

CHAPTER 25

Markos and the lame donkey

Stelios Vamvakaris

When Markos got stuck into one of his gloomy moods he had to find a way of relaxing. He preferred not to go to the café and spoil his friends' good humour with his grumbling. So he would wander off round the orchards and gardens of his friend Malikoúitis, who had peacocks, pine trees, mulberries, cows, chickens, flowers, vegetables and olives. Malikoúitis was a generous sort – he always gave Markos something when he saw him – a cauliflower, or a lettuce, or whatever...

One day, as Markos was walking round the gardens, he saw an abandoned donkey. It was standing in the middle of nowhere, scraggy, skinny, just about at death's door. Someone had tied a thick noose round its neck and the other end they had tied to the branch of a tree. It was summer, it was hot, and Markos thought: "How's the poor thing going to survive without water and food? How's the poor devil going to survive with the heat of the sun on its head all day?"

The donkey was traumatised, and kept pacing up and down, as far as its rope allowed it. Markos realised that it had a problem – it was lame in one leg. Obviously its former owner had decided to get rid of it, and had taken it to a deserted spot and tied it up so that it would die there – or maybe some kind-hearted gardener would find it and give it a home. So Markos untied the rope, and he brought the donkey, slowly-slowly, limping along, from Malikoúitis's place to Aspra Chómata. He looked after it and nursed it back to health, and soon the lame donkey became part of our family. Later, once the animal had recovered its strength, we hitched it up to a cart, and I used to go to the vegetable market with my elder brother Vasilis, load up vegetables, and then go selling them around the neighbourhood. We'd be alright as long as it didn't rain. When it rained the donkey dug in its heels and refused to budge, and we'd get soaking wet as a result. One time we got caught in a mini-flood, and the mud washed away all the vegetables we had in the cart.

In our neighbourhood there was a market once a week. Markos would put two panniers on the donkey and set off shopping. In the market the stallholders would load him with stuff, because they loved him, and they would never accept money from him. Markos would go among the stalls, barefoot, with a thick flannel vest, whether it was summer or winter, and with his misshapen hands and the lame donkey at his side, and people would die laughing but at the same time their hearts were breaking to see how low had sunk the man whose, with his songs, had raised others so high. Markos... He who had lived all the glory of his songs, and had seen them enter into the hearts of men. The man who, the moment he fell ill, the system threw him out, and nobody out of all the people he had helped even gave him a thought. They all kept him at a distance, threw him out, and nobody – whether record company bosses, night club owners or fellow musicians – stopped to wonder how Markos was surviving, and his family.

This man who, from the royalties, from his percentage, so many other people had gotten rich. Only I know with what pain Markos left this life, and how friends and enemies alike had treated him. Various people used to go and record his songs without asking his permission, and without paying a cent to Markos. Others would steal one of his intros, or part of a verse, or they would disguise the songs a bit and put them out on records under their own names, and not that of Vamvakaris. There was a fearsome plundering took place on the name of Markos – robbery – and I can tell you that exactly the same thing is still going on today. Robbery with impunity... theft, that's what it is...

My father never thought to go chasing after them with lawyers and law suits. Markos died very poor. I'll never forget how I had to run to the AEPI – the organization that collects musical royalties – to borrow 35,000 drachmas to be able to pay for his funeral. A few days before he died, he told me: “Stelios, be careful. Make it your business to look after your father’s property, his songs. And with the money you get, buy a house for your brothers and your mother.”

His dream was to buy us a small house and to set us up OK. Just a few moments before he died he looked at my mother and asked: “Did you buy it, Vangelio, did you buy it?” There he was, breathing his last, and he was asking my mother if she’d managed to buy the house. The poor man was in his sickness and in the fever of death, squeezing out the last moments of his life, but on his mind there was still that worry about what would become of his children. Everybody should light a candle to his memory, and cross themselves for him, because it was Markos who made and spread the big table where all the others sat down and eat. And that man died with a huge regret in his soul, and only I know that regret, and what was done to him by his... fellow musicians. Markos loved both the ox and the ant. He always forgave those who harmed him. He never did harm to any living soul, and he never spoke ill of anyone. He was the one who opened the way, and on that road travelled all his disciples. He used to sing:

From the bouzouki to the tekke,
they're all pupils of mine,
those kids who today are playing
high-class bouzouki.

In the period between 1932 and 1951 Markos put out a lot of records. A short while after the German occupation he started to have that trouble with his bones – his legs and his hands got swollen, and the pain was so severe that he couldn't play any more. The water in the slaughterhouses in which he had worked for so many years – and also the dampness of our house – had given him arthritis, and he was in a difficult situation. He couldn't hold his bouzouki, which meant that he wasn't able to work, because Markos played and also accompanied himself when he sang.

When he got sick with his hands, nobody ever thought about him, nobody ever invited him to a club to sing three or four songs so that he could earn the odd fifty drachmas. They didn't want him around, because the new players had just come onto the scene – with their bow ties and cufflinks. And they were scared of Markos turning up with his thick flannel vest, because he came from another world and he would have brought down the tone of their party. Markos was a *mangas* and proud of it. On the rare occasions when they invited him to play in a club, they usually stuck him in the third row at the back, because as soon as he started singing and playing, the fans would all rush down to the front and start throwing flowers and bursting balloons and trying to touch him and give him money. Because it was a big thing – the club would be packed, when Markos started to sing. His appearance changed the whole appearance of the evening. You can still see from the photographs what a striking presence he had – the holiness of his music, and how faithful remained those who loved him. They would put up requests, and they wouldn't let him stop and carry on with the regular programme of the night. They'd keep asking him for stop after song after song.

Not just anyone danced when Markos played. Only those who knew how to dance zeibekiko. In my life I have known flea market traders from Monastiraki, butchers from Kokkiniá, grocers from Rédi, criminals, pickpockets, restaurant owners, postmen, lottery ticket sellers, *koutsavákia*, university professors, shipowners, jewellers and factory owners, who have come up to me and said: “Markos Vamvakaris played for me and I danced.”

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