





STRAY LIGHT

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To those old, stray, images  
To every Ilena and her passion for light

My gratitude to the RadioArt Internet radio, for the inspiration and  
the company

Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that.  
Martin Luther King



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## Darkness

“Where did I go wrong? Why did she leave? What did I do?” the visitor asks, his voice tinged with despair.

There’s a pause. Then roaring laughter resounds all around him. Finally, his host speaks, answering the visitor’s questions.

“My, what profound questions! And you seriously expect me to answer. As if there’s an answer to every question! That’s what you think, then! That’s how deluded you are!”

Roaring laughter again, growing louder. Then the same voice adds, or rather, begins answering the visitor’s questions,

“You’ve done nothing wrong! Don’t fret searching for an answer. There is no answer. She left; she just left; no reason. She felt something; something strong and undefined. And she left. It wasn’t your fault. Nor did you make any mistake. You were just, how should I put it... unfortunate, that’s all.”

The visitor buries his face in his hands in despair. Then he asks again,

“Unfortunate! That’s all! So why can’t I see, then? How is my misfortune connected to my inability to see? How long will this last, this inability? The inability to see anything but you. When will I find the light again?”

There’s a long silence. Then the host’s voice replies,

“You were unfortunate and wound up here, with me. In my darkness. You wound up here where light, my great and eternal foe, dares not penetrate. Because this is my kingdom. Because it stands no hope here, I blot it out on the spot. Light is diminished here, vanquished. The same goes for you in coming to my kingdom; light has vanished. And there’s nothing you can do to find it again. From now on, you’ll only see me; nothing else.”

The host pauses a moment and then adds,

“Light in its entirety left with her; it followed her. That’s what happened. And you were exiled here. Welcome to my kingdom, then!”

The same sarcastic laughter resounds again. There’s a brief pause. Then the visitor lifts his head.

“So there’s nothing I can do? There’s nothing I can do about the light I’ve lost either?”

His host replies,

“Of course not; there’s nothing you can do. You’ll live in darkness. In my kingdom, where you’ve come, there’s only darkness.”

The visitor takes a step forward, then asks,

“Only darkness, even though it’s not my fault, even though I haven’t done anything wrong?”

His host shakes his head.

“Even though it’s not your fault, yes. It doesn’t matter if it’s your fault or not. Those are the rules here. We are part of the vast kingdom of fortune. We are the dark side of fortune’s star. That’s what we are! Only fortune determines who comes here and who doesn’t, not meanness or injustice, as you now know. Those come after. It doesn’t matter if it’s your fault or not. It’s totally irrel-

evant. That's what makes everyone down here cruel and mean. Everyone! That's what will make you cruel too, cruel beyond recognition. That's how things are though, how they always were."

The visitor ponders briefly, then asks, fear now coloring his voice,

"And how long will I be like this, unable to see?"

Laughter resounds again. Then comes the answer the visitor was afraid of.

"Maybe forever; it could be forever."

The laughter gradually dies down; the two men look each other in the eyes. Some time passes. Then the visitor speaks again. Despair seems to have subsided a little, there's now a hint of hope in his voice.

"What were those voices I heard the other day? Voices so loud, like I'd never heard before. And why were those voices crying: 'I saw, I saw'? That's what they cried. What was that about, if light is forever lost here?"

Suddenly the host grows solemn. He remains quiet. The visitor asks him again,

"Well, what is it? Why have you grown so serious all of a sudden? Why aren't you mocking me anymore?"

"Yes, it's true, there is an instance, only one instance, but I'd urge you not to count on it," the host says and pauses a moment while his face changes, his features stretch, flushed by angry crimson colors.

The visitor approaches him; he looks at him from a small distance.

"Tell me about it then: what instance is that?" he asks, deeply anxious.

The host seems vexed; clearly irritated, his words come

slowly.

“The light might find you. The mutinous light. The light that defies me, the one I have no reign over, the one I can’t blot out.”

The visitor frowns and stares hard at him. Then he asks, “What light is it that you don’t reign over? When does it come, how long does it last?”

The host turns his back. His head moves up and down, with a slow and steady motion.

“When does it come, when does it come!” After a pause he adds,

“I don’t know when it comes. It wouldn’t if I did, I’d blot that out too. Just as you don’t know why you wound up here, I don’t know when that light will appear.”

He turns and looks at the astonished visitor. Then he goes on.

“See, I don’t know everything either... That’s something we have in common!”

There’s that roaring laughter again. Afterwards, when it dies down, the visitor slowly asks,

“How long does that light last, then? Do you know? Can you tell me that?”

The host replies. His tone is flat, indifferent.

“That light lasts but a little, just a fraction.”

He pauses a moment and completes his phrase, angry now.

“That light lasts only a little. Don’t get your hopes up. It lasts but a fraction and it’s called...”

He looks him in the eyes.

“It’s called... stray light.”

\* \* \*

Orestes' first and great love with Anna, a painter, ended unexpectedly. During their relationship Orestes came to know the light, a different light, which seemed to radiate through his girlfriend's paintings and infused him, coloring his entire life. A rare light perceptible by very few people besides Orestes. Only a few followed its flow and saw the strange objects in Anna's paintings. For most people they remained obscure, unseen, hidden. That was a unique trait of Anna's light and her paintings.

The day after a passionate outburst, when they'd made love against a door, with Orestes holding Anna and Anna holding some lilies he'd brought her a little earlier, the day after that, Anna didn't return home. She only told her friend, Thaleia, that she'd left, for no reason, and that she'd gone to Paris, where she intended to stay. Finally, that she didn't want anyone to seek after her. Not Thaleia herself, nor Orestes.

Orestes heard the news from Thaleia. As a result, he withdrew from the outside world and his university studies for months. He roamed the streets with no purpose, and no destination. The streets were the only place he could breathe; he felt he'd suffocate everywhere else. The only exception was a bar, a hangout called Rodeo, where he spent a few hours a week. And then his house, where he returned late at night only to rush out the door early the next morning. He had to get out before that unnatural, unbearable and stifling feeling, his steady companion during that period, had time to rear its head inside and overwhelm him.

And after some time, when mourning over his girlfriend's irrevocable exit from his life completed its circle, when his attempt to, at least, figure out what had happened was clearly leading nowhere, when it became apparent that the whole thing was beyond him, Orestes returned to his previous world.

Or rather, that's how it seemed.

Because when he returned to his old world he was deeply changed. He was cruel with people. He couldn't forgive what had happened to him so abruptly, so entirely without reason. He was constantly plagued by a feeling of injustice. And, instinctively, unconsciously, that sense of injustice grew larger inside him. And it mutated into cruelty, which he lavishly bestowed upon everyone around him.

Worst of all was that, with Anna, light too had gone from his new life, his new world. And along with the unique light, the extremely rare light typical of her paintings, the light of his own life was gone too.

Besides, his new host, the master of the darkness which overshadowed his new life, had been explicit about that.

From now on he'd be blind.

He didn't leave him much hope. He'd stay that way for a long time, maybe forever. That's what he told him.

\* \* \*

Unless he was visited by that strange light his host was forced to admit, in anger, intermittently exists. And which sometimes manages to evade and trick him, defeat and

sweep over him. And that he's too slow to blot out with his darkness.

That rebellious, stray light. That's what he called it.



Part I - 1986



## A trip to the river

The day was warm, as usual for that time of year, but every now and then a sudden gust of wind would sweep up hats, newspapers and the like, periodically causing a minor upheaval on the beach.

“Ileana, careful Ileana! You’ll trample Alexandru!” an irritated Antonin shouted to his daughter. Ileana had, at Mirella’s throw of the ball, its trajectory altered by the wind, taken a few steps backwards trying to catch it, forgetting all about little Alexandru who was playing in the sand right behind her. Attempting to guess where the wind would carry the ball, she tripped over the boy and on her way down hit him hard on the head with her elbow before landing on top of him. So now, sprawled on the ground, little Alexandru was wailing.

The two cousins were playing volleyball with a friend; the girls had formed a triangle and were tossing the ball between them. Ileana was the eldest of the three, approaching eighteen. She was also by far the best player. A true athlete.

She was a real tomboy as a child. She’d started training in the martial arts before her teens, and had shown an aptitude for karate. Then her beauty suddenly blossomed. Eventually she was told, at an age when she was too young to respond, to drop such man sports and take up something more feminine. And so she found herself

playing volleyball. She didn't quit karate though. She was good, very good at karate, but she excelled in volleyball. She went from tournament to tournament. And recently she had been asked to join the national girls' volleyball team of Romania. When her cousin and their friend heard about it, they were wonderstruck. They were also a little envious. They had barely been to the capital themselves, while Ileana had roamed Romania from one end to the other, and soon she might even travel abroad, to take part in international meetings. All this sounded very distant, truly incredible, to the other two girls. And made them a bit sad also.

\* \* \*

They'd gone to the river that day, the big river. To the Danube. The Danube which flowed a few kilometers from their village, a small community near Orsova, a little town in south Romania, a mining settlement on the border with Bulgaria.

It was a summer holiday and Antonin and his brother had taken their two daughters and their girlfriend on a small trip to a nearby beach, on the riverbank. And they would've been spared the tears and the injuries, if little Alexandru hadn't started niggling. Unfortunately for him, he wanted to join them.

"But Alexandru, you'll be bored, the girls are too old to play with you," his father Mihai, Antonin's brother, had told him. Then his mom, in a different, and alack prophetic, tone added,

"Let the boy come with you, Mihai. As long as he makes

certain to stay clear of the girls' ball; OK, Alexandru?"

Alexandru was determined that day. It was a sweet, sunny summer day, and he apparently fancied playing on the riverbank and swimming in the water. Besides, there wasn't much for him to do at home. All his friends were away on holiday; he'd be alone there too. Better running along the river then, and swimming in its waters. That's how he'd pictured it in his childish little head. How could he ever imagine that his eighteen-year-old cousin would land on him with all her weight? It was practically impossible for him to foresee such a misfortune.

A large bump began forming where Ileana's elbow had knocked full force against Alexandru's forehead. And that caused further pain and distress.

\* \* \*

They carried Alexandru to a nearby deserted, ramshackle hut Antonin had built himself years ago. It was relatively quiet there; it was also a way of removing wailing Alexandru from the annoyed glances of the other holidaymakers. People from the mountainous regions of Romania have the custom of building such straw huts as makeshift, cheap summer lodgings. And Antonin had brought the custom from the mountains where he originated to the riverside town of Orsova when he and his brother settled in the area with their families many years ago. To the astonishment of his new neighbors, who, among other things, wondered how legal Antonin's makeshift structure was. True, it was a very small structure; it could barely accommodate three people. And it was also out of the way, you

would hardly notice it. But, most importantly, back then people had no way of knowing who their neighbor really was. So, what if Antonin wasn't a miner, like he said, but something else, something more, cleverly concealed behind a miner's guise? Better let sleeping dogs lie, then! Consequently, the only ones who might cause Antonin any trouble were the police, who knew everything about everyone. The rest preferred to mind their own business.

The police had many posts in the area. After all, it was near the border. Bulgaria was just a few kilometers away. Even worse, Yugoslavia was right across the river. Many people managed to escape to the west from that side. Some didn't make it, though; the police caught up with them and they ended up in the river forever...

The police did come and inspect the hut one day. They also checked on the owner, Antonin. They visited the premises and made a thorough investigation. Their original intent was to pull it down. Then something happened, something to do with the bureaucracy, and the whole thing was forgotten. Thus, what with the neighbors' phobias, what with the heavy work load of the police force, plus a little luck, Antonin's hut was eventually spared.

\* \* \*

It was about the same time when, before the family had had time to rejoice for the fortunate outcome of the situation with the hut, Antonin's wife, Ileana's mother, passed away: from a heart attack, at a very young age. Ileana was barely ten years old. It was unexpected, sudden and tragic. They pulled her out of the river and took her to the hut.

And there she remained, motionless, for a long time, until the paramedics arrived to verify her death. And in their panic, her family had forgotten little Ileana, who stood nearby, looking tearfully at the hut, sensing that something bad was happening inside.

Both families were in deep mourning for a long time. And when they recovered, as much as they would ever recover, they weren't interested in the hut anymore. They associated it with the tragedy. It became the focal point of their anger and their grief. Ileana was afraid of it, at first; she didn't want to go in. Then she came to hate it, she never entered it, she wouldn't even go near it. So in the end, fate succeeded where the police and the neighbors had failed. The hut was abandoned and left to fall apart.

And only now, with Alexandru's unexpected injury, were they forced to visit it again.

\* \* \*

Agitated, Antonin rushed to a nearby store and asked for some ice. As if he wasn't distressed enough already, Alexandru's mom, Elena, arrived on the scene. She was informed about the incident by her husband and was first upset, then angry with him and even more with Antonin and his daughter's antics. So when Antonin appeared, she sent him a few poisonous looks for Ileana's latest feat. But the hostilities didn't last long. They had to work together, to hold down the boy, and put some ice on his forehead. Antonin held him fast, Mihai looked on, Alexandru howled, and his mom strove to hold the ice on his bump, to prevent it from swelling further, which would

make the pain worse. And so, thanks to the mayhem and the joint effort, Antonin was spared his sister-in-law's nagging and reproach.

\* \* \*

The three girls chose to stop playing while Alexandru's wailing and treatment was taking place. They had already been harshly told off by the two men for their thoughtlessness in throwing the ball so hard that close to the little boy. They thought it better to make themselves scarce, hoping things would blow over quicker that way.

So they stayed away and sat by the river, gazing at the quiet flow of its waters.

\* \* \*

Mirella struck up a conversation, to lift the mood.

"You're so lucky, Ileana! You've found a way to escape this desolate place. You can travel, do interesting stuff, meet people, play volleyball, win, get noticed. I envy you! Wish I could do as much!"

Their friend looked on in silence, though it was clear from her expression she shared the same thoughts and wishes as Mirella.

Ileana looked at them. Her gaze overflowed with confidence and self-esteem. For a moment she pretended she was going to laugh at their fantasies. At their nerve to assume they could ever reach her! But another thought instantly crossed her mind. No, Ileana didn't merely plan to leave Orsova and its isolation. The things her cousin

praised so high weren't enough for her. Of course they weren't. She had other plans. She would go far further than unsuspecting Mirella had just described with such awe. But first she had to overcome some obstacles. And these obstacles stressed her. It was exactly these obstacles that toned down her arrogance and kept her from breaking into laughter.

But Mirella had to hear what Ileana had in mind. That desire overwhelmed her cousin. Mirella had to hear, so she could acknowledge how far Ileana could see – much further than any other girl her age ever imagined. How inapproachable not only her life was, but also the places she would reach, the things she would do, were.

She hesitated a bit. It was an important secret. Was this the right time to share it? And how should she put it? How much should she reveal?

In the end, a strong force within her urged her to speak. Nothing could surpass and overshadow her ambition. An ambition as great as hers. Not even the danger involved in revealing her secret, which was now on the tip of her tongue. So Ileana spoke, and her words caused a sensation.

“You know, Mirella, I plan to leave Romania.”

She paused a moment and wondered if she had sufficiently unfolded the full scope of her feat before them. She saw the other girls' eyes widen with surprise and was convinced that no, she hadn't made it plain enough. There was more to say. So she added,

“My boyfriend in Bucharest is graduating Medicine. I'm leaving with him in a few months. We have everything planned. We're going to marry.”

That's what Ileana said and her face darkened a moment, as if she regretted going into so much unnecessary, perhaps even trivial, detail. The important thing was she was leaving, not the circumstances under which she meant to do it.

But a few seconds later her vanity shone through her features again, in the look on her face and in her entire posture. She radiated with pride. And the more the look of surprise spread over the other girls' faces, the more the sense of her great, insurmountable, supremacy heightened.

She could've remained in that state of deep self-content for a long time. Not that the other two seemed capable of breaking the spell of awe that kept them dumbfounded. But Ileana thought about it again. And once more resolved she still hadn't told them everything. She hadn't manifested the full magnitude of her splendor. The blaze of her unique capabilities still hadn't come through as glaring as she deserved. So she fired her final shot.

“And I'm going to Greece, to the islands!”

she said, and rolled, feeling excited, relaxed and proud of herself, on the riverbank. And the glamour of her final statement widened the eyes of the other two flabbergasted and dumbstruck girls completely.

## From Sifnos to Amorgos

Ileana had recently met a guy, Sophocles, a medical student, in Bucharest. Sophocles saw her in a volleyball tournament and liked her; he liked her a lot, and sought her out after the game.

\* \* \*

Of course Sophocles wasn't interested in volleyball. He never was, not in the least. The thing was, he was very lonely in Bucharest, and came up with the idea to attend women's tournaments until he achieved his goal: namely, to find a girlfriend. Back then Romania had as many sports clubs as Greece had bars. So he had to adjust his tactics to local conditions in order to score.

Sophocles wasn't very picky; most girls would do. So he made a list of various women's sports, asked around, found out where they trained and which training sessions were open to the public, and set off to try his luck.

His initial standards were quite high. He started off with gymnastics. A wise decision, befitting his name, but overly ambitious. He was destined to fail and soon became disappointed. You see, at the time Romanian gymnasts were famous and extremely popular the world over. Sitting in the tiers with about a dozen other guys he could immediately tell who dated whom from their adoring re-

actions. He was crestfallen when he realized there wasn't a girl available. They were all taken! He gave it another try. The results were the same, if not worse. In fact, some of the boys noted that, although he was a total stranger, he came to watch the training a second time. Also he had a strange, probing look in his eyes. Which made them think some rather dark thoughts. And Sophocles attracted a few dissuasive, meaningful looks himself.

He shook his head. "Forget it!" he thought. But he didn't lose his nerve. Armed with resolve and courage, he determined to keep at it until he found something for himself. Besides, studying Medicine in Romania required a lot of courage in itself back then. Sophocles, therefore, was accustomed to hardship.

So he lowered his standards. He left gymnasts in peace and to their lovers. And he made a list of the different sports. Sports that had some potential, that is. No shot putting or hammer throwing. More delicate stuff. He started with sprinters, then moved on to tennis players. But he had a streak of bad luck. And he didn't have much leeway to persist. The males had their eyes peeled, they were on the lookout. After the second, third time tops, Sophocles showed up at training, he'd get the looks. Which meant it was time to shove off.

So he thought he'd better quit trainings and take up games, the actual games themselves. There would be many people in the tiers during a game: he'd be lost in the crowd and could go unnoticed by the watchdogs, the girls' boyfriends. Then, after watching the game and making his choice at leisure, he could try his luck during the break or after the game even. Of course the danger

of falling on a well-guarded girl couldn't be entirely ruled out. But there wasn't much he could do about that. He had to take his chances. Besides, he could always pretend he simply wanted an autograph. Where was the harm in that? If some watchdog showed up, he could flash them both a smile and take off. For the next autograph. Ideally, for an autograph one should have the picture of the person who's meant to sign it. But who cares? Sophocles was looking for an excuse, not an actual autograph.

That's how the whole autograph scheme began. He failed thrice. First time he fell on a watchdog so mean and fierce, he almost landed in serious trouble. Unfortunately, the bully didn't buy the story about the autograph. He had to beat a hasty retreat to avoid being badly roughed up. The second time the girl had such a surprised, scared and frozen look, he had gone off her on the spot; her eyes were so terrified and cold, they made him change his mind and clear out as fast as he could. The third time he thought luck was on his side until the basketball player got smart and sent him to hell.

Three games, then, three attempts; and not a single autograph.

Forth time around Providence was on his side.

He met Ileana.

Ileana was a volleyball player: an exceptional player, who happened to be taking part in a tournament in Bucharest at the time. But, more importantly, she was a beautiful woman. Tall, blond, very good-looking. Sophocles was stuck on her from the moment he saw her. "This is it," he thought. And then tried to figure out her character from the way she played. So he could adjust his tactics to

achieve the optimum result. He also decided to approach her for an autograph after the game, which was going to be a short one by the looks of it. Owing mainly to Ileana's impressive performance, her team made a clean sweep. Sophocles' desire was growing stronger. So much so that when he tried to choose a runner-up, in case Ileana had an escort, he immediately lost interest. Today he was here for her and her only. For Ileana.

Fortunately, there was no watchdog. Nor did Ileana hang about chatting with coaches and teammates. Sophocles nodded his head. This was a good sign. The girl seemed a loner. That was ideal for his plan. Come to think of it, that's what he'd first thought about the basketball player too. And he was shocked when she had started swearing at him in that foul, uncivilized manner. "This is volleyball though, not basketball," Sophocles thought, managing to strike up some courage, to feel he had some kind of an advantage here. For no reason, really. Basketball or volleyball, he found both equally indifferent and drab. He only cared about football, but decided the sport was unsuitable for his purpose. He could tell more about the girls when they played the ball with their hands. That's what he thought; and he had a good point.

Sophocles was on pins and needles towards the end of the game. Ileana made some defensive vertical jumps and shot some impressive spikes that shook her entire being. He was thrilled to the core. He felt lucky Ileana's team was making such a clean sweep. He was certain the game would soon be over. It was obvious it wouldn't be long now. The thought was a relief. "Imagine if it was an even score. You'd go mad, poor Sophocles!" he thought

in delight.

And when the game was over with a clean 3-0, Sophocles' eyes locked entirely on his target, Ileana, who seemed totally disinterested in the mad jubilation of the rest of her team. Oh yes, she was a loner, no doubt about it. Like she didn't give a hoot about their victory, which was mainly her achievement. Like she was somewhere else. She sat quietly in a corner and looked indifferently at her teammates screaming their heads off with excitement.

Now was the time.

Sophocles knew his way around the arena, he'd studied it beforehand. He had some change in his hand, in case he was stopped by a security guard. He meant to offer to buy him a beer, if he'd let him pass and enter the court.

But he didn't encounter anyone. Not even a policeman. Sophocles would have bought them a dozen beers that night in order to pass. But he was lucky and walked freely into the court, making a beeline for Ileana.

And as he approached her, all worked up and excited, he searched for the picture Ileana was supposed to sign. But the picture was nowhere to be found! Sophocles stopped dead in his tracks and searched his pockets. He was frantic. Damn! He must've dropped the stupid thing!

The way he hectically entered the court, the way he suddenly froze in his tracks, searching himself from tip to toe for the picture - this time he truly had gotten himself one - he caught Ileana's eye. He attracted her attention. She saw him and found the sight so hilarious, she cracked a smile. But Sophocles saw her smile and misunderstood and interpreted it arbitrarily, at will, as an invitation and a

summons. And that filled him with resolve. He stopped searching over and over again, seized on Ileana's misinterpreted smile and began moving slowly and surely toward her.

Ileana's features darkened. She realized this funny character was most likely heading for her. She appeared to utterly disapprove of his trajectory. But nothing could stop Sophocles now. He didn't see the change in Ileana's expression. He preferred to remain in the grip of his original misinterpretation. When he had misunderstood the silly image he presented to Ileana and read a summons in her eyes.

Sophocles had finally reached Ileana, who now stood up, her eyes full of contempt, anger and repulsion. But Sophocles saw none of these. Fortunately for him, of course. Indeed, quite the contrary. Her image from up close drove him mad. Ileana appeared to him even more beautiful now than she did before. And the light sweat that hadn't dried from her body yet made him fantasize and excited him even more.

"I've lost my picture, the one I had for your autograph! What bad luck! I must've dropped it somewhere!" Sophocles said, smiling awkwardly while trying to think what the heck to suggest now for Ileana to sign. And the more he realized it was next to impossible to find a substitute, the more he thought he should perhaps forget about autographs and simply ask her out to dinner.

In the few seconds it took Sophocles to decide a change in tactics, Ileana's expression changed as well. And her anger and contempt gave way to something gentler, something more human. Just as he was about to

unfold his new, more direct approach, Ileana spoke first.

“You’re not Romanian, are you?” she asked, allowing an utterly enigmatic smile which revealed nothing of the workings of her mind.

Sophocles seized on Ileana’s question. This was his best chance to change his approach and drop the autograph scheme! First he’d answer her question and then, right after that, he’d use his reply as a springboard to continue the conversation. He’d ask her to dinner. Sophocles was beaming, deeply pleased about the soundness of his strategy!

“I’m Greek, I’m a graduate student here in Bucharest; I study Medicine,” he replied. “My name is Sophocles,” he added and flashed an awkward, bordering on stupid, smile, preparing to enter the second and modified stage of his siege, which omitted the autograph scheme.

But there was no need to unfold his siege any further. The second stage was unnecessary. For some magical reason, the castle inexplicably opened its gates and bid him enter. It welcomed its conqueror, and in no uncertain terms either.

“There’s no need for an autograph, Sophocles. Come, take me to dinner, I’m starving.”

That’s what Ileana said, imperatively, without leaving him any choice. And for a moment there Sophocles, his head spinning, was overwhelmed, his mind raced, a craving raged in his insides. Ileana’s words kindled his own hunger, the one he anticipated she would satisfy. What a connotation! But even Sophocles realized it would be best to keep this thought of his to himself. Better not risk trying to put it into words. The sense of what was erro-

neous, inappropriate, was maturing fast. Some good fate made him bite his tongue and refrain from elaborating on the subject. “Better not let her suspect I want to trade dinner for sex,” he thought. He broke out in cold sweat when he realized the magnitude of the blunder he’d only just avoided.

But he had misjudged the situation. There was no reason for Sophocles to worry about his near blunder. If he knew, if only he knew what he would soon learn, he’d realize that Ileana would’ve simply passed by his ridiculous joke. She would’ve passed by even that. Like she passed by the stupid autograph scheme. Just as, minute by minute, she passed him by, too. Ileana had, of course, no doubt whatsoever about Sophocles’ character. She had permanently classed him exactly where he deserved to be.

Her craving was to get out, to escape, not for food. And she would gladly trade a dinner for sex and many other things as well. She was so eager, so fervent, to change her life, that she didn’t even have the patience to wait for Sophocles’ answer to her request.

“Come, let’s go, I know a good restaurant near here,” she said. And Sophocles soared. He soared and felt like a winged giant, flying over the volleyball court. He felt so powerful, he could finish an entire game single-handed with his new unnatural height, and the immeasurable strength of his spike would wipe out his opponent’s defense scoring - that spike alone - fifteen points.

\* \* \*

At the restaurant Ileana strove to determine a strategy. To get a handle on the situation. She could tell precisely what Sophocles wanted the moment he stepped into the court. She had absolutely no doubt about it. Of course she had no intention of sleeping with him. She didn't think it was the proper approach. First of all, it was a repulsive prospect. She definitely wasn't in the mood. Second, even if she forced herself to do it, she had no guarantee Sophocles wouldn't rush to another stadium the next day for more autographs. She had to take every precaution against such an intolerable possibility.

Of course, the more time passed, the more Ileana realized her beauty would most likely have a lasting hold over the idiot dining with her. Sophocles had a craving, a deep craving, quite different from the common, superficial and passing craving of most. Ileana could easily tell these things, at a glance. Her unique insight made her soon rule out any chance Sophocles might drop off the face of the earth the next day. But that of course wasn't reason enough for her to jump into bed with him so easily. Not to mention that, when the time came, she would need a few strong drinks beforehand. A condition which, in any case, couldn't be fulfilled that night in the humble restaurant in which they were dining.

While Ileana was pondering over which was the best strategy to follow, the solution suddenly came out of nowhere. Actually, it was Sophocles himself who offered it to her. He started telling her of the shock he'd felt when he first saw her. He then went on about how what he felt

was wonderful and deep and anything but a passing fancy. He told her about the first excitement he'd felt, when he saw her stretch her gorgeous body and jump to make a spike against the stunned and helpless opponent. But only now, Sophocles added, could he actually see what a truly rare woman Ileana was. How sensitive and elegant. He talked of a strong feeling building up inside him. He added a few more lines of sweet-talk, more lame and less successful than the above, but he'd got his message across to Ileana.

Thus, she ruled out any chance he could be lying to her. The guy was so emotional he was practically in tears. And Ileana realized that was her solution. It was right in front of her, he'd just offered it to her on a plate. She could build on Sophocles' crush, that's what she could do. She could keep the pot boiling, nourish his infatuation, kindle it, keep fuelling it. She could reinforce the feeling she saw building up inside him. And while she was on it, she should add some drama about herself. About how miserable and unbearable her life was. About her decision to escape it all. And, finally, try and connect all that together: Sophocles' feeling, the fondness she of course felt towards him, but also her deep yearning to change her life, to get away from the mediocrity that suffocated her. To connect all these dots, then, with a clearly defined line, and make it plain that, as far as she was concerned, these things were all in the same basket. And that she was in absolutely no mood for one night stands. And so she embarked on a long and bitter narrative.

"Sophocles, I believe that after everything I've told you, you now have a better picture of who I am and what

I want. I'm glad your feelings run as deep and you're not looking to get a lay. I'd like to hang out with you, get to know you, and see if you can inspire in me the sense of security, the strength I long for so much. The rest will follow," Ileana said, rounding off her narrative of misfortune with a positive promise.

Sophocles was troubled. He had written off sex that night and he didn't really mind. But all this talk of inspiring her with strength and security etc... That was all very well, but how long would it take, damn it? He saw it would be difficult to make it stick, and that kind of worried him.

He didn't worry too much, though, since the main thing was the admiration and the strong attraction Ileana's body exerted over him. The attraction was so strong it even made her words sound somehow majestic, endowed them with the ability to penetrate deep inside him; these were words that, if it weren't for her body, Sophocles would never have paid any attention. But now, what an influence they had over him! They armed him with patience. And they also made him see the whole thing as something of a challenge. To inspire strength in a woman like her, now that was something he'd never even dreamed of!

So new boundaries were set in Sophocles' world that night. And Sophocles himself was soaring once more.

They left the restaurant wrapped in each other's arms, with Sophocles raving about how many things he realized that incredible evening, about how much he loved her and understood the way she felt, and about his firm decision to help her escape all the mediocrity that made her life miserable.

“Ileana, I want you to trust me, to count on me. You’ve probably realized by now that I’m not looking for a short-lived relationship. I want to be constantly by your side, to be with you.” That’s how Sophocles said goodnight to his sweetheart that night. And Ileana nodded modestly, with pleasure. And gave him a passionate, well-calculated, kiss which would drive him mad for days. For the entire ten-day period Ileana would be away, when she’d gone back to her village, near Orsova. Ten days which would prove an unbearable torture for Sophocles. When images of everything that had happened that day would constantly come to life. Ileana making a spike, Ileana sweating, Ileana giving him a kiss. But which would also breed other, new, images of things that, alas, hadn’t happened yet. Endlessly making love to her, undressing her. Those images raised Ileana on a pedestal, despite himself. And amid his intolerable craving those images managed to make him realize full well the great responsibility and the unique opportunity before him.

Sophocles shuddered at the idea. He shuddered and shuddered again. And in ten days’ time he was ripe.

\* \* \*

The wedding took place in Greece, in the island of Sifnos, the groom’s place of origin. It went against protocol, of course, but the circumstances were so special that no one gave a hoot about protocol. Attending were the two in-laws who were still alive, namely Antonin, Ileana’s father, and Antigone, Sophocles’ mother. And naturally some of Sophocles’ friends. From the other, the Romanian side,

there weren't all that many friends; neither did what few friends there were have all that much money; nor would the few friends who might happen to have the money ever manage to get permits to travel.

In God's divine plan, Antigone must've been the exact opposite of Ileana. Kind-hearted, jubilant, always smiling, always thinking well of everyone. What with the language barrier which made communicating difficult, Mrs. Antigone remained blissfully unaware of the abyss inside her daughter-in-law's soul. Nor did she pick up on anything, despite what people say about the mother instinct. Her son was in seventh heaven and that was more than enough for her.

Ileana explained to the groom that the only one coming from Romania would be her father. And that she would therefore feel very uncomfortable surrounded by numerous Greeks and only her father from Romania. It was only natural Ileana wouldn't be in the mood for friendly gatherings. These things never pay. They were potentially dangerous. And Sophocles, who proved unworthy of his name, agreed that Ileana's wish was only logical. And then tried to cash in his tremendous understanding with exerting yet again strong pressure for prenuptial sex.

Ileana had thought of that, too. She had foreseen it. It was part of her plan. It was essential to keep Sophocles happy. She'd thought about it and resolved she would have to give in so he would be happy when the two of them arrived in Sifnos, as young lovers about to get married. She'd put him off till then, but decided to sleep with him before they went to Sifnos to keep him happy. She didn't want something to go wrong and thwart her plans.

And so, to gild the pill, she dropped a hint that if he agreed to a private wedding she'd sleep with him. She had decided to do it anyway. Sophocles got the hint when she told him she didn't want many guests and if he agreed then she just might, she maybe could, it would be difficult, but she'd think about it. Sophocles naturally agreed and immediately started exerting pressure towards the countervailing benefits she'd just promised him.

Because, truth was, he suffered a lot until the moment of the great surrender.

"But Ileana, I never thought you were so traditional, and that we'd have to marry before we could make love. Anyway, I'll agree to it but I want you to know that you're breaking my heart," Sophocles would moan plaintively over and over again.

And it made no difference, it didn't relieve him at all when Ileana would tell him that that's the tradition at home and, sorry, but that's what she'd sworn to her mother and grandmother she'd do. But towards the end she got scared. She didn't want Sophocles to express some sort of privative bitterness while they were in Sifnos and risk some kind of dangerous friction. And so, she bit her lip, got the private wedding in exchange, and slept with him.

"Sophocles, now you've agreed with me about the wedding, just so you know how much I love you, I'll forget my oath and we can make love the day before we leave for the wedding. It's a promise; are you happy?" said Ileana with a heavy heart, which she hid of course from Sophocles' unseeing eyes.

So on the eve of their departure Ileana had a couple

of drinks too many, and saw to it that she overexcited him with a bit of foreplay, and Sophocles was done in less than three minutes. And he stopped bellyaching over her constantly putting him off. And the fact that, despite his future wife's oaths to her mother and grandmother, she wasn't even a virgin didn't seem to register at all.

His ability to impose his will upon Ileana and make her break her vows and promises sent Sophocles soaring again. And the three minutes of his great carnal pleasure crowned victorious the entire difficult period he had strived to bed Ileana. That's how Sophocles saw it and that's why he beamed because of it in Sifnos, during the days of the wedding.

And when Ileana met her mother-in-law she realized that she had stressed and panicked over nothing. There was no way Antigone would ever worry over her son. She had a genetic jubilation, rooted deeply within her being. "That was one wasted fuck," Ileana thought and shook her head, but instantly bounced back. She wasn't the type that could be knocked down by trivialities of the sort. In any case, she had to remain focused. The next few days were crucial. She'd have to put up with bedding him a couple of times before she could get rid of him. She had to be patient.

\* \* \*

The wedding, in a remote little church, was uneventful. And practically went without a word said. All in all, it was attended by six Greeks and two Romanians: the bride and her bewildered father. Only Sophocles spoke to Antonin

sometimes. He was the only one, besides Ileana, who could exchange a few words with him. What little English the bride knew she kept to herself. No need to chatter. “The sooner the whole thing’s over, the better.” That’s how she saw it.

