

"Allo, allo . . ." she repeated several times.

Christos kept silent. He recognized the voices of his brothers in the background and tried to picture the scene at the other end of the line.

"Allo." The voice was angry now.

A reply formed on his lips but he did not sound it. There was so much that he wished to tell his mother now. He felt lost and sorry for himself and wished that at this moment his mother could take him in her arms and let him cry in her lap as when he was a boy.

"Allo."

But things had changed. Christos was no longer a boy and his mother had grown hard, bony and adamant. They no longer shared the same life. It was simply too much of a defeat for him to tell her what she had prophesied from the beginning. She would find it out in time, he thought. No, he must not speak even though it left him with nothing.

The phone went dead. Christos kept the receiver to his ear until the last possible moment then returned slowly to his chair. He sat down and looked sadly about him. The objects in the room seemed to shrink from his gaze, and the light, so sharp and brilliant, appeared to illuminate the emptiness that surrounded him too clearly.

He sighed deeply and let his head fall back on the chair. He stared into the light above and was struck by the reflection of his own emptiness. He was weak, humiliated, pitiful and slightly drunk. His heart cringed faintly. He felt cold and knew that he was alone.

Kapetan Nikola

Nicholas Athanasou

Sydney, 1948.

It was still dark when Kapetan Nikola opened the shop. He stepped inside and groped his way toward the light switch at the far end of the room. He traced a path around the sack of potatoes near the door, between the rows of sloping shelves filled with fruits of all kind and the counter on which lay the cash register, the sweets cupboard and the open sheets of newspaper, then edged his way carefully toward the wall. He trod on the leaves of yesterday's vegetables and heard them crackle drily underneath. The naked brightness of a hundred-watt bulb showed him the work he would have to do that morning.

He followed methodically the routine he had established over the last two months. First he swept the floor, then he went over it again with a wet mop; he wiped the shelves and the counter vigorously with a damp cloth. He restored the display of apples, pears and oranges, replacing any fruit that had fallen to the floor during the night. Then he emptied the rubbish into the garbage tin at the back of the shop, stored the empty bottles of soft drink into a box, carried in the milk and cut the double sheets of newspaper used for wrapping, into single sheets. His last job was to sharpen the knives which were used for slicing the vegetables.

Kapetan Nikola pulled out a packet of cork-tipped cigarettes from his pocket and sat down behind the counter to enjoy a smoke. He gazed at a mirror above the rows of fruit and brushed back an untidy shock of white hair that had fallen over his brow. He was wearing a collarless white shirt, buttoned to the top, and a pair of blue-striped trousers held by suspenders. He was not tall but broad shouldered, and his hands were thick and hairy. His immobile expression-

less face was thrown into areas that reflected the light differently. His cheeks were shiny and smooth, his lips, beneath a thick grey moustache, thin and colourless, and his eyes, dark and thoughtful. He stared fixedly at the objects before him and blinked deliberately.

His work took no longer than forty-five minutes but often, like today, he could stretch it to the hour. Now he had only to wait for Tony his son-in-law to return from the markets with a fresh load of vegetables and fruit. He had nothing to do till then. His daughter, Evangelia, and the other women employed in the shop would arrive in a few minutes to officially open the business. For Kapetan Nikola could neither speak nor understand English, so even if a customer had chanced to enter the shop, he would not have been able to help him.

Six months ago, he had left his island in the Aegean and emigrated to Australia. The war had devastated the small island, and most of the inhabitants had been forced to migrate either to Australia or America. During the war, he had transported refugees from Cyprus to Port Said in his own caique, and had managed slowly to scrape together the passage money to Australia for each of his six children. Why Australia? Simply because others from his own island, Kastellorizo, some even before the war, had already settled there and had sent back favourable reports of the country. So first, he had sent his eldest son to scout the land, weigh its people and plan his family's settlement. But in his first letter his son had written that this was no place for foreigners, "... Here, they work you in the markets for fifteen hours a day and pay you barely enough to live on. The people swear at you and laugh at your appearance... they hate your dark skin and the way you talk... I hate these people and their damned country..." Kapetan Nikola had pitied his son but knew that there was little else he could do. His son was young and would adapt quickly, and he had expected the letters which followed to be more hopeful. Once his son had become reasonably established in the new country, Kapetan Nikola sent out his four daughters, singly or in pairs, and with this injunction to his son: "Find them husbands, men from our own island." So each girl had been matched either while en route or soon after her arrival in Australia.

