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CYPRIOT FAIRY TALE MAKER

I first saw Elenitsa Georgiou performing a story about a pencil in Cypriot at the first Open Mic Night last December. There were many beautiful things that happened that night, but what I remember as maybe the most beautiful moment of all was the sound of Cypriot being used in a literary work of art and the reaction it had on the crowd.

I communicated with Elenitsa off and on for a while, and then one day a few weeks ago she told me she had a story she wanted to share.

Elenitsa is a rare breed of storyteller—a fairy tale maker. What you'll be reading below is one of her reworkings of the traditional Cinderella tale, which you may discover if you read the interview that follows, you actually know nothing about.

Max Sheridan

“In most of the Greek variations, Cinderella’s mother is alive but then eaten by her two older sisters. There isn’t a fairy godmother or a pumpkin or even a glass slipper. In the good old days the violence and the menace were always elements of the stories.”

— Elenitsa Georgiou

CINDERELLA'S COOKIE

BY ELENITSA GEORGIU

Dedicated to Max Sheridan. Special thanks to Eoghan Walsh.

I’ll take the bittersweet cookie, wrap it in a white handkerchief and hide it in the folds of my flowing gown. When my sisters turf me out of the house away from the warmth of the fire, with the ashes I will play no more. When they turn on me because I refused to take even a single bite from our mother’s body as they did, I will cry above her bones, under the evening scent of an almond tree, and I will call the nightingale to come and soothe my sorrow.

I will take the bittersweet cookie, break it into small pieces, one for every tear that pours down along my cheek. My trembling palm will feel the picking of the bird’s beak, patiently resisting the urge to pull away while he eats every last crumb, and then I will ask him to sing a lullaby for me. And when the bird begins his lament, the tree itself will mourn for me and like the teardrops rolling home, a child of hers will fall and drop into my lap.

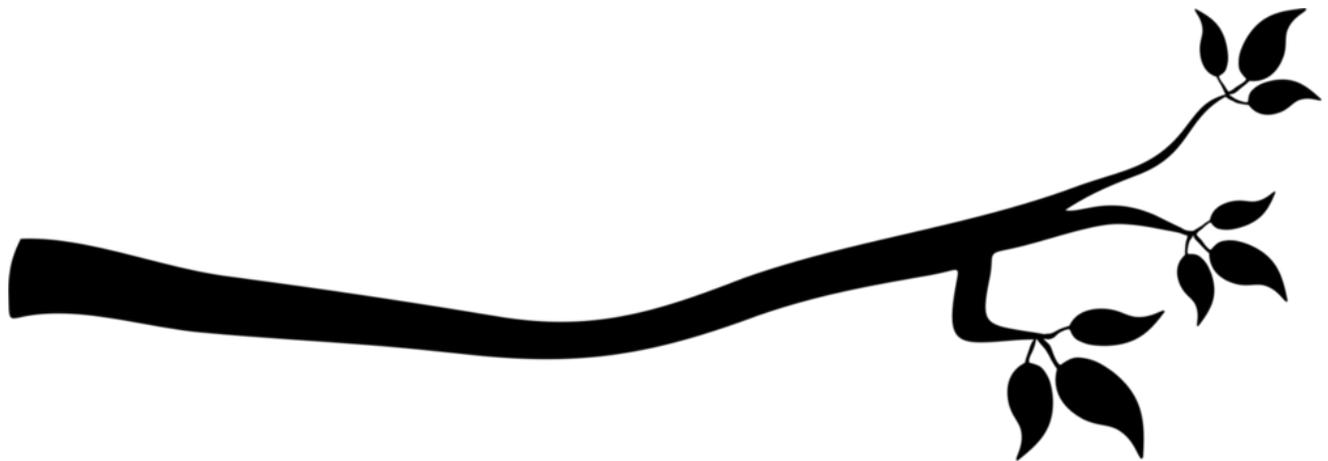
I will take the bittersweet almond and hold it between my teeth. Gently I will crack it and when it opens, oh mother, I will see the golden dress, the golden slippers and the golden horse you've been preparing for me all these months. A child no more I will be. I'll go to the palace and make the prince fall in love with me at first sight, caress his arms as he holds my waist and he shall feel my rose smooth cheeks while we dance: 1,2,3—1,2,3—1,2,3.

I will give him a bittersweet kiss and turn away. I will rush down the stairs, pass through the forest, water the horse, get in my old house and sit by the ashes.

This happened twice, but his majesty the prince, found a way to trap me. Was it tar or honey that he put on the stairs? One slipper is gone, mother... Was it that my sisters hid me in a chicken basket and I pinched his cute little bum? The dress got dirty, mother. Was it the bird that sang "Blood is running, why, oh why, let another sister try?"

The horse turned back, mother. Golden and glowing, galloping and glittering. He knocked on the door again, he searched for me. I let out half a smile and the sun broke through his cloudy forehead.

And before I noticed, we were sharing the same embrace under the almond tree. The nightingale was singing from the highest branch, an almond falling in our lap and he opened it for me. No more now the acrid tang of almond, in its place a kiss as sweet as all the fruits of summer.



EPILOGUE

Lucky are the ones
who accept the small presents of life,
keep them for a while,
in an unsorted pile,
give them away with a smile
and let them travel more than a mile,
to the hands of a wild mind
that prefers hot to mild,
and the tiles of their lives spell the word ALIVE.