For Antonin, this flash development in his daughter’s life was a real lightning bolt. Ileana wasn’t even eighteen yet. At first he was dumbfounded, he asked no questions. He didn’t ask for an explanation or any other kind of information. He realized the matter was beyond him, its proportions apparently too deep for him to fathom. He could tell that Ileana, despite her many achievements, was suffocating; she wasn’t getting any joy out of life. He thought this decision of hers to marry had also to do with Greece itself, where she was to live permanently after the wedding. Therefore, it had to do with getting away from Romania and her miserable, godforsaken village. The place was too small for her there, that’s how Antonin saw it. He could understand it, approve of it to a degree. He didn’t need any more details.

He was therefore in a good mood and his mood got even better when he found himself in Sifnos, that beautiful little corner in Greece, for his daughter’s wedding. His thoughts were affirmed there. And got his silent, wholehearted approval.

Antonin was living in a dream in Sifnos. It would take him some time to return to his mundane reality, days after he’d gone back to his tiny village. As for his daughter’s reality, he’d never return to it again. He’d never find out why everything happened so quickly. No one would ever tell him. And so Antonin would live in a fantasy. He would

remain free to bless his daughter's fortune for finding someone to love her in this magical country that appeared to have everything: everything they, he and his daughter were deprived of in Romania. If they ever had them secured. Namely sunshine, smiling people, freedom, riches.

That's how he'd spend his days. Besides, later on, during the years to come, he would completely lose sight of his daughter's world. That would shelter him, it would preserve the dream he lived in. It would conceal reality from him, and him from reality. It would be many years before he'd see his daughter one more, one last time. And all the many years in between he would be sustained by that beautiful myth etched in his soul by his daughter's strange wedding, by his conjectures and his imaginings, and by the sun and breeze of the Aegean. They would also comfort him for her great absence. Fortunate Antonin!

The priest admired Ileana's piety. As funny as it may sound, he was the one person least off the mark at the wedding. Because Ileana, who was of the same faith, felt a sincere connection to the Divine and the Orthodox Church. A connection which went beyond the devotion and the religious habits of her family. As if her reverence covered the void of her otherwise empty life. Where this connection stemmed from exactly, neither her father nor, much less, an astonished Sophocles could fully comprehend, when they witnessed Ileana's deep contrition before God and St. Mary.

"There's the explanation, then; she's very religious! That's why she wouldn't jump into bed with me so early on," Sophocles thought, when dumbfounded he saw

Ileana's genuflections and deep contrition. He too believed, as usually happens, what he wanted to believe - whatever did him good to believe.

"May you have a long and happy life together. My dear Sophocles, what an exceptional wife you have. Most beautiful women are usually removed from the Church and are easily lost to sin. But this one here is a true Christian; you saw how penitent she was before the Divine. You're lucky, my son, you have my blessing, you and your wife too. Please tell her that." And before Sophocles could translate his words, Ileana knelt, grabbed the priest's hand and kissed it thrice, with a deep genuflection each time.

Sophocles usually relished this behavior. Ileana's religious devotion. He certainly had ulterior motives, he was only thinking of himself. What else? He saw in her behavior a kind of shield, some sort of protection. Then again he sometimes found it hard to believe his wife was so religious. He was intrigued, and something made him question it. He adored her for a thousand different things and accepted her wholeheartedly. Only one thing he occasionally doubted: the sincerity of her faith.

And he was of course wrong, both for the thousand as well as for the one thing. So much for the soundness of Dr. Sophocles' diagnosis!

\* \* \*

A few days later Antonin left for Romania. As soon as he was off, Sophocles experienced a nasty surprise. He was badly shaken. Ileana, after biting her lip first and of-

fering him another three-minute shag to keep him calm and avoid a scene, told him the next instance, while he was still descending from bliss and spinning from his easy, brief pleasure, that she had to go to Athens the next day for some business. She would stay at some friend of hers there. She also told him she'd be away for a few days.

Sophocles lost it! Just when he finally had a legal and God-given right to the body which had captivated his imagination for so long, to the body which remained almost intolerably untouched, apart from those numbered three-minute pleasures, now that body was telling him it would be gone a few days! Just when his imagination was galloping unchecked on a humongous bed, given entirely over to scenes of unending sex, he would have to go back to abstinence all over again! And then, what sort of business did Ileana have in Athens? What the hell did she know of Athens and its businesses? When did she get to know the city?

He tried to say something, tried to react. First he suggested they invite her friend to Sifnos but Ileana replied that was out of the question. Her friend was too busy, she couldn't leave Athens. "Do you hear that? Busy! I'm literally on fire here, and her friend is too busy!" was what Sophocles secretly thought. But he refrained from voicing his thoughts and simply asked to go with her to Athens.

"Oh come on, Sophocles, why are you being so difficult? I told you, I'm leaving tomorrow and I'll be back in a couple of days. A friend of mine from volleyball is in Athens. I just want to see her, that's all! What would I do with you around? Are you afraid I'll get lost? No, I don't want you with me. And please, cut out the shenanigans and the

jealousy! Come with me! Don't even think about it! We're not going to last long if you keep this up." That's what Ileana said and Sophocles found himself in a bind again. It was obvious that pushing things would get him nowhere.

"Alright, Ileana, alright; but only for a couple of days, OK? I can't stand longer than that! And then we've got to talk about where in Greece we're going to live. I graduate in a few months, and then I have to do my internship, here, in Greece this time. We're going to move back permanently. We must talk about all that. OK? It's about time, don't you think?" Sophocles replied, venting his grievance that his wife was running off to an unknown city with her friends, leaving him alone again.

And then he affectionately added,

"Be careful in Athens: it's a large city, there are many dangers there."

\* \* \*

On the boat to Athens Ileana decided it was time. There was no point in putting it off, it wouldn't help anyone. She now had the papers she needed for the police, she had enough money to make a start, it was time to toss everything else, everything she had no need for, on the dump heap. She sat in a chair on the deck, picked up a pen and began writing. To Sophocles. And what she wrote was sincere, and blunt. She thought she could perhaps drop in a kind word here and there, to apologize for deceiving him. But she shook her head and decided it would be pointless.

Ileana wrote no more than ten lines. And in those ten

lines she called him a typical fool, whom she recognized for what he was as soon as she saw him, that day when he entered the court for an alleged autograph. Then she wrote she felt absolutely nothing for him, that every time they had made love she found him totally indifferent, if not repulsive. Finally, that she had used him to get away from the hellhole she was living in. That's all. As for the future, she'd stay in Athens, and he'd never see her again. She told him to start procedures for a divorce, she didn't care. She had no idea how long it might take him but she wouldn't impose any difficulties, of course. He could do what he pleased. Her letter might help speed up the process.

She thought about her father Antonin for a moment. She thought about him and grew pale at the idea he might hear about any of this. What if Sophocles decided to go to Orsova? She got up, went to the railing and looked out across the sea.

And then she calmed down again. The wind of freedom soothed her. It reminded her she'd taken care of everything. She'd taken every precaution against Sophocles ever finding Antonin. She was certain she'd made absolutely no mistake.

With that certainty she returned to her seat. She smiled, put the letter in an envelope, wrote on the address and put it aside. Then she got herself a beer and drew a deep breath.

"Cheers and happy birthday! Now that's out of the way, I'm free at last!" she mumbled.

It was her birthday; she was eighteen.

\* \* \*

At first Sophocles couldn't believe his eyes. He read and reread and refused to believe what she wrote him. He considered going to her father and then realized he had nothing, no phone number or address to find him. A small town she'd mentioned in passing he soon found had no one by her father's name living there. She had thoroughly deceived him. Everything she'd told him was a lie.

Initially he was angry; he thought he could somehow track her down, somehow get to her father and from him to her. And then he suddenly reconciled himself to the fact. What exactly did he expect would happen if he sought her out, he asked himself. He never found an answer to that question.

That's how great shocks usually work. They don't last long. And they leave you with an overwhelming sense of futility afterwards. You resign. So he didn't tell anyone anything. Nor did he pursue the matter further. Fortunately, his mother was too benign to suspect any wrongdoing.

He got a ticket to Athens and from there back to Bucharest. To complete his studies. And perchance get a new autograph.

\* \* \*

Daybreak over the city: a sweet, new spring day is dawning. The sun slowly rises across the sky, while traffic picks up, faster, on the streets and sidewalks of the capital.

A tall female figure is slowly walking along Patission

Street. She wears a long raincoat, tied tightly at the waist, somewhat unsuitable for the time of year and the temperature of the warm day only just begun. She also wears a scarf, like those pious women wear when going to church. Raincoat and scarf conceal Ileana's beauty and help her go unnoticed.

They also conceal her nudity. Under the raincoat she wears nothing but underwear, garters. A big, bulging handbag, stuffed with the day's profits hangs, inconspicuous, from her shoulder. The figure turns into the side streets of Kypseli, goes past yet another lonesome chapel, enters, lights a candle, worships two or three icons, leaves a few small banknotes at the candle stand and then quickly leaves for home. Amorgos Street. Named after an island in the Cyclades. Near the island of Sifnos. She sees a letter, picks it up, opens it. It's from her father, from her village in Romania. "We are all in good health, but the situation is unbearable." That's what he writes. Ileana shakes her head. Then he asks about Sophocles, when will they go to Sifnos, if they plan to visit Romania in the near future. Things like that.

She leaves the letter aside, puts the bundle of large banknotes in a drawer and takes off her raincoat. She goes to bed.

\* \* \*

Athens 1986. The cows are well favored and fat fleshed. Money flows in abundance and no one much bothers about where its source lies. Ileana enters the flow as well, to claim her share. Freely. Besides, she's put so much into

getting there, to drink from its waters, to swim. A handful of funny characters try to block her way. Do-gooders, who offer services. Like protection, and such. As the martial arts champion she is, she easily tans their hides. She doesn't need anyone's help to swim! The flow keeps getting deeper, new tributaries open before her every day. But Ileana is an athlete, a karate and volleyball star. She welcomes its deepening, with all the gifts it bears.

Gradually she becomes a legend in the wider city area. Among the counter society. The unseen, the less posh one. The one newspapers hardly refer to. Day by day her value soars in the unofficial stock market of flesh. And her power, the reputation she's made with the thrashings she so generously affords when necessary, goes round quickly as well. Eventually she's surrounded by a unique, a rare aura of wonder and awe. An aura extending towards the posh neighborhoods, mostly. Far from the great unwashed, who only take pleasure in the flesh, and don't appreciate such rarefied mysteries and are therefore unwilling to pay for them. There, where politicians and businessmen live. Who are enchanted by Ileana's rare gifts. And offer her free protection, on top of everything else. Which is more than welcome! She's thrashed so many lately they might team up on her. For messing up the market, and their faces too. Free babysitting is more than welcome, then! The kind that's motivated by an appreciation of uniqueness and not by self-interest and easy money like those others, the ones who got dusted, had in mind. Besides, now she's built her legend, it's unbecoming that she give thrashings herself and allow herself to be distracted from her main duties.

\* \* \*

Ileana is swimming, then. Endlessly. She swims and makes money. That's all she does. Coldly; blindly. Without shame or disgust or any of the things pertaining to those who see. The life she lives is beyond all that. She hides from all that. For her, the only light that gets through is the regulated, the controllable one. The flickering light from the oil-lamps in the chapel, every time her footsteps lead her there.

And if one day she tires of swimming herself, as she can foresee, as she realizes will happen after a point, then she'll see what she'll do. She'll find a solution to that too, like she always does. That's the easy part.

But what if she sees an unforeseen, an unexpected light one day? How will she handle that? What if she suddenly sees where she's now blind, what if it hurts her eyes? Will her unaccustomed gaze be able to bear seeing all that is currently hidden, forgotten? What if the light passes inside her and she beams too?

Would she be given away then? Or simply become an easy target?



Part II - 1986 ... 1991



## The following years

There's always an end to winter, as there is to sadness and anger. That's how nature works. And that's what happened to Orestes after Anna's unexpected departure.

After months of torment and wandering, Orestes found a new point of equilibrium. Instinctively, effortlessly, he banished from his everyday life everything that turned him back. Everything that brought him face to face with the memory of his great beaming as well as the difficult period that followed. When he was exiled from his old world. He gradually erased all that from inside him. He had to put it all aside, let it fade away, disappear, to preserve himself.

One of the things that turned Orestes back to his old world was his friend Harry. Harry was a childhood friend, their relationship and friendship went back to their first memories of life and happiness. And their relationship was strong, for many years.

Later, in adolescence, Harry met Helena. But Helena was from a different mould, she didn't fit in with the world the two boys had created over the years. Orestes never really understood what attracted his friend to Helena. Harry would come up against the same difficulty a little later, when Orestes entered a relationship with Anna.

He too would be unable to see into their relationship. As if that weren't enough, the distance gradually build-

ing up between the two would be strongly influenced by Harry's girlfriend and the irrational, complex-ridden hatred that came over her the moment she saw Orestes. Her intense dislike was mostly what kept Harry away from his friend, kept him from seeing closer into his life, and realizing what sustained Orestes' great passion and his brightness during that great and brilliant but also very short period of time.

Initially that distance made them both very bitter. From then on that bitterness became their common ground. And it would be the only thing they would share in the future. Bitterness over how things came about, how that large gap opened between them. Over how they ceased being essential to one another. And perhaps even more over another thing. Over losing the ability to feel joy about the other's happiness. Or rather, over how neither of them could comprehend the other's happiness, much less feel joy about it.

Finally, the worst was yet to come. It hadn't happened yet. It would come later, after their present deep bitterness had run its course and died out.

\* \* \*

When Anna left, and Orestes sank into darkness, Harry was already too far distanced from him to actually see anything. He'd heard rumors, but the distance between them was already so great he was unable to feel true sadness. Then, his girlfriend, Helena, benefited greatly from that development. Orestes' disappearance was a good sign. Although she never knew the details, she saw Or-

estes pulling out of their lives for good. They might actually be rid of him once and for all. The possibility elated her. And Helena's elation then passed on to Harry and kept him out of his friend's difficult sojourn through exile.

And so, Harry never saw or suspected a thing about all those months of Orestes' ceaseless wanderings.

\* \* \*

And now that Orestes is trying to return to a new life, now he's putting aside everything related to his old world, Harry of course can be no exception. Orestes has permanently exited Harry's world. Life's cast him out, he's exiled elsewhere. He doesn't know why. He just can't return there. There's nothing he can trade with it - his old world - any longer. Neither joy, nor sadness. He gradually forgets it; he lets it slip into oblivion and indifference. As for the prospect of hooking up with Harry again, it seems so remote he smiles at the very thought. A smile like the one brought on by the pointless reflection over something long dead.

\* \* \*

As for Anna, he would think of her. Sometimes. Without bitterness, sadness, or expectations. Without strife or discontent. In his own special, neutral way. Besides, no one asked him any questions all that time, no one delved into what happened. Only Yiorgos, the barman at the Zeppelin where the two, Orestes and Anna, had met, asked him once. Orestes answered then they'd broken up and didn't

see each other anymore. And the look on his face was so aloof, so dry and neutral, it almost frightened Yiorgos and discouraged him from inquiring any further. Not knowing what to think, he dropped the subject, without a comment and without another, a second, thought.

At another point, Julia, a neighbor and fellow student at the technical university, who knew about his relationship with Anna, remarked he looked so distant and withdrawn she wondered if he wasn't broken hearted still.

Broken hearted! Orestes inwardly smiled. He smiled because he'd never thought of the phrase before. And when, induced by Julia's question, he weighed the phrase against his months of exile, Julia's words seemed so unsuitable, so simplistic and childish! But he felt unable and unwilling to explain. On the other hand, he realized that's how it probably looked on the outside, how a third person might perceive and read his soul. Perhaps Julia's interpretation wasn't totally off the mark.

So he lied to Julia that yes, it was something like that. And then added another lie, saying he preferred not to talk about it because it upset him.

His reaction was enough to discourage Julia from ever bringing up the subject again. And when they'd happen to meet, she'd talk about herself and her world. Orestes preferred it that way, too. He felt a pleasant tranquillity listening to Julia's stories and adventures. He was a good listener; and he would sometimes offer his opinion, which usually impressed Julia since things would often, to her astonishment, verify Orestes' opinion.

And so their relationship was a well-demarcated, undemanding and pleasant friendship for both.

\* \* \*

But Julia and all of Orestes' casual friends during this long period, lived outside the thin crust, the superficial and fragile crust especially designed for those around him. And everyone living outside that crust was fooled, and spoke of a well-balanced, pleasant, sociable, creative person. Who was successful in everything he put his mind to. His studies, sports, and the relationships and friendships he formed the following years as a student. But despite how light that crust was, how necessary and protective, there were times he got tired of it. Times Orestes yearned to be rid of it.

And when he shed it, that protective crust of his, and left it behind, at home, he had many alternative, private hang-outs, where he lived an alternative, more private life. Hang-outs where everyone was but a recent acquaintance and therefore never in danger of making him turn and look back. Here he didn't appear odd and changed without his crust, nor did he have to answer justified questions and elaborate on how he felt and how he was doing. Or talk about anything which would bring on that different, that deeper, true repose. The one he needed the most.

In these hang-outs he met many different people looking for simple pleasures. And all these hang-outs were the same, almost identical. A jumble of places, a jumble of people seeking company and relaxation. Out of all these Orestes favored a bar named Stairway. He liked the music there and it had many indoor areas for the winter as well as a large terrace overlooking the port of Tourkolimano.

It had a beautiful, sweeping view, where you could see all the way to Glyfada and even beyond, the entire stretch of the Saronic Bay.

Orestes lived far from there, in the centre of Athens. But that didn't keep him from taking the underground, usually to Faliro station, and then walking uphill to the Stairway. And the reverse for the way back.

He got acquainted with the owners, a pair of twins, Maria and Thomas, and the three or four waitresses working there. They exchanged a couple of niceties, nothing more.

\* \* \*

Apart from the music and the beautiful view, of nearby Tourkolimano and far-off Glyfada, in Stairway Orestes met and had affairs with many women. Brief affairs, lasting a few days or a couple of weeks. Not by plan, but because things eventually turned out that way.

Affairs indifferent, flat. With a female body and some brief sexual gymnastics as a trophy.

\* \* \*

One day Thomas came over to his table. After the usually niceties, Thomas ventured one step further.

“Orestes, you've been coming here for over a year now. We feel you are something of a friend, even though we haven't really talked much. I see how you carry on here, and I realize you're not looking for a serious relationship. I've no problem with that; it's none of my business actually! But there's something I thought I should tell you.

You know, there's someone here who's got her eye on you; I guess you could say she's in love with you. Eleni, that's her name; she's kind of a friend. So I took the initiative to put in a word for her, to tell you, although she doesn't know."

In the meantime, Maria, Thomas' sister, came over and joined them. Orestes could tell by her look she was in on their topic.

He turned to her and greeted her. Maria seemed to know exactly where the conversation had stopped. She too was waiting for Orestes' answer. Orestes then turned to Thomas.

"Who is Eleni, Thomas? The one in the red trousers, sitting behind me at the bar?"

Thomas and his sister were surprised. Then Maria took over.

"Yes, Orestes, that's her; you've noticed her, then?" she asked.

"Yes, I've noticed her," Orestes answered, sounding somewhat ambiguous and vague. Then in the same strange tone he added,

"How could I miss her, such a beautiful woman, with such a sweet look on her face?"

Thomas and Maria exchanged glances, their hopes raised. Then Maria added,

"So, what do you think, Orestes? Will you talk to her?"

Orestes remained quiet for a moment. He seemed indifferent, hesitant, undecided. Like something was holding him back. Then Maria asked,

"Perhaps there's someone else in your life at the moment?"

Orestes looked at her, his expression as flat as before. Then he answered,

“No, Maria, there’s no one.”

“What do you think then, Orestes, will you consider it?” added Maria, who’d taken over the conversation.

Orestes’ expression changed. His initial hesitation was gone; it was replaced by resolve.

“Yes, Maria, I am considering it; more precisely, I already have,” he answered.

Thomas and Maria weren’t sure they should feel happy. They found the change they’d just witnessed, the large distance Orestes had covered, from indifference to resolve in just a few seconds, strange and sudden. But on the other hand, wasn’t that how these things often worked? There was that side to it, too.

“Alright, Orestes, as you wish. But if you’re planning on making a move, you’d better leave it for another day. I don’t want her to suspect we had anything to do with it. Besides, Eleni comes here often: you’ll have plenty of chances. See you around,” Thomas said while he and Maria got up and returned to the bar. And sent a drink, on the house, over to Orestes’ table.

\* \* \*

Orestes got into a relationship with Eleni before long. She was as Thomas and Maria had said. In love. And when she saw Orestes responding to her feelings, her love grew deeper.

Orestes asked her to sleep with him from day one. Eleni turned him down, saying she needed more time. Orestes

replied he agreed, he understood. Everything appeared to be normal.

The only thing was, he sometimes seemed distant. But she put it down to sex and felt things would change as soon as they made love.

She talked it over with her friends at the Stairway. They thought so too, although they criticized the way she'd handled it a bit.

"What do you need time for, Eleni? Things will turn out fine as soon as you sleep together," they'd tell her in chorus.

And when the time Eleni had asked for and needed had passed, she repeatedly showed him the time was ripe. But it now seemed Orestes wasn't getting the message, like there was no hurry.

Eleni was puzzled. The more desire she felt, the more she wondered about this change in Orestes' mood. Until finally one day she took the initiative and asked him herself.

"Orestes, I want us to make love, tonight at my place," Eleni told him, tired of waiting for him to catch on to her passes.

Orestes agreed. He told her he'd come by the house in the evening. So Eleni waited for Orestes to come, and make love to her for the first time. She was ready and willing, she'd created the proper atmosphere at home, she'd taken care of everything. She would've preferred it the other way around, though; for Orestes to have asked her and make the preparations. That it was she who was coming, instead of waiting for him. "Oh well, what difference does it make?" That's what she thought when the

doorbell rang.

\* \* \*

Orestes wasn't playing hard to get, like many of the people Eleni confided in about her personal affairs felt certain he was. He never put on a show with her.

He just couldn't see Eleni's desire. If he had, he would've responded instantly. And apart from Eleni's desire, he couldn't see any desire from his own part to ask her again. He'd asked her once and then it, too, was gone.

It was snuffed out.

\* \* \*

"Hi, Orestes," she greeted him.

"Hi, Eleni," he answered.

Then she hugged him. And he responded.

And everything was normal and things were going smoothly until Eleni lit a candle and offered to pour him a drink. Only then did Orestes' voice change, as did the look on his face. And instead of a drink, he asked for something else.

"No, Eleni, better take off your clothes." That's what he said, feeling an uncanny, brutal desire overwhelm him.

Eleni froze stiff. She didn't have the strength to say or do a thing. She didn't even have the strength to undress. And when he undressed her himself, so differently from the way she'd dreamed of, she didn't have the strength to break away, or react, or even say something. She just surrendered to his hands, with a lonely tear in her eyes.

Later she found the strength and told him she wanted to break it off. And Orestes got up and dressed, and went to the door, and on his way out said simply, without even turning to look at her,

“As you wish, Eleni.”

Then he closed the door behind him, went to a nearby bar and had a beer.

\* \* \*

Orestes stopped going to the Stairway. He thought about the place a couple of times, without questioning, without wondering about that odd lust he'd felt, back then, with Eleni. Soon he totally forgot the whole incident.

As if it ever was of any significance!

He quickly found a new hang-out. And another Eleni.

## Distance

One day, at a much later date, after Orestes had graduated and was preparing to go abroad where he'd found a job, he found a message from Harry on his answering machine. He wanted to see him. He said something important had happened.

Orestes smiled. What important thing could ever have happened to Harry, so important he felt the need to share it with his old, forgotten friend, from whom he'd drifted apart so long ago? He wondered what it could be about. He wondered, but he couldn't think of anything. Harry's world was so distant in Orestes' eyes.

He hadn't seen Harry for almost two years. Their lives followed different courses, they ran on different tracks. As a result, there was such a stellar distance between them Orestes had written off any chance it might be gapped. He'd accepted that distance as if it were a natural phenomenon, inevitable and irrevocable. He felt none of the old sadness, the bitterness over the distance imposed upon them by Helena at first, and by life itself later on. It felt different now, more permanent.

And so, apart from a pinch of curiosity, Orestes couldn't see or read deeper into Harry's message. It could be about anything.

A message from his college or the company in Germany where he'd found a job, or a phone call from one of his

numerous girlfriends. They all fell into the same void; into the same abyss. They all sank into oblivion a minute later, without a trace.

But lo! This time he thought to call Harry! To answer his message. It was probably some deeply buried, some hidden desire that managed to fool him and find its way to his will alive. He was startled by the bizarreness of his own thought. Calling Harry on the phone felt so weird!

Yet he eventually decided to do it. He called Harry, hoping at least Helena wouldn't answer the phone. But apparently they were both out, so it was the answering machine that did. So he left a message. He addressed him like he would address his new employer, his future girlfriend, or some casual acquaintance. His tone was aloof; he told him to come by the house. Whenever he wanted. Then he hung up and went out. By the time he'd shut the door behind him, he'd already forgotten Harry's strange and unexpected request.

When he returned in the evening he saw the phone flashing. He listened to Harry's answering message. He said he would be in the neighborhood that night and would drop by. Unless he had any objections, in which case he should call him on the phone.

But what objections could Orestes have? As if any of this had some significance. No, he had absolutely no objections and therefore didn't answer the last message. So later that night Harry stood on his doorstep.

\* \* \*

But there was something different about Harry today.

Orestes noticed it. The change was so obvious, his old friend's appearance was so peculiar, even Orestes could see it. It managed to penetrate his indifference, to stimulate his senses.

Harry looked different, distraught, depressed. And this was so evident, so pronounced in his appearance and his movements that Orestes was startled. An expression of slight concern formed on his features over what he now saw before him. There was undoubtedly something serious going on with Harry. And that something appeared momentarily to bridge the gaping distance between them.

"Harry, it's been so long!" Orestes began first, backing away from Harry. As if he wanted to see if there was any change in his friend's extremely distraught appearance.

"Yes, Orestes; very long indeed! I'm sorry. It's my fault I didn't come find you. You see, I thought you had so many things to do, so many friends and girlfriends, I might be unwanted," Harry replied. Although they'd fallen out of touch for a long time, some vague rumors concerning Orestes' new life were going around and had reached Harry.

Orestes smiled.

"Is that so, then? You thought you'd be unwanted? Is that what you thought?" he said. Orestes widened the distance between them and turned his back on Harry. Then he concluded his thought, adding in a surprisingly harsh tone,

"But Harry, how can something be unwanted when it doesn't even exist? That's the truth of it, Harry, and not that one of us could be unwanted. We didn't, we don't exist to one another. That's the correct wording, not that

someone might be unwanted. And I'm sorry if it upsets you, but that's the truth."

The initial distressed look on Harry's face never subsided. Only now another thick layer spread over it for a moment, a mixture of guilt and sadness caused by Orestes' stern remarks. But that expression didn't last long either. Something else appeared to be torturing him.

"Orestes, we broke up," Harry said after a while. "She's left me, Orestes, would you believe it? Helena's left me! She's found someone else, that's what she told me; someone she can trust, who's got steady feelings for her."

That's what Harry said, his tension and his distress slightly vented for the moment.

At another point in time Orestes would've been shocked. But now indifference prevailed, asserted itself. So he just turned towards Harry and looked at him in silence, his mind still.

And the longer Orestes looked at him, the longer it took him to say something, the more Harry's agitation and despair heightened. The more obvious it became he'd start talking again, he'd go into more detail about this terrible, this incomprehensible thing that had befallen him. He could barely restrain himself. And if there was something that kept him and made him hesitate, it was only the expectation of a remark from Orestes.

"And aren't you glad, Harry?" Orestes asked, his expression unchanged. And after a short pause added,

"That moron broke up with you and instead of dancing with joy, you're falling apart!"

That's what Orestes thought. That's what he had al-

ways thought. In the past, though, he would've added a cheerful hug. That's what had changed in the meantime, what was now entirely lacking.

So Harry had no delusions, he had anticipated something along those lines. In the past the same remark would probably have had a redeeming effect. But now, the way it was said, without the hug and the happy smile, was far from having such an influence. Harry turned all this over in his head before saying,

"Indeed, Orestes, that's how you see it, that's how you always saw it. I know. I know where you're coming from and I won't claim you're a hundred percent wrong. But you're so distant your comment sounds off, Orestes; it doesn't do a thing for me. It doesn't soften the heartache." Harry was gathering momentum to elaborate further when Orestes cut him short.

"We have been distant Harry, both of us, for a long time. I'm not the only one distant, that's the truth," he replied.

Harry grew angry; his attitude changed. He looked at Orestes and in a mixture of anger and sadness he said,

"You keep reminding me about truths today, Orestes. As soon as I'm in danger of making a logical error, you're there to correct me. That's all you do. According to you, we're not simply unwanted, we don't even exist for one another. And you're not the only one distant, we both are."

Harry fell silent for a while and then added,

"We weren't always like that, Orestes. We used to talk about so many things in the past. Not only about truths."

Orestes changed position, walked about the room a

little, then went to the window, and looked out to the street.

“It’s been very long since then, Harry; we’ve changed. We’ve led different lives in the meantime. Very different! What you describe going on between us seems so remote to me now. Inside me it feels like a thousand years ago. I’m sorry to upset you Harry, but that’s how I feel. I can’t lie to you; you could tell if I did. I don’t want to lie to you; and why would I, anyway?” he replied.

“Thank you, Orestes, at least that’s something. Not lying to me. It’s not much, but it’s something. I realize you find my company today, right now, unpleasant even,” Harry added, his tone soft and distant.

And Orestes, his voice flat and colorless, replied without even turning to look at him.

“I find it indifferent, Harry; that’s the word. And the story with Helena, two times as much. The whole thing’s so ridiculous I wonder how you put up with it so long.”

It was Harry’s turn to speak. Haste was now written all over his face. He could see the conversation had reached a dead-end.

“OK, Orestes, I’m leaving. I’m leaving to spare you the feeling of indifference. I’ll tell you one thing, though. It hasn’t been all that long, Orestes. What difference does the length of time make? Do you have some measure against which you measure it and find it long? Not that many years have gone by, Orestes. It’s your distance that’s great, the distance you have. That’s what this is about. I have a measure against which I measure it, that distance: your distance. Your distance from me, perhaps from everything else as well. Your distance has become

stellar. And from up there where you stand you don't see what's going on around you. If you can see at all."

Then, as if the thought suddenly occurred to him, he hastened to add,

"That's it! You're blind, Orestes, or you live in darkness and you can't see; that's it."

Orestes turned abruptly around and looked at him, a strange look on his face. As if some faint cracks had appeared on his till then stony and indifferent expression. Harry moved to the door, opened it, looked at him, and added a final comment,

"I hope one day you'll come out of the darkness, and see again. And then you'll see how truly close I am. Till then, goodbye."

\* \* \*

Harry closed the door and left. He was deeply distressed about Orestes. So much so, there was no trace left of that other distress, the one over Helena. If only briefly, the second one sank, drowned, in the first. The one over a lost friend, a dead friendship.

Orestes was momentarily almost able to think. As if he was trying to comprehend what Harry had just told him.

But it proved impossible. Indifferent. He couldn't see a thing. His mind quickly turned to something else.

He soon forgot this inconsequential incident. He picked up the phone and dialed a number. Someone answered at the other end.

"Good evening, Tonia. Will you be coming over?" Orestes said.

He put down the receiver a few minutes later without saying another word, without changing expression. Tonia must've said something. Who knows?

That's all.

## The Athens years

Ileana spent the first two or three years leading a very tedious life-style. Work during the night, sleep in the morning, a walk and a bit of shopping in the afternoon. And a few, rare and strictly solitary, nights out for recreation. That was her daily routine. The first few months it was totally standardized. In time there was some variety added to its strict repetition, it became a little more flexible. Without any changes as to its content, though.

At first the disgust she felt for her job she managed to drown out with some difficulty but without an inkling of mercy. Relentlessly, the moment it was born. Later, she learned to handle it, effortlessly, lightly. The endless routine of the sex trade that unfolded before her, for an indefinite period of time, allowed no room for the luxury of strong emotions and permanent friction. She had to get used to it, to make it part of her, to come to terms with it.

In time she got more into her role. She quickly realized that in her line of work, and in the neighborhoods to which she gradually relocated to offer her services, and the demanding clientele she had to deal with there, in the posh suburbs, the way she dressed, especially under her raincoat, was very important. But also the way she wore her hair and her makeup. With a few clever tricks she created a sensation. And sensation resulted in gifts and large bonuses. She therefore devoted a considerable amount

of time to shopping and updating her wardrobe, especially her underwear.

Apart from tedious, her life-style was also very profitable. She made a lot of money, money that all went into her bank account, without having to share it with pimps, the taxman and various others, like needy friends and relatives, as usually happens.

After a while she raised her standards high. She became very picky. Twenty years old, gorgeous, and with an air of mystery: all that, if you put your mind to it, and if you manage to steer clear of all those out to exploit you, is enough to make you rich, very rich. That is enough to make people chase after you, not you after them.

Soon her appointment book was full, restricted to approximately twenty clients. Rich men, who could, ideally, speak some English: those two were her basic criteria. English was desirable for two reasons. Initially, as she spoke hardly any Greek, if the client didn't speak English there was a lot of time wasted while rendering services and that got on her nerves. Later the language spec remained, even when she'd learned Greek. Perhaps because those who spoke English were refined in a way – they weren't boors – therefore, Ileana's tricks and mystery sold better. In order to register in Ileana's roll call, sufficient command of the English language was more than desirable. It put you in a different category. It wasn't enough to simply be rich to get into her appointment book.

And only when one of those regular and well-paying lovers changed his mind, or had it changed by his lawyer, his wife or his mistress; only when he died or for some other rare reason decided to abstain from Ileana's plea-

tures; only then would she, immediately, renew her clientele from one of her reserve lists. Or, again, if there was a very tempting offer or some other special request from a client which she found impermissible or unthinkable to ignore and, even better, if there happened to be an opening on the list at the same time, then she might register a new client. In general, though, it remained hermetically sealed. Besides, when the client isn't a pig in a poke, you can refine your services. You can anticipate his wishes, his vices and his fantasies. And double or triple your fee. Also, with new clients you're always in danger of finding yourself up against a lout, a weirdo, or even one of those early roughed up ones. Why risk it? Better forget it. So the list was renewed only when there was an opening or an exigent recommendation from a trusted person.

There were also deletions, of course. From the list. At least in the beginning. In the early days half a dozen of her clients were carried away by her mystery and her beauty and pressingly asked to marry her, to make a lady of her. That's what they'd tell her. In truth they only wanted her for themselves, that's all. They were selfish and jealous. But, then again, men sometimes have a vague notion about these things; they confuse sex with love and therefore easily slip from one to the other. That's what happened to those heartbroken admirers of hers.

Of course Ileana had no intention of becoming a lady. And not because she was already married. She'd totally forgotten about that. But when they started pressing her to marry them, she realized it would become a pattern. There was no way to curb it. It would always resurface. And so she decided to show them the door as soon as

they'd start harassing her with amorousness and noble offers. The passion and love of those who would make a lady of her then quickly went out the window. They swiftly returned, in reverse, fervently, to the previous role they were now in peril of losing. And begged on their knees to keep their place on the privileged list. Even as simple five-minute shags and not necessarily as husbands. But it would be out of the question by that point. When she said something, she meant it; that's how Ileana saw it. And she told them so when showing them the door. To the deep, unending sorrow and disappointment of those magnanimous clients.

