibly successful. 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 Papa 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 found the young girl's features attractive. More photos were exchanged, as well as letters. Finally, Stavros asked for Marika's hand in marriage. The young woman considered carefully the portrait sent to her. This 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 was true that she was never madly in love with Papa. But she did love him and gave him all her affection. Her judgement had not let her down: Stavros was a trustworthy man, hard-working, 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 in 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. 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 round about.

But the spectre of war, which had brought Yaya so much suffering, loomed once more. My brother Théophanis was only three years old when the Germans occupied France, and my grandmother had 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 Théophanis 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 put 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 Théophanis, 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.’

Their 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, rue de Provence, when she felt the first contractions, at the end of the day. As there was a curfew in place at this time, in Paris, no-one had the right to leave the house and certainly there were no taxis on the roads. It was urgent to get to the hospital but how could they manage? Maman was in pain, Papa was thinking aloud. A woman from the apartment block who’d come for a hairdo was there. She 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 outside, in

rue de Provence, in front of the building. 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 then came back saying they were sorry; the maternity unit was over its limit so they would have to go to Hotel-Dieu in the 4th arrondissement. While Maman was 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 against her.

During the liberation of Paris, Maman took me to the orthodox church in rue Georgez-Bizet, where she had married my father; Théophanis 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 at La Frette. My parents liked well-

dressed tables and the guests were brought together for lunch in the living-room, complete with white tablecloth, crystal glasses, silver place settings and Limoges china. Celebration of the baptism was enhanced by joy in 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 window which separated it from the lounge turned it into the perfect stage. With 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 be 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 Théophanis, my uncle, my aunt, my cousins. I can still see Saint-Lazare Station, as if it were yesterday: the vendors of sandwiches and drinks; the train with compartments, and netted 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 catch! 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; it had been ransacked. In fact, only the walls and roof were still standing. In the surrounding region, many families lived 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 at a tomato. Then we would go back into the house, where the smell of coffee wafted past – Greek coffee, obviously. Maman would make toast; slices of day-old bread browned under the grill. Yaya made jam with plums from the garden. But before breakfast, Théo and I would sometimes 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 existence. 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. 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.'

Théo was a boisterous child; he made a swing by attaching a taut wire in the garden between two columns of bricks, which didn't stand up to the use for very long. He liked climbing trees and listening to music in secret, always lost in his own dreams.

Our parents weren't regular churchgoers: only Yaya went to mass every Sunday. But we were believers in our family. There were icons in the house; we were lifted up off the ground when instructed to kiss them. There were also biblical phrases which seemed to drop of their own accord from my father's mouth. Papa quoted Scripture naturally and sayings from St Paul and the Gospels were slipped into his everyday conversation. I can still see him making the sign of the cross before eating.

When Easter came, THE holiday of holidays, Maman went to the Greek church on Good Friday. Then, with my grandmother, she created red eggs and the sugared bread called *koulourias*. Before the cake was cut, a cross was carved into the top with a knife. The first slice was for the Father, the second for the Son, the third for the Holy Ghost, the fourth for any elderly people present, and so it continued. These were the religious elements which formed part of our lives, in a household where both father and mother had been to orthodox schools. At that time, I had no worries about God or about churches. Round about my sixteenth birthday, I was even taken with the idea of entering holy orders, but my brother

made fun of this whim and I immediately gave up thinking about it. Nevertheless, a grounding in Christianity had been passed on to me, which would then flourish years later.

In the village, where Papa was known as ‘Monsieur Max’, we used to go to the baker’s, which smelled of baguettes, fresh from the oven; the market; the news-stand; and the grocer’s, where Théo and I used to love buying balls of chewing-gum and the famous Pierrot Gourmand caramel lollipops. I also remember a mysterious character, wearing a hat and dressed in a black velvet cape, who at first frightened me a little. This man lived opposite the school in a huge mansion which overlooked the Seine. Our paths would often cross when I was going to school and he would say, ‘You shouldn’t eat sweets or you’ll spoil your teeth.’

I had the impression he’d discovered my secret. From when I was little, it was true that I needed to suck a sweet before going to sleep. ‘How did you know I like sweets?’ I asked him.

‘All children like them.’

As I later found out, this man was a famous writer called Jacques Chardonne. Author of *L’Epithalame*, he had figured in the forefront of literary circles before the war. He had continued to live in La Frette.