“Through stories we learn in the most painless way how to face life because in tales all feelings are firstly personified and then accepted and/or eliminated.”

— Elenitsa Georgiou



From *The Sleeper and the Spindle* by Chris Riddell

FIVE QUESTIONS

1) How have you changed the traditional Cinderella tale? i.e. there's a definite hint of violence and menace in this one. Is that in the original?

The answer is hidden in the words 'traditional' and 'original'. What makes something traditional and original? The fact that it is popular for decades through books, movies and theatrical plays? The well-known Cinderella came to us from [Charles Perrault's *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*](#) in 1697 and later from the [Brothers Grimm's](#) folk tale collection *Children's and Household Tales* in 1812. Over the last few months though, I have been preparing a performance based on Cinderella's variations from around the world and the material I've gathered shows how little we know about the 'original' Cinderella. I surprisingly discovered that the Cinderella stories are as many as the ants that come out from their holes in the ground—thousands. The oldest documented versions come from China, Italy and Greece (by the Greek historian [Strabo](#) in the 1st century BC). Despite the fact that most of the stories follow the same structure—about a young woman who is persecuted and later she achieves recognition through the kindness of her character—few follow the scenario that Disney made famous. In most of the Greek variations (254 gathered by the 1970s) Cinderella's mother is alive but then eaten by her two older sisters. There isn't a fairy godmother or a pumpkin or even a glass slipper. In the good old days the violence and the menace were always elements of the stories, firstly because the stories were told from adults to adults, and secondly because through the symbols people wanted to prepare children for real dangers and situations they would face later in their lives (death, discrimination, etc.) and help them, in this way, find their own way to adulthood.

So, in my short story CINDERELLA'S COOKIE, I combine some of the Cinderella variations, talking in the first person, and I take the listener on a journey around these unknown plots. I write in the future tense as if I know my fate, but as in real life, unexpected things can happen.

2) Have you "reworked" any other fairy tales?

I love 'reworking' fairy tales. As a musician I try to find the musicality that comes out of a tale. This helps me study a tale or a myth on various levels. The kind of songs or instrumental music that can accompany the story, what voice each character has, as well as where I can put different tempi (fast and slow parts in storytelling) and dynamics while narrating a story. Trying to deal with these elements leads me to making a new story by keeping and respecting, of course, the 'bones' of the original source. Sometimes I combine two similar stories into one, sometimes I write my own stories based on traditional songs, sometimes I narrate the stories from different perspectives and sometimes live music accompanies the scenes of a story. The last

story I have reworked, called TO ΠEPTITZIN (THE GROUSE), based on a Cypriot fairy tale, was presented at Fengaros Festival in 2015.

3) FAIRY TALE MAKING ISN'T A HOBBY FOR YOU, it's your work. WHEN DID YOU GET SERIOUS ABOUT IT?

It all started as a game with my grandmother, who used to stimulate my imagination by singing Cypriot songs and narrating Cypriot fairy tales. Years later, during my music studies, along with the music educational lessons, I had the opportunity to do a lot of theatre and dancing and this artistic environment urged me to start externalizing the stories running around my head in the form of a live performances. I was also participating in traditional music concerts and the love for my cultural heritage became stronger day by day. I started inventing my own interactive storytelling performances for children and after an intensive course in Storytelling and Writing Tales (2011), I felt that it was about time to share my stories with adults too. Completing a degree in the School of Storytelling Art (Limassol) gave me the opportunity to come across a variety of genres and techniques. Since 2014, I've been running a small artistic company—THE MAJESTIC MUSIC TREE—through which I give music and storytelling workshops and performances for all ages. Cypriot fairy tales are astonishing! They hide the treasure of our culture. They are usually very long, with stories nestled within stories, as happens in 1001 NIGHTS. In my performances at schools I give emphasis to the Cypriot tales because I believe in the importance of knowing our traditions, keeping the language alive and giving children the chance to see how difficulties can be defeated through our 'local' heroes' achievements.

4) Einstein once said that if you want to make a kid smart, read her fairy tales. Does READING FAIRY TALES make us more receptive to engaging with stories as adults?

As children we need to listen to and read fairy tales. The reason is well hidden in the subconscious: through stories we learn in the most painless way how to face life because in tales all feelings are firstly personified and then accepted and/or eliminated. This constant decision making enhances one's intelligence. The countless images one invents in one's mind by reading not only gives wings to the imagination while young, but also help us gradually make a map of experiences for the journey of becoming a king/queen. It's not about gaining power to rule, but about being a king that obtains the essentials of inner beauty and self knowing. As we grow up we have the need to retell the stories and write new ones in order to communicate and share

this treasure with others. Myths, fairy tales, legends and fables give us the tools for reaching someone's heart.

5) What kind of work are you planning FOR the future?

I'm working on various projects. One of them is a storytelling performance for adults with live music called FORGOTTEN CINDERELLAS. It's based on Cinderella variations from around the world, which will be 'reworked' in order to present each story in a different way. It should be finished at the end of June. In addition, I am preparing an animation based on a story I wrote some years ago. At the end of the summer I have the honor of collaborating with the *Hambis Printmaking Center* to present Hambis Tsangaris' latest Cypriot fairy tale ΟΙ ΤΡΙΠΛΑΠΙ ΤΖΑΙ Ο ΔΡΑΚΟΣ ΤΗΣ ΜΗΛΙΑΣ (THE TRIPLETS AND THE DRAGON OF THE APPLE TREE).