Quite soon word went round that whoever got carried away by his passion, got funny ideas and made the inexcusable mistake to propose marriage or anything of the sort, he would be deleted from her appointment book once and for all, without any chance of her ever reconsidering. Which became part of her mystery, too. And the certainty of the fate befalling every futile offer, regardless of where it came from, eventually eliminated all suitors. So that was soon over, as well.

She made no friends during the time, nor did she attempt to pick up volleyball or the martial arts again. She had decided to sever all ties with everything, forever. Volleyball reminded her of Orsova and all the poverty and misery she'd been through there. She left all that behind, she had no need of it.

In about a year's time she vacated Amorgos Street and moved to the posh northern suburbs. She bought a large house at a bargain price. A luxurious four-bedroom residence in Penteli, with courtyards, gardens and terraces.

That way she didn't have to cross the city back and forth all the time and she could receive her customers there. She also bought all sorts of training equipment to keep in shape now she'd dropped sports. But mostly for props. They helped stimulate the imagination and bang out her clients faster.

\* \* \*

At first she sometimes phoned or wrote to her father, but to no one else. After about a year she started calling Mirella as well. And of course she lied through her teeth to both, Antonin and Mirella. "All's well," she'd tell her dad, "Sophocles is working, she's working too. And the sun always shines high in the sky." And Antonin would report back his, always the same, news. "All's well, but the situation's unbearable," that was his usual singsong. And then he'd ask plaintively when she would visit them.

Ileana kept promising she would, and kept putting it off. Travelling to Romania was out of the question at that point. For many unimportant, plus one very important, reasons. She had no idea what Sophocles' reaction had been in the meantime. He could've gone to the police. He might've filed a report; who knows what lies he could've said in his anger. All that, but mostly the obscurity surrounding them, made Ileana hesitate. Her father was blissfully unaware of all this, of course. She had everything covered with the lies she'd fed Sophocles and the well-worked-out, misleading information she'd given him. Sophocles hadn't got as far as that, as far as her father, of that she was certain. But who knows if he hadn't involved

any lawyers and the police. Best forget about Romania. At least for the time being. A time being which had no end though, it never changed into past.

Perhaps if she knew how Sophocles had handled the situation from his side, she would've acted differently. If she knew he'd swallowed his tongue, he'd come to realize what an ass he'd been and was therefore too embarrassed to tell anyone anything, much less the police, she might've decided the trip. In fact, Sophocles' sole reaction was to contact a trusted lawyer in Athens and ask him to take care of the divorce quietly, discreetly, without word going round. And then he too lied to his mom, to buy himself some time; until some excuse would crop up, of the sort time usually affords. Such as that they were unfortunately incompatible, and kept arguing; stuff like that. He'd see what he'd do in time.

But Ileana was unaware of Sophocles' strategy. And lived with the vague fear of a possible involvement of the police, and everything that went along with it: mainly the unbearable possibility her father might find out the dark truth about her life.

\* \* \*

Three years went by in Athens like that. With a lot of shagging, loads of money, excessive shopping and in great extravagance. With no friends, much loneliness and few, scarce and empty, words. And her heart bleeding each time she spoke on the phone to her dad, keeping the miserable truth about her life a carefully guarded secret.

\* \* \*

The only exceptions to this routine were the many small banknotes she left in the chapel in Kypseli. When she visited it sometimes. From the early days till after she'd moved to Penteli. Whenever the old memory stirred inside her and her mind travelled back in time and revisited that sad moment in her past. Whenever that image came alive inside her. The last image of that good Christian, her beloved mother.

She'd then alter her schedule, whatever it might be, and her footsteps would lead her to the small church in her first neighborhood. And there, in a personal sacrament, she would conquer her deep sadness. She would diminish it in the undying light. In the light of her soul, that would escape the darkness, and strike against it and triumph over it.

Even for a short while; for as long as it took to light a candle.

\* \* \*

This life-style eventually caught up with her and brought on mental fatigue. Ileana grew tired. Of constantly opening and closing. Her drawers and her legs. She simply got bored, nothing more. The disgust she felt early on, until she'd set the ball rolling and got things going, was long gone. As was that brief period, back then, in the beginning, when she would wonder with some anxiety if those whippersnappers, to whom she'd been obliged to give a string of greatly unpleasant surprises and a good thrash-

ing, were planning some sort of revenge. But she soon found herself under the official custody of her clients. No one could approach her without permission after that.

Thus the minor risk she was up against in the early days, when the bruised chauvinist ego of those useless pimps might induce them to remember her and threaten her, was gone too. That remote sense of danger was also removed. It faded, without an incident; it faded behind the impregnable entrances to her house and the tight security offered her by her clients. It was gone, as well. And so was the inkling of suspense that came with it. Until finally the only thing left to her was boredom.

And when boredom and weariness became intolerable, she began wondering about the day after. How long would she continue living this way? How long could she take it?

When Ileana started wondering about her future the calendar read 1989. More precisely, 1989 was on its way out; as was the communist regime in Romania.

The situation there altered dramatically. The borders were opened, people could travel.

So, what did Ileana care about all that? She didn't give a fig about what went on in Romania. She'd ploughed through her way herself; she hadn't sat around waiting for History to open it for her. That's how she saw it.

But one day she took that thought one notch further. Now that History had opened her country's gates, there was bound to be a rush. A definite and great rush. An outgoing rush, it goes without saying. And what she had done, with considerable difficulty, and sacrifices, with that idiot fondling and fucking her until she found her

bearings and got rid of him, many others would do, and much more easily.

Of course getting out of Romania was one thing; getting into Greece was still quite another. That troubled her a bit. She realized the difference. But as much as times might've changed, although it was now rather more difficult to enter Greece than exit Romania, the risks were reduced, almost minimal. Virtually non-existent in Ileana's world and the high-class protection surrounding it. Getting gunned down by the Romanians while attempting to exit, in the past, was quite different from getting caught by the Greeks trying to enter, today. And being treated with kid gloves. And with your friends in high places constantly calling and demanding your release. What could happen to you, then? Absolutely nothing, that's what. Ileana laughed at the idea. Worst case scenario, you might get delayed a bit upon entering. And if you happened to be good-looking and use your charm, you'd be through in a flash. Then again, why get caught in the first place? The Greek border is quite extensive, full of holes, rugged with mountains. A piece of cake, then.

\* \* \*

And so Ileana found a perfect solution for the day after. She discovered the remedy for the boredom which was slowly starting to poison her. She would become a manager, that's what she'd do. She'd bring girls over to work with her, under her protection and supervision.

But that was just a pretext, a means to an end. What did Ileana care about money? Money didn't mean a thing

to her anymore. The only thing that really excited her was the idea of company. That's what she'd truly missed these past three years. That's what she looked forward to now. That was her guide, the source of her initial enthusiasm, after three years of silence and extreme loneliness.

That day, the day this new idea dawned on her, she politely cancelled all her appointments. She wanted to devote herself to this new idea of hers. She was anxiously looking forward to something after a long time. And this newfound feeling grew stronger as the day passed. Until, by the time she went to bed, she felt a kind of thrill of joy. And with that sweet thrill she fell asleep.

She woke up the next day feeling calm. She worked over the previous day's thoughts in her head. Her initial enthusiasm had matured into resolve. She saw the project required a lot of preliminary work, she couldn't do it singlehanded. But she had connections. She also had her phonebook. She opened it, browsed through it and made a call.

\* \* \*

"What exactly do you have in mind, Ileana?" Mr. Yiorgos asked her. Yiorgos Konstantinou was a powerful businessman, a member of the new elite of the time, born and bred by the political "change" of the 80's and therefore very well connected with the government and the authorities, if not part of them himself. Finally, he was an old and important client of hers. That was the question he asked her, then, after a brief introduction she gave him over the phone, emphasizing how valuable his help was

at this point.

“I’ll find girls, bring them over, and they’ll work,” Ileana replied. She summarized her entire plan in three verbs, focusing on the stages of its implementation rather than elaborating on the real motive behind it, on her expectations concerning this new enterprise. And, anticipating her client and future business associate’s questions, she went on to explain:

“I’ll only need your help for the third stage. You can leave the first two to me. I want to make certain I won’t have any trouble with permits and things like that when the girls get here. Can you guarantee that, Mr. Yiorgos? You told me you have connections inside the police and with politicians, isn’t that right?”

A formal code of conduct on her behalf was a hard and fast rule for Ileana and applied for all her clients. It helped maintain a certain distance, sustain a degree of mystery and cultivate an air of subordination. This eventually excited her clients, even though at first some of them wanted idiotic intimacies, as if they were her main squeeze.

“And what happens if one of them runs away and rats on you, what will you do then? How do you think I could help you then?” Mr. Yiorgos asked. Mystery and excitement are all very well, but there’s a limit. The whole thing was getting risky.

Ileana frowned; she was upset. She didn’t quite understand what Yiorgos was driving at. His remark shook her. She felt confused and unbearably uneasy.

“What do you mean if one of them runs away, Mr. Yiorgos? Why would she do something like that? Why would I run away, why didn’t I run away? From whom and from

where would I or they run away? I don't understand what you mean," she replied slowly, in bewilderment.

Then, softening her tone, she added:

"Why don't you come over and tell me what you mean? Better we meet and talk things over in person. I need to make decisions soon."

Then she became even friendlier, ensuring an immediate and positive response from Yiorgos.

"It's been some time since I last saw you. Why don't you come by? I also have some small surprises for you, concerning the favor you asked for last time. Come by, you won't regret it."

That's what Ileana said. With polite submission and promises. And Yiorgos took care of the meetings, and the phone calls, and the documents he had to go over, in less than ten minutes. To be there on time. For his surprises and their conversation in person.

\* \* \*

That's how strong Ileana's urge was to escape from her life in Romania! So strong she sincerely believed the girls she planned to bring over would share the same passionate urge. And in such a passionate urge there was no room, of course, for violence or running away. That didn't fit the picture she had in mind at all, it didn't fit her plan. And it also didn't fit in any way Ileana's soul.

So Mr. Yiorgos had made a serious mistake. She was angry inside, furious, that he could ever think of her that way. That's how she felt and that was her mood until the cause of her great anger arrived at her house.

Soon Mr. Yiorgos would realize what a serious mistake he'd made in what he'd told her. In what he'd so thoughtlessly blurted out as if he didn't know her at all.

\* \* \*

So after the concise little surprises, they went back to the matter at hand. Yiorgos spoke first. Sexually relaxed and financially relieved, he began explaining to Ileana that Greece was full of women from Eastern Europe who were lured over with false promises about finding a job and were then locked up in brothels it took them years to escape from, if they ever did.

Ileana was still amazed that Yiorgos persisted in the same motif. She was so amazed she couldn't even get angry with him by this point. She was overwhelmed again by a deep feeling of disappointment. He really thought her capable of what he'd told her over the phone! Of locking up girls against their will! It wasn't something he mindlessly blurted out, he actually believed it! He actually thought her capable of such a thing!

She sulked for quite a while; she averted her gaze, and let her thoughts wander elsewhere, far away. Yiorgos looked at her and realized he had to let her follow her thoughts through. He obviously had said something wrong. What though? He couldn't think of anything.

So he sat quietly and waited. For Ileana to come back from the strange path she'd followed. And Ileana, after a spell of silence, when she became fully aware of the extent of Yiorgos' great misconception turned around, stood up, looked at him and said with a faint smile:

“Mr. Yiorgos, I wonder why I was so upset over what you told me, what you thought about me. I pondered over it a bit, but I can’t find an answer. It’s strange. But anyway let’s not linger on that, let’s move on.” Ileana paused a little. She drew a breath and then added,

“Who said anything about forcing people, Mr. Yiorgos? What did what you said have to do with me? You sound like you don’t know me at all. You disappointed me! What did what you said have to do with me, Mr. Yiorgos? What does it have to do with me? Just because I dusted those clowns in the past, you assume I like roughing up and forcing people?”

Ileana had raised her voice. And she raised it more, the more she spoke. She was getting furious. Yiorgos looked at her in amazement, almost in alarm; he didn’t know what to make of her reaction. He stood up and moved close, intending to calm her. Then Ileana yelled at him, laughter mixed in with her angry voice,

“There’s no way I’d ever bring anyone here by force! Tell her I’d bring her over to paint, and then lock her in here to fuck against her will. Absolutely no way! No, Mr. Yiorgos. Did anyone ever lock me in here? Well, did they? Of course not! Do you think I’m that weird? Or do you think I’m so fucked up I’d do such a thing? That’s something those guys are in the habit of doing. The ones I beat to a pulp until you did me the great honor to take care of them. You’re gravely mistaken; even you, one of the oldest in here!”

Then she turned and went into the kitchen to get a glass of water. But she quickly returned, as if she remembered something important.

“And while we’re at it, perhaps I should make another thing clear as well because something tells me you’ve got that wrong, too; perhaps you even felt a little concerned about it, dear Mr. Yiorgos. Let me reassure you, then, to help our conversation move a bit further!” Ileana yelled at him. Then she lowered her voice and added,

“I’m going to continue working, Mr. Yiorgos; it could never be otherwise. I thought it went without saying, otherwise I would’ve stated it from the start! And I’ll bring the girls over for company, so I might have someone to talk to after three whole years in silence. So we might gossip about things in my country. To work with me, not in my place. I don’t want them to do my job for me. Do you understand now? Have I made myself clearer? I hope I’ve set your mind at ease, Mr. Yiorgos.”

Ileana sat down. For a moment there it looked like she would calm down. But soon her expression changed; it hardened again, like there was something more, something important. She looked at him and continued:

“And another thing. You of all people shouldn’t worry about losing me! I’ll explain soon enough, we’ll discuss things in a minute. In a minute though; first I need some time to calm down after that ridiculous – allow me to say so – thought of yours! Truly unthinkable!”

Yiorgos’ astonishment and surprise over the verbal storm he’d just witnessed, over all the incredible things he’d just heard, were so great they completely overrode the insult of her reference to that “ridiculous thought of his”.

His admiration for her soared. He stood there a while, leaning forward a bit, looking awkward. Then he replied,

“I don’t know what to say, my dear Ileana; what can I say? All this is so strange, so different! But then isn’t that the reason you’re so extremely popular?”

That’s what Yiorgos said. Those were the words he exclaimed. Flattering but at the same time false and shallow words. The reason Ileana was so extremely popular had nothing to do, of course, with the sensitivities that now charmed Mr. Yiorgos. And Ileana disliked fairy tales when they didn’t serve some ulterior purpose, like the one she had had back then, with that Sophocles guy. That’s why, to Yiorgos’ great and now unpleasant astonishment, there now followed a surly reply from her part.

“I’m extremely popular for many, but totally different, reasons, Mr. Yiorgos. Mainly because I’m a fancy piece and I have style, a personal style. I guess you don’t come across that often. That’s what I’ve come to believe. But I’d be extremely popular even if I were in the trade by force. Or do you think that would put off my admirers? What you just said, then, is totally irrelevant. So why say it? It’s just, force is not my style, Mr. Yiorgos, nor will it ever be. There are some things I do only for myself, even though they may not help me become extremely popular, as you said. So, let’s take it from the top.”

That’s how Ileana replied, briskly elucidating and amending the final ambiguities and exaggerations of an otherwise completely thunderstruck Mr. Yiorgos.

\* \* \*

Then she went on to describe her plan to a deeply surprised and totally astounded Yiorgos. She would be the

one to find the girls, a lot of them: good-looking, uninhibited and willing. Her part would be to protect them, not to force them. At some point, after some time, when she finished her narrative, it was Yiorgos' turn to speak. He seemed now to understand what Ileana had just told him. He was condescending and calm and indirectly apologized for misjudging her, for having such erroneous thoughts about her. And he concluded, his voice carrying a faint and discreet tone of sadness:

“I only hope, now you will be otherwise occupied, you will allow your business associates to continue enjoying your company. Occasionally, I mean.”

That's what Mr. Yiorgos said and Ileana lost it again.

His age interfered with Yiorgos' ability to absorb long conversations. It therefore became apparent from his reply that he'd missed an important bit of Ileana's elucidations, even though it personally concerned him. Ileana was going to continue working. She'd stated it so plainly! Still, Yiorgos managed to miss that very important and rare statement! And he wondered what would happen now she was going to be otherwise occupied. And if he would continue to enjoy her company!

Unless he did hear Ileana's statement but ignored it, took it to be empty words, meaningless. Like the ones he was used his entire life. Whatever the case, he didn't escape Ileana's scathing reply.

“But didn't you hear what I said just a few minutes ago? I'm not going to stop working, Mr. Yiorgos! The girls and I will be in the same line of work. Why would I stop working? Where did you get that idea? Besides, that way the girls will see that we are all equal, no discriminations.

We are going to be partners; business will expand, that's all. Those who work get paid and put a percentage aside, that's all. For running costs. Isn't that something like the way your companies work, too? You have shareholders, don't you? Same here. It's going to be a company. OK, I guess I'll be the first shareholder. It'll be to everyone's benefit. And then, I'll also have company. Life will become more interesting that way. I'm bored to death lately."

Ileana stopped talking and appeared a little calmer. She remembered she needed Yiorgos for her plan. She approached him, her look suddenly changed, and served him her seductive, carefully worked out, bait.

"As for you, my trusted business associate, I'll upgrade you. From now on you won't have to pay for anything. I'll be at your disposal, to entertain your every fantasy. The ones I've occasionally refused you included. What do you say? Are you satisfied?"

That final bit, about his fantasies, got Yiorgos going for good. He overcame Ileana's anger, he overlooked the many dark and incomprehensible parts of her plan, as well as the unbearable boredom Ileana stated she suffered from and which he, of course, could do nothing to help her remedy. And, despite his many failures, despite his advanced age, Yiorgos' libido began to climax. But he was so fascinated by what Ileana was saying that it finally superseded the stimulation caused by her words and the incredible promise she gave him. So he voiced the rounded expression of a shallow and self-serving admiration.

"What kind of a person are you, Ileana? Where did you get that cooperative model from, dear girl? Don't worry about a thing. You get them to the border and I'll take

over from there. And I don't want any shares. The upgrade you just promised is good enough for me."

Yiorgos concluded, mumbling absentmindedly into space.

"Can you imagine that, partners and shareholders!"

He was about to add something derogatory about the new shareholders, but then realized Ileana was sure to be displeased by his comment and he'd risk losing his privileges. And so he quickly swallowed his tongue.

\* \* \*

And so, out of Ileana's boredom, a unique venture began. A cooperative and self-managed salon de massage. Ileana was destined to succeed where so many theories and sonorous policies had failed. Simply Ileana's boredom, nothing more. And it was so unheard of that the sex trade couldn't digest it, couldn't understand it. Outside the now widened but also hermetically sealed and select circle of clients, outrageous stories went round. About black magic, about orgies between crazed lesbians and the like.

Ileana contacted some old friends. She gave them the basic outline. The poverty and despair of the times made things easy. Besides, she didn't need too many girls. A dozen was more than enough. She was aiming to set up a small business, not a corporation.

They just had to get to the border and enter the country. Yiorgos took over from there. And a few trusted old clients took care of their tight security, on the off chance some foolish competitor, like those who spread rumors of witchcraft and orgies, happened to have an epiphany

and see the light and, carried away by jealousy and envy, lost their head and came up with some evil and vengeful scenarios.

In time Yiorgos got to grips with Ileana's plan. He became part of it, he found a balance, and fitted it in, felt it totally compatible with his superego. He came to believe that this once incomprehensible plan was perfectly acceptable by the codes he'd set himself in life. He almost felt proud and important for being part of it. And that pride helped him enjoy the upgrade Ileana had offered him for his important assistance and help more thoroughly.

So Mr. Yiorgos' mundane and carnal ego was perfectly happy, while his higher and more sensitive superego rejoiced as well. As usually happens.

And he felt so wonderful and elated between his ego and his superego, that one day Mr. Yiorgos got carried away, sort of lost that wondrous balance of his, and kind of got a fleeting, a new, totally mundane idea through his head.

To aim for one of the new girls, too.

But that was strictly forbidden by the salon's rules. It was forbidden to switch clients. To keep the girls on their toes and make certain everyone knows who does what. And so Yiorgos quickly dropped the idea and contended himself with admiring the other girls, the ones forbidden to him, from afar. He didn't even consider asking Ileana to make an exception, to grant him right of access. He quickly saw his request would be pointless. He realized there wasn't a chance, that his upgraded rights wouldn't help him in the least. Like in the past, with anyone who fell

in love with Ileana and wanted to marry her, now those who got the idea in their head and decided to be handy with anyone other than their regular caretaker, they were all kicked out on the spot. And Yiorgos knew full well that his privileges were no safeguard against such treatment.

And so, as he had twice as much reason to be careful, he finally put aside his impulsive, thoughtless and nearly fatal desire and was contented with the special treatment he received from the managing director. From Ileana alone.

\* \* \*

The transfer from Romania to Greece was organized by Stefan. He lived in Serbia, near the border with her village. Ileana knew about Stefan, her father had told her about him in the past. He'd told her Stefan helped him smuggle Romanians across the border to the West. With the help of one of the first girls they managed to make up a story and the girl got his phone number from Antonin. But Ileana decided not to have any kind of contact with Stefan herself. He knew Ileana, even if only by name. He'd heard about her from his dear friend, her father. So Ileana chose not to risk talking to him directly and then have Stefan make some sort of weird association: finally the unthinkable might happen, namely something of her plan and her key part in it reaching Antonin.

So she assigned that to Yiorgos, too. To get in contact with him and arrange the details of the girls' entry and his fee. To plan everything perfectly. Yiorgos decided against arranging it over the phone. He sent a trusted

assistant, who contacted Stefan and met him in person. Stefan was puzzled, and hesitated at first. He feared they might be traffickers and turned them down. Then he was given more details and was reassured. So it wasn't like he thought. The girls would be on their own, free, there weren't any traffickers. Then money was put on the table. Stefan examined the matter backwards and forwards, he weighed his poverty and gradually changed his mind. He started to feel that what Mr. Yiorgos' assistant proposed was of course unorthodox, rare even, but harmless. The money involved was considerable, as well. And so, the large fee plus the certainty he would not be involved in any wrongdoing, since the girls weren't anyone's hostages or victims, convinced him to agree, and work with them. And when, sometime later and despite Ileana's strict warnings, a girl unintentionally let her name slip during a transfer, Stefan never thought of his friend and his daughter. Eventually soon Ileana herself, seeing there was no danger and in order to organize things better and quicker, would call him on the phone, without fearing he might make some association that could result in Antonin getting word of her involvement.

\* \* \*

And so the years went by. One, then two. It was now 1991. And these years were much better for Ileana. She hung out with the girls, she became friends with all of them, without exception. For the first time in her life she made real friends. Simple stuff but how much she'd missed it! They went out together, went to the movies, and trav-

elled. She even started reading books.

All of them were aware, of course, how wretched but at the same time, also, how different their life was. Ileana treated them as equals. And that was so rare, totally unheard of. Rare even for the other, the decent jobs where extreme utilitarianism is usually the norm. More so when it came to the illegal and indecent ones like the sex trade. So they all realized, they all sensed, how different their “manager” was. How like them, how totally apart she stood from what went on in their line of work. She could’ve retired, and just supervised them. Even if she did, they would still admire her and feel grateful towards her. Yet she never thought nor implied such a thing. And that was mainly what brought them so close together. What turned admiration into true friendship. Friendship between equals, a friendship which would last, would stand the test of time.

\* \* \*

But the girls never understood Ileana’s truth. They never understood her total indifference for what she did, the ease with which she did it. To them, to all of them, it brought a mixed feeling, something between shame and disgust. And no matter how much time and habit rounded its edges, a feeling of the sort always remained with them.

But those words, shame and disgust, had become unknown to Ileana, forgotten. She had transcended them a long time ago. That was the root of the girls’ inability to understand her.

And so, when some bold client broke the salon's rule and proposed marriage and another way of life to any of the girls, they would usually accept with enthusiasm. Others might never manage to receive such a proposal, but would soon find themselves loaded with money. Regardless of what happened, the first or the second, the girls would soon appear to Ileana, their heads lowered, and tell her they'd quit. They'd say they'd never forget the rare chance she had offered them but now wanted to lead a different life. That they'd found someone to love them or that they'd made enough money or hoped to find somebody to love, to have children, to find another job, to go back to Romania. And that they didn't want to live that life anymore. The life of a prostitute.

And Ileana, who considered them her friends, not only didn't scold them but was happy for them. She was deeply, sincerely happy, with a joy unprecedented for her. Even though the girls spoke a language she couldn't understand herself. Even though she told them off sometimes for lowering their heads like that, as if they were ashamed. Those who professed being ashamed of the job they did shouldn't feel that way now, exactly when they were quitting it! That's how she saw it and that's what she'd tell them. And the girls would nod in agreement, but also in surprise as well.

And so, in the two years that went past, many girls also passed from Ileana's company. They'd stay a few months, a year tops, would save a bundle of money, and were off.

\* \* \*

One day Ileana got tired, she got bored again. It was the kind of boredom she'd felt a few years ago, when she went from a single-member company to a cooperative, with numerous shareholders.

But now, one by one, the shareholders were all walking out on her. And their course seemed predestined. For some strange reason, incomprehensible to Ileana, who never really understood what shame or to become a lady meant, nor why it was so important. She saw their joy when they left the salon and she felt happy for each and every one of them individually. But she was tired of them collectively.

So eventually Ileana was bored again and stopped renewing the shareholders. Thus, in a couple of years the company returned to a single-member one again. She limited herself to her old clientele. She returned to where she had started. She now had loads of money. But she didn't care about that either, it didn't mean a thing to her. She'd gorged herself on it. Nor was it, of course, reason for her to stop working. She just downsized her appointment book. She cut it down to ten people. There was considerable panic and a lot of begging. But she'd made up her mind. She assigned Yiorgos the task of breaking the sad news to those ostracized. The special services regarding the import of girls were over and done with. And so, to justify his privileges, she asked him politely to take on a new role. That of executor emissary.

\* \* \*

“You get bored of everything, Ileana my girl. It seems like yesterday, hardly two years ago, when you started this strange project. And now you’re bored of it, like everything else. Is there anything you don’t get bored of in life, dear girl? Not that it matters – I know I’m a zero in your eyes, I accept that – but believe me when I say it really saddens me to see you feel so empty, like there’s nothing that doesn’t bore you.”

That’s what Yiorgos told her one day. And Ileana drew close and reproved him, and brought him back to earth.

“If you were a zero, Mr. Yiorgos, I’d have sent you packing a long time ago. You wouldn’t be here still if I saw you as a zero, don’t you think?”

Old Mr. Yiorgos liked what Ileana said. He liked it, even though it didn’t excite him this time.

\* \* \*

And old Mr. Yiorgos, the businessman, had of course made a mistake in assessment and an error of judgment. That Ileana got bored of everything, that is. And that nothing meant anything to her in life.

The things that made up Yiorgos’ world, every Yiorgos’ world, bored Ileana, it’s true. They totally, unbearably bored her. And when one day Yiorgos began telling her about some guaranteed and safe investments, where you could invest your money today and it’d be doubled in a year, and then went on to offer his help in investing and multiplying her already humungous savings, Ileana was bored to death. She was so bored, so paralyzed by

boredom, she couldn't even find the energy to tell him she had absolutely no interest in the great and strange opportunities he was talking about. But she opted to close the subject quickly, subtly, instead, by giving him a large check and telling him to invest the money wherever he thought best. Thus reminding and pointing out to him that she trusted him entirely. And in the end she smiled and thanked him for his advice.

Yiorgos felt Ileana's gesture and her check offered him a unique opportunity to help her. To help her overcome her boredom and find new, profitable interests. To help her approach, draw even closer, to his world, a more proper and dignified one. That's how Yiorgos saw what happened that day. That's what a great opportunity he thought he offered her. That's how he saw it and rightly felt, in his great illusion, a deep, a very deep sense of pride!

\* \* \*

She would now visit the chapel in Kypseli only late – very late – at night, when there wasn't anyone around. She'd become so well known in the neighborhood, she had no other choice really. But even though they rarely saw her nowadays, she had become a legend. St. Mary's miracle, perhaps even St. Mary herself. That's what the simple women in the neighborhood called her.

But even though she visited the chapel late, whenever some vigilant eye happened to catch sight of her, a silent alarm seemed to alert the neighborhood. People flocked to the chapel in no time. They'd leave their beds and their sleep and enter a dream. And remained there, in dream-

land, until she'd crossed herself and tearfully lit a candle; until she'd worshipped the icons, and finally dropped a bundle of large banknotes in the money box next to the candles.

They'd watch her in awe, stone-still. And when she'd leave, head high, without a word, waving sometimes, rarely, with a slight flick of the hand, to the human statues watching her dumbfounded, they'd cross themselves.

## The preparation

The calendar now read 1991. But no news had reached the remote, godforsaken village outside Orsova. Time went by differently there. It didn't seem to bring about any change, as if it were frozen in a standstill. In some respects, at least. Because in others, it sometimes jerked violently forward. Mirella's and Alexandru's mother had died a year ago, within a few weeks, of cancer. Their father soon followed, again of cancer. In their mother's case it was because of her job, in their father's it was alcohol. In situations like these the hands of the clock jerk free and race unchecked. And things that would take considerable time elsewhere suddenly speed up to just a few weeks in the tiny village. That's how long it took for Mirella and Alexandru to find themselves orphaned, completely on their own, in their small world.

\* \* \*

Her first year abroad Ileana had no communication with her cousins in Romania. She only spoke on the phone with her father sometimes. But just with him. And then he'd pass on to them a few words, some news from Greece. Always the same words, always the same news.

His daughter was always the one to call, to save him the charge; that's what she'd tell him. Truth was it was a

way for her to have absolute control over the situation, to be prepared about what to say.

Later she began occasionally writing to Mirella. She preferred writing over phoning: it was safer, it kept a distance; there were no unforeseen surprise questions to juggle, to quickly respond to. But how much can you re-vamp a lie you serve someone each time?

So letter-writing got tedious. Her letters began to seem odd. How could Ileana's life, which appeared to them so radically different from theirs, come out so unvarying and repetitive in her letters? So concise and monotonous, so dreary. There were times Mirella would bet Ileana's letters were almost carbon copies of one another.

And so, on Ileana's initiative, letter-writing was gradually dropped. They then began talking on the phone, about once every ten days. Again, it was Ileana who called. So they wouldn't have to bear the cost. That's how she put it. And Mirella accepted it. Even though Ileana's refusal to give them her phone number struck her as particularly odd. Something was off, it felt like she was hiding something. And it seemed odder still when Mirella found out from Antonin that Ileana hadn't even given him a number he could use in case of an emergency.

Ileana soon realized herself how peculiar her refusal must seem. So she decided to give them a number. She had many phone lines in her mansion in Penteli by now, many numbers. She gave them one only she and no one else would answer.

She was very firm about this with all the hired help she had at the house: maids, cleaners, gardeners. It was her private phone, no one was to answer it, ever. And that's

how it was, no one ever answered it. No one ever picked up that particular receiver. No one ever used it. No one but Ileana.

And when the two spoke on the phone, the two cousins, Ileana usually let Mirella do the talking while she mostly did the listening. And Ileana's short repetitive answers to her bewildered cousin's justified queries were followed by long pauses. She never said where she worked. She never gave any specifics about her life. She never called Sophocles her husband.

Nor did her cousins ever happen to hear Sophocles on the phone. He was away to Sifnos often; that was the usual lie to that question. But it was hard to believe a doctor could be away to Sifnos so often. Nor did anyone else ever happen to pick up the phone, of course. None of this went unnoticed.

And the longest pause was the one which followed the most difficult of all questions. Why had she never set foot in Romania again?

\* \* \*

She'd never visited them all these years. Despite the fact that, especially from her side, the borders were open and easy to cross. Why not, then? That gnawing question was on everyone's mind but most of all on Antonin's, naturally. His daughter's inexplicable absence tormented him. His health hadn't been very good lately. He'd suffered a serious heart attack recently. He'd pulled through and was allowed to leave the hospital but the doctors were concerned. He had to have an operation; a difficult opera-

tion. Antonin himself was aware the end was not all that far off. And that made his anguish over his daughter's absence unbearable. An absence which, apart from anguish, gave rise to a series of questions. And it also made cousin Mirella very angry.

Mirella had told Ileana about Antonin's serious health problem. Antonin avoided touching upon the subject because he didn't wish to upset her. But Mirella had explained the situation thoroughly, she'd told her how serious his condition was. And she put pressure on her again. To come to Romania.

Ileana was deeply shaken. She realized time was running out, she couldn't wait any longer. After all these years, the chance she'd have trouble crossing the border was very slim. But even if she did, she could pay her way through. That's what she always did. That's what she could do this time, too. Sweeteners would be lower now, not even worth mentioning. She had to risk it. Rather, she should have risked it a long time ago. She'd thought of leaving straight away, of visiting Romania, many times. But she always hesitated. She couldn't bear the idea of having to lie to their faces. To continue putting on the act up close.

Then, through a different course, her desire to bring her cousins to Greece had grown. She began entertaining the idea not long after she'd set foot in Greece, as soon as she'd settled and her life had fallen into a comfortable pattern. But never with true resolve. She feared all the terrible things that would be revealed with their arrival in her life. And above all, she shuddered to think any of these horrible things could reach her father's ears, back

home.

When the regime changed in her country, she briefly felt things would be different. But soon she realized how long it would take for the situation there to actually change, if it ever did! And so the idea of bringing them over grew stronger. It turned into a resolution.

\* \* \*

And the resolution grew stronger when Mirella's and Alexandru's parents died. Ileana was deeply upset both times, over her aunt and her uncle. And she immediately ran to the only place she could find peace, the only place she could feel anything besides the boredom and the indifference which overwhelmed her and haunted every other aspect of her life. There she lost herself in her singular ceremony, in her unique, personal ritual.

She would call the light there, and it would come and illuminate everything inside.

That's how Ileana said farewell to her uncle and aunt. Bathed in her bright light, with her mom present, motioning to her from nearby.

\* \* \*

And the resolution became distress, unbearable distress, when Antonin had a heart attack soon after.

She'd bring them over to Greece as soon as possible. That was the picture. That was also her obsession. A very compelling obsession which happened to coincide with a second one: that of her unbearable loneliness which, with

the demise of the salon, had become even more pressing and overbearing.

First she'd bring her cousins to Greece immediately and then she'd go to Romania straight after. That was the plan.

And as with all Ileana's plans, it was carried out with dedication and unwavering determination. And the tremendous pressure she put on her cousins suddenly grew out of proportion, and started to get out of hand. It became unbearable. Time sped up frantically. The schedule had to be extremely tight.

She estimated she could manage, she could pull the whole thing off, in ten days. Bring them to Greece, that is. And then she'd leave for Romania. "What difference will ten more days make after five years?" that's what she thought. What could possibly thwart her plans?