The Market Square was often the site for a funfair or circus. These were tiny affairs with two horses, three dogs, an acrobat, a clown. The fairground workers always included a stop in our village, knowing that they could count on my mother’s generosity if they needed something.

Each year, La Frette organised a Lilac Fête. Volunteers decorated cars and horse-drawn floats. Théo and I were always first in line for these activities. Even for the procession of Chinese lanterns, when the whole village paraded behind the local brass band. The evening of the 14th July, the National Fête, everyone used to go to the ball, and I can still remember a scene that was often repeated: our parents dancing together while Théo and I watched them, feeling emotional.

Maman had left her parents at the age of seventeen to live in France. They had died during the war, without her ever having had the chance to see them again. She felt homesick for her family, which is why one day she wanted to visit her sister, who was married to a Greek man and had two children. They lived in Egypt, in Alexandria. Maman was away for a whole month. During this time, Théo, myself and my little sister, who was still a baby, were living at La Frette with Yaya. Each evening, after work, Papa caught the train to join us.

One evening, he took us, Théo and me, to the circus in the square. When I came back home, I was running a high temperature. Papa called the doctor out and I was examined. Then it seemed to me that there were hushed conversations all round the house, but I was too ill to listen in to what was being said and I fell asleep without knowing what was wrong with me. When I awoke, I realised that I'd been moved onto the ground floor, into the morning room. I could see the lime trees and the flowers in the garden through the window. I was not allowed to go outside. The doctor arrived, accompanied by a nurse, who carried needles and a medicine box made of iron. Both of them wore white coats, like in hospital. They gave me three really painful injections. Then Yaya told me that my father was going to speak to me. He came into the morning room, dressed in a white shirt, him too. He was even wearing gloves! He sat on the edge of my bed and asked me how I felt.

‘The shots hurt!’

‘You’re ill, darling. You have diphtheria. It’s a very contagious disease.’

During this episode, the hardest thing to bear was that Théo was not allowed into my room. We couldn’t confide in each other or laugh together. We could only communicate through the window when he was in the garden. It was frustrating because we were so close. I was seven and he was thirteen. Approaching adolescence, he was already very good-looking. Of course, I hero-worshipped him. He knew so many things of which I was ignorant as yet. He read a great deal. He was planning to study literature but was worried as to whether our father

would approve. I loved his creative side, which perfectly expressed our family's yearning for the past. And I also loved the way Théo made me feel protected.

We had to get used to this new situation. When he came home from school, Théo would put his schoolbag down in his room, then come back down into the garden to exchange a few words with me through the closed window. His dark hair made a magnificent contrast with the flowers and greenery of the background. He would play the clown just for me and mime silliness which brought tears to my eyes from laughing. I was entertained, having a good time watching my favourite actor. At last, I wasn't bored stiff! At last, there was a distraction from this antiseptic universe of pain, peopled with nurses and injections. After a while, I would ask him through the window, 'What are you going to have to eat tonight?'

He would invariably give the same reply, carefully articulating to make sure I'd understood, 'Vegetable soup, like you!'

Vegetable soup; I wasn't allowed anything else and he wanted to spare my feelings.

I was the only person in the village to be contaminated, hence the quarantine and precautionary measures. Thanks to the little mirror beside my bed, I could analyse the evolution of the white spots at the base of my throat.

After a month, Yaya took the phone off the hook, called Papa and said, 'It's finished, Stavros.'

Thinking that Yaya was announcing my death, Papa felt his blood freeze. But what Yaya meant to say was that I was cured! The time had come to disinfect the room and throw away everything that carried a risk of contamination. Workers came to the house with buckets of disinfectant and rolls of adhesive paper to make the windows draught-proof. The whole room was covered in white powder. Yes, it really was over. I was no longer ill. I knew the joy of talking to Théo again, who, when he came back from high school, said to me, 'Look, I've got a surprise for you.'

He took me into the garden, beyond the lime trees. However, after a few steps, my strength let me down; I was still feeble, convalescing. Théo carried me in his arms as far as a shed that he had built for me with lime branches; three walls, a roof, one side open. Inside he had put a table and two chairs. The table was laid. Everything was ready to make a meal; tomatoes, cucumbers, strawberries. Théo made me sit down, saying happily, ‘Goodbye vegetable soup!’

He’d even brought a pack of cards to play a game after the meal.

A few days later, Maman came back from Egypt. The telegrams Papa had sent had never reached her. She had no idea that I’d had diphtheria. Horrified by the news, she swore she would never again travel without her children.