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## The Song of the Afternoon

**T**o celebrate the weekend, Mama Papadopolos liked to make ice cream on Fridays. She saved an egg a day all through the week, especially for the purpose of making the ice-cream custard. This Friday was no exception. When school ended and Mama had rested, she and Nina set about cracking and beating the eggs for the ice-cream custard. Alex was sent on his bicycle with the pull-along-cart attached, to fetch back a bag of ice-crystals from the factory. When the custard thickened, Mama put it in the fridge and said, ‘now that’s ready, all we need

is your brother and the ice?’

Nina went outside. She walked down to the low wall at the end of their yard. It was still very hot even though it was late in the day. She stared out at the sea. It lay still and quiet. Across its wide surface tiny, silver ripples ran playfully after one another. Far away on the horizon Nina could see the small dot of the Blue Line fish-boat. It steamed towards Moutsouna, to make its daily collection of ice, before heading on for Athens. Nina kicked her feet in the dust and wondered about Athens. Should she write something about it in her book? She frowned. She had never been to Athens. What was the city really like? Could it really chew people up and spit them out, like Grandfather had said? She began to sing a song to comfort herself, a made-up song about the heat and the sea and making ice cream. A small lizard crawled up the wall beside her and she sang him into her song too.

Grandfather emerged from the house and shuffled to join her where she sat.



‘Here comes the fish-boat,’ he said and Nina looked up at him admiringly.

‘Can you see it, Grandpa?’ she asked.

‘No,’ he smiled. ‘It’s nearly four o’clock. It always comes about now. But this afternoon I can smell it.’

‘Can you smell the fish?’ Nina wanted to know.

‘I can smell a lot of things today,’ Grandfather said. ‘I can smell a memory of the old days when the harbour was a flurry of boats all day long.’

‘What sort of boats were they?’ Nina asked her grandfather.

‘All sorts, large and small. Every fisherman in the Aegean needed our ice in those days. There were crab boats from Crete and lobster boats from Lesbos. There were the eel men and the squid men. We made so much ice the whole harbour was cool. You could have worked right through the siesta if you’d wanted.’

‘But now there’s only the Blue Line fish-boat, only one boat that gets ice,’ Nina said and she looked up to see it slowly steaming into the harbour.

‘Progress,’ the grandfather muttered crossly in a hoarse whisper. ‘The biggest boat of all that one. Thirty years ago the Blue Line Company said it was the best thing to happen to fishing. Maybe so for them, but it put all the little boats out of business.’

‘What else can you smell?’ Nina asked quietly, taking her grandfather by the hand.

He sniffed the air and said nothing for a moment. Nina listened to the song of the afternoon, the sound of crickets and the small waves dancing on the beach.

At last the grandfather spoke.

‘I smell something coming,’ he said. ‘There’s a strong smell from the north.’

He sniffed again.

‘It’s a bad, bad smell,’ he said finally and he stood up to go indoors.