She told them to get their permits to exit and their visas to Greece immediately. She told them how great it was there, how much sun, how easy life was. Work as well. She told them they could live in Sifnos if they wanted. Be in the sun and the sea all day. She kept pointing out that the regime in Romania had now changed and travelling, even though with considerable difficulty and through a lot of red tape, was now permissible. In her mind everything was easy, everything could be done in no time.

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Mirella was taken aback by her cousin's sudden and overbearing persistence. She'd now call from Athens sometimes even twice a day. Always for the same reason.

Basically, she had no objections to Ileana's plan. Everything Ileana spoke of seemed like a memo about all the things Mirella wanted herself. It was more like encouragement rather than pressure to do something she didn't want to do. It was like an awakening of her own personal desires. Hers might be somewhat foggier, more timid perhaps, but they were essentially the same. Seeing how things there were stalling, feeling none of the changes trumpeted on television had any actual impact on life in their remote little corner, she also wanted to leave.

Therefore, although this sudden, great, pressure over the phone puzzled her, she had absolutely no difficulty following Ileana's reasoning nor succumbing to it in exceptionally good humor.

Mirella was always practical, and soon began considering the flaws she saw in her cousin's plan. First, there was the issue of their permanent residence in Greece.

"How can we go live there, Ileana?! They'll never give us permits to stay in the country permanently!" This was the, rather reluctant, manner in which Mirella responded to the constant pressure she was subjected to. And while they were on the matter, she'd quickly move on to her next consideration. She never forgot to add,

"When will you visit us, Ileana? Why don't you ever come? It's so much easier from your side."

Ileana couldn't be bothered with the details. She was excited over the big picture, she didn't care two pins about Mirella's concerns – which she had under absolute control anyway. The idea there might arise some glitch with the paperwork drove her up the walls. That was the only unknown quantity in the equation. She flipped whenever

she considered how simple everything would be if she could just go there and sort out the matter herself. She could buy them the damn papers, in a couple of hours: that's what she thought. Of course they'd be left gaping, and such an incredible display of resources was guaranteed to arouse suspicion. Especially Antonin's. That was the only thing that worried and upset Ileana deeply. Her great, vile secret mustn't be revealed to Antonin. She had to let things follow their own, slow but safe, course.

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Because, as far as her cousins were concerned, she knew full well she couldn't keep the truth from them forever. The more she pressed them to come to Greece, the closer she brought forth the moment of truth. It was inevitable. She was aware of the fact and at times she hesitated, she faltered, she dithered. "Father, take this cup away from me." That's what she felt she was saying inside. But she no longer had a choice, and there was no chance she'd change her mind, she'd stop thinking of them and their well-being first, she'd stop pressing them.

To make certain she didn't arouse any suspicions, she avoided taking the easy way out and asking Yiorgos to help her buy the necessary papers and send them by post. She prompted her cousins to try and sort out their exit permits and entry visas – even simple tourist visas – themselves, instead. At once. They should have cleared that minor obstacle in a week's time; that's what she thought and what she told Mirella. And then, they'd come join her. And she'd take care of everything else. They wouldn't

have to worry about a thing after that. They'd enter the country as tourists and be registered Greek nationals a few days later. That's what she told them, and pressed Mirella to sort out the paperwork. A trivial obstacle, the only one between her and Mirella. Between her and her father.

Of course her plan culminated in her trip to Romania. First she'd have them all nicely settled in Greece. Then she'd talk to Mirella; she'd tell her the truth. She would be up against her cousin's contempt. She had no doubt about that, but she was prepared, she was resolved. Then she'd find closure, her confession would bring her peace. And finally, relieved from the burden of her great, dark secret, she'd go to Romania, to her father.

And that's how things would've worked out if they hadn't followed a different, unforeseen course, in the meantime.

\* \* \*

Those days were among the most difficult in Ileana's life. She was a jumble of emotions, all bad, inside. Exasperation over her cousin's obstacles, anger, impatience, anxiety. And, occasionally, the one rarest for her temperament. Fear. A double fear. Fear lest details about her way of life got to Antonin. And, mainly, lest she wouldn't make it. Lest she wouldn't make it back while he was still alive.

All this was so obvious, even her consultant, Mr. Yiorgos, noticed. But he didn't dare raise the subject, that's how fearsome Ileana's expression of anguish looked. A few hesitant and quiet glances Yiorgos ventured her

way also remained unaddressed. Ileana could tell he was concerned, but she was in no mood to elaborate. It was her problem, she'd handle it. Yiorgos was for later. He'd nothing to offer at this point. So she didn't respond to his glances.

\* \* \*

She went by the chapel three times during the time. It was her sanctuary, the one place she found peace. Just for a little while though, for as long as she was there, for those few, private, moments. Only then did she put aside the doom and gloom of those days. And when she left, she left quickly, without a word, with the same hard glance as when she arrived, now mixed with an odd, stony indifference towards the amazement she always caused those who hastily gathered to, silently, catch sight of that rare, weird spectacle. She now left without ever motioning to anyone. And that made them sad, since they expected her gesture; to the simple folk of the square it was sort of like a blessing. Like a blessing that, for some reason, she didn't deem them worthy of anymore.

Some of them wondered if she even saw them. Perhaps they were right. Her fiery gaze was turned elsewhere. And she was wrapped in darkness.

\* \* \*

Mirella was gradually warming to the idea, she was now ready to follow Ileana's persistent incitement. The first and only step she needed to take care of herself was her

papers for a three-month entry to Greece. Everything else, all the tricky stuff, the permanent residency, the work permit, the registered address, Ileana considered a joke. She probably had her reasons, she probably also had the means to secure them. The immediate problem was arranging for the documents to travel from Romania to Greece. She focused all her thoughts on that. It was time to start working on them.

Without a word to anyone, she gathered what money she had aside, along with various certificates, and went to Bucharest, to see how she could get the papers to exit Romania and then try and get a visa to enter Greece. She went to the competent authority, she waited in – long – queues, she filled in dozens of forms. Until she was finally summoned to the head of the department’s office.

“What do you intend to do in Greece, Miss Mirella?” a Romanian officer distrustfully asked her there.

“I have relatives there, I want to go see them,” Mirella replied.

He looked at her again with a strange expression, like he approved something, like there was something he found sufficient and satisfactory. Then he asked for her details. Name, address, phone number. And in the end, he wryly said,

“Very well; you will be notified about the course of your application quite soon.”

Mirella was puzzled. Mainly about the look on the officer’s face. She thought it was ambiguous. Did he approve of her decision to go to Greece, or did he approve of something else? She couldn’t tell. She returned to her village and waited for the papers to arrive. A few days lat-

er someone called on the phone and told her there were now certain restrictions, and they needed to check out a number of things. The papers would take about a year.

“For goodness sake! But the officer who interviewed me said the papers would be here soon. What the heck changed in the meantime? A year!” Mirella replied, frustrated.

And then came the answer that gradually clarified the officer’s look in Bucharest and the approval welling inside him.

“He said you’d be notified about your application, not that you’d get your papers! So I’m notifying you. Look, it’s going to cost you a thousand dollars, a thousand each I mean, if you want to speed up the process. Otherwise, it’ll take about a year or two.” There followed a pause, as he waited for an answer. And since nothing came from dumbfounded Mirella, he seized the opportunity to conclude, to present her with an alternative.

“On the other hand, you’re quite good-looking: you can pay us in...”

Her bewilderment having run its course, Mirella hit the ceiling and suddenly started to swear. She said she’d report them, she wouldn’t let them get away with this.

She went on and on, until they hung up from the other end before she had blown off all her steam and run out of profanities. Nothing had changed. Nothing at all.

She had no money to give. And she had no intention of rendering sexual services. She was deeply frustrated. There was no point in reporting them, as she threatened. She knew nothing would come of it. She thought of standing in the long queues again, to plead her case. She

realized it would be pointless.

She felt utterly alone. She couldn't talk to Alexandru, and she felt she couldn't discuss the matter with Antonin and tell him what she thought, what they'd told her. And she didn't feel at all comfortable talking to Ileana. She was always angry, and also very pushy lately; she kept saying Mirella made a mountain out of a molehill, that this sort of thing was a piece of cake and that she most certainly approached things from the wrong angle, making everything sound so difficult. "She's totally forgotten how things are here," Mirella thought in despair, naturally ignoring her cousin's tremendous resources which prevented her from sympathizing with their difficulties there. She hadn't told Ileana about her trip; she wanted to surprise her. But instead of the pleasant surprise she'd intended for her cousin, things got screwed up.

As if that wasn't enough, sometime later, one Tuesday morning, an urgent notice arrived. She was summoned to appear within forty eight hours at some office in Bucharest. The authorities had lodged a complaint against her. For a criminal offense, for attempted bribery. She was also prohibited from leaving the country. They hit her right where it hurt.

She smiled. Then she mumbled, "You're not going to beat me, you bums," and went out to find Antonin.

She realized there was no way she'd get her papers now. And she was in danger of finding herself in serious trouble. Mafias always have the means and support of each other.

\* \* \*

Mirella realized she was at a dead end. Apparently that prompted her to take the great step. She decided to discuss the matter with Antonin. The uncle, the one and only close, trusted relative she had in the village.

It wasn't easy. Antonin was ill and their irreversible departure from their village to Greece was certainly not something he'd like to hear. Uncle Antonin would be left all alone. But Mirella realized she would need his approval, perhaps even his help. She felt certain Antonin would not try and stop her. Lastly, she also hoped Ileana would finally quit playing hide and seek, and come take care of her ailing father. Perhaps their departure might act as a catalyst. Besides, that's what Ileana herself kept saying she meant to do. That was her wish, as well.

So first she told him about her plan. Which was according to his own daughter's persistent incitement in the first place. She shared her plan with her uncle and that brought her some relief. She hadn't spoken to Alexandru yet. He was totally unaware of his sister's plan and of Ileana's constant and persistent exhortation they should join her in Greece. He was also ignorant, of course, of the trip to Bucharest, of its purpose and its outcome.

Then she told Antonin about the incident in Bucharest and the summons they sent her. There was no way she was going, she added. She had no intention of jeopardizing or delaying their departure.

Antonin frowned at this latest development. He could see things getting more and more complicated. More and more dangerous. But Mirella had anticipated correctly.

There was no doubt her uncle would consent, he'd have no objections. He was silent, appeared to turn things over in his mind. But he remained calm; the incident in Bucharest troubled him, but it didn't seem to dissuade him in any way. He told her he understood how she felt and that both she and Ileana were absolutely justified in their views.

"You're right. You should go. But I'm not sure it's wise not to respond to their summons. They'll get a warrant and come looking for you."

He drew a deep breath before he added,

"We must consider our actions carefully. Give me some time; we'll come up with something." That's what he said.

And then concluded with his usual, sad motif,

"You'll leave me too, obviously! And Ileana will then have one less reason to visit. I fear I'll never see her again."

Mirella remained silent. First she felt anger again over her misadventure in Bucharest. Then she thought of Antonin's recent heart attack. The truth of his statement made her sad and she realized she had been wrong in not coming to him earlier.

\* \* \*

The next day, a Wednesday, Mirella spoke with Ileana again. Initially she felt embarrassed and found it hard to tell her cousin the whole truth about the solutions offered her by the authorities regarding her papers and the false complaint they'd filed against her.

When, in the course of their conversation, through Ileana's incessant questioning, the entire story gradually

came out, Ileana went ballistic; she was livid; she shouted Mirella should have given them the money immediately. She blamed herself too, for not handling the matter personally, for not having Yiorgos' office ring them, and buy off all the cheapskates up there. Then she went back to yelling at Mirella again. She told her she was totally useless and that she was now in deep trouble the way she'd messed up.

Mirella listened and her questions about all the inexhaustible means her cousin apparently had were reinforced. She'd never ever imagined it was so easy, such a trifle, for Ileana to hand out several thousand dollars on sweeteners.

Eventually Ileana calmed down. The thought of going over there and handling the matter herself crossed her mind for a moment. But she couldn't achieve anything in two days time. There was no way she could meet their deadline, open a suitcase full of dollars in front of their faces and change the course of events. It was obvious Mirella had screwed up. It was too late now to go through the 'legal' channels. Those of the sweeteners. You need to address such matters early on. There's not much you can do after a certain point. And apparently they'd overstepped that point.

Ileana was debating their next move while she ranted and raved at intervals against a totally silent Mirella.

Mirella interrupted her at one point. She spoke up and told her she had an idea; there was an acquaintance who might be able to help.

But Ileana had no patience; she didn't want to hear a word about acquaintances. She persuaded herself the

whole thing was ludicrous, insignificant. And that time was running out. She turned on Mirella again.

“Mirella, do you realize they’ll start looking for you the day after tomorrow? They’ll come there for you and every border post will have your picture. Do you realize that? Of course you’re not going to respond to their notice. That would delay us for months and you have no way of knowing what those bastards who asked you for money are capable of.”

Then she told her the two of them had to get to the Greek border any way they could in two, three days tops, before the noose started tightening, and she would take care of them from there on. Everything would be taken care of after that.

Then she told her about Stefan. She told her to go straight to Antonin, right after they hung up, and ask him about this guy Stefan, who lived in Serbia. He knew how to hide and transport people and sneak them across borders; he was a good friend of her father’s.

“They used to help fugitives out of the country. They risked their lives back then, Mirella, they certainly won’t hesitate now! You’ve got to get a move on, Mirella, get a move on! Go talk to my dad! You must cross the border as quickly as possible, and meet up with Stefan. Everything will be fine after that. It’ll be as good as being here. And if my father refuses to call Stefan, pressure him. I’m certain he can help, you hear? And if he still refuses, let me know and I’ll find you a solution.”

That’s what she told her, never missing the opportunity in between to remind her how timid she was and how she kept on failing.

So some enigmatic figure called Stefan would bring them safely to the Greek border. With no papers, no nothing. And Ileana would take over after the border. That was the plan.

She didn't give her any more details. Mirella was puzzled, deeply puzzled, about this unknown Stefan and her uncle's old, unknown and dangerous involvement, but also with her cousin's confidence that everything would be so easy in Greece.

Ileana's confidence had Mirella constantly worried. Although these past few days her concern faded, in face of the immediate and serious problem that cropped up in the meantime. As there was nothing she could do about Greece, she hoped at least her cousin indeed had everything under absolute control, as she kept telling her.

Mention of Stefan made her think there had been many things going on which she was totally unaware of. How many exactly, and to what extent, she couldn't say. But it was no time for questions. She'd ask Ileana once she got to Greece. She felt a growing impatience, mixed with a deep sense of determination.

But what Ileana had said, apart from raising a string of questions, was also very reassuring. And so, even before speaking to Antonin about Ileana's idea and suggestion, Mirella felt assured. The time was drawing near. It was just a matter of hours. They had only to cross into Serbia. That was all they had to do.

This certainty compelled her to speak to Alexandru. She told him the plan, and explained there was no way they'd have their papers ready in the foreseeable future. And that they would soon enter Serbia secretly and ille-

gally. Then they'd enter Greece the same way, on foot, through some passage a friend of their uncle's would show them, who would take them to the border. There they'd meet up with Ileana who had her way with things and would help them settle in Greece. They'd go with her to Athens. Which is a large city, where it's easier to go unnoticed. Later Ileana might take them with her to the island, if they decided to stay, to settle, there.

Alexandru wholeheartedly trusted his sister. So he overlooked the details, their uncle's friend and the secret passages. He nodded in consent. He didn't say anything specific.

\* \* \*

Mirella spoke to Antonin about Stefan the afternoon of that same day. She also told him about his daughter's suggestion. She told him Ileana was certain he could help them.

Antonin was alarmed.

"What a bizarre idea, Mirella! That was ten years ago. Where did Ileana get this crazy idea? And how can she be so certain? That Stefan will be able to help now?" Antonin replied. He was perplexed.

Antonin was totally unaware of Stefan's new, fairly recent enterprise, dating only a short while back. Gradually, though, mention of Stefan started to excite his curiosity. Besides, it was an opportunity to speak with him. It had been quite some time since they last spoke on the phone. So he decided to call him on the spot to see if he could help.

He explained the situation at length, he told him everything that happened the past few days. Naturally Stefan was puzzled. He ran through a series of possibilities in his head. But he couldn't find any connection between his latest enterprise and his friend's request. So he answered he'd help; there was one major reservation though.

"Of course I'll help you, Antonin. But I can't go north, I can't cross the Danube to meet them, if they intend to enter Serbia from there. There's a war on up there. I happened to pass through the region just ten days ago and the moment they realized I was Hungarian, they commandeered my van in a flash. I almost found myself in serious trouble. I'm inconsolable Antonin! A new van, only five years old. I swore I'd never go up there again." That's what Stefan replied.

Antonin turned things over in his head. He realized what Stefan was suggesting.

"So you suggest they cross the river, Stefan; is that what you're saying?" he asked.

"That's exactly what I'm saying. Also, listen; I'm not as young as I used to be. I can't climb the rock, by the river, anymore. You'll tell them how to get there, to the hide-out, then how to get down from there and how to come to the village to find me. It's only a three hour walk for them. It's quiet, they won't meet a soul. We haven't been affected by the madness of war, not yet anyway. They'll stay the night at my place and next morning we'll start for Greece. It's quite a distance but we'll be at the border by nightfall. That's the only solution," Stefan added.

Then Antonin asked him if he knew the passages to Greece. He'd have to instruct his daughter how to go find

him.

Stefan considered Antonin's reply. Then he answered calmly,

"Yes, Antonin, I know a few passages, don't worry. There won't be any problem. Tell your daughter to call me herself for the arrangements." Stefan was greatly relieved Antonin didn't ask any further questions concerning the new passages.

Stefan was about to hang up.

"Make haste, dear brother! Tell them to cross the river tomorrow night. I'll be expecting them the day after tomorrow, on Friday."

\* \* \*

Mirella and Alexandru had grown up in the area, on the lower side of the Danube. They were familiar with its waters and the surrounding countryside. Antonin talked to them right after the telephone call, immediately after talking and making arrangements with Stefan; he explained their only way out was the river.

"Mirella, you'll have to go by the river. It's not a difficult river to swim, you're both excellent swimmers. It's only a hundred and fifty meters across. You both know it very well, at least from our side. And they don't patrol it the way they used to. The times have changed, no one really cares who crosses the river and where he's going anymore." Antonin shook his head and let out a, somewhat prolonged, sigh. As if his thought travelled momentarily back to the old days, when they patrolled it heavily.

"Of course you don't know what to do once you reach

the other side,” Antonin added. And continued with the rest of the details.

“We’ll go to the river together, Mirella, and I’ll show you. I’ll explain where to go in, where to get out. Where to beware of the waters, where the current gets stronger and the waters become a bit dangerous. And then, exactly where to go once you’ve reached the other side, to dry. And then how to fare, until you reach Stefan’s house. It’s a steep down-slope; he won’t be able to walk, to climb it, to come get you. It’s about a three to four hour walk. Finally, I’ll tell you where Stefan will wait for you so you can spend the night, and then he will take you to Greece the next day. He knows the passages well. You’ll be in Greece in twenty four hours.”

Antonin was addressing both, but he was well aware it was Mirella who would be in charge.

Then Mirella asked him,

“I’m not afraid of the river, uncle. But why not go further north, and cross the border from an easier location, avoid the river altogether?”

Antonin drew a deep breath. A hint of doubt and distress spread across his features. Then he added,

“That’s impossible, Mirella. Going north, bypassing the river, is out of the question. There are too many posts and patrols on the other side of the border, they’re in the grip of war there. Not to mention there’ll be a warrant for you on our side. They’ll be looking for you. Tomorrow, Thursday, is your deadline for appearing to the authorities. They might come looking for you. Furthermore, Stefan can’t come up there to get you. I already discussed the possibility with him. He ruled it out. They recently commandeered

his van up there, that's what he told me. I shouldn't even consider it, while there's a war on. Stefan's Hungarian, you know, so he's considered second rate. No one gives a hoot about him."

Antonin paused a moment and then quickly added, before Mirella had time to voice any objection to his arguments,

"It's here, across the river. In no time. The only thing that worries me is the bad weather. Otherwise, there's only one way to go across. Through this passage here, by the river. But the weather is bad, and it will remain so for the next ten days, perhaps even longer, who knows. But it's dangerous to wait that long."

Her uncle's arguments were solid. Mirella considered waiting for the weather to get better. There would be no point, she concluded. If they waited, the noose would tighten. They had to go across as soon as possible, tomorrow. Nor of course would Ileana ever agree they wait. She thought about the abuse she'd get from Ileana if she dared to even suggest such a thing. She quickly ruled out any such possibility.

So she agreed with him.

"You're right, uncle. By the river, then. Don't worry, we'll manage. Only, arrange with Stefan. And tomorrow morning, instead of going to Bucharest, we'll go down to the river together and you'll show me the passage, the rock where we'll spend the night. Tomorrow night we cross the river, Friday we'll be at Stefan's, Saturday at Ileana's. Your friend said he'll be expecting us on Friday, didn't he? Friday it is, then!"

Antonin frowned.

“What if they show up tomorrow?” he asked.

“I’ll call them and ask them for one more day. Yes, that’s what I’ll do! I’ve thought about it. As for the rain, so what? Let it rain. It’s a river, it doesn’t get waves, so why worry about the weather and the rain? Water underneath, water overhead, it’s the same thing.” That’s what Mirella replied and then added,

“We’ve waited long enough, uncle! And once we’re there, I’ll try and find out why she’s not coming. And I’ll send her back to you in a parcel, if necessary. You’ve waited long enough, too.”

Mirella was ready and determined.

Then they left. At first Antonin felt guilty for urging his niece and nephew to cross the river at this time of year, in the winter. Then he felt tired and sat and let his thoughts wander, back to the old days.

Antonin had lost his wife in that river and the memory made him bitter. But it wasn’t the river’s fault. He never saw it that way. He never blamed the river.

He was bitter because it was the first and only time he was actually beaten by the river, when he was defeated. That time with his wife who didn’t make it. But that happened a long time ago, when things were much more difficult. And although that distant memory made him sad, it wasn’t enough to dispel the confidence he now felt.

\* \* \*

Mirella knew the river well, she had been familiar with the area since childhood. But she had never swum across it, from one bank to the other. Neither she, nor Alexandru.

Like Uncle Antonin told her he'd done quite a few times in the past. Only he knew every detail of its course, every peculiarity it held. Those he now had to share with his niece and nephew.

Early next morning they met with Antonin again. So he could show them exactly where to enter the river and how to swim it, in order to use its current to their advantage instead of struggling against it. Mirella and her brother. The two of them.

"Let's go, uncle. The only thing I need from you is to show me the crossings you've mentioned. The rest I can take care of myself." That's what Mirella said.

"Yes, my dear Mirella, let's go; let's go so you can soon meet her," replied the brave man and they slowly set off for the river.

He there gave them a detailed description. Mirella nodded confidently and asked the odd question. Alexandru listened, without commenting, to his uncle's instructions. A couple of farmers that went by paused a moment and looked on in surprise. Then they discreetly moved on, unable to fathom what was so interesting about the wooded rocks on the opposite bank that Antonin was examining so studiously with his niece and nephew.

Finally Mirella asked Alexandru to make a small raft to load a few things onto. A raft which they could hold onto, when in the water. To use as a steer. And on which they could carry some clothes, and keep them as dry as possible. And what little money, a few dollars, they had. And matches, in a water-tight bag. And a couple of photos.

"Light a fire, I'll wait for a fire," Antonin hesitantly asked. And instantly realized how silly his request was.

“Matches get soaked, uncle. And don’t tell me you’ve still got matches in the cave after all these years! The blankets you mentioned might still be there. They’ll do just fine. But we’ll manage without them even if they aren’t.”

Then to comfort him she added,

“I’ll call you from Stefan’s as soon as we’re there.”

Antonin nodded without saying a word. Then his face darkened for a moment, something obviously having crossed his mind.

“Did you call them, Mirella?” he asked. And Mirella replied,

“No, I didn’t. The very idea of talking to them gives me the creeps. I’ll stay at the cabin until dark. They won’t find me, even if they do come.”

Antonin wasn’t surprised. He said nothing.

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After arranging everything with Antonin, it was time to call her cousin. She went to a friend’s store nearby and called Ileana from there. She’d never set foot at home again.

She called her, and talked to her, and tried to explain how things were. She told her they would cross over that night, and should be at the Greek border on Saturday, where Ileana was to come meet them. The only thing she needed to make certain was to show up; apart from that, she shouldn’t worry about a thing.

Ileana was overjoyed. But when she asked about how they planned to cross the border to Serbia, when she heard they were planning to cross the river, her heart

sank.

“Are you out of your mind, Mirella? You’ll swim across the Danube in the winter? Can’t you at least get a boat?” That’s what she said.

Mirella didn’t reply. She thought she’d give her cousin some time to get used to the idea. Then she told her she couldn’t get a boat, no, but even if she could, it would be easily spotted and would prove dangerous against the current. She reminded her they both were excellent swimmers and that she needn’t worry about a thing.

Ileana replied slowly, hesitantly. She refused to believe the dangerous route her cousin had chosen was the best. Eventually she calmed down, changed attitude, mustered her resolve, and encouraged her.

“Yes, it’s a piece of cake, Mirella, a few hundred meters all in all. You’ll be here in two days’ time. I’ll come meet you at the border myself on Saturday, I’ll pick you up. I’ve already spoken with Stefan, it’s all arranged. Everything’s ready.”

Then Mirella reminded her she would soon be an outlaw and they might be looking for her in Greece too. The idea triggered roaring laughter on the other end of the line.

“Choose a name, Mirella, choose a name now, on the spot!” Ileana incited her and kept laughing and mocking the stupidity of those who would be looking for her.

Eventually she stopped sneering and laughing, and changed attitude and subject, as if she realized she’d wasted enough time on trivialities. And moved on to the important stuff.

“As soon as you’re here, a couple of days later, I’ll leave

for Bucharest and then Orsova, Mirella.” That’s what she said. And she told her to jot down her phone number in Thessaloniki, where she’d be staying, her last stop before meeting them at the border.

And her peculiar, her rare utterance deeply moved Mirella, dispelled all her fears and gave her a different, still greater, kind of strength.

\* \* \*

Late that afternoon Antonin came by the cabin. Alexandru was also there, he’d finished the raft.

“What did Ileana say?” Antonin asked Mirella. He was certain they’d talked on the phone.

“We’re crossing tonight, uncle; we’ll join Stefan tomorrow, and Ileana the day after. And a couple of days later, she’ll be here. Sounds simple.” Mirella smiled and hugged Antonin. She hugged him and added,

“She agreed with the plan, uncle, she said she’ll come pick us up at the border. She was glad. Truth is she’s very impatient lately.”

She paused for a moment. Antonin looked at her. It seemed there was something missing, like he expected to hear more. Mirella added,

“You’re the reason she’s impatient, uncle. She said she’ll take the first plane out as soon as we’re there. To come see you. She promised. And I’m certain she’ll keep her word!”

She paused a while, smiled and then added,

“She wants me there first, to take over, before she comes here. Even so, she’ll finally do it, I’m certain, there’s

no doubt about it,” said Mirella.

She was unaware of the fact, but her words touched upon an inkling of her cousin’s truth. Then Mirella hugged Antonin who was in tears.

When Antonin pulled himself together he replied,

“I hope her confidence about things in Greece is justified and you don’t run into any trouble down there.”

“Everything will go well, don’t worry, uncle. We’ll cross the river shortly,” Mirella replied.

Then she asked meaningfully,

“Did anyone show up?”

“No one, dear Mirella, not a soul,” Antonin replied.

Mirella looked at the river and finally added,

“The bums lost the game! We’re crossing over tonight!”

\* \* \*

Meanwhile Ileana was on the phone with Stefan. Conversation was difficult, his English was appalling. And she hadn’t learned a word of Hungarian from her father. But all this was rather irrelevant. Ileana pretended she listened tentatively to Stephan’s instructions without asking any questions. She already knew everything he told her. She tried to alter her voice a little. Same name, same voice, Stefan might get suspicious. But she was never a good actor.

“How strange, your voice sounds so much like another Ileana’s, who also lives in Athens,” Stefan eventually said.

“I don’t live in Athens; I live in the Cyclades, in the islands, Stefan, not in Athens. We simply happen to have

the same name, it's just a coincidence!" That's how Ileana managed to lead him astray.

"Oh, right, so in the islands, then! How nice, how nice! Yes, just a coincidence," Stefan replied and then added with a smile,

"What else, what else?"

Ileana was relieved that Stefan bought her story about it being a coincidence.

"We'll be expecting you then, Stefan, on Saturday, the day after tomorrow, nine thirty to ten at night. At the appointed place. Bye now," she said without trying to alter her voice and making Stefan feel even more awkward than before.

\* \* \*

Saying goodbye was difficult. Mirella wouldn't hear of Antonin waiting at the riverside. So Antonin said goodbye, turned around and started towards home.

"Aren't you going to wish we meet again, uncle?" Mirella asked as he walked away.

"May you meet again," replied Antonin and started towards the village. Then he realized what he'd just said, turned and looked at them, and changed his wish.

"Until we meet again."

And then turned in the direction of the village again, without looking at them a second time, though his second wish had a significant effect.

It transmuted sadness into strength.

\* \* \*

It was nearly time to go. Mirella left the cabin for one final look around. A soft breeze had picked up in the meantime but didn't look like it was going to last. From where she stood she could see if anyone was coming. She thought it highly unlikely they'd be looking for her so soon. No matter how much their spite might be, their incompetence was even greater. So she wasn't truly worried.

And then, at that time and place, right there outside the cabin where she stood, she recalled the time when her brother was injured, more than five years ago. A sweet sense of nostalgia overwhelmed her. She recalled Ileana's delivery and fiery gaze that day. That same gaze guided her today. Today she felt exactly the same resolve. About nearly the same things.

Even though there was no bridegroom waiting for her on the other side of the river.

Her glance fell on her brother. Her train of thought halted upon that long past moment. She went towards him.

"All set, bro?" she asked affectionately. She was proud of her brother.

"All set," he replied, perfectly calm.

She hugged him, she talked to him. With the same voice as Ileana's. With the same gaze, the same courage.

"And I'm going to Greece, to the islands!"

That's what she said and smiled. Alexandru was puzzled for a moment. He had been in agony when his cousin was setting sail and uttering those exact words. He hadn't heard her say them. But his sister's words sounded

so much like Ileana. That's how she would've said it, like Mirella did just now. So it was definitely something she had said!

Mirella lifted her eyes to the sky.

A light drizzle just started.

## The light of freedom

Lightning shot across the sky, gradually growing more violent, more frequent and rhythmical, over the tiny village. The wind had died down. The drizzle was getting stronger. These were, undoubtedly, the last signals, the last warning to every living creature in the Romanian village, man and beast alike, to take precaution. To hurry and find shelter before the storm broke out full force and drowned everything in a deluge.

The villagers had indeed taken precautions and were quietly huddling next to the fireplace. The only exception was an axe, not far from the village, which with the aid of a small lamp, never once broke its monotone rhythm, unheeding of the signs from heaven and the darkness around it. It defied them and continued its urgent and belated business, falling with remarkable precision, rhythmically and forcefully, on some tree trunk. Apart from the human inhabitants, a few hens were scuttling about nearby and fluttering their wings like crazy. They clucked incessantly, in sheer agony. As if they foresaw what was coming. As if their owners had forgotten them, helpless and unprotected, outside their house and they were in the grips of panic.

At that specific, sharp, point in time did twenty year old Mirella and her brother, Alexandru, two years her junior, believe was the optimum, the safest moment, to take

the first, great step. The two were now on the river bank. Next to the border with Serbia. Ready to cross into Yugoslavia and from there on, after a few days' journey, to Greece. Let the fear of a deluge carry on a few days; let it carry on. That's what Mirella thought. Let it carry on then, and keep the road open and their faring smooth.

\* \* \*

But the Greek border was the second one. Ahead of them now lay the first and the toughest. The Danube itself. And God above. And his great downpour.

They checked the final details. In a remote corner, away from the glances of their fellow villagers. They threw the small raft Alexandru had made in the water. They pushed it into the water, they tried it out. It was easy to haul. It didn't sink.

"Very well done, Alexandru," Mirella smiled at him.

Then they loaded and secured their meager belongings and covered the whole thing with a sheet of plastic. To keep it as dry as possible. They were initially concerned about the river, but now it looked like the main bulk of water would most likely come from the heavens. Let the matches stay dry at least, so they could warm up and dry off once they reached the other side!

Meanwhile the light drizzle had gradually turned into proper rain. It guaranteed a great downpour. It resounded louder than the roar of the river, gradually covering its low voice. It broke and added some color to its flat drone. Back in the village the night wood cutter was now missing beats in his monotone rhythm. And the henhouse had

finally worked it out and quieted down as well. Before them the river was rolling at the same, never changing, speed. Only now its surface was stippled by the rain. It was also constantly illuminated by flashes of lightning, quickly followed by loud thunder claps, enhanced by the echo of the surrounding rocks. All this made the river very frightening. The ceaseless lightning bolts now gave the eerie, iron name of the passage a fitting semblance.

\* \* \*

Others would have definitely chickened out. Even in the peace of summer, as soon as night fell, as soon as the blue of the water faded and turned dark, the surrounding landscape immediately grew hostile. Now, though, it wasn't just the water that had grown dark, but the entire world as well. In the ineffable darkness and the tempest of the winter night, under a thick layer of clouds that trapped and prevented any moon ray from slipping through, all the pixies and the water nymphs came to life. They howled and raged in the soul of anyone who dared venture nearby. They sought to frighten him, and drive him away.

Not even the impenetrable darkness; they wouldn't allow even the darkness to offer refuge. A place where the unwelcome passerby could hide. They ceaselessly broke even that with swift but continuous, blinding flashes of lightning. They wouldn't allow you to forget for a moment where you were.

But now was the best time. Now that, apart from elves and water nymphs, there was absolutely no one around

to see them. On either bank. On this or the opposite side of the river. Now that men and beasts alike were huddled in their nests. That the rain wasn't raging yet, it wasn't possessed, completely and thoroughly, by the demon that dogged it.

They got ready for the great crossing. Carefully instructed by their uncle. Where to go into the water and how to swim. Where to get out. How to proceed, afterwards. They had to swim a hundred and fifty meters in the cold water, which, if they made any mistake, could become well over two hundred by the current. And the most important, the most difficult bit was the strong current somewhere halfway across. Antonin had emphasized and explained this to them in every detail. Mirella estimated it would take them about half an hour to swim across. If all went well. If the instructions were accurate; but mainly if they managed to follow them through successfully.

They went into the water.

\* \* \*

Did this world have anything in common with the inexhaustible patience of their fellow villagers? Did it in any way resemble the hasty but indifferent chopping of the wood cutter? No; not in the slightest. It had nothing in common with the pointless agony of the henhouse. These two wanted to get out, not in. To travel, not hide. Therefore they felt the raging heavens, perhaps even God himself, somewhere beyond the sky, as more of a friend and an ally rather than something that sought to harm them,

something against which they ought to seek shelter.

Those who'd never heard of passion would doubtlessly call them damned. And if a sudden flash of lightning happened to reveal before their eyes the stormy iron gates of the Danube, those same people would also call them mad.