He had been the last to come himself. For now that the war was over, there was trade in neither people nor goods among the islands. Everyone had spoken of bad times and even worse ahead. Before the war, Kapetan Nikola had seen good times, sailing regular trade routes between the islands and even venturing as far as the mainland, Cyprus and Egypt. But the islands were now for the most part deserted, and what little trade existed was taken over by the big companies with their larger and more efficient vessels. On Kastellorizo, just a handful of people had remained, and Kapetan Nikola had sat in *kafeneia* filled with only the oldest men. Almost every week, he had found himself farewelling relatives or friends setting out for other countries. They would embark saying, "We shall see you in Australia. Don't you worry Kapetan Nikola. This will not be the last time." His family had sent numerous letters clamouring for his presence, but he had continued to postpone departure. He had been reluctant to leave the things he knew so well. Finally a generous offer was made for the caique, and Kapetan Nikola found that he could delay his departure no longer. He had gone the rounds of all his friends and relatives to bid them farewell. He had felt them slap his back and toast him one more time; he had listened to their well known stories and had wondered whether he would ever hear them again. His cousins had cried and embraced him. His own voice had choked and the tears had flowed slowly down his cheeks. And before leaving, he had walked down to the pier and had gazed at his caique for the last time. The brass of her wheel had shone in the moonlight and her masts had stood bare and tall. The rope had been pulled taut, the caique had groaned to be set free, and a gnawing sense of emptiness had overwhelmed him as he had felt in his heart that this life was over and he would never know it again.

Kapetan Nikola took out his pocket watch to check the time. It was almost 7:30, time for his daughter to come down from the rooms above, where they all lived together. He extinguished his cigarette and began to whistle a Greek melody, but he seemed to run out of puff half-way and could not end it satisfactorily. He moved to the window and looked out through its misty pane at the early Sydney morning. On

the other side of the road, two women stood at a tram stop, talking to each other. They signalled a tram but it raced past them, ignoring their angry shouts and gestures.

He was about to turn away when he noticed that one of the apples in the window display was missing. He picked another from the box behind him and gently tried to wedge it between the others. But he succeeded only in upsetting the balance completely so that the apples went tumbling down. Kapetan Nikola swore aloud. He began to gather the apples but when he had collected an armful, did not know what to do with them. He placed them on the counter nearby; then, just as he turned round to collect another armful, he spotted some of these apples rolling toward the edge. He dropped what he had and turned to stop them — but not quite in time. Five of them had already fallen to the floor. Kapetan Nikola swore aloud again.

"What are you doing there?" a shrill voice cried in Greek from the back of the shop.

Evangelia, Kapetan Nikola's daughter, strode into the room, paused, and surveyed the disaster with outraged authority. She was a slim young girl with a smooth olive complexion and thick, wiry, chestnut hair. Her lips were compressed tightly into a thin angry line as they regarded the hapless Kapetan Nikola. He looked so awkward there, beside the counter, his arms outstretched in both directions to prevent more apples running off the edge.

"Father, what are you doing there? You've wrecked the display. Why are all these apples on the floor? Look, they're all over the place. Now they're soft and have been opened. We won't be able to sell them if they've been opened. You know that."

From the moment his daughter had entered the room, Kapetan Nikola had been expecting this tirade, and to some extent, he felt he deserved it. But his attention was strangely less taken by his present embarrassment as by the Greek word that his daughter had used for "floor", *flori*, a borrowing from English, rather than the correct word *patoma*. He let her continue until she had worked off most of her indignation.

"Well, haven't you got anything to say, father? At least do something!"

"Come here and give me a hand, daughter, and stop gabbling away! Come on!"

She appeared satisfied that her point had been made and went over to help him.

"But what are you trying to do?"

"I was trying to rearrange those apples. That's all."

"Oh silly, it's always like that. You can never get that row filled tight."

"How was I to know that?"

They checked if any apples had escaped their notice.

"No more?" she asked.

"None."

Kapetan Nikola watched in silent resentment as his daughter began to check and rearrange what he had already done that morning. She chatted about her sister's baby and Kapetan Nikola agreed that he did look a little like him. They stood facing one another. Evangelia seemed to pause deliberately before saying, "Listen father, Tony and I have been thinking. We don't really need your help that much in the mornings. We're very grateful that you do it, of course, but if you'd rather stay upstairs and rest in the morning, we can always get someone else to do this. It wouldn't cost much, really."

Kapetan Nikola looked kindly at his daughter. Yes, she meant well by it. She was a good girl. But how long had she been wanting to say all this? He tried to answer in as unobtrusive a voice as possible:

"No use throwing good money away, girl. It's really no trouble. And I've little enough to do now anyway."

She shrugged her shoulders; she said "All right . . .," but asked him to think about it anyway.

With order restored, Evangelia cheerfully kissed her father and ran up the stairs, promising to bring him down a cup of Turkish coffee. He was about to light up another cigarette when the door opened and the Australian shopgirls, Moya and Sandra, entered.

"G'day pop, 'ow are ya?" said Moya, the livelier and more friendly of the two.

"'Allo Moya, 'allo Sahndra."

Sandra did not acknowledge his greeting but walked