And they would probably feel briefly puzzled and wouldn't know what to say, what to think, if they found out the reason for undertaking this gravely dangerous adventure, as they now saw it, was not, like in the past, in order for these two before them to escape years and years of imprisonment and a death squad, hard on their heels, with an order of execution. All this had to be done for much more humble and mundane reasons. Simply to escape bedding some bureaucrat in the capital. Only that thought could soften their harsh criticism and stir their sympathy. For these two poor, perhaps somewhat naïve, daredevils.

\* \* \*

But apart from all those mentioned above, apart from the many, there were also the others, the few. Mom and dad among them. They would emerge, one here, another there; from the pages of history and the trees of the forest, they'd come forth, gradually, those rare few. Seafarers, explorers, fighters and all sorts of bold travelers. And others. Confident in those two before them, perhaps even in tears. Stirred by the sight and the recollection of the great, the rare crossing they once had undertaken themselves.

Apart from the many, the others would be there, too.  
The few. The beloved.

\* \* \*

The river grows deeper where the watercourse narrows. To hold the bulk of water flowing between its banks. That's what the river was like where Mirella and Alexandru went in. It became seventy to eighty meters deep. A real abyss. And what you know is there, but you can't see, is easily exaggerated by imagination. That's what inspires fear the most.

It was this chaos then that now struck terror into their souls. The chaos below their feet, as they slowly swam across the river. And their original fear, their fear of the water, now they were in it, ceased to exist. Now that the water engulfed them, now that it lapped gently against their bodies, as they swam, now that they felt it all around them, it ceased – the water – to inspire fear in them. The proximity, the feel of the water, its low, playful, familiar sound, now seemed to somehow evoke distant images, intimate images. The sound of the water was different now; its first, distant and deep, terrible roar was entirely covered and lost. And that's what made such a difference. The sound of the water was now almost a friendly, familiar sound. It was as if it talked to them, like it sang to them. Washing away, carrying away, their previous fear. And with all the gifts it brought them, it also helped them forget how cold it was.

And as its embrace and proximity now made the water a friend rather than a foe, as it broke free from the

power of the nymphs, living inside and governing and holding sway over it, they flew in a rage. And betrayed by the familiar, tranquil caress of the water, they now tried a different strategy. They commanded the imagination of the two trespassers to run wild. They commanded it to turn elsewhere, to a place where an unfailing, lasting fear is born, somewhere the nymphs' power and dominion is certain to prevail, where no other such promise is possible, like this soothing caress. They commanded it to turn to the abyss. To overwhelm their souls with awe, indissoluble awe. That was now the certain punishment for the two profane who dared, thus uninvited, intrude at such a sublime moment, a moment of worship. Who cropped up at the most inopportune moment. Who interrupted, with their sacrilege, such an exalted rite.

“Beware, Alexandru!” Mirella said.

“The water will soon grow swifter. Beware, do your best to get past the current and don't get caught in its flow,” she added softly.

A bolt of lightning shot across the sky and Alexandru caught a glimpse of his sister drenched from the union of the waters of the river and the sky. Drenched, but with no sign of apprehension or tension on her face.

\* \* \*

They enter the current. The strong flow pushes increasingly harder against the small raft. The raft tilts and swivels to the left. They're now well into the current. Where they must push and swim against it with all their might. They are now also over the deepest point...

“Mirella, can you imagine what an abyss lies right underneath us?” said Alexandru and swam harder, on the right side of the raft, against the flow. He pulled with all his strength while Mirella pushed. They tried, as much as possible, to maintain a straight course.

“Don’t think about it, Alexandru. Get it out of your head. We’ll be on the other side soon, concentrate on that,” Mirella replied. And immediately realized just how difficult following her suggestion was, how impossible she found it herself to turn her thoughts away from the bottomless, the invisible depth, underneath. It was as if some uncontrollable force had taken over the workings of her imagination.

They’ve now reached the heart of the current, where the water is at its swiftest. Perhaps even its deepest. Its voice becomes distant and hostile once more. It surges hastily past them, jostles indifferently against them. It blindly obeys its masters again. They’ve got it back under their control. They rejoice in vengeful glee and reverence. The nymphs and the elves. Alexandru, never ceasing to wrestle against them, is overwhelmed with angst. Mirella feels the raft pushing hard against her. She’s swept back and momentarily yields to the current. She calls to Alexandru to pull harder, her pushing alone is not enough.

Alexandru turns on his back and continues, as much as the panic that’s taken hold of him permits; he continues, backstroke now, pulling the small raft. And sees the shimmering, sparse village lights from afar. He momentarily wonders if those lights can indeed be from their village.

And even before he has time to answer, those tiny lights have utterly dispelled his panic. He now feels con-

fidant again, the raft stops swiveling and gains a steadier, a straighter course. Mirella, seeing the raft slowing down, starts pushing again. To help the raft maintain a straight course. She's relieved from the great strain she felt for a moment there. When Alexandru froze.

"Well done, brother!" she says and keeps pushing. Gradually the raft passes out of the current. The waters grow quieter. The tiny village lights are now gone. The rain is at its strongest point. The nymphs have totally forgotten them. They are devoutly absorbed by a strange calling; they are in the middle of, they are engrossed by, the climax of their ritual.

A few more minutes, with the calm waters as an ally again, and despite the pitch darkness all around them, they'll cross into, they'll be in Serbia.

\* \* \*

Their uncle's account was so detailed they had no trouble finding the cave. They soon left the river behind them, continued defying the rain and the storm from heaven and climbed up the roughly one hundred and fifty meter slope on the right bank of the Danube. The forest was thick but the road their uncle had shown them was an easy walk. They followed all the signs he'd told them and in about half an hour they stood at the well hidden mouth of the cave, exhausted by fatigue and tension. They carefully uncovered the entrance, exactly as Antonin had instructed. They opened the way to its interior. A deep feeling of satisfaction, security and confidence followed as soon as they saw the inside of the cave. They suddenly

felt, from one moment to the next, that their hardships were now over, they've left them behind for good. They could see the end of the road, they could see the island in the Cyclades, waiting for them. Ileana greeting them and giving them a tour of the new world. And an uncannily strong winter sun welcoming them.

With their matches, which they had managed to keep dry, they quickly lit a fire with the wood they found stacked in a dry corner. They lit the fire and sat next to it to dry, their clothes and themselves.

Mirella then thought of her uncle and smiled to herself. Hope that a glint of light might be visible from the opposite slope would have certainly led Antonin to the top of the hill. He'd definitely be watching them from there. Perhaps he could even, happily, see their small, hidden fire.

\* \* \*

"Alexandru, for a moment there I feared the water was going to beat us and carry us to Bulgaria instead of Serbia. Luckily it didn't last, though, and you soon regained your strength and pulled me clear across," Mirella said, after they'd lit a fire, inside the cave, under the huge rock Antonin had described, where they were now recovering and drying.

"True. For a moment I panicked at the thought of the abyss under our feet. Until I saw the lights of our village and the panic subsided and I found my strength again," Alexandru replied. His attitude was bitter and apologetic, for losing his nerve like that.

Mirella looked at him in surprise and said,

“What lights could you ever see in such a storm, brother? And which village were those lights from? From our village, hidden behind the hill?”

Alexandru didn't reply. Nor did Mirella ask him a second time. But a strange breeze did, that blew and moved the leaves of the surrounding bushes, there, just a few paces from the rock.

\* \* \*

Ahead of them now lay the long, dry road to Greece. That's where their thoughts turned now.

And from the feeling of relief and the warmth of the small fire, they embraced and fell asleep practically without realizing it. In the downpour that grew stronger in the meantime and now raged, a few paces away, unbroken and determined, without further hesitation or warning. The fire cackled, the water flowed. The two beasts of nature respected and melted away the tension the two felt. And thus the only thing left in their company was sleep.

And before they surrendered to their redeeming sleep, they thought of the rain again; they thought of it the way they had before, when they were going into the water. As a protector, that is, rather than an obstacle. The rain, together with the fire and their small shelter, perfectly hidden among the trees and the other unseen underbrush of the forest. That's what brought on the peacefulness of their sleep.

And anticipation, of course, of the other, of the important stuff, at the end of their journey. Anticipation of the sun, the light, and their cousin.

## On the road

It was well past eight when they woke up next morning. The fatigue of the day past proved greater than the uncertainty of the one coming.

It had just dawned. Raindrops were still falling, but they were faint, uncertain. The rain had passed, allowing the roar of the river to be clearly heard.

Mirella woke first. She went to the entrance of the cave and gazed at the bank opposite. At Romania. The landscape was more peaceful, that's how it looked to her. Iron gates seemed an unbecoming name. She wondered if it was actually so or if tranquility was simply in the eye of the beholder. The awe that overwhelmed her the day before, when she looked towards where she now stood from the opposite bank, had totally vanished.

Then she looked up. The sky seemed still undetermined. But relieved of the waters it held. A few unexpected, random and sparse drops fell now and then. But they bore no resemblance to the fierceness of the previous night, nor heralded anything similar, at least for the new day only just begun.

The nymphs and the elves had withdrawn, their ritual well over by now. They too had surrendered to a deep, peaceful, post-erotic sleep. And the occasional drops from heaven seemed to belong to the few tears of sadness shed by last night's sentinels, when they proved un-

able to inspire terror and deny passage to the profane.

Now Mirella saw their tiny village in her mind's eye too. She saw Antonin; she saw him peaceful, confident. Her imagination flew through time and space and she could see him talking to his daughter, saying her cousins would be in Greece in a couple of days. That it was time to go pick them up from the location, north of the city of Florina, Stefan would have described to her in detail. To take them with her and introduce them and share with them the better world she had been enjoying all these years. And then travel to Romania for a while herself and come see him.

Those were the words Mirella heard coming from Antonin's lips. That's what she heard, and smiled. A gentle, benevolent smile spread across her face, full of love of her uncle. A brief smile that quickly dissolved as her thought, currently nostalgic and vulnerable, quickly turned to her recently departed parents. And then her thought jumped back to Antonin and his serious, recent illness. And if it weren't for still half-asleep Alexandru's jubilant voice and invitation, who knows how long her thoughts would have lingered along those lines, there, on the opposite bank.

"Mirella, are you out there? Is it still raining?" Alexandru asked while his tone of voice betrayed he anticipated a negative answer.

"It's stopped, Alexandru; it looks like there's no more water, the sky will soon be clear. Only a few drops here and there, which I doubt will last much longer. Did you sleep well?"

Alexandru sounded enthusiastic.

"Exceptionally, Mirella. Like a log. I slept surprisingly

soundly considering what we'd been through last night. Maybe exhaustion had something to do with it, too. Plus, I've dried out completely. I'm coming out there, too; what are you doing out there, is there a view, can you see our village?"

That's what Mirella saw, what Alexandru had seen the previous night, at the crucial moment, as well. That's what she saw, even though her answer was negative.

"You can't see our village from up here, Alexandru; I'm just looking at the river. And it kind of feels like it's looking back at me, too."

That's how Mirella responded and saw, for a moment there, the raindrops falling harder.

\* \* \*

They gathered their few belongings. They were completely dry. Their uncle's instructions were thorough and totally precise. They were to follow marked forest roads, moving south and west, until they reached their next hide-out, which he'd described in even more detail. A human hide-out this time. At Novi Sip, a Serbian village about twenty kilometers from where they were.

Where Stefan would be waiting for them.

\* \* \*

Antonin met Stefan, his friend, at a football match in Bucharest, many years ago. Antonin was half Romanian, half Hungarian. And it happened he yelled something in Hungarian while in the stalls; Stefan heard him, looked at

him in surprise, then smiled and replied in Hungarian too. He was a hundred percent Hungarian himself. One of the many upheavals in the Balkans had led them to their new countries. When they first met Stefan lived north of Belgrade, where there always lived many Hungarians. Later he married and moved to the south, to his wife's village. So he found himself living thirty kilometers from his friend Antonin. Thirty kilometers, a river and a number of other obstacles as well.

Initially they had little contact. And only over the phone. But when Stefan moved to the south, their friendship grew stronger. After a while Antonin felt he could trust him. So he talked to him and asked for his help. Antonin helped Romanian fugitives escape to the west. Secretly, without any personal contact, which could compromise his safety. Stefan's new village was an ideal hub for fugitives on the move. To take a breather, rest a little, get credible instructions and then be on their way. Stefan travelled to Orsova, they met once more, discussed things in detail, and made an agreement.

The fugitives would pay Stefan for his help. He wouldn't be simply helping his friend Antonin, he'd also have a financial motive. Until, one day, one of his clients, a young woman, didn't make it; she never arrived. It was Antonin who told Stefan, he told him in their special code. It was the only time they were defeated.

So it then occurred to Stefan that the money, which he had already counted on and made plans for, would also never arrive.

And the more he thought about that dark incident at the time, the more guilt he felt. Some ray of light shot

forth, something shone inside him. And he saw and bitterly regretted the thought that had occurred to him. About the money he'd lost. Quite soon he was paralyzed by a deep feeling of guilt. It shook him to the core. And that guilt then came and marked him and changed him in the most permanent manner. He gradually regretted what he'd been doing till then and never again received money for the help he offered those on the run. Those whom Antonin first helped across the river, before he helped them the rest of the way.

He would again receive money for his services only many years later, under very different circumstances. From Ileana and her girls.

\* \* \*

They were now on that road, the dirt road to freedom as they used to call it, inaugurating its new name with their footsteps, and renaming it the road to the sun and to a better life.

That was the road the two were on.

The sky had now dried. The daylight was growing stronger, but so was the cold. The temperature was nearly zero degrees, humidity a hundred percent. But it was nothing compared to the previous day. And it was also nothing compared to what lay ahead. And these thoughts, about yesterday and tomorrow, were sufficient to make today's step quick and light.

\* \* \*

“Mirella, how much further is it to... Stefan’s – isn’t that what uncle said his name was?” Alexandru asked.

They had been following the rough track for four hours before they finally reached the foot of the steep mountain along which the Danube flowed. Of course these hours were different from the ones Stefan meant. He estimated time differently. They were probably still far from the village: about ten kilometers as far as they could tell.

“A couple of hours, Alexandru: we’ll be with Uncle Antonin’s friend by nightfall. Something tells me we’ll sleep in a soft bed tonight. Be patient, it won’t be long now,” Mirella replied.

“Do you have any idea where uncle met this friend of his? Has he ever told you?” Alexandru continued without commenting on the picture his sister painted. He’d slept perfectly well the night before, and his sister’s embrace was exquisitely soft too.

“I don’t know much, Alexandru. They helped fugitives from Romania cross the border in the old days. He never went into details about that time and his teaming with Stefan. I also know they both love football and that Stefan is Hungarian; that’s how I think the two manage to communicate. I don’t know anything else about Stefan. It’s enough that uncle trusts him with his life. That’s more than enough.”

Alexandru was a little surprised. He was about to ask about those fugitives of long ago. But he then thought their adventure was probably similar to theirs. “Could it always have been this way?” he wondered. His fleeting

and naïve question would remain unanswered, as he felt there was no need to ask, or to know, anything further.

The day had almost ended. About an hour before they reached their destination they passed outside another, neighboring, small village. Somewhere, far out of sight, the day's sun was setting. The villagers had returned from the fields. The smell of smoke and coal was in the air. It was there, in the dim evening light, they came across the first person they encountered on Serbian soil. They passed within a short distance, no more than five meters, from her. It was an old woman, loaded with wood. She paused for a moment, then turned and looked their way. They thought that, being strangers to those parts, she would be surprised to see them; perhaps she might even speak to them. But she never said a word. She resumed exactly the same tired pace as before and indifferently went on her way.

And as they watched her draw away and recede in the darkness descending all around, they had the impression the old woman mumbled to herself. And that she also nodded her head.

That she nodded her head in the specific manner induced by a familiar picture, a persistent and sad thought.

\* \* \*

At the end of the road, when approaching a house matching Antonin's description, they saw a tall man in the courtyard. It was now dark, fog had settled upon the village and his form was hardly visible under the weak street lights. The way he moved betrayed a somewhat advanced age.

He paced nervously up and down a large garden, disproportionately large compared to the tiny house behind it. From Antonin's description, but also by the nervousness he radiated, they suspected he must be Stefan. They were almost certain when, arriving at the house entrance, they saw him stop pacing, change direction and come towards them. And finally they were entirely certain when they saw him relax the moment he could see them clearly, when they stood in front of his yard's entrance.

"Come, come, here Stefan," he called in broken English.

Alexandru and Mirella drew closer, then stepped into the garden. They stood there a moment and offered their hands to a still agitated Stefan. It was obvious by Stefan's English that, during the next difficult hours, communication would be more through gestures rather than words. Neither of the two spoke any Serbian or Hungarian.

After the handshakes and through many gestures and apparent joy, Stefan led the two kids to the house. He paused a moment, telling them in a mixture of words and sign language that he should've met them earlier, to save them a couple of hours walking.

"Stefan why not go, why not go?" he said regretfully, turning the imaginary steering wheel of the vehicle which he should've picked them up in with his hand.

They tried to convince him it wasn't a problem. That the going was easy, something of a pleasant walk. Even though Stefan had seriously underestimated the distance.

"Nice walk Stefan, nice walk, no problem, don't worry," they kept telling him. But Stefan remained unconvinced.

Then they went into the house. Stefan appeared to be alone. There was no one else there. “Is there a family, who knows? Is this his actual home... or not?” These were Mirella’s thoughts as she looked around, carefully scrutinizing the inside of the house. Only to discontinue her thought and leave it unconcluded the moment she remembered she had to call her uncle and let him know they’d arrived and everything had gone smoothly.

She tried to explain. She mimed the turning of the telephone dial in the air. Stefan understood at once. He grabbed her by the arm and led her to a phone.

“Here, here,” he said eagerly.

Mirella dialed Antonin’s number. He picked up immediately. His voice was a mixture of agony and joy.

“Are you there, Mirella? Is everything alright? Are you both well?” he asked her and the tone of his voice changed; he now sounded more relieved than anything.

“We’re here, Antonin, we are both very well; only the river was a bit tricky, everything else was exactly as you foresaw and described. We’re at Stefan’s house now. He seems guilty he didn’t come pick us up earlier. Please talk to him and reassure him. Today was literally a stroll. But communication is difficult! Are you certain he can explain what we should do next?”

Antonin became upset. As if his niece’s remark and question was totally unrelated to the difficulties which still lay ahead. He hurriedly changed the subject.

“I told you, Stefan is like a brother. There’s nothing for him to explain. Tomorrow morning he’ll take you straight to the south, to the Greek border. It’s five hundred kilometers from there. It’s dangerous to travel on your own,

Mirella, without any papers and without a word of Serbian. You'll stand out like a sore thumb. A little to the north from where you are they're at each other's throats. There's an atmosphere of war. You do exactly what Stefan tells you. You're not to venture on your own. That's where the danger lies now, not in the Danube. Stefan will show you how to get into Greece. He'll gesture his instruction with his hands: left, straight on for two hundred meters, then left again. Something like that. Then you'll meet up with Ileana. She'll be there, she'll be waiting for you. It's all arranged. You'll be together tomorrow night. Don't worry about communicating with Stefan. He's well trained." That's what Antonin said and then asked her, firmly again, to pay attention to Stefan and follow his instructions to the letter.

And after a brief pause he concluded,

"Understood, Mirella, understood? If you've understood, explain it to your brother as well. Damn, this rain! There's thunder again here. It'll be raining where you are soon as well."

But Mirella continued in the same vein, venting the astonishment and the bemusement she felt over this whole affair.

"Uncle, what kind of business does your friend run here? I strongly suspect he never quit doing what he did back then, more than ten years ago, when you two smuggled people across the border. People are passing through here; I have the strong feeling that's what's been going on in this place. Where's his family? Are you certain you've told me all there is to know about Stefan? All this mystery makes me jittery. Much more than the Danube. I

feel like a piece of luggage handled by middlemen. Who will pick me up and carry me and have me delivered to my recipient, Ileana?” Mirella said nervously, cutting right to the heart of her many questions. Her agitation was so pronounced that Stefan and Alexandru heard her and came in from the next room.

“Mirella, you’re talking nonsense! What business could Stefan be doing at his age! I don’t understand what you find so odd. Better forget it and keep an eye on the boy; give me Stefan on the phone please, I want to talk to him,” Antonin changed the subject, trying to persuade her to stop her irrational questions and put aside all her untimely suspicions. To put all that aside and concentrate on the following day and that alone.

Mirella gave Stefan the phone and cast a puzzled glance on a rather carefree Alexandru. Then she heard an unintelligible conversation in Hungarian, from which the only thing they could make sense of was Stefan’s repeated affirmative, “Igen, igen.”

She waited for them to finish and then took the phone from Stefan’s hand and spoke with Antonin again. She said she was sorry for being so upset, so worked up, which apparently made her see things. Finally she tried to reassure Antonin, and told him not to worry and prepare to greet his daughter.

This conversation helped Antonin feel, after they hung up the phone, a deep sense of relief.

## Sacrifice

As much as Mirella suspects things about Stefan, as much as her keen intuition helps her see a small portion of the truth and realize there's no way this small building has been deserted for years as Antonin thinks, Mirella's fraction of the truth is light years away from the dark truth behind that humble little house: the one and only truth, her cousin's truth. The cousin Mirella will meet tomorrow and the truth which will be revealed to her the day after tomorrow.

After the water border of Serbia, and the land border of Greece, the fiery border of truth will spring up before them immediately after – the very next day.

\* \* \*

The God of darkness is celebrating. His dark abode resounds with roaring laughter. He feels his triumph is certain. The victim is at the altar. It will soon be swallowed by his abysmal darkness.

The time is drawing near. It's only a matter of hours now. Events will unfold swiftly and the approaching revelation will, inevitably, unfold swifter than the waters of the Danube. And this time it's Ileana's words that will serve as the new terrifying elves and nymphs of this biblical river of revelation just a few hours ahead.

Like a human repetition of the formidable, “Take, eat, this is my body.” Together with the revelation, the messenger of darkness will firmly request Ileana’s sacrifice. It’s necessary; it’s a prerequisite for the opening of their path. So that the two can come to the light. To the light of Greece and that other light as well, the light of truth. That’s how it works. Gods staggered along this thorny path. There is no other way. Ileana will be sacrificed even if the final command, her turning over to the rage and the dark abyss of the impetuous messenger, will not be by their command, Mirella’s and Alexandru’s.

\* \* \*

As if that is of any significance. As if this world was ever short of Pilates.

## On the road again

They woke up the next day in precipitation. They had many kilometers ahead of them and had to hit the road early. Stefan told them he'd wake them at six. But Mirella woke earlier. Stefan woke up roughly the same time, went out into the corridor and disappeared behind a bathroom door, without encountering Mirella. But the noise he made woke Alexandru, too, who chose to stay in bed until the appointed time.

Mirella got out of bed and wandered around the building where Stefan had lodged them. There was no way people lived here permanently. But Mirella was certain the place had been used recently, it couldn't have been deserted for as many years as her uncle said. The place was some kind of warehouse, haphazardly turned into a lodging. And a lodging for many persons, at that. Stacked in a corner were four or five mattresses. The questions of the previous night recurred to her. All this seemed extremely odd. But she had a difficult day and many kilometers ahead of her. If everything went well, she'd have time to think more about it tomorrow. Perhaps she might even discuss it with Ileana. She might know. Antonin was her father, he might have told her a few things more. Even though she wouldn't know this guy Stefan in person. You see, Ileana had left the country the other, the dry way. With a passport, a marriage license and an airway ticket.

Ileana had no connection to the road they were on.

Then Stefan appeared. He rushed out from the small bathroom and straight into what looked like a kitchen. There he bumped into Mirella and uttered a hasty good morning. By the time she had returned his greeting and rushed to the bathroom, Stefan had opened a fridge and taken out some cheese and butter. He took some bread out of a cupboard and put everything on a table. Not long after, Alexandru made his appearance too.

“Eat, eat, then go, go,” said Stefan. He was stressed and spoke loudly so Mirella would hear too, and then dug into their modest breakfast first.

Mirella came out of the bathroom and joined them at the table. It occurred to her she was going to spend the entire day with Stefan’s limited vocabulary and his gestures. The idea spoiled her mood. Unlike Alexandru who didn’t bother about such things, if he didn’t actually enjoy them.

The day was a rainy one; Uncle Antonin’s forecast was spot on. The three of them ate in silence, with only the metallic sound of the rain falling monotonously on a tin surface. They didn’t take long to finish their humble breakfast. Alexandru was trying to explain something to Stefan using hand gestures when Mirella stood up and said,

“Go, Stefan, go.” Then she turned to Alexandru and said,

“Let’s get a move on, Alexandru; we’re meeting Ileana tonight!”

Alexandru stopped miming and grew serious.

“Let’s get moving, Mirella, let’s go,” he replied and stood up.

Stefan heard the word “Ileana”, he heard the name; his mind raced back in time, the look in his eyes changed. His hand briefly faltered in the gesture he was making. But only briefly, just a split second. He then focused quickly on the moment before, on Mirella’s bidding. He got up, picked up two blankets, stuffed them in a couple of bags and then hastily led them out of the warehouse, locking the door behind him. They quickly crossed the courtyard and stepped out into the street, where the truck they would travel in was parked. Stefan locked the yard door, and then unlocked and opened the truck’s passenger door, motioning them to get in.

They scrambled quickly into the truck, to get out of the rain. Alexandru got into the passenger seat first. Then Mirella got in after him. She shut the door behind her and gave Stefan the cue.

“Go, Stefan!”

The truck’s engine started; the wheels turned. Time was rolling again.

\* \* \*

Stefan drove west. He stayed off the main roads. In a couple of hours they came to the junction with Serbia’s main motorway, running north to south.

Stefan drove past the junction and kept moving west. Mirella asked with her hands, showing the road to the south, and he answered with dissuasive gestures and a flat, dry, “No, no, big, big.”

Mirella realized he didn’t want to use the main roads for some reason. He probably thought them dangerous.

And kept driving along small side roads, towards the west. He'd definitely turn south at some point.

"He seems to know the area, Mirella, he seems to know every village before we even get there. Are we going to drive the entire four hundred kilometers on roads like these, I wonder. It's going to take us at least twelve hours if we do," Alexandru said to his sister in a low voice.

"I guess he knows where he's going, Alexandru. I don't know why he stays off the main roads, but he probably has his reasons," Mirella replied.

A convoy of about a dozen army trucks drove past them in the opposite lane. The road was narrow, so Stefan swiveled aside a little, pulled over and stopped until they were past. Mirella looked at her brother again.

"Perhaps the main roads are dangerous."

Two hours after the junction with the main motorway Stefan pulled over at the side of the road. He pulled the hand-break, mumbled something to himself first, something incomprehensible. Then he looked at the two and addressed only one of them, as he was in the habit of doing during the entire drive.

"Eat, here eat, Mirella."

It was a small inn, at the edge of a village. The village looked pitiful, a true mud hole. The rain kept falling in the same steady and medium tempo, the same as when it began that morning in Stefan's small town. It looked like it was going to continue that way for days.

The two siblings got out of the truck and ran quickly to the inn. They waited at the door for Stefan to join them and go in first, to show them in.

\* \* \*

On the inn's ground floor was something of a small restaurant. It was noon already, there were people eating and drinking at two or three tables and chattering quietly. No one turned their head, or paid any attention to the new customers.

They found a table near a window where they could keep an eye on the truck and on the road. Soon the restaurant owner appeared. He came toward them. He cast a quick glance on the two, then turned and heartily greeted Stefan.

He spoke to him and showed him the sky and made all sorts of gestures and grimaces. They were apparently soaked through from too much rain in the area and the owner seized the opportunity to unload.

Stefan said something. He seemed to agree. Then his attitude abruptly changed; he turned around and looked towards the kitchen. He suddenly felt time was flying and became stressed. Then he realized there was no way he could explain the menu to his companions and decided to take the matter upon himself. He asked about the food, he told him what to bring and asked him to be quick. That last bit was the only thing Mirella could make out of their conversation. Meanwhile her brother was transfixed by a broken TV; it had no sound. The pictures it showed were otherworldly, entirely out of place in that miserable area. The pictures were so otherworldly no one else paid them any attention. They had no relevance to the mud, the bleak weather and the poverty of the area.

The TV was showing a fashion show where beautiful

women paraded up and down in summer clothes. Apparently that made Alexandru travel forward in time and southward in space. Where there was sun, instead of dirt or mud. And perhaps beautiful women, too. All that made him totally indifferent towards Stefan's hunger and haste and his incomprehensible exchange with the owner.

Before leaving for the kitchen the owner cast a quick glance at Stefan's company. Something didn't feel right. There was something unusual about the situation, something seemed to bug him; there was something he couldn't understand. Until Stefan's stern look and firm remark recalled him to order. And persuaded him to get moving and sent him quickly into his kitchen for their order.

While waiting for their meals Mirella asked Stefan to call Ileana on the number she'd given her. She would be in Thessaloniki by now, at some friends', according to what she'd said last time they spoke on the phone, when she'd given her the number. She was just two hours away from their rendezvous. She should still be there, she wouldn't have started for the border.

Oddly resentful, as if Mirella's request was totally uncalled for, Stefan got up, got permission from the owner in a glance and quickly dialed the number. As soon as the line opened he called Mirella and gave her the phone.

Ileana in person was on the other end of the line. Mirella asked her if everything was ready. Then there was a pause, after which Mirella smiled, said goodbye, put down the receiver and returned to Stefan.

"Ileana, OK, will wait for us," Mirella summarized their brief conversation.

\* \* \*

They left as soon as they finished their meal. They continued a while along the same road and turned south about an hour later. The day had almost ended. Mirella's thoughts turned to yesterday's sunset. Out of sight, and distant, like today's. In another small village, near Stefan's town. In her mind's eye she could see the old woman whose trembling shadow receded into the night. Then her mind turned further back, to the day before last. When they were still in Romania, next to the Danube; when the sky sent them its final warning. When the elves looked at them in silent amazement, without daring to believe what was to soon follow and would inspire such a great and vengeful rage in them.

"Two ora, two ora," said Stefan in his Hungarian English.

That was enough to instantly evoke in Mirella the image of her cousin who would be starting for their rendezvous on the other side of the border. Stefan's voice and timekeeping also woke Alexandru, who'd fallen asleep on his sister's shoulder in the meantime. Pointing to a huge lit minaret, totally disproportionate to a mosque that looked out of place in the middle of a field, Stefan added, "Muslim, no good Muslim, problem Muslim."

They'd left Kosovo, and were now driving between Skopje and Tirana.

Night was spreading all around. The day had ended and with it ended all signs of life. Only a few small lights shimmered, here and there, in the sleepy settlements through which they passed. Meanwhile the fog was growing

thicker. It dimmed the lights, it obscured them, striving to put out even those last traces of man.

\* \* \*

When around nine o'clock Stefan killed the engine in the middle of nowhere and pointed straight ahead, trying to convey that their destination was over there somewhere, where people were waiting for them, Alexandru refused to believe they had finally arrived. And refused to accept that the important thing there, lost in the fog, was Greece.

They were between two snow-covered mountains, one on the left, the other on the right. And in-between a frozen valley, where they now stood.

The cold was extreme, unbearable. Without a trace of wind, mute, unlike anything they'd experienced these last two days. The temperature was well below zero and the whole area was shrouded in thick fog. You couldn't see more than two meters in front of you. Alexandru turned and looked at his sister uneasily.

"Mirella, have we come to Siberia?" he asked.

Many people believe Greece is bathed in sunlight all year round. Naïve stereotypes for the ignorant. And unlike Alexandru, Stefan apparently belonged to the others, the knowledgeable ones. That's why he'd thought ahead and brought along two blankets, which he now gave them to wrap themselves in and ward off the cold a little. Immediately after, he pulled a torch out of his pocket and gave it to them.

"Cold, very cold, take, take, half ora, Greece, sister," he prompted and informed them, albeit misleadingly, since

“cousin” and “sister” are of course words for a relative, but not of the same degree. Then he continued, through gestures, to explain how they should fare, religiously keeping next to the ditch.

Somewhere a little further, invisible because of the darkness, was Ileana. They had arrived, they were only a few meters apart.

“Mirella, go!” he commanded.

“Half ora, no problem!” he reassured her immediately after.

They said goodbye to Stefan. Only now could Mirella appreciate how important this strange man’s help had been. How wise her uncle was, in discouraging her from any thought of an alternative course. How next to impossible it would have been to ever make this journey unnoticed, like they’d done today, thanks to Stefan. She was about to hug him in gratitude. But hesitation stopped her. Hesitation founded on all those questions that kept piling up during the course of the day, but earlier as well. And it was those questions that made her distant, that hindered her from saying thank you the way she actually felt.

“Bye,” said Stefan abruptly, helping her overcome yet another obstacle.

Then he got in the truck, turned it around quickly and disappeared in the dark. A few minutes later the sound of the engine was gone too. And they were left, the two of them, in an absolute and eerie silence.

“Let’s go, Alexandru, let’s go. We’ve another half hour to go,” she told her brother and thought her breath crystallized on Alexandru’s face.

She looked in his direction. The snow on the mountains

around them cast some light on his face. The moon was hidden behind multiple layers of fog. Mirella studied her brother's face and felt a surge of admiration. Admiration he never lost his nerve, apart from those brief, uncanny moments in the river. Alexandru's expression had a tranquility, an indefinable tranquility. As if he didn't really fathom what was going on, as if he didn't care, as if his mind was elsewhere. Mirella couldn't actually say exactly what his expression betrayed.

\* \* \*

With the aid of the torch they walked straight ahead, along a well defined path, running next to an abandoned, frozen ditch, exactly as Stefan had told them, emphasizing they should use it as a guide, and never stray from it. No doubt these last few meters would be easy. Frozen, but well defined and easy. In case of the opposite, Mirella thought, Antonin would have forbidden Stefan to leave them in the middle of nowhere, on their own.

"In which country could we now be, Alexandru? Do you think we're in Greece already?" Mirella asked him after the half hour walk expired.

Alexandru didn't answer. He only focused on some weird signals by torch, barely visible in the distance, somewhere ahead.

"There, Mirella, that's where Greece is. It's there, where our cousin stands and signals us with the torch," Alexandru said, pointing towards the dim signals, just a few hundred meters away. And Mirella used their torch and signaled back.

\* \* \*

They now approached where the end meets the beginning. The beginning of the new life they looked forward to. The bright life they dreamed of.

And what if they were greeted by fog and dim signals? Those would be out of their life soon enough. The surrounding darkness would come to an end. That's what they hoped. It gave them the strength to cross over mountains and through rivers. To brush against war, pass through silent, sad villages, sunk in the mud. To venture through mute, frozen, sunless, moonless and starless landscapes.

And in the boldness and the unflagging determination they'd shown during the past hours, in the profound disregard they'd felt for all the hardships they came across and the despair they'd caused to the elves and every other living obstacle along their path, the excitement and ignorance of youth misled them in one thing only.

In the impression they had that what they dreamt of and anticipated as their new, their bright beginning, was definitely part of cousin Ileana's – now just a few meters away – reality. Even if in her escape from the darkness she lived in before, she was luckier and found the path stretching wide open and easy before her.

\* \* \*

As if anyone ever found any trace of an easy, an open path. As if that was truly Ileana's path. Whatever she may have found, whatever her fate might be.

## An odd assignment

He got into the lift; rather, he managed to squeeze in at the last minute. He mumbled good morning without looking to see who else was in and pressed the button to the seventh floor. A simple, mechanical, routine gesture. Even that came out dulled and jaded today, though. Nothing got through to him; he hadn't noticed anything of the day's limpid, slate colored, after-rain winter light or the dew that pervaded the atmosphere, endowing it with a unique freshness. He hadn't noticed any of that the whole ten minutes. That's how long it took him to walk, like he was in the habit of doing, pensive and silent, from his house to the office.

Truth is he always came in pensive. And somewhat sullen. But not silent, like today. Usually he talked – to himself. It was a habit of his. He'd ask himself questions, and his self would answer. An actual dialogue. External. Even his lips moved. Bewildering the other passers-by sometimes, when he happened to catch their eye, walking alone like that, with hands gesturing and lips moving, yet no one by his side to heed them. And with the look on his face changing abruptly each time he finished placing himself a question and began articulating an answer.

But he didn't have much to discuss with his counterpart today. Not much to ask or answer him. The look in his eyes showed resolve. Consequently he appeared simply

sullen and broody, and silent. And totally impervious to the strong, dewy odors of the day. And, therefore, eventually, non-peaceful in his soul.

He got out of the lift, quickly entered the office and dropped his briefcase on the table. He then went up another floor, this time using the stairs. He knocked and entered the director's office. Mr. Yiorgos Konstantinou's office.

They had a meeting about a new project. A project that troubled and deeply worried Orestes. He was determined to set his terms.

\* \* \*

Orestes had been working at Kyklos, one of old Mr. Yiorgos' many companies, for a few months. Kyklos offered consulting services and its main clients, more precisely its only clients, were from the public sector. Such state-subsidized companies were a fad back then. Such were all Mr. Yiorgos' many enterprises. Roads, commissions, consultations. All sorts of things. But always for the state and only for the state.

Against this backdrop, the unusual and unprecedented project commissioned by a private company stood out a mile. Yiorgos' thought went straight to Orestes. He reckoned, quite correctly, Orestes was the only person, out of a staff of almost thirty in this particular company, who was capable of getting to grips with this rather unique client. Orestes had experience working for a company, he spoke the right language and Yiorgos immediately and correctly assessed that as the most important qualifica-

tion to assign him the responsibility of this new and somewhat peculiar project. Of course Orestes had a lot on his plate at the time, but those projects could easily be reassigned to others. He could be replaced.

\* \* \*

Orestes had returned from abroad, from Germany, about a year ago. He worked for a company there for a couple of years. For an electronics company. It was a demanding job but the pay was good. The decision to return to Greece was therefore a difficult one. He knew finding anything on a par with his old job would be next to impossible.

He was introduced to Kyklos shortly after returning, through Nikos, an old acquaintance, who worked there. Nikos had been a schoolmate and later a fellow student at the Technical University. The two had kept loosely in touch following graduation. And when Nikos heard Orestes was back from Germany, he contacted him and suggested he work with them. Without even discussing the matter with Mr. Konstantinou beforehand. He was certain Mr. Yiorgos would be more than interested in someone with Orestes' work experience. So what if his profile was irrelevant to Kyklos' objective? A work experience like his is always relevant and important. Besides, Yiorgos dealt with many enterprises, of all kinds. Orestes was certain to find a post suitable to his qualifications.

At first Orestes was taken aback when Nikos approached him with a proposal to work in Yiorgos' group of companies. Even the company name sounded funny:

more like a cram school than a company. Plus, he couldn't see what he, an electronics engineer, could do in a consultant company that took on odd, perhaps even a bit obscure and therefore possibly also slightly pointless projects, instead of dealing in actual, tangible products. That's how Orestes saw and felt about the matter back then.

Of course Nikos alone was a good incentive. An old acquaintance, a person he could get along with. Someone he could trust. Then the rest of the staff at Kyklos, to whom Nikos introduced him in an exploratory visit to the offices, were notable individuals, with university degrees and impressive professional experience. Plus, the company offices were just a kilometer from Orestes' home in Glyfada, which was very convenient. Perhaps initially all this seemed rather insignificant. But soon he realized that career opportunities and working conditions in Greece were quite different from what he'd experienced in Germany. There was practically no hope of finding a similar position. So Orestes compromised and began working at Kyklos. In the same office as his good old friend, Nikos.

\* \* \*

When Orestes knocked and entered the director's office, Yiorgos was happy to see him. First he greeted him good morning, then he urged him to take a seat, and finally he asked,

“How about it, Orestes, have you thought it over? Will you take on the new project?”

The new project was far from the office. And Orestes was less than thrilled at the prospect of having to travel

almost daily such a distance from Athens for an indefinite period of time. He found the idea stressful and was determined to set Mr. Yiorgos some terms. He took a seat and replied,

“I’ve no objection, Mr. Yiorgos. But I’m sure you will agree I’ll need some help. And I don’t mean simply reassigning some of the projects I’m currently working on to someone else. I’ll also need a couple of assistants for this new project. What do you say, then, have you taken that into account or do you intend that I will undertake the whole thing myself? This project involves frequent visits to the factory, so I’d prefer I didn’t have to do them all myself. Frankly I don’t like the idea of having to leave Athens all the time. The work here in the office I can handle myself, no problem there, but I’ll need help with the work at the factory.”

That’s how Orestes replied to Yiorgos’ question. He made it perfectly clear he wasn’t at all keen on travelling daily, or almost daily, a hundred kilometers from Glyfada; that was how far away the factory was.

Yiorgos didn’t mind assigning a couple of employees to assist Orestes at the factory. But he seriously doubted he actually had them. All the same he chose not to voice any objection and disappoint Orestes. He wasn’t quite certain he had anyone besides him capable of taking on this specific project and seeing it through without making a blunder of the whole thing. That’s how he saw it.

“Of course you’ll have help, Orestes. I plan to assign you two assistants to help you at the factory as well as in the office. Are you OK with that?” Yiorgos added.

There was a small, probing pause.

“Right; let’s get started then. When do we have to visit the factory for the first time?” Orestes answered with a question, without totally dismissing from his look and his voice the reserve and uncertainty he felt about this turn in his career. Even though in the course of their discussion he’d felt Yiorgos’ intentions were good and sincere. Besides, he had no complaints against his employer. He always stuck to their agreements. Without second thoughts or reconsiderations.

“Tomorrow, if possible,” Yiorgos replied.

“Great; should I go alone, this first time?” Orestes continued.

Yiorgos hesitated a moment, then looked at him before replying,

“No, Orestes, better the first time we go together. They’re important clients; I think they’d appreciate it. There’s also something else, Orestes. I need to ask you a big, a very big, personal favor. You’re well aware how highly I think of you. I think highly of you as an employee, but even more as a person. So I take the liberty to ask for your advice, your help if you like, on a big problem, a personal problem, that’s been plaguing me lately.”

Orestes was surprised. He was aware of the regard the business magnate had for him. He liked him as well. But this – having a powerful man like his employer ask for his help in a personal matter – came as a shock. It went far beyond what he considered the limits of their relationship. Still, he had no intention of turning him down. Not so much because he didn’t wish to hurt his feelings, but because he was intrigued by his request. He wanted to catch a better glimpse of what Yiorgos was like inside, to

see what he wanted exactly, what in the world could ever induce such a person to ask for his help.

“Of course, Mr. Yiorgos. I’m deeply honored by your trust. I’ll do my best, everything in my power. I must admit you’ve intrigued me,” he replied with a smile.

Yiorgos shook his head.

“Understandably, Orestes, quite understandably. But my experience in life tells me you can help. I could be wrong. If so, it’ll be entirely my fault, don’t worry. I don’t want you to worry about it at all. There’s just one thing I must ask of you, Orestes my son. As this is a strictly personal matter, I require your absolute confidentiality. Promise?”

Orestes replied without hesitation or further delay,

“I promise, Mr. Yiorgos. I promise you as a person I respect, and not just as my employer. Or, rather, not as my employer at all,” Orestes emphasized to show he’d got the message. He’d come to realize that old Mr. Yiorgos’ request was rather peculiar, not the typical professional favor to be accommodated within the boundaries of the formal relationship between an employer and an employee.

“We’ll leave tomorrow morning. We’ll go to the factory together this once. And I’ll tell you what I need your help with on the way back,” Yiorgos added.

“Tomorrow then, Mr. Yiorgos! Will we use your driver or should I take my car?” Orestes asked.

“Take your car, Orestes. Our conversation must remain strictly between the two of us,” Yiorgos replied, nodding faintly and leaving the phone, which had been ringing for some time, to complete its cycle, and go unanswered.

\* \* \*

Next day the two started off, before noon, for their first visit to the client's factory in Chalkida. Orestes and Mr. Yiorgos. On the way they talked about business, about Yiorgos' many ambitious plans for branching out into Europe. They didn't touch upon yesterday's topic.

After an exhausting day at the factory they started on their way back. It was finally time for Yiorgos to confess the problem weighing on his mind. To confide it to Orestes, who was dying of curiosity by now.

\* \* \*

"Orestes, I think you're kind of detached lately. You look stressed. I think you need some rest. I found it very difficult to ask for your help on this new project we started today. I don't want you to feel hard pressed! You're a valuable asset to the company, especially for this project. But only on the condition it won't put additional pressure on you. I don't want you to be stressed." That's how Yiorgos opened the conversation. Quite differently from what Orestes had expected.

"Mr. Yiorgos, I don't think it has anything to do with stress or exhaustion, as you may think. I just find the job a little odd, a little different from what I was accustomed to in Germany. That's all. Plus I was quite apprehensive about this new project. But it's not worth worrying about, honestly; I'm gradually getting there, I'm getting used to it. You needn't worry," replied Orestes, his eyes on the road.

Yiorgos studied his expression. Then he added,  
“Orestes, are you currently in a relationship – something serious I mean?”

Orestes turned towards him for a moment. A look of surprise spread across his face. He was expecting Yiorgos to start a conversation about his own personal problem, the one he’d asked his help with. And here he was asking about him! He answered honestly, to encourage Yiorgos to cut the preliminaries and get on with what he actually wanted to talk to him about.

“Mr. Yiorgos, truth is it’s the least of my concerns at the moment. Perhaps I haven’t met the right person. I don’t know how to put it, really, but it’s the furthest thing from my mind right now. In any case, your question has nothing to do with what you, erroneously I think, took for stress and detachment. Isn’t that what you called it?”

Yiorgos nodded his head.

“I see, I see. But you know...”

Orestes cut him off and finished his thought.

“But Mr. Yiorgos, aren’t we going to talk about the problem you mentioned yesterday, and see how I might be able to help?”

Without taking offense at Orestes’ abrupt manner, Yiorgos took his cue from his remark and cut to the chase.

He spoke openly, without reluctance or hesitation.

“Orestes, I’ve been in a relationship for some years now. A relationship with a girl roughly your age. I surprise you, don’t I?”

Orestes was unruffled. His tone of voice remained unaltered.

“Not at all. These things happen,” he replied.

“What I’m about to tell you is quite uncommon, not the sort of thing that happens every day. You’ll soon see. I ask that you hear me out first and then speak, tell me what you think. And finally, after I answer any questions you might have, I’ll tell you what I want from you,” Yiorgos added.

A pause followed. Yiorgos was waiting. Waiting for Orestes to respond. And he was pleased when the response finally came. The response which, even though he had anticipated it and taken it for granted, was quite another thing to hear from Orestes’ lips. And he was very pleased when the response was the way he wanted it to be, limpid and straightforward.

“Alright, Mr. Yiorgos, I’m happy to oblige. Please, go ahead; go ahead and tell me and I’ll tell you what I think in the end. And I’ll do whatever you wish, I promise beforehand.”

That’s what Orestes replied and Yiorgos nodded his head in content. And began his narrative.

\* \* \*

Yiorgos had never forsaken Ileana’s services. And when she upgraded him and gave him a permanent free pass for his valuable and manifold services, Yiorgos was thrilled. Not because it was free, of course; he had money to burn. Nor did he ever make actual use of his new privilege. He’d never stopped buying her extravagant gifts anyway. But this specific development signified a special relationship with her. Maybe even something beyond what she offered the rest of the customers. Some degree of fond-

ness perhaps.

The idea of fondness excited him at first. He was strung out, felt he had to do something. The desire to pull her out of the murk where she chose to wallow overcame him. But Ileana had no use for lectures. That was something Yiorgos realized very early on. And, wisely, never attempted. But now, there was a chance this special treatment actually meant something. Perhaps it was a pretext for something else. The idea he could pull her away from the prostitution to which she endlessly submitted herself agitated him greatly.

What was the agitation Yiorgos felt back then about? The change in his behavior, the agony that tormented him? Was it about himself, about his distress over seeing Ileana bedding every Tom, Dick and Harry, or was it about Ileana herself, witnessing her turn tricks?

All this lasted but a few weeks. His agony was soon resolved by Ileana herself. She caught a whiff of what was going on, Yiorgos' hazy notions, and decided to save him from himself.

She chose a moment after she'd just rendered her services to Yiorgos himself. Then she spoke to him and said,

“Mr. Yiorgos, I think you're about to make a grave mistake. I suspect you're beginning to think about me the wrong way, that you're getting some funny ideas. Perhaps you've got the wrong impression...”

She smiled to herself as she was getting dressed before she added,

“Perhaps you've misunderstood your privileges.” And she rounded off her thought with a word of caution and a particularly fierce glare.

“Beware, Mr. Yiorgos; beware of your own self. We’re fine just the way we are, and that’s precisely the way we’re going to stay. Precisely! I hope you get my drift!”

Yiorgos was terrified. He got the message: loud and clear. The fondness he read into her behavior was purely in his head. He meant to say, to ask, something but realized there was no point. Ileana would accuse him of foolishness, right after she’d just warned him against it. And who knows what that could lead to.

Therefore old Mr. Yiorgos swallowed his tongue. He simply approached her and said,

“As you wish, darling Ileana; as you wish.”

And then he opened the door and left, leaving all the agitation he’d felt behind, and having buried all his anxieties under Ileana’s explicit statements.

And so it was all over. All over for good. Which goes to show that the root of “all” lay in Yiorgos himself and his utilitarianism rather than in any true concern for Ileana.

That’s the norm with the human condition.

\* \* \*

Time passed without surprises after that. It was when the salon was at its peak. Yiorgos gave the matter no particular or further consideration. He enjoyed his privileges, pursued his investments, doted on his family. And that’s it. No further consideration. Whatsoever.

Until one day, quite some time later, when the salon was winding down; when the situation had returned to right back where it had started and a depressing air had settled all about the mansion; when Ileana had grown

distant and withdrawn; when all her friends, those who'd benefited from her, had gone "straight" and fell out of touch; it came to pass that Yiorgos lost an old female friend, his first love of almost fifty years before.

That cost him dearly. It plunged him into sadness for a while. And when he re-emerged and went back to his many, never-ending enterprises, he revisited those old thoughts, the ones he had in the past, about Ileana. Back when he wanted to believe he saw some sort of fondness on her part and wondered if he should do something, respond to it somehow.

Although his incentive was always his self, his ego, Yiorgos did possess a certain – small – degree of boldness. A sound judgement. Looking back now at those times long past, when he was obsessed by the notion of helping Ileana escape her own self, he realized that his concern, his plans and throes were nothing but pure selfishness, plain and simple. What really bothered him was sharing Ileana with others, not the life she led. That was the truth! And Ileana's response had been utterly justified. How right she was!

But this time Yiorgos, possibly affected by the loss of his old friend, didn't confine himself to scorning and mocking his old notions. On the contrary, he revisited those old thoughts, but from a different angle. A truer one, this time. He had to tear Ileana away from the life she currently led any way he could, that's how he thought about it. Same as before. Only this time he thought in addition that he had to tear her away even if he lost all his privileges, even if he lost Ileana herself for ever.

This was now the tremendous difference in Yiorgos'

soul and mind. A bold realization indeed. Pity it took someone's death to inspire such altruism in him. To make him think of what was good for Ileana and not only of what he was going to lose.

\* \* \*

All these thoughts induced an unprecedented feeling of inner peace. He discovered a new world, one populated by beings capable of taking another person into consideration, and not solely themselves.

And there's not much room for naivety in that world. He realized he could never be the champion of what he deemed Ileana's salvation. She'd never believe him, of course. How could he, who had benefited above all others, now profess distress over what was happening to Ileana and be convincing? It would sound absolutely ridiculous! Ileana was certain to burst with laughter! It was an insoluble riddle, a blatant contradiction. Ileana would split her sides laughing; and if she didn't kick him out, it would be solely because he was now pushing seventy and she respected his age, perhaps even pitied him. And she'd be perfectly justified, for that matter.

That's when Yiorgos came up with the idea to commission the assignment. To someone who hadn't benefited from Ileana's services, therefore his benign intentions would not induce roars of laughter. To someone with character, someone different, someone entirely unrelated to the wealthy and ridiculous scum, himself among them, who thronged Ileana's house for their five-minute, high-priced indulgence. Someone handsome, young,

strong.

Old Mr. Yiorgos examined all this carefully, weighed, measured and settled on a candidate. Orestes. Then he had him followed, to check out his personal life, for two–three months. He would be unsuitable if he was in a relationship. Through the private detective Yiorgos learnt that Orestes changed partners three times during that period. And that he was always the one to walk out: the detective was adamant about this crucial point. A sober character, that’s how the detective described Orestes to Yiorgos; that was the impression Orestes gave him, although he couldn’t elaborate when Yiorgos asked exactly what he meant.

“That’s what he looked like to us, Mr. Yiorgos, seeing how he goes about things, how he spends his spare time. Sober, stone-faced, indifferent: that’s what he’s like.” That was what the private detective who’d followed Orestes replied to Yiorgos’ persistent request for further explanations.

But the matter was rather unimportant in Yiorgos’ mind. He didn’t understand what the detective meant, nor did he attach much importance to his words. He was content with his own exceedingly positive impression and evaluation. The only thing he took into account was that Orestes was unattached. If he’d been in a relationship, it would be very difficult if not entirely impossible for him to undertake the role Yiorgos planned to assign him. So then, Orestes was perfect for the assignment! Yiorgos stood in front of the mirror, looked at himself and asked him

“Now, then; are you prepared to lose her?”

And shortly after, he nodded his wrinkled, decrepit head.

“Yes, I am!”

This then was Yiorgos’ scant but also rare amount of boldness.

\* \* \*

Yiorgos’ narrative was slow-paced. Slow-paced, targeted and illuminating. He was sincere; he didn’t let shame dictate his words. His soliloquy lasted over an hour.

He told Orestes about Ileana, about how he’d met her and the special, longstanding relationship he had with her all these years. He even told him about the previous attempt he’d planned and almost ventured. The attempt to pull her away from the life she led. He boldly professed the utilitarianism behind the way he thought back then. And, finally, he arrived at the present. The present, where he felt he had weighed things well this time. Where he was now interested in Ileana’s deliverance, as he put it, even if it meant the end of his relationship with her.

There was a pause which Orestes allowed to go unbroken. Then Yiorgos went on to explain what he wanted from Orestes. Ileana was expecting her cousins from Romania soon. They’d be illegal for a time until he pulled some strings and got them sorted. Then he’d hire them in one of his businesses. What he wanted from Orestes was to mediate, to discuss the matter with Ileana, to organize things.

Orestes looked at him in surprise at this point. Something seemed amiss. This was also the first time he inter-

rupted Yiorgos' narrative and asked,

"Let me get this straight, Mr. Yiorgos. Is that all you want of me? To act as a technical mediator?"

Yiorgos smiled and explained what he expected from him: that the aforementioned technical arrangements were only a pretext which would allow Orestes to invade Ileana's world.

"Orestes, you're the only person I can think of and you know I can think of plenty! But you are the only person I feel certain can influence Ileana. That's what I want from you."

"And how exactly do you picture that influence?" Orestes immediately replied.

There was a brief pause before he added:

"Something like falling in love with me, is that what you have in mind?"

Yiorgos wasn't taken aback by Orestes' bluntness. He replied like he had had the answer ready for quite some time.

"No, I couldn't ask for such a thing. Nor do I seriously believe something like that could ever happen. I realize these things don't come on demand. Just like I realize that you'd have many objections to a person like the one I'm talking about. No, that's not what I have in mind, although I confess that some such hope occasionally springs up at the back of my mind. But I know it's out of the question and I understand the reasons. No, I hope for something simpler. Namely, that your altogether different presence might stir something inside her, rekindle some dormant desire. Not the desire to fall in love with you, but to see beyond her daily reality. To take note of another world

that's out there, a cleaner world: one that nothing in her current situation reminds her of anymore."

Orestes' curiosity heightened though he remained inexpressive. He then said to Yiorgos, more to put things straight rather than touch upon the heart of their topic,

"Mr. Yiorgos, I may not have anything serious going on at the moment, as I replied to your question earlier, but even if I was in a casual affair, I still might not consent to take on such a role, don't you think? I might've perceived some kind of threat, the possibility something bad could happen. Also, I might've not wished to find myself in such an environment; did you consider that? Did you examine the possibility?"

Yiorgos looked at him fondly, like he recognized the soundness of his reasoning. He smiled in sympathy, a sincere smile, and finally answered,

"Of course, my dear Orestes, of course. Only, you don't have such a relationship, a casual affair, going on either, for me to worry about."

Orestes nodded. Mr. Yiorgos was right. Dead right. And he had no interest in asking how he knew, how he was so certain about the current state of his personal affairs. He liked, he was content with Yiorgos' targeted, entirely accurate and correct answer. Therefore he accepted Yiorgos' proposal.

"OK, Mr. Yiorgos, let's proceed. When do we start?" he replied.

And Mr. Yiorgos answered him with a deep feeling of joy, with a conviction, as if his bold desires were already speeding towards certain implementation. It was his wide experience in life that made him so certain – that much

more than the information he'd gathered on Orestes. And his great and altruistic desire of late gave him confidence, convinced him he could hardly misplace his judgement.

\* \* \*

Except Orestes lived in a parallel world as well, unperceivable by detectives, dark and inaccessible even to Yiorgos' trained, sharp eye. A world unexplored and uncontrollable even by Orestes himself.

That world would soon find an outlet in Yiorgos' proposal. Which would cause conflicts far beyond anything Yiorgos' subtle mind could possibly have guessed.

Two dark stars were about to collide soon: a violent, tectonic collision. And only a god could ever fathom the magnitude of that collision without shuddering in awe. Without feeling totally powerless to direct and affect those stars in their wild, manic orbit.

## Invisible star

Orestes was informed about the possible positions open to Ileana's cousins. And when he finally had everything ready, he received notice from Mr. Yiorgos' office that Ileana would expect him that evening at seven. To visit her at home, where they would talk: he would present her with the available openings and together they would organize how to go about it. Mirella and Alexandru were due from Romania in a few days.

He started off for Penteli. Yiorgos' narrative had fired up his imagination for some time now. All that time though, while he was preparing his presentation, it was just curiosity. It was all in his head, and there only. Nothing more, nowhere else. And that's how he felt now, when he set off to meet Ileana. Just curious. Very curious.

It was a very cold day. He turned left and walked to the car. He walked awhile under the trees, still heavy with water from the deluge that had just passed. He walked slowly, absentminded, without noticing the drops constantly falling on him. He reached the car, got in and drove off.

And the moment he started up the engine, a strange feeling started up inside him as well – in his soul this time. Curiosity gradually faded from his mind, it vanished. Something different now stirred inside him. Something similar to lust. Some sort of deep, uncontrollable, animal lust. Something like a winner's lust for his trophy. For a

collectible trophy, of a rare, unusual animal.

And his lust grew stronger by the minute. He was surprised at first. What could have brought on this excitement? It wasn't like there were no women in his life. After a point he surrendered himself to the feeling growing stronger inside him without thinking about it, without trying to fathom it with his mind.

He reached Penteli. He got out of the car. He studied the stately mansion before him, the large wall surrounding it. He walked to the gate and rang the bell. And although he successfully concealed the strange tension that overcame him, it was now in full rage inside. The extravagance he witnessed before him didn't change anything.

"Come in, then straight ahead about fifty meters, I'll let you in," Ileana's voice sounded flat and colorless through the video intercom.

He entered the courtyard without answering and walked to the house door. The door opened before he had time to knock.

"Hi Orestes, I'm Ileana. Come in, please; come in, I've been expecting you," Ileana said. Nothing in her demeanor betrayed anything unusual, of course.

Owing to the excellent heating and warm temperature inside the house she wore a light red-silk dressing gown. Orestes cast her a quick glance. "Dazzling, indeed," he thought, and the sight before his eyes fuelled the strange tension he was experiencing inside. But it remained secret and well hidden; no sign of it slipped through or took form across his features.

Ileana led him to the living room, asked him to sit and offered him something to drink.

“Coffee, black, would be fine,” were the first words Orestes said. And they seemed to rekindle the strange, inexplicable lust that had accompanied him during this last hour.

Ileana brought the coffee, served it, sat down and looked at Orestes, oblivious to what was going on in his soul.

Orestes then started to talk. He acted perfectly normal. He described and numbered the job positions open to her cousins. He told her of the rough pre-selection Yiorgos and his associates had already drafted for her approval, once he'd given her all the details. Then later, once Mirella and Alexandru were settled, they could consider their options and decide for themselves. Then he moved on to other matters, like how they would get their residence permits and the rest of their papers.

Ileana studied Orestes while he talked. And her attention gradually shifted from her cousins to Orestes himself...

\* \* \*

So far old Mr. Yiorgos had anticipated correctly, then. Orestes' gaze and discourse had certainly nothing in common with the lechery of Ileana's customers, the only ones ever to set foot through her gate. And that in itself was something, something that touched her immediately. First, it opened a crack inside her; then, it made a small chink and eventually opened a little window to her soul.

And the window let in some air. Some fresh air. And Ileana surrendered herself to that air and relished it. After

a certain point she neither listened to what Orestes said, nor studied him any longer. She surrendered herself to the fresh air which for the first time after many years she felt entering and blowing through her house.

And when she'd finally taken a deep, clean breath, she interrupted Orestes and said,

"Please thank Mr. Yiorgos for everything he's done for me." And before Orestes had time to make a comment, she added,

"Do you know what goes on here, Orestes, did Mr. Yiorgos tell you?"

Orestes appeared unfazed and answered laconically, without any intimation of surprise.

"Yes, I know; he told me," he said, anticipating she meant to continue.

"Did he tell you anything else? Did he happen to go into details?" Ileana ventured hesitantly.

Orestes' answer almost shocked her. It surpassed anything she might have expected to hear when she asked about the details Yiorgos may have told him.

"Yes, he told me a lot. He also told me about the two of you. Rather, he verified what I would've worked out myself anyway," Orestes replied smugly. And his direct and blunt remark rewarded him with additional tension.

Ileana momentarily wondered why Yiorgos had done such a thing. She seemed to recover after a short pause.

"Right; so you're the clever one, then. For a moment there I thought Mr. Yiorgos had been the brave one," she added, with a touch of irony and no hint of surprise. Then she asked him,

"I hope you don't feel uncomfortable, you don't feel

awkward coming here?”

“No, I’ve absolutely no problem, I don’t feel uncomfortable at all. Since Mr. Yiorgos asked for my help, I’m happy to oblige. Besides, I’m deeply honored by his trust in this particular instance but in general as well,” replied Orestes.

Ileana’s attitude changed, her tone turned harsh and sarcastic, like it often was.

“So, you’re happy to help a rich and beautiful – as you see – bitch, find jobs and buy legality for her poor cousins through her good customer of choice, your boss, old Mr. Yiorgos! Right! And where, may I ask, does this happiness come from, Orestes, can you please enlighten me? Is it only happiness, or is it perchance adulterated with other things, like curiosity, disgust, or even desire?”

Orestes looked her in the eyes. He remained silent, totally unsurprised by the direct and sharp tone she’d just used with him. He felt no new emotion comparable to the strange, invisible, deep lust which had come over him the whole time. Everything Ileana said was wrong, even that last bit about a latent desire; it was wrong and bore no resemblance, it was light years away from what was now roused inside him. Orestes’ bizarre lust had certainly nothing to do with what Ileana meant when she spoke of desire, of typical sexual desire.

Then Ileana added,

“You know, I haven’t heard a word you said for some time now. I’ve surrendered myself to the way you talk. It’s so different, so unusual.”

Orestes cut her short.

“You know, all your assumptions are wrong, totally off

the mark. Nothing you said is true,” he said in a way that left no doubt about the sincerity of his remark.

Ileana looked at him in surprise. So she could still feel surprise on occasion! She had no doubt he was telling the truth. And that the truth now surpassed anything Ileana could imagine. This was truly unprecedented, and strange. Besides, she could tell the mean cravings of men lusting after her body a mile away after all these years. Regardless how well hidden, dressed or disguised they were. She instantly recognized their inner core, and then scorned and mocked them.

But here, now, things were different. She had absolutely no doubt Orestes was telling the truth.

“Right, I believe you. I believe you and I’m delighted to hear that; thank you,” she replied slowly. The words she’d just used felt odd, uncommon, for a moment. She smiled and went on:

“Delighted, thank you! I can’t remember when I used those words last! You see, my job is to delight with deeds! Words are usually addressed to me. They go with the money,” she said, with a self-deprecating smile. Then she added,

“Yet here I am now, thanking someone myself for a change.”

Ileana was practically beaming for a moment. Then she glanced at the clock on the wall before adding,

“And to celebrate this rare thank you I just gave you, Mr. Orestes, the two of us will soon, in the next couple of days, go out to dinner somewhere nearby and there you can continue your narrative about my cousins. I’ll let you know when. Now, forgive me, but you must go, I’m busy.

Agreed?”

And before Orestes had time to answer, she stood up and quickly led him to the door.

Orestes looked at her then and said,  
“Agreed, yes. I’ll expect your call.”

He went out, got in his car and drove off, watching the heavy gate to her house as it closed behind him.

He was alone again, accompanied by that bizarre lust which seemed to have taken root inside him, not only unabated but now uncannily intensified.

\* \* \*

Everything went well, then! Everything followed old Mr. Yiorgos’ plan to the dot. He’s proved himself an expert with his forecasts so far. Something clean and fresh entered inside Ileana. Perhaps a memory or some distant desire will awaken. Something is definitely starting to stir.

“And Orestes’ lust is welcome and foreseeable!” bold Mr. Yiorgos would think if he could’ve witnessed their first conversation which ended with a promise. “Let’s hope Orestes will be the one to shake her and pull her out of that wretched world she’s sunk into,” Mr. Yiorgos would think then. And would conclude with a small degree of sadness, perhaps even disgust as well, for being part of that “wretched world” himself. To eventually find solace in his sincere effort of late. Now that he’s trying, successfully by the looks of things, to help her.

\* \* \*

The dark star is now approaching with stellar speed. Its dark matter goes unseen. It hides without even trying. The guardians of the galaxy can't see it. They don't recognize its dark core. And so, naively, will let it through.

## Greece

Ileana knew it. Her cousins' adventurous arrival in Greece would terminate the lie she had supported all these years. It would also initiate a great shock, to Mirella in particular. Alexandru she still considered a boy, she didn't bother much about him. She promptly dismissed any thought of staging an act to uphold the story of her marriage to Sophocles. It wouldn't serve any purpose important enough in her book. Not according to her unique standards of evaluation, at least.

When she embarked on her plan to bring them to Greece, her only concern, the one thing that truly terrified her, was any chance the truth might travel back to Romania and reach her father, Antonin. She worried Mirella might tell him something. Her concern was absurd of course; Mirella had absolutely no reason to do a thing like that. But she fretted so much over it she conjured up the most outlandish worst-case scenarios.

Then she kept thinking about her father's recent health problems. Her cousin was adamant. Antonin had to have a heart operation within the next few months, there wasn't much time. Antonin himself denied it of course, he assured her there was nothing wrong with him. And avoided talking about it and asking anything of his daughter. But Ileana had made up her mind. Surely there could be no risk in her return after all these years. So in the next

few days, after taking care of her cousins, she'd go back, take him by the hand, and lead him to the hospital for his operation. She cried her heart out every time her imagination ran wild and thought something horrible could happen, that things might suddenly speed up, that she would be too late.

In the meantime, and while she was struggling against time, she asked one of her customers to search, and find, and recommend a good clinic abroad. She didn't want to bring her father to Greece. Greece was his fairyland, the place where Antonin's memories of her wedding lived. She wanted to keep him away from all that. She'd take him somewhere else, somewhere in Europe.

Day by day, little by little, she realized her apprehension about Mirella was unfounded. Why would Mirella do a thing like that? Why reveal the truth back in Romania, to her father? Ileana knew her cousin well; eventually she got a grip on herself and gradually became convinced Mirella would never do something of the sort. Ileana would be honest with her; she'd tell her the truth. She'd tell her everything. She'd crawl at her feet. Then she'd help her take her first steps in Greece. So why would she ever do such a thing? No; there was no such risk. Thus, in time, her thought was rarely clouded by the possibility.

She never considered hiding the truth from her cousin. On the contrary, she looked forward to that moment, insufferable as it might prove. The moment of her atonement, when she would shed at least part of the heavy load she carried, when she would finally share it with someone.

Deep down inside she was relieved at the idea. The

weariness that took hold of her so easily lately had metastasized everywhere, it had spread to her entire being. She was weary of lying, it had become an intolerable torment.

\* \* \*

That was where she met her cousins after all these years. Their reunion took place at the freezing border. Their older cousin's good fortune in Greece sounded like a fairytale. Coated with gold dust and steeped in magic. And just like a fairytale, it drew its appeal from fiction and unfeasibility. That's what fairytales are like. That's what Ileana's fairytale, which marauded in Mirella's and Alexandru's imagination, would soon prove to be also. Less fabulous, less luminous. As different as the border. Which they expected to be bathed in sunlight and glints from the nearby sea. Only to find it buried in ice, fog and darkness.

\* \* \*

"Welcome to Greece!" Ileana hugged and kissed and greeted them. Warmly. Then she asked,

"How is my father; did you leave him in good health?"

And when, after some time, they finally pulled away and stepped back, Mirella replied,

"Antonin is quite well, Ileana. Of course you do remember what I told you. He must have an operation. But you're the only one who can talk him into it. He's expecting your visit. That's the only thing he looks forward to, that's what's eating him up. Nothing else. And he can't understand why you haven't visited already, why it's

proved so difficult,” Mirella replied in a steady tone. And then added, reproachfully,

“Neither do I.”

She’d been waiting a long time to say that, to voice her mild accusation. She’d planned to do it later, but since it came up now, she seized the opportunity. She now voiced it vehemently, from a short distance, like she wanted to make certain she was clearly heard. Her frozen breath broke against and melted on Ileana’s face.

And Ileana, totally unsurprised, replied with a perfectly plain answer.

“I’ll visit him, Mirella, I’ll visit him; I’ll visit him soon enough. I told you I would. Nothing’s changed since we last spoke. And now I can tell you when exactly. Next week, in just a few days. As soon as I see you settled, I’ll leave, I’ll go see him, and make sure he has his operation. I’m working on it. We’ve got time, we’ll discuss everything. Now let’s go, you and the kid have had enough of this brass monkey weather.”

The kid was Alexandru. Then she added in a weird tone and with a faint smile,

“Why couldn’t Stefan bring you closer to the border? Why did he drop you off in the middle of nowhere, and had you walk all that way? That’s not what we agreed. Anything happen?”

Mirella shook her head as if her cousin was making a serious mistake. Then she replied,

“The last half hour was literally a stroll for us, Ileana. But it would’ve been extremely difficult, next to impossible, for Stefan’s truck. The road was all muddy. If you could even call it a road! Don’t blame Stefan! He helped

us immensely.”

Mirella, despite the questions she had about Stefan, was well aware of the great help he'd offered them. God knows where they would be without him! She felt Ileana was being unfair. Then her thought momentarily turned to the past couple of days and she added,

“You should've seen us cross the river!”

“I'm not blaming him, Mirella; I'm not blaming him. It was just a thought. Anyway, let's go, the car's over there,” Ileana replied.

Suddenly she seemed to remember something. She looked at Mirella and said,

“Cousin, what a crazy thing to do! Swim across the Danube in the middle of the winter! I still can't believe it!”

Mirella quickly changed the subject.

“Let's forget all that, Ileana. It couldn't be helped, it was our only option. Time to go. Won't you introduce us to your escort? Is that your husband? Sophocles?”

Ileana's escort had been standing aside in silence, discreetly waiting for them to get the greetings over with.

Ileana smiled and shook her head. So the tale of her marriage endured! Yes, that's it; as odd as it sounded to her, that was it! It felt so far flung, so naïve, people considering her married to Sophocles. Inside her she felt like a thousand years had passed since then. That's how Ileana felt. Not without some guilt for having fed their imagination with her silence and, the few times she actually did say something, her countless lies. She also felt a small and uneasy sense of relief she would soon begin to share her true story with someone.

“No, that's not Sophocles,” she answered with a

strange look, as if her cousin had asked something bizarre.

“He’s a friend, his name is Tasos,” she added and went on with the introductions.

Tasos took a couple of steps towards them, greeted them warmly and bid them welcome in English.

Mirella began to sense something fishy in the air. Nothing so far had turned out the way she’d expected. And Ileana’s mysterious attitude betrayed this wasn’t the last surprise in store for them. Looked more like it was one of the first.

“Shall we go then? We’re going to Athens, right?” Mirella asked.

“Yes; get in, let’s get going,” Ileana urged.

“Yes, we’re going to Athens,” she added. Then she turned and looked at Alexandru.

“Are you alright, kiddo? Are you tired?”

Alexandru turned to her with a distant, icy look, as if frozen by the fog of the time and place. A look like when you see something far-off and strange. Perhaps even a somewhat hostile look. Then he turned to his sister and without a word to his cousin he said,

“Let’s go, Mirella; let’s go.”

Mirella moved towards the car. She paused, waiting to see who would drive. When she saw Tasos open the driver’s door she realized he was going to sit behind the wheel. She quickly motioned to Alexandru to sit in front. Perhaps because she wanted to keep Ileana close, at a short distance. Maybe the tangle would unravel quicker this way. Ileana’s tangle, full of numerous mysteries. Romania and the father she never visits; Stefan whom, though living in a forsaken Serbian village, she seemed to

know so well; elusive Sophocles. And all the rest.

\* \* \*

The drive to Athens took them four, five hours. It was past two o'clock on a Sunday morning when they reached Penteli. There was hardly any traffic so the car could speed along. Gradually the weather became a little warmer and the fog lifted. The landscapes and towns on the way had nothing of the harshness of the day before. It was late night, so there weren't many people about. Occasionally they would come across small groups of revelers: wholesome, cheerful, gratified figures, on their way home from Saturday's nightclubs and eateries. Further on, after Lamia, a constant darkness accompanied them on their left, without inspiring the slightest feeling of alarm.

They hardly exchanged more than a few formalities during those hours. Alexandru had fallen asleep. And the two cousins in the back seat were silent. They held each other's hand. That was their contact. Every now and then Mirella would briefly nod off to sleep, overcome by the accumulated exhaustion of their ordeal. And woke up every time she felt the pressure, the stroke of the other hand. Which she returned. And they exchanged glances, but not too often.

What was Ileana trying to tell her? Was the pressure she transferred to her hand an expression of nostalgia? Or joy over having a loved one beside her? Or relief from some pressure of her own, that now came out on Mirella's hand?

\* \* \*

Tasos drove carefully, at a relatively even speed, without accelerating. He didn't want to wake Alexandru and Mirella, but he also didn't wish to disturb the clasped hands, in the back seat. That was the main reason. And his eyes, where the road was easy, every time they strayed and wandered, would always end up, discreetly, on the mirror and on Mirella's face, in the back seat.

\* \* \*

Mirella's jaw dropped when she saw Ileana's majestic manor in Penteli. Her eyes moved back and forth a few times, from Ileana to the house to the huge wall around it, her mind a blank. Without arriving somewhere, at a theory.

"Welcome to Greece, and welcome to my home," Ileana said with a welcoming gesture, after she had unlocked the gate and waited for them to enter the yard. When they were all in, she let the gate close and moved to the door of the house. She opened that too and spoke again as she went in.

"First floor, up the stairs, first room on the left is Mirella's, the one right next to that Alexandru's. Have a good rest!"

Mirella cast Tasos a meaningful glance. He corroborated by nodding his head. "Yes, it's true, it's hers," he said. Then he drew near and greeted her.

"Welcome, Mirella, pleased to meet you: honestly pleased!"

Mirella looked at him a little surprised, then warmly replied,

“So am I, Tasos; we’ll see you again, I suppose.”

She hadn’t met a simple, normal person, someone not shrouded in mystery and riddles, for days. His presence brought her a sense of relief. She’d also noticed Tasos’ glances in the mirror and was anything but indifferent towards them. But it would have to wait; there were a number of things she needed to clarify first. Tasos apparently realized that and slowly answered,

“Of course, Mirella, of course we’ll see each other again. Go inside now. I must be on my way.”

Then he said goodbye to the other two, Alexandru and Ileana, who’d come back out in the meantime. He said goodbye to them from a distance, and turned to leave.

“Bye, Tasos. Thanks a lot. And please thank Mr. Yiorgos again for me,” Ileana called after him.

As soon as Tasos left and they heard his car starting, Ileana turned to her cousins again.

“Come in,” she said, and gave the example by entering the house first.

The two moved hesitantly towards the door. Doubt that the villa they saw before them was indeed Ileana’s house was written all over their faces.

A few hours more until the new day – a Sunday – dawned, and everything would eventually find its explanation.

\* \* \*

“Where’s Sophocles, Ileana?” came the question the next

morning after they got up.

The two were sitting in the living room, Alexandru still asleep upstairs. Ileana had expected that question. The time had come. She had expected it earlier, during the trip. And only after their hands clasped had she felt certain there were more important things passing between them; the question wouldn't come that night but at a later point.

Ileana was tired of that lie. Mainly of serving it to her father, on and on, for five years. And not daring to face him, so she wouldn't have to serve it to him in person, which is always more difficult. That was probably why she hadn't visited Romania. More than the risk of some surprise awaiting her at the border. She wasn't afraid of that anymore; she hardly took it into account. Besides, Mr. Yiorgos said he'd looked into it personally and vouched for there being absolutely no risk.

But now the time had come. A weird, complex emotion came over her. It had joy on the inside, like a core, coated with fear. But there was no putting it off any longer. And Ileana always preferred it short and sweet in such cases. She hated pussyfooting and beating about the bush.

So she looked Mirella in the eyes and bluntly said,

"There's no Sophocles, Mirella; he never was really my husband. What my father saw at my wedding was a sham. I took him for a ride, Sophocles; the moron thought I fell in love with him. I wanted to marry him to escape from that hellhole up there. I used him to get out."

She stopped and took a deep breath. She studied Mirella as her eyes gradually opened and her entire expression grew distant. Then she went on,

“And you shouldn’t feel any pity for him: he was a spoiled dumb-ass. He’s probably remarried and forgotten all about me by now.”

Then Mirella said, or rather stammered,

“But what about your father, all these years?”

Ileana’s expression hardened, she was now entering the home stretch. She continued with the same, fearless, look.

“Yes, I lie through my teeth, Mirella, like you just guessed; I’ve done a lot of lying and I’ve done many worse things than lie. This place you find yourself in, Mirella, the house you – both of you – are going to live in, as well as the city out there where you’ll soon be able to move freely without worrying if anyone stops you in the street asking for your papers, no Sophocles arranged for all that Mirella. And you wouldn’t have had to swim the Danube, if only I’d known about it earlier.”

“Then, how? How, Ileana? How?” Mirella stammered after a while.

Then Mirella saw her cousin’s divine beauty; her eyes wandered to her surroundings, to the extravagance evident everywhere in the large mansion and it suddenly occurred to her. It occurred to her spontaneously, without Ileana having to say anything. But muteness was never Ileana’s style. Nor had she ever sought to hide behind it. Same now, she quickly put Mirella’s thoughts into words:

“I was a whore all those years, cousin, a luxury whore. And I’m still a whore now.”

Mirella shook her head slowly without saying a word; eventually she asked to sit down a moment. Ileana took her by the arm. And as she led her to a chair, Mirella pulled

away violently, slipped Ileana's grasp, and ran outside. She ran to the garden and vomited. And after the vomit came the tears, and the anger, and the words, all in a mix.

"Better we'd drowned in the river," her voice came from the yard. Those were the words that followed the sobs and the anger.

\* \* \*

They didn't exchange another word the rest of the day. Around noon Mirella spoke to her brother, she told him how things were. His expression was deadpan. He wasn't all that fond of his cousin anyway. Apparently he still felt a certain fear and dislike because of that old incident, when she landed on him with all the weight of her firm, athletic body and made him cry for hours. Plus, she kept calling him "kid" and he didn't like that: at all. So he wasn't much upset by what Mirella told him. Besides, he was a male. He couldn't fathom these things full scope.

Tasos came by in the afternoon. He brought food. He also wanted to talk to them about the clothes he'd have to buy them, and bring the next day. Ileana opened the door through the door phone, but stayed in her room, out of sight. She'd noticed Tasos glancing at the mirror the night before. She knew Tasos well; she approved of him. And felt certain Mirella would like him too. So she wasn't needed.

And so Tasos approached Mirella. He saw the sorry state she was in and instantly realized what had happened. Tasos knew things almost to the dot. He'd even acted as Ileana's driver for a while, until she got her li-

cense and could drive herself. He'd learned a lot about her then. He'd seen a lot, too. The salon, as well as other, more private incidents, such as Ileana's habitual storming of the chapel. That had really amazed him. And also gave him a true picture of Ileana. Tasos had seen and heard and realized many things. And it never crossed his mind to avail himself of Ileana's services. That's the sort of person Tasos was.

So when he saw Mirella, he hugged her and said,

"Don't fret, Mirella, don't fret! There's so much you don't know! Don't condemn your cousin so readily; you'll see in time, you'll see. And when you do, you'll think better of her. You'll see, Mirella!"

Mirella broke into a belated short fit of crying in Tasos' arms. And eventually, after some time, still in Tasos' arms, she turned and looked at him and asked,

"Not you, Tasos; right?"

And Tasos shook his head dismissively and replied, while taking her in his arms again,

"Not me, Mirella, no."

\* \* \*

Mr. Yiorgos came by in the evening. By then Mirella had grown tired of guesstimating and didn't bother much about him. In any case, he seemed like a nice guy. Ileana came downstairs after many hours of deliberate absence, to give her cousin the time to start digesting the truth. Ileana addressed Mr. Yiorgos formally, with respect. Mirella would never have guessed the special relationship between the two.

Yiorgos welcomed the newcomers and introduced himself as Ileana's friend. Ileana nodded in agreement. Mirella felt certain then. For some unknown reason she was gripped by the conviction Ileana would never lie to her again.

Unsuspecting Yiorgos then told them about the following days. About the clothes that would arrive the next day, and the papers that would be ready soon after. And more importantly, of the jobs he was setting up for them. There were many options, he said. He had assigned a close associate to discuss things with Ileana. That, too, would be settled soon. Then they could choose from the various options Ileana had preselected on their behalf, as she had a better understanding of the conditions in Greece.

Finally he said he couldn't stay longer. He approached Ileana and kissed her on the cheek, looked at her, said goodbye to everyone and moved to the door without waiting for questions. At the door he turned and addressed Ileana, while looking at them all.

"Ileana, I nearly forgot the most important bit. Orestes has been working on a report about the kids' jobs. He'll have it ready by tomorrow. You should meet to discuss the matter. I've already booked at table at the usual restaurant, for nine o'clock. Can you make it?"

Then he suddenly stopped and swallowed hard. His tone changed a little too before he ended his phrase.

"I won't come; it'll be the two of you."

"Thank you for all your help, Mr. Yiorgos. Yes, I can make it; tell Orestes to come by the house. We'll use my car. I like to drive and don't often have the chance," Ileana replied.

\* \* \*

In the evening the three of them sat down to eat the food Tasos had brought them. Alexandru looked at his older cousin with the same, slightly hostile, look. And unlike his sister, he had a great appetite. At some point Mirella broke the silence.

“I don’t imagine you expect me to stay, us to stay, in this place?” she said, her eyes lowered to the plates and the food.

And Ileana, who anticipated what Mirella would think long before she actually thought it, instantly replied, before Mirella had had time to actually finish her question,

“Of course not! I neither imagine nor wish such a thing, even if it were possible.”

She paused, and under her cousins’ surprised and now lifted eyes, ate a bite. And then replied to the question in their eyes,

“You’ll stay here a few days now I’m on leave. As you already heard, we might know as soon as tomorrow what jobs you’ll do. When that’s settled, and when your papers are ready in the next couple of days, you’ll move to your own place. To an apartment. Your own apartment. I’ve taken care of everything. And you’ll never have to set foot in here again. We’ll meet elsewhere, I’ll come to you.”

Then she turned, looked at Mirella, fixed her gaze on her cousin and said, always in the same haughty tone,

“I imagine you realize how easy it would’ve been for me to feed you a line, spin a yarn about some prince or other.”

They exchanged glances. Mirella had slowly started to

nod when she realized Ileana wasn't finished. Ileana went on:

"We're now entering the final act of the fairytale, Mirella; or, rather, we're ending it, once and for all. I'm tired, I'm fed up. I'll never lie to you again about anything. From now on, just ask whatever you want to know, and you'll get your answer on the spot. Don't torment yourself thinking. Get it, cousin, get it? In no time at all!"

By this point Ileana had raised her voice considerably, and the look in her eyes followed suit, turning cold and hard. Mirella remained silent, slowly nodding her head while Ileana went on, her voice still rising. She didn't answer her question. She knew Ileana hadn't followed her thought through yet.

And Ileana, lowering her voice a little, continued,

"And we'll get along just fine that way: you with your life, me with mine. And naturally we'll hang out whenever we feel like it. Only, Mirella, there's just one thing you should never dare to even consider. You and the kid over here."

She'd now reached the core of her thought. Her eyes burned with tension while Mirella's, anticipating her next phrase, widened.

She cast one of her usual dismissive glances to Alexandru. Then she added, briefly diverting her train of thought,

"Who, obviously, is not that much of a kid anymore! You're approaching eighteen, Alexandru – aren't you? – so let's cut the crap about kids Alexandru, let's cut the crap about kids!"

She raised her tone at the end, angry at the thought that Alexandru was indeed a kid and might be exempt

from the one and only term she was about to set them. Nor could she ever forget, of course, herself at eighteen.

Now her look blazed and her voice brazened.

“Only, only, don’t either of you dare make a peep to Antonin about what I’ve told you, about what you’ve seen or what you’ve thought. About what you realized and what you didn’t realize. Don’t even dream about daring such a thing because... because I’ll show you.”

Then she lowered her eyes. She bowed her head. Her blond hair tumbled from the sides of her head and fell to the front, vertically. And because of its length, it shook visibly to and fro, a soundless chord to her crying.

And then there was silence; they spent the rest of their dinner without another word.

\* \* \*

That night Mirella went to Ileana’s room. She knocked on her door and went in, without waiting for her response.

Ileana didn’t even turn to look at her. The low sound of classical music came from a radio next to her bed. Ileana, half naked, moved her head slowly as she looked at her reflection in a large mirror, where she could also see her cousin. Then Mirella said,

“Don’t worry, Ileana: what you fear will never happen.”

Mirella looked into the mirror. She expected a reply, a motion from Ileana, perhaps even her approval of what she’d said.

But no sign came from Ileana. Nothing changed in her look or her movements. She kept looking at herself with the same empty stare. She kept looking at herself,

her great, invincible beauty, in the mirror. After a while Mirella realized that she'd never get a word, a sign or anything of the sort from the mirror. Ileana had already said all she had to say. She'd said it once, like she always did. And Mirella's words now didn't add a thing. Didn't clarify anything. They were utterly useless. Perhaps even insulting as well.

As if it could ever be otherwise!

So Mirella retreated in silence, only muttering good-night as she closed the door behind her.

Which remained unanswered as well, an epilogue to a totally redundant thought.

Only the sound of the clock came through the radio as the door closed.

Sunday was gone. A new week began.

Her Holy Week.

## Crucifixion

They drove to the restaurant in Ileana's ridiculously expensive car. The place was just a kilometer away from her house. She drove. It was a posh restaurant and the owner was a customer. A waiter approached and said the boss wasn't in: he sent his regards but unfortunately was unable to come and greet her in person. Then he led them to the table he'd reserved for them and told Ileana that dinner was on the house. She nodded and replied,

“Thank him on my behalf.”

They sat at the table. Ileana beamed in her red suit. She continuously attracted all the straight-laced gazes in the house.

“I wish the best for your cousins in their new start,” Orestes began. Ileana replied, with a smile,

“Thank you, Orestes. Now, let's talk about what we are going to do with them. What jobs we can find them.”

For Orestes it was as if their previous meeting had taken place just a minute ago; he felt exactly the way he did then. The same friendly attitude on the outside and the same bizarre lust driving him mad on the inside. It was as if their last encounter had taken place only a minute ago for Ileana as well. She was ready to give herself over to his straightforward manner of speech. Her cousins' arrival had lost its significance; it was downgraded, for both. It was just an excuse for them to meet.

Orestes began his presentation again. He joked and asked her to pose a question from time to time, so he knew she was following him and was clear about the details. But Ileana didn't heed his advice. Nor did Orestes actually mean what he said. Ileana's cousins were just a pretext. They were both aware of the fact. They'd come here for another reason. Each for their own.

\* \* \*

Ileana surrendered again, like she'd done previously, to the fresh air that sprang from Orestes' words. That's what she'd been looking forward to that night, nothing else. She climbed on and walked down a bridge that took her back in time: way, way back. That's how clear his words sounded to her that night, how solid. She surrendered to Orestes and flew back. To her childhood. And there she encountered her mother, dead since she was ten years old. She smiled and whispered something to her; she answered back and hugged her. And she stayed there a long time, taking in Orestes' words, without actually listening to what he said. And on the way back from her long journey, after a considerable time, she allowed a tear, without any intention of holding it back. Of holding it back from Orestes, perhaps even from the other discreet but persistent admirers of hers in the restaurant that night, too.

And Orestes continued to talk, aware that it didn't matter what he said. He looked at Ileana and knew she was miles away. Something was going on inside her, something peculiar and strange. Something he'd helped happen, without even trying. And the more Orestes watched

Ileana being miles away, the stronger the bizarre, mad desire inside him burned.

At some point, when it became obvious to both that neither of them was truly interested in their topic, but without either of them fully comprehending the other's world or the course of their paths, at that point then, Orestes' thought took flight. And it instantly flew to an image, a moment of the past. Back to the night he first met Anna. In a bar called Zeppelin. Where Anna came and sat next to him that special night. When he studied her strange necklace and his thoughts wandered down paths entirely unrelated to Anna's slow-coming words. Just like Ileana's paths tonight, which were totally unknown to him and entirely unrelated to his words.

What evoked that image? Ileana looked nothing like Anna. And her soul and her life were utterly different too. The way she dressed was different as well; her neck was covered, she wore no necklace as far as he could tell. No necklace from which so many things would unfold, like back then. Nor would he wrap his arm around Ileana tonight, of course, like he'd done with Anna then. And his lust: that most of all had absolutely no connection to that moment in time. The inexplicable sensation burning inside him today bore no resemblance to the virginal, sublime mystery of that night long past. There was no resemblance, nothing in common between one lust and the other.

He looked around him. He was certain there was something, something that made him revisit that day. Perhaps a similarity between the two places, a person, an odor, maybe even a sound? He strove to build a bridge to that

time long ago. But he was unsuccessful. After a while, he gave up.

He realized he couldn't find the line connecting those two moments in time. And so his question remained unanswered.

\* \* \*

It was the light. The light was the same.

Ileana's light that evening was the same as that other light, Anna's light from the past. It was simply the light and nothing more. That was what caused a certain kind of spark inside Orestes. That's where the feeling, the memory, the conviction of a similar image came from. Ileana was beaming for the first time in her life, her life as an adult. And her radiance evoked Anna's old radiance. It brought that old image to life.

But immersed in his dark sky, Orestes can't see Ileana's light now. He's unable to see the light. He's no eyes for such a thing. The only thing that reaches him is an aura he vainly attempts to ascribe to material things, in the restaurant, around him. But the aura that reaches him doesn't come from them. What if it shines so bright! It's received, filtered and dissolved by the endless, impenetrable darkness of his soul.

And his inability generates a resounding, an unnaturally evil, thunderous and triumphant laughter from his new host. The one that's now holding him by the reigns of his soul.

\* \* \*

They left the restaurant after some time. Ileana drove back to her house.

That's where Orestes had parked his car.

"This is the second time we meet without reaching any decisions," she said when they arrived at the house. Then she looked at him and smiled. The usual harsh tone was gone from her voice; it had been ground against the previous moments.

Orestes looked her in the eyes and replied,

"Yes, we haven't reached any decisions this time either." And after a while he added,

"You see, my mind was elsewhere."

Ileana could tell something was holding him back. He meant to say something but hesitated. She thought she might encourage him.

"Yes, mine was elsewhere too, Orestes," she said. Then she added,

"I'd like you to come inside."

Initially Orestes was surprised. Then he accepted her invitation.

\* \* \*

The last attempt at identification proved unsuccessful. The guardians saw that Orestes felt something for Ileana. Something human. That's how they interpreted his peacefulness that night. That's what they understood his lust as. Truth was they neither saw nor understood well.

And Ileana relied on the erroneous information from

the guardians. And gave herself over to that breeze, and let it keep her company. And glided upon it and travelled back, to magical, cherished moments long past. This hadn't happened to her in a long time! If it had ever happened before. She always wandered those paths alone. When she used to visit the small church like a phantom. Mainly then. But even then, she only got as far as the candles; that's as far as she could see. She couldn't see past them, like she did tonight.

And now the guardians told her to let the unique star that suddenly crossed into her sky pass. She didn't see anything wrong with it. Nothing of the many traits that tired her so much in everyone else. And the guardians verified her assessment. They agreed she was right and assured her there was nothing to worry about.

So Orestes crossed into Ileana's galaxy unhindered. He crossed the threshold of her home, and made love with her on the floor right after they crossed the threshold. On the floor, which was clean, untainted. Which had been trodden by many, but never tainted by any of them.

It was also the first time in her life Ileana made love. That night.

That's what she thought.

\* \* \*

And when they got off the floor, much later, Orestes' look changed. It was then he revealed his true, his horrible, dark face. The guardians realized it then and sounded the alarm. Ileana herself realized it too. But it was too late. The dark star was approaching Ileana, it was crashing

into her with cosmic momentum. It would devastate her, nothing would be left standing.

\* \* \*

Orestes reaches for his clothes. He pulls out his wallet and says,

“How much do I owe you?”

Then, as he doesn’t get an answer, he leaves some money, gets dressed and goes. Without a word.

And as he closes the large outside door behind him, he hears a harrowing cry rend the air and the dark winter night.

\* \* \*

“Mr. Yiorgos, I want to thank you for all you’ve done for me. For the help you offered me in the past. In the beginning, when you roughed up those bastards for me. And later, when you brought in the girls. Above all I want to thank you for your thoughts, those true thoughts, the ones you had about me recently. I’d like you to know they were effective! Through a strange channel perhaps, but they were effective. And I want you to feel glad about the result. And don’t bother at all about the channel and the course.

“I’m leaving, Mr. Yiorgos. I’m leaving the life I led behind. Permanently. We’ll never see each other again. Nor will you ever hear of me again. I leave the house to my cousins. I also leave them money in the bank. It should keep them going a while. I only ask you do me one last

favor, that you find them jobs and sort out their papers. Nothing more. As for me, you needn't worry.

"Now, about your proposal to invest in the stock market, I'm afraid I'm not interested in something like that, Mr. Yiorgos. I never was, but for some reason I didn't want to tell you from the start. Put it down to stupidity! And the money I gave you, do with it whatever you see fit. I'm certain you'll put it to good use. That settles that too, then.

"Finally, ask Orestes how much the bill he paid at the restaurant was. It's not the winner who pays, you tell him that. He won; therefore the treat's on me. Please pay him back on my behalf.

"Bye, then. Take care.  
Ileana."

\* \* \*

Yiorgos remained calm. Even though he must've read the letter at least twenty times.

And all that time, instead of feeling glad, like Ileana urged him, a sadness began building up inside him at first, mixed with pride. Sadness he wouldn't see her again. He had no doubt about that. Ileana stuck to her word. He'd witnessed that time and again. He'd witnessed it and it scared him. She never went back on what she'd said the first time. There was no second thought, nor second chance. Ever. Then, he also felt proud of himself. Of his great achievement. For seeing something different in his life, something over and above his self. And for paying the price of that different view ungrudgingly, courageously.

And for something else, more important than any of that. Ileana acknowledged it. She acknowledged his effort. And thanked him for it.

But as time went by, and he read and reread the letter, his pride subsided and he began having questions. More and more questions. They multiplied inside him continuously, pushing aside his initial feelings of sadness and pride. Those things she wrote, about the strange channel, but mainly about the bill Orestes paid at the restaurant: there was definitely something wrong there. Ileana was surely implying something in that last reference. Yiorgos knew the restaurant they went to. And he knew the bill would've been on the house. And he also knew that even if it wasn't, Ileana would never have allowed Orestes to pay for their dinner. That wasn't her style at all. Which meant Orestes had paid another bill.

And thus, gradually, the truth started to infiltrate Yiorgos' mind. His wide experience in life only now began working in the right direction, shedding light on the truth. What had really happened only just started, in crystal clarity, to inundate his soul.

First, he was shocked to the core, utterly dumbstruck. Then his eyes filled with tears, his body trembled and shook, until he began exclaiming in sobs:

“How could you make such a mistake, Yiorgos? How could you make such a mistake?!” His sobs gradually turned to cries, until the phrase became syncopated and he ended up crying out in rhythm, non-stop. Indifferent to the fact that his peculiar lament, accompanied by the thunderous, rhythmical pounding on his desk, no doubt resounded throughout the entire floor, perhaps even fur-

ther.

“How? Tell me, how?”

\* \* \*

Orestes was fired the same day, the day after the incident. Yiorgos read Ileana’s letter on Tuesday morning; Tuesday afternoon Orestes was out of a job. He received notice to pick up his pay check and go: immediately.

He wasn’t surprised, not in the least. Nor did he ask any questions. In fact, he had expected it. He’d been instructed to do something and failed to follow his instructions. The bizarre lust, which had so uncontrollably possessed him, had brought him to this, this failure. Especially the feeling of triumph that overwhelmed him after he’d gratified his lust and paid Ileana for it on top. That bit was probably totally unforgivable. But his lust was completely quenched only after that gesture. Anything less would’ve left it unfulfilled. It would’ve made it worse. It would’ve tormented him incessantly. Yiorgos’ anger was therefore foreseeable. And also justified. So be it, then; it didn’t matter.

So Orestes left Kyklos for the last time feeling calm. At peace with what had happened. Unrepentant for what he’d done.

Without actually seeing anything.

\* \* \*

A deep insatiable darkness filled his already darkened soul even further. It blocked out every kind of light, old

or new. It prevented any old and cherished image from coming alive.

Like he'd been explicitly told, without being left any hope, darkness would swallow every morsel of light around him: it would eliminate it.

## Good Friday

That day, a Tuesday, after Ileana had dropped by Yiorgos' office and left his secretary the envelope with her message, she didn't return to the house in Penteli. She disappeared, without seeing or talking with anyone else. After a – still fairly restless – Tuesday, on the next day, a Wednesday, Mirella received a preliminary report on what had gone down. Which wasn't very informative considering how little Tasos knew on the subject. Namely, next to nothing.

Tasos visited her on Wednesday and told her that at work the big boss, who was coordinating all necessary arrangements concerning Mirella's and Alexandru's settling in Greece, had received a message from Ileana that drove him up the wall. He yelled and raged and lamented all at the same time, and was totally uncommunicative. He also sacked Orestes, the guy who'd been working on finding them a job. There was apparently some connection between all this and Ileana's disappearance, but what exactly, impossible to say. And Tasos couldn't ask Mr. Yiorgos himself in hope of finding out more, because of the terrible state he was in. That's what Tasos told Mirella and then tried to comfort her, as she kept conjuring up all sorts of terrible scenarios.

\* \* \*

Two days later, on Friday, with Ileana still nowhere to be seen, Yiorgos called Tasos to his office and asked him to drop whatever he was working on and focus on Ileana's and her cousins' case. Tasos was familiar with the subject but with Orestes now out of the picture, he had to undertake the responsibility of finding them a job as well. Yiorgos gave him a file and asked him to study it and then discuss things with Mirella directly. Ileana was gone, he said. He had no idea where to, he added, and more likely than not he'd never find out, or see her again.

Tasos realized then something serious had happened. He found the nerve to ask his boss, in an attempt to find out what he could.

"But what happened, Mr. Yiorgos, what could be so important to drive you into such a state?"

And Yiorgos replied, shaking his head to and fro in despair,

"I made the greatest mistake of my life, Tasos, that's what happened. I've been beaten and I still don't know what it was that beat me. I wanted to help her and..."

Yiorgos could hardly conceal his emotions as he rounded off his sentence.

"And I devastated her, Tasos, that's what happened."

Tasos attempted to lighten the atmosphere up a bit.

"I'll take care of everything, Mr. Yiorgos, rest assured. I'll take care of everything," he said, turned around and quickly left the office.

Yiorgos was already showing him the door with his fingers, voicelessly telling him by the abrupt motions of his

hand to go, get working on what he'd just assigned him. As for the rest, the things Tasos asked him about – Ileana's decision and everything behind it – there was nothing he could do anymore. They were all beyond his great power.

\* \* \*

And so, downcast and thoughtful, but also with an inkling of content that he'd spend the most part of the following days with Mirella, Tasos arrived at the mansion. It was around noon. There he was surprised to see an utterly devastated Mirella. He was bewildered. Something must've happened, he thought, for Mirella to be in such a state. It couldn't be due solely to weariness and distress over the disappearance of Ileana, who had now been missing for four days. Surely, there was more to it than that.

He asked her what was going on, but she stayed silent and awestruck. It was doubtful she heard him. She stared into the distance, with an empty look and eyes all red. Then, as she remained speechless, Tasos put his arms around her, caressed her and repeated the question. Again, no answer. And since she remained stock-still and wordless, he thought to break the silence first, by telling her what little he'd learned from Yiorgos. And with that thought he began to speak.

And Mirella listened without saying anything. At some point she started to react, albeit slightly, to stir, to wonder if what went for this strange Mr. Yiorgos guy went for her as well. Namely, that Ileana was out of their lives for good, too. Now and then she'd let out a sob. Which re-

mained unaddressed by Tasos, who had by now given up hope of holding a conversation with Mirella that day. The only thing he could do was talk, without actually expecting an answer. And when he'd finished his narrative, without bothering to ask her any, pointless, questions, Mirella turned and looked at him and said a couple of words before withdrawing again into a different sort of weeping this time, for a different reason.

“Antonin’s dead, Tasos; her father, he died early this morning. They called from the hospital in Bucharest. Antonin died all alone, with only his deep sorrow for company.”

She stopped for a moment. And she seemed to pull herself together a little. But a new, terrible thought, brought on another crying spell.

Eventually she went on, her words choked by sobs,

“And Ileana doesn’t know a thing; she’s disappeared, I can’t find her anywhere!”

Tasos hugged her, trying to comfort her with gestures instead of words. After some time Mirella managed to add,

“But I know, Tasos, I who saw him all these years. My cousin has no idea. That’s why she never got around to visiting him, not once all these years, despite her endless resources.”

She drew in a deep breath before she went on:

“Sorrow over not seeing her again after she moved to Greece, five years ago.” She turned, looked at Tasos, then added, still crying,

“How, Tasos? How? How will she learn of his death the way she’s dropped off the face of the earth? How, how,

how, how...”

And then, with what tears she had left, she added,

“The funeral is tomorrow.”

The clock read midday Friday.

That’s when the phone rang.

\* \* \*

When Ileana received news that her father had been rushed to the hospital with an acute heart attack, Antonin was still alive. Olga had sent word to her. Olga was one of Ileana’s girls, who now lived in Romania. She was also from the same village, and happened to be there at the time. She was the first to hear that Antonin had been rushed to the capital, to the hospital, with another heart attack. And that he probably wouldn’t make it. It was Thursday afternoon when she called Ileana’s personal number, her business line. Her private line, the one that was locked in her room. The one she’d given strict instructions no one was to answer besides herself.

And she would’ve answered it herself, she most certainly would, if she had been at home. But she wasn’t answering. Ileana wasn’t at home. Olga called and called again, then left a message: for Ileana to hurry, her father had been taken to the hospital again, and it didn’t look good.

She tried again later, and this time called the public line as well. Mirella answered that one. And Olga told her the news. She also told her she couldn’t find Ileana anywhere.

Mirella collapsed. As if things weren’t already bad enough, with all the riddles and Ileana’s mysterious disap-

pearance, now there was Antonin's new health crisis on top. And judging by Olga's tone of voice, she realized it could be fatal.

They stayed on the phone a long while, silent most of the time, shaken, trying to figure out what could be the line that connected all these recent events. They finally hung up when, after a while, they realized they'd never find the answer. They agreed that if there was any news, one would let the other know.

Mirella called the hospital soon after. They told her Antonin was in intensive care, in a critical condition. Despite her terrible state, she managed to explain to the doctor at the other end that all Antonin's relatives were in Greece. And that if anything happened, they should notify her. Finally she said Antonin's daughter was away from Athens and they had no contact with her. But when they managed to get hold of her, she'd come to the hospital at once.

The doctor jotted down the number and said they'd inform her if there was any change.

\* \* \*

Ileana heard the devastating message on her answering machine from the hotel where she was staying. The death knell Olga had sounded.

She received the horrible news, the thing she dreaded most in her life, on Thursday night. While Antonin was still alive. She managed to find an aviation rental company, rented a private airplane with a pilot, and early next morning flew straight to Bucharest. After she'd first hast-

ily called Olga and informed her she'd found a way and would soon be flying over. Finally she asked if Olga could come meet her at the hospital.

Olga said that yes, she'd start straight away, and she'd meet her there, at the hospital. Then she started for Bucharest by car. She was in such a state she forgot to ask Ileana about her disappearance. She also forgot to call Mirella. Or, rather, she was certain Ileana had called her already. Besides, the important thing was that Ileana was now on her way to the hospital.

\* \* \*

By the time the two of them got to the hospital, Antonin had passed away. At three o'clock on Friday morning.

And so Mirella was the first to receive the news. The doctor gave the number she'd given him to call if there was any change to a hospital clerk. The clerk told her he had instructions to notify her if anything happened. He was laconic, he didn't get into details.

He also asked if they were to arrange with her for the funeral of the deceased which would have to take place then next day, i.e. on Saturday. But he got no answer, so he told her to call in the morning, after dawn. Finally, he hung up.

\* \* \*

When Ileana arrived at the hospital, at five o'clock on Friday morning, they told her Antonin had passed. Two hours ago. She'd never see him again. When a frantic Olga

arrived a little later, she fell into her arms. They stayed that way, without a word, for a long time.

Later a doctor appeared, introduced himself, offered Ileana his condolences and asked to speak to her in private. She followed him to his office.

\* \* \*

There he asked her to sit and said,

“I’m aware that nothing I can say will offer any consolation. But I’m obliged to tell you about the incident because it happened, and because it deeply moved everyone in our unit.”

The doctor paused a moment. He looked at Ileana and was perhaps a little puzzled by the lack of expression in her face. Then he went on,

“Your father was with you during his last moments; he saw you standing before him, he touched you and caressed you in the air with his hands. With considerable difficulty he repeatedly mumbled the same words for hours. Until the light faded from his features, leaving an expression of deep happiness on his face.”

The doctor paused again. And with a trembling voice he repeated as best he could Antonin’s last words, those pouring out of him again and again, as he bid the world farewell:

“You’ve come, my darling girl; you’ve come light of my life, you’ve come my light, you managed to come; I knew you would; you’ve come my dear girl, you’ve come! You’ve come, my light!” The doctor paused again. Then he added,

“That’s what he said, over and over again, for hours. Two, perhaps three. You should know that’s exactly how it happened.”

The doctor was in tears while Ileana listened in silence. She had been treading the underworld for some time now, she was beyond tears.

\* \* \*

“Ileana was in time to say goodbye to Antonin. Tasos, Alexandru, she was in time!”

That’s what Mirella said, her voice trembling with amazement, to Tasos and her brother on Friday, a little after midday. A little after she’d cried her heart out in Tasos’ arms over Ileana not knowing a thing, she discovered Ileana not only knew everything but was also at Antonin’s side during his final moments. And she put the phone call she received from the hospital down to the bureaucratic duty of some clerk who hadn’t been informed that Ileana had arrived at the hospital in the meantime.

And her voice now carried a non-hoped for, a deep joy, a joy so great it managed to eclipse her immense personal sorrow for Antonin’s loss and for all the other inexplicable things that had happened to Ileana. That had happened during this past week, their first week in Greece.

That’s what Ileana told her during a brief call on Friday afternoon. And Mirella’s soul rejoiced with this unexpected development. Ileana’s voice left no room for doubt that she was indeed there during his final moments, that she was telling her the truth. And, apart from her voice over the phone, there was also that angry promise of

hers, just a few days ago, that she couldn't forget. Ileana's promise that she'd never lie to her, again.

And she never lied to her again, of course.

During the brief soliloquy Ileana delivered over the phone, she told her something else too. She told her she was going to stay away, far away, from them for a long, an unforeseeable amount of time.

Mirella didn't think to ask her more about this new, odd decision of hers. Nor did she quite understand what she meant. In any case, it wasn't a good time for questions.

For a moment she thought Ileana was shaken. Perhaps she was exaggerating a little in what she said. But she instantly realized she was wrong. She shuddered. No, Ileana definitely meant something with what she said.

She always meant something, she never used words at random. And she never changed her mind once she'd made it up.

\* \* \*

Next day, at the funeral, at the village, apart from Ileana and Olga, there was a strange looking man present, who didn't speak Romanian. It was Stefan. Ileana had sent him a telegram. He sat aside, at a distance, and didn't say a word. He had another elderly man with him. He looked wealthy and spoke to Stefan the entire time, even though Stefan rarely answered him. He was one of those, one of the first, Stefan and Antonin helped get out of the country. They'd come together by an easy and quick road this time.

Stefan looked at Ileana and Olga and his eyes moved from one to the other and he thought there was something strange going on. But his soul was deeply shaken and he couldn't put his finger on it. He soon dismissed the matter and turned back to his friend and their many common moments.

\* \* \*

She will tread far away from them for a long time. The time has come for Ileana's resurrection.

Who can say with any certainty if she'll ever appear in the lives of her loved ones again? If she'll appear to them a second time?

The light, her father's last rebellious light, has passed inside her. It has taken root inside her. She's not threatened by darkness any more.

She's now invincible.



Part III - 2015



## Printemps Gallery, Paris

“Why, look at this painting, Pierre; isn’t it wonderful?”

A woman browses the paintings in a Parisian gallery rather quickly until she’s riveted by one of them, on a wall opposite her. The look on her face reveals she’s moved, deeper the more she studies it. Surprised by her reaction, Pierre looks at the painting. But he has trouble understanding the excitement of the woman he’s escorting.

Then he replies, with an inkling of disdain,

“I agree, Pascale; it has beautiful colors! Honestly. But I don’t see any lilies or doors. Isn’t that what the painting is called? ‘Lilies against a door?’”

Deeply affected by it, Pascale scrutinizes the painting, asking her escort again and again not without a hint of scorn, surprised he still can’t see anything,

“Look more carefully; it might help if you move back or change angle. The painting has a strange depth; are you sure you can’t see them? There’s so much light in this painting!”

Pierre tries but apparently fails. He can’t see any lilies, or doors. Somewhat wary, he wonders exactly what it is the woman sees. He considers asking her to show him, but decides it would prove embarrassing, a confession of total failure.

So he merely asks, trying to figure out what has made her so emotional,

“No, I don’t, dear; and I wonder what it really is you see.”

Pascale now casts him an almost condescending look, gazing at him with disappointment; she makes no attempt to show him where to focus his attention. She merely affirms she sees the painting’s subject and that she finds it perfectly and very proportionately placed.

“I see them, Pierre; of course I see them! Pity you can’t see a thing.”

Then her look changes. She sounds resolved, assertive.

“Pierre, I want us to buy this painting. It’s incredible, astounding! I’ve never seen such a perfect composition: as if the subject is hidden on purpose, as if you need a skilled eye to see it. You’re the best proof; you can’t see anything! And that’s a great pity, Pierre! Please ask if the painter is expected to come by in the next few days. I’d love to meet her, to talk to her!”

“I think you’re over-reacting a little, Pascale, but if you like it so much, I’ll ask about the price; I wouldn’t mind buying it. Besides, I like the colors too, they are truly beautiful, perfectly balanced. And they also match our living room,” Pierre says, looking around to see where he can ask about the painter.

Pierre goes off to find someone to ask, while Pascale shifts angles as she carefully examines the painting. It’s obvious she’s deeply moved by it. Other people in the gallery walk past behind her. They look at the painting and make some remarks, while most of them move along quickly. The woman continues to study the painting that has impressed her so deeply. She keeps looking at it, trying different angles and distances.

Pierre is back soon. He sounds a little disappointed.

“Unfortunately the painting is not for sale, dear. Nor are any of the others on this wall here. That’s what they told me. Perhaps you would like to see some of the others? All of them have lovely colors, very well balanced.”

Pascale still looks at the painting, only now she’s in tears. Every now and again she looks at Pierre, coolly. When she finally speaks, her voice clearly betrays her frustration over what he just told her, over his new failure.

“Oh how unfortunate, Pierre; how very unfortunate. And what did they say about the painter? Is she expected to come by at some point? Perhaps we could discuss it with her?”

Pierre feels very uncomfortable; he’s eager to answer and show her he’s asked about that too. He’s doing his best to show his consideration for her request, and to respond to her great fervor. But he sounds unconvincing and fails to change her mood, since he has been again unable to achieve a result.

“I fear the painter won’t be coming, my love. She usually doesn’t, that’s what they told me. They said she’s Greek, but she doesn’t attend her exhibitions or talk with the visitors.”

She pauses and after a deep breath appears to remember something.

“Oh, yes, I found out her name is Anna,” he adds.

Then he smiles nonchalantly, as if the name of the painter had any importance.

A new surge of frustration runs through the painting’s fan, followed by a new question.

“Pity; great pity. I wanted to ask Anna, as you said her

name is, about these ones too, to help me make out her subject, to understand what inspired her and where she depicts the things referred to in the titles.”

Pierre is still struggling to live up to the surprisingly intense feelings of the woman he’s escorting, caused by the odd painting. His tone is anything but inconsiderate.

“Yes, I understand. You know, the people here said other visitors ask the same thing too. And the reason the painter does not attend is that it’s not something she can explain to them. She can’t, perhaps she doesn’t even want to. She prefers leaving it up to the eye of the beholder, that’s what they told me.”

A tone of dejection now colors Pascale’s reply, quickly replaced by the same, deep, initial feeling of surprise, along with a deep-set refusal to settle for another painting, as Pierre suggested.

“Pity, Pierre; great pity. And so strange!”

Then she added,

“No, Pierre; since we can’t buy this one, I don’t think I care about any of the others. What a pity we’ll never find out, we’ll never see something in those too!”

## Kypseli, Athens

“Incredible, eighteen year old kids listening to the Cure, to music we listened to when we were their age!”

That’s what Tasos said to Mirella, after first calling to their twins to turn down the music because it was still midday quiet hours.

“Did you listen to the Cure, Tasos? Because I don’t remember listening to anything of the sort. I remember swimming the Danube; that’s what I remember,” Mirella replied with a smile.

“My darling swimmer! My glorious athlete. You know, I think we should swim the Danube together this year. So I might experience something of the great moments that brought you into my arms!” Tasos teased.

Mirella looked at him; she seemed surprised and slightly miffed. Then she answered with a touch of sarcasm,

“Those moments are gone, Tasos, they were washed away by the river. I fear it will be difficult to bring them back to life. They only come alive inside me sometimes. I’m afraid we can’t share those, my love, splashing about in the Danube in the summertime.”

Then she remembers something. She remembers Ileana: Ileana, who’s coming to Greece this summer, after a very long time. And from a great distance. Her face lightens up. She’s very excited when she speaks to Tasos again.

“And then, have you forgotten? Ileana is coming this summer, and she’s bringing little Antonin with her. He’s eight years old now. We’ll get to meet him at last and he’ll get to meet his cousins for the first time. Incidentally, Tasos, before I forget! We’ve agreed to stay at our place, in Amorgos. Ileana prefers it that way; she wants to see the house. She wants to avoid Athens at all costs. So we’ll spend a lot of time there. More than a month. We have so much to talk about. It’s been so long. It was a cruel decision, to cut herself off from us completely all these years!”

Mirella’s excited by the prospect of Ileana’s visit. Then she decides to defuse the atmosphere. She carries on, more calmly now,

“We’ll go to Romania for a brief visit and certainly not to swim in the Danube.”

Tasos’ attitude changes; he turns serious.

“Come to mention it, how is Ileana, Mirella? Has she told you anything about herself, apart from her trip?” he asks.

She looks at him and smiles, shaking her head.

“A goddess in every religion, Tasos! That’s what Ileana is. What news can a goddess have? They worship her and light candles to her in Kypseli, they talk about Ileana as if she were Saint Mary herself. Saint Mary of the Charity Box! And they worship her as a goddess in Africa, too. She mentioned it tongue-in-cheek, but I’ve no doubt that’s how it is. A goddess of beauty, a goddess in people’s souls, that’s Ileana. A goddess that’s decided to visit us after many, many years, and make us part of her life again!”

She pauses, a nostalgic look on her face. Then she adds in the same vein,

“In the past, when she used to leave bundles of five thousand drachma bills in the charity box, she would rush into the church, regardless of the time. Many people would see her back then and cross themselves. Now, when I leave the bundles of fifty euro notes she’s asked me to, I take care no one sees me. I don’t want people turning me into a saint, I’m not worthy of such a thing! But now they don’t know who’s donating so much money, they’re beside themselves! I sincerely hope those church people put it to good use!”

Hearing of Ileana’s miracles, Tasos felt the urge to compliment his wife a little, even at the risk of going off topic. So the minute Mirella concluded her sentence, he changed subject and excitedly said,

“Truth is your cousin is almost more beautiful than you, my love.”

His wife smiled and shook her head.

“Tasos, darling, try making me more convincing compliments next time, please! But what has that to do with anything, where did that come from?” she teased.

Then her face suddenly darkened. She seemed to remember something. Her look changed.

“That guy Orestes, have you seen him again? Did he ever contact you?” she asked.

Tasos was surprised Mirella’s thought turned to that particular subject.

“Not since he was discharged. A friend of his comes around sometimes, asking to meet you. His name’s Harry; he seems a nice guy, Mirella,” he replied, softly compelling her to reconsider her uncompromising attitude.

“And what do you tell this Harry, Tasos?” she asked.

Tasos hesitated a little. Then, still trying to sway her opinion, he asked,

“You’ve told me the answer is no, right? Any chance you’ve changed your mind?”

“I’ve told you the answer is no, and you should keep telling him that. I haven’t changed my mind at all,” Mirella snapped.

Tasos seemed troubled. He decided to press it a little.

“Haven’t you softened a little, Mirella, after so many years?” he asked.

His wife’s reply is abrupt, harsh, it leaves absolutely no room.

“I haven’t softened one bit, no. Orestes crucified Ileana; I want nothing to do with him. Neither him nor his friends.”

There’s a pause. Tasos is puzzled by the stony look on Mirella’s face.

“They crucify gods sometimes, Mirella,” he says.

But Mirella is not prepared to change her mind.

“Cut out the religious stuff, Tasos. Let Ileana forgive him first and then we’ll see about me. But that can never happen, since she’s moved to the other side of the planet and has settled in Africa.”

Tasos shakes his head thoughtfully; he realizes there’s no point in pursuing the matter further and decides to end the conversation there.

## Tears of rain

“How are you today, Orestes?” Harry asks him.

“I’m alright, Harry; better,” Orestes replies. The two of them, Harry and Orestes, are sitting in Orestes’ living room.

“I’m glad to hear that, Orestes; can I get you something to eat?” Harry goes on.

“No thanks, Harry, I’m fine, I don’t need anything. Thank you. I look a bit weak, don’t I? If you agree, I’d like us to go for a walk later, that’s all,” Orestes replies.

“Of course, Orestes. Besides, didn’t they tell us at the clinic it’d do you good to walk?” says Harry.

Orestes nods, turns and looks at Harry, before adding, rather abruptly,

“To walk, yes: that’s what they said at the clinic, I should walk...”

After a brief pause he adds,

“When will I be able to go back to work, back to living again? I’m so far removed from all that, aren’t I? When will I get to all that... by walking?”

Harry looks at him with conviction. Then he says,

“You’ll get there, no matter how great the distance. You’re getting better by the day. You’re gradually improving. That’s what’s important.”

The look on his face changes, he turns thoughtful. Then he asks, “Have you taken your pills today? Perhaps

it's time to go into therapy, don't you agree? I think you're ready."

Orestes looks at him, an expression of immense sadness on his face.

"It's a great distance. You put it very well. And I must walk it to the end."

Then he rounds off his thought.

"I must remain in the light, now I've managed to find it again."

Harry reassures him, his words convey conviction.

"Of course you'll go back. You'll go back to work, back to living, and to everything else."

Orestes unexpectedly returns to Harry's earlier question.

"Yes, I've taken them, all of them; don't worry... The pills, I mean. And I'll go into therapy, yes!"

Then his look changes, he seems to waver.

"I don't know how to thank you."

Harry looks at him a little surprised, then answers, reassures him.

"There's nothing to thank me for. I found you again, we found each other again: that's what counts." Then, in the same breath, he rounds off his thought:

"I'm the one who should thank you, my friend!"

Orestes replies, his words come slowly.

"We found each other again, well put! I've been lost down unknown, dark paths, for so long. But now we've found each other again. I like the way you put it. We found each other again!"

He looks at him, then adds,

"But you stood by my side before we found each oth-

er. Even though I didn't always see you..."

His look changes, he appears to recall something, he gets worked up.

"And now we've found each other, I... I'm lagging behind: way, way behind. I've nothing; I'm a wreck, I'm burned out. You're all I have."

Harry smiles; his tone is nostalgic, encouraging.

"And yet, it's not like that at all! The spark grows stronger by the day. Your light, the light that shone through you, is starting to show."

Orestes nods his head and mumbles,

"My light, yes... my light..."

Harry is determined not to let his sadness grow any deeper. He cuts him off, with resolve.

"Yes, Orestes! You're gradually coming back... I still remember that light of yours, with great affection sometimes."

Orestes still nods, his voice louder now.

"And if my light was so bright, why did she leave, Harry? Why did Anna leave?"

Harry turns and looks at him.

"I don't know... perhaps you'll never find the answer. Perhaps you'll carry on as you are now. Without an answer to that question," he says and turns away, like something crossed his mind.

Orestes stretches his hand towards him.

"And all the evil I've done in my life afterwards, what about that? Where was my light then? The vengeance that filled my soul for so long, how do you reckon that, how do you add that to the equation?"

Harry speaks and tries to alter the course Orestes'

thought has taken.

“That’s all over now, it’s all over. It’s over; now you’re back, back for good.”

He pauses a moment before adding,

“You’ve paid for all that. You’ve been through a lot these past four years. You were in tatters, brought to your knees, you’ve suffered, been in and out of clinics. You were tormented; you’ve paid for the past. Now it’s over. All that is over and done with, you’re back.”

Orestes nods. He agrees with what Harry just said.

“I can see, Harry, I can see again. That’s what happened. I’m back in the light, that’s where I’ve come back to.”

Harry nods his head; he agrees with Orestes. Then he moves away from him. He stands up, paces the room and stands with his back to Orestes. Some time passes. Then he says,

“I’ve got news.”

Orestes slowly lifts his gaze. A look of surprise spreads across his face.

“You’ve got news? What news?” he asks.

“News about Ileana,” Harry replies without looking at him.

Orestes is visibly shaken. Harry allows a brief pause. Then he goes on.

“Well?”

Harry turns and faces him. He then responds.

“She’s in Africa...”

Orestes’ eyes widen.

“Where?” he says, astonished.

Harry approaches him, quickly adding,

“She probably has no intention of coming back. That’s what I’ve been told. She’s done very well there. She’s set up a huge corn plantation. A co-op. Word has it the locals worship her. Like a goddess.”

Orestes looks at him, his gaze relaxed, his initial shock subsided.

“Where did you hear that? About Africa?”

“From her cousin’s husband, Tasos; where else? He told me,” Harry replied. Then he added, somewhat hesitantly,

“She also has a child.”

Orestes shakes his head.

“So, she has a child then...” he mumbles to himself. There’s a pause. Then he turns, looks at Harry and says,

“How long has she been in Africa? Do you know?”

“Quite long, twentyfive years almost. Since she left Greece. She went straight to Africa after she left,” Harry replied. And then adds a bit of information to the previous part of their dialogue: “She has a child but lives alone, you know.”

Orestes counts the years trying to figure out how long it’s been since she left Greece. But his thoughts turn to something else. “Like a goddess!” he exclaims.

“Like a goddess, yes,” Harry repeats.

Orestes gets up with some difficulty and approaches a window, fogged by the rain. He looks at it; it seems to remind him of something.

Then he turns to Harry and asks,

“Did this Tasos tell you anything else?”

Harry has told Orestes everything he knows. “No, that’s just about it.” Then his tone changes.

“It’s in her system, it seems, this co-op thing. You remember that incredible story I told you, that other thing I got from Tasos. About the salon de massage. Would you have ever imagined something like that?”

The two exchange glances without another word.

\* \* \*

Harry, when Orestes went through a serious breakdown and sank into depression, went searching for answers, getting as far back as his tenure at Kyklos. Back to the time when his friend initially got caught in a downward spiral until, slowly but surely, he finally hit rock bottom a few years ago. Along that path he came across Tasos, now married to Mirella, who told him everything there was to know about Ileana. Tasos, seeing Harry’s concern, came to like him and told him what he knew: what went on before and what came after. Which was quite a lot.

When Orestes came apart at the seams and Harry followed him going in and out of psychiatric hospitals, he asked Tasos, once, to accompany him to the hospital. He didn’t expect Tasos would actually agree. The feelings both Tasos and his wife had towards Orestes were extremely negative. Mostly Mirella’s, of course. She didn’t want to hear of Orestes, or his friends, like Harry, and was deeply vexed every time Tasos would meet him. But Tasos too, though apparently fond of Harry, had written off Orestes completely. He’d sent him right where he felt he belonged. To the bottomless pit. Harry was therefore surprised when Tasos agreed to visit Orestes at the hospital with him.

Tasos remained distant and unemotional throughout that one-off visit. And Orestes, loads of pills affecting his soul, would forget him completely; he'd never remember that visit in the future.

Orestes never encountered Tasos again – if you could call that completely sponged from his memory visit to the hospital an encounter. But Harry continued acting as go-between. He had recently decided to ask Tasos to bring him in touch with Mirella. He considered a meeting with her a potential first step towards Orestes' pending apology. Harry had never expressly discussed with Orestes the details of the incident with Ileana.

But Harry witnessed his friend's transformation. And realized Orestes would only find his way back to the world through Ileana. She held the key to his return to life. And perhaps her cousin Mirella, Tasos' wife, could serve as a first, feeble step in Orestes' journey back. A step not in hope she might come to like him. A simple, a marginal sense of sympathy over his friend's deterioration would suffice.

Tasos did not dismiss the idea. He decided to help by asking Mirella to meet him. But she was adamant. And so Tasos told Harry his idea was out of the question.

That's when he told him about Ileana's upcoming visit to Greece. He implied Mirella might not be necessary after all. If Orestes could face Ileana herself, perhaps Mirella was unnecessary.

\* \* \*

Harry's reference to the salon de massage carved a faint,

bitter smile on Orestes' face.

"Of course I remember, Harry, how could I ever forget!" he said.

Then he grew serious. He looked Harry in the eyes.

"Her cousin refuses to see me, right?" he asked.

"Yes, Orestes, she refuses to see you; she still refuses to see you," Harry replied slowly, and not entirely honestly, since his choice of words implied there was a chance Mirella could change her mind in the future. But according to Tasos, there was no such chance.

There followed a pause which Harry eventually broke. He looked at Orestes and said,

"Orestes, I heard that, after all these years, Ileana is coming to Greece, to Amorgos this summer. I can find out more, if you like. We're on good terms with Mirella's husband; I think he wants us all to free ourselves of this great burden. I can find out more: like when she's coming, how long she's staying. What do you say, should I ask?"

Surprised, Orestes turned and looked at him.

"What are you implying, Harry? That I go see her when she comes? When her cousin refuses, do you think Ileana would be more willing to see me?"

"Perhaps it would be best if you did try to see her, Orestes. To apologize to her. That's what I'm implying," Harry replied.

Then he smiled and attempted to lighten the heavy atmosphere with a joke.

"Of course, she might beat the pants off you; she used to be a karate champion you know."

Then he grew serious and added,

"Then again, she might not. There's a chance you might

find the redemption you're seeking. You never know in such cases."

Orestes listened without saying a word, his head lowered.

\* \* \*

After an awkward silence Harry attempted to change subject, to give Orestes time to think over his suggestion.

"Tell me, Orestes, how did it happen? Did you realize something, did you feel something – how did this great change in you come about?" he asked his friend.

"What change do you mean, Harry?" asked Orestes and Harry elaborated.

"This one here, Orestes, your return! Your recovery. Do you remember something, like something snapping, or switching inside you? It was so abrupt. Your recovery was so sudden, swift, unexpected. It surprised everyone at the clinic."

Orestes stared blankly towards him. His mind travelled back through time.

"It was the day before you came. The day they told you I was doing better, much better."

Harry was visibly curious.

"What happened the day before, Orestes?" he asked.

Orestes immersed himself in that moment in time and began a slow narrative.

"I remember I was alone in the room, looking out the window. I was watching some kids play in the lot opposite the hospital. I didn't eat lunch that day, I must've sat there a long time. I was alone all day that day. No one came to

visit. Then, in the afternoon, it got cloudy. The sky got thick with gathering clouds. The kids ran off quickly, soon the lot was deserted. There was a spell of lightning across the sky. And then... then, it began to rain. It rained hard, without a break. Initially, when the rain started, I kept on looking at the empty lot. Until the window pane fogged over I guess, and I couldn't see outside anymore. My eyes then shifted from the dimmed, deserted lot and focused on the window pane. Raindrops were sliding down it. I watched them a while. And then I began to scream. I began to scream, Harry, as if what I saw were not raindrops but something else. The doctors rushed in, someone wanted to give me a shot. I remember at this point, I think it was the head doctor, a voice saying, 'No, leave him, no shots.' And they just sat there, a couple of them, next to me, watching me scream and wail. My eyes fixed on the drops sliding down the pane the whole time."

Orestes stopped and looked at Harry before rounding off his narrative.

"That's when it happened, Harry; that's when I came back, when I saw. You remember how I was the next day, completely changed."

Harry approached him and hugged him.

"Welcome, Orestes; welcome, my friend; welcome back to the light," he said.

Orestes shook his head, still trying to decipher the song of the rain that day.

\* \* \*

"Ready for that walk, Orestes?" Harry asked.

“All set, Harry. Let’s go for a longer walk today, I’ve much to tell you,” Orestes replied.

Harry smiled.

“Yes, please do, Orestes, please do! I’ve got much to tell you too. We have a lot to talk about, we’ve lost a lot of episodes, we’ve got a long way to cover!” he urged.

They moved to the door. Suddenly Orestes hesitated, a step away from the door.

He addressed Harry, had something to ask:

“Harry, we have a long way ahead of us, as you said, much to discuss and learn about each other. And the road passes through Amorgos, as well. Will you accompany me, Harry?”

Harry’s face lit up.

“What a question! Of course I’ll come!” he readily replied.

Orestes smiled. “Thank you; thank you, Harry!”

\* \* \*

The two friends open the door, their arms around each other’s shoulders.

A warm, majestic sunset, laden with every fragrance of spring, awaits them, welcomes them and greets them.

The two friends are immersed and lost in it.

## Livingstone, Zambia

“My dear friends, I’ve been here with you all these years without a day of absence. I’ve always been here, by your side. But now, after many years, I must leave for a few months; it can’t be helped. I must go, though we’ve got harvest ahead of us; indeed, it will be harvest soon. But I’ll be back, here with you, by the end of summer.”

Ileana’s words, ringing across the crowded hall where the numerous partners in her company are all gathered with their families, freeze the festive atmosphere.

Everyone falls silent; they stare at her, refusing to believe what she’s just said. Then, suddenly, weeping is heard from the back of the hall. Some speak up, addressing her impersonally, beseeching her to change her mind. Others foresee at the top of their voices that she’ll be leaving for good, never to come back. The initial silence caused by her words is now succeeded by clamor and agitation, mixed with shouts and sobs. Ileana is taken aback; she looks to the right, at the flabbergasted man in charge of tonight’s festivities, then turns to her left. There, her assistant and servant appears more composed.

“What is it, Ayinzini, what’s happening?” she asks him.

“What’s happening is they love you, Master Ileana and since you’ve never gone away before, they fear you’ll leave and never come back,” he replies.

Ileana stands up. She looks solemn; she raises her

voice.

“Have I ever lied to you? Answer me! You there, flailing about, there at the back, answer me! Have I ever lied to you?”

The packed audience quiets down. They look at Ileana, waiting for her to continue.

Ileana goes on in the same tone.

“I’m going away for a few months. I’m going back to my old countries. I’m taking my son, little Antonin, to meet my cousins. That’s all. And then, I’ll come back, so we can expand the plantation further. I’ll miss harvest this year. That way you’ll see you don’t need me anymore. Ay-inzini will take care of things; he’ll be in charge and bear responsibility this year. Have I made myself clear?”

“When will you return, Master Ileana?” a voice comes from the back of the hall, while another voice, near him, in the colorful local dress, is still convinced Ileana won’t come back. He mumbles something about gods coming and going, about how it’s always been that way and how that’s the way it’s going to be now. He foresees that Ileana too will follow the path of the gods.

“I’ll be back before the end of September, I promise. By then you’ll have gathered the entire crop. In the autumn we’ll discuss how to secure enough water to expand the plantation and grow new corn. I’ll be back before the end of September, do you hear?”

That’s what she says and waits to see if her words have any impact, if people are reassured.

Ileana’s straightforwardness apparently convinces the large audience. There’s some commotion again, but this time it’s explicative, not plaintive or remonstrative. Sud-

denly, a voice is heard above the din and the confusion.

“Work won’t be done properly without you, Master Ileana! Only you can make the workers do their job the way they should!”

Ayinzini is angered. Ileana motions him to stay quiet. She looks in the direction of the voice, but again addresses the entire hall.

“That too must happen someday. Some day in the distant future I’ll have to leave you; and then what? Will you abandon the plantation? Ayinzini is one of you. You know him and he knows you, and he also knows all the secrets of the corn. He’s a hard worker; his name, from the time of slavery, means ‘machine’. And he still works as hard as a machine today.”

There’s a new stir in the audience. Ileana’s last reference, that she’ll have to leave them some day, fires up their imagination, and rekindles their laments. Shouts and sighs sound anew.

Ayinzini turns and looks at her, shaking his head dissuasively.

“You needn’t have said that, Master Ileana, that distant future bit...” he says quietly.

Ileana’s voice cuts loud and harsh across the crowd.

“Is there anyone here who wishes to take charge of the crop this year? Anyone? If there is, let him come up here and introduce himself.” A new silence prevails in the hall.

“Since there’s no one, then, things will be done as I say!” she adds.

Ileana turns towards relieved Ayinzini. She addresses him quietly.

“Ayinzini, tomorrow morning we’ll check out the fields and discuss the last details. I’m leaving in a few days. For a short while. Don’t tell me you doubt my return, too?” Ileana asks.

“I’m probably the only one here, besides the guests from the church, who doesn’t, Master Ileana,” Ayinzini replies.

Ileana turns to the now quiet audience again and rounds off the discussion without leaving further room for doubt.

“I’m glad we’ve reached an understanding. So, then, on with our party,” she says in a loud and resolute voice.

Soon after Ayinzini has joined the crowd, dancing to the melodies of Livingston’s chorus of elders, a cross between song, prayer and theatre play. And Ileana, along with a group of enthusiastic women, claps to the new boss.

\* \* \*

The large, bright African sun moves in the opposite direction to the jeep driving through a vast stretch of corn fields bound east, towards the city of Livingston. The soft breeze blowing through the plantation barely manages to disturb its leaves. From time to time, when it grows a little stronger, their rustle is audible over the sound of the engine. It’s like a conversation between the two, as if the corn is calling for someone to quickly come and gather their heavy cobs, relieve them of their weight. Ileana, dressed in white, is in the passenger seat. Ayinzini, her black servant, is at the wheel. Ileana is talking to him.

“Thumbs up to all of you, Ayinzini! This year’s crop will yield more than fifteen thousand tons. Next week you start gathering: will people be ready?”

“Everything’s ready, Master Ileana. Everything’s ready. And we had no diseases this year, it’s the best year I can remember, we’ll probably reach twenty thousand tons,” Ayinzini replies.

“We’ll have twice as much produce in a few years, Ayinzini. We’ll bring more water, and turn the wasteland into corn fields. All that water going to waste: rivers, waterfalls! A terrible waste. Fifty thousand tons for sure in the next few years. Mark my word,” says Ileana, her words colored by enthusiasm and joy.

Ayinzini nods in awe and gratitude. Ileana glances over her shoulder; the sun has begun to set. She’s enchanted. She looks at her servant and commands,

“Stop a moment, Ayinzini, stop here. Stop the jeep a moment, please; turn off the engine and wait for me here, I won’t be long.”

Ayinzini kills the engine. Ileana stands up, turns around, looks at the sun again, then looks at the laden corn. The rustle of the plants is louder now. Mingled with the sound of running water, the huge Victoria Falls less than thirty kilometers away. Ileana steps down from the jeep, signals Ayinzini to sit and wait for her. She moves west, slowly entering the corn field; soon she’s out of Ayinzini’s sight, lost behind the huge plants.

\* \* \*

“Master Ileana, Master Ileana, where are you? Where are

you, Master Ileana?” Ayinzini’s voice rings in the air.

There’s no answer. He enters the cornfield and eventually sees her in a clearing ahead. She’s sitting down. He approaches her. She hears him and turns.

“Here, Ayinzini, I’m over here. What, were you worried something had happened to me?”

“I thought you might need something, Master Ileana. You’ve been gone for half an hour, it’ll be dark soon,” Ayinzini replies.

Slightly irritated, Ileana snaps at him,

“So what? Didn’t I tell you to wait? You know I enjoy walking through the corn alone; as if I’ve never done it before!”

Then she stands up and adds,

“Come, time to go back. I have a meeting with our suppliers and I want you to come with me.”

“Of course I’ll come, Master Ileana, certainly! Now you’ve put me in charge in your stead!” That’s how Ayinzini replies. Then his attitude changes, he returns to their previous topic.

“No, it’s not that you’ve never done it before, disappear through the corn that is, only this time you were gone a little longer than usual, somewhat...”

Ileana turns, looks at him, and cuts him short.

“And the larger the plantation grows, the longer I’ll be gone. You better get used to it! There’s no need for you to worry, or come looking for me. Understood?”

“I’m sorry, Master Ileana; I’m really sorry, I didn’t mean to disturb you. I won’t follow you again, I’ll always wait patiently for your return,” replied the black servant, visibly shaken.

Ileana's mood changes. She continues talking to him, less harshly now.

"Last night I feared for a moment we wouldn't be able to calm them down. I admit I was a little surprised."

Ayinzini looks at her and replies,

"Master Ileana, many people consider you a goddess; in fact, some worship you as a goddess. And gods don't stay with mortals forever. According to the beliefs down here they come and go."

"Don't tell me you have a picture of me with some candles somewhere and worship me!" she teases with a smile.

"No, Master Ileana, not anymore. But when we saw you pregnant one day, during a time when you were living alone, when we saw you get pregnant out of the blue like that, then I admit I too began to wonder if you might be a goddess. And when I mustered up the courage to ask who the father was and totally offhand you replied you had no idea, I was almost convinced!" Ayinzini flashed a smile.

Ileana smiled back and then said,

"It's quite common in our day and age; you can have a child without knowing the father. It's called medical technology, Ayinzini, not the work of the gods! You can have a child with the aid of science. Even during a time when you live alone, as you correctly remember!"

Ayinzini interrupts before she finishes her thought.

"That doesn't rule out the possibility you might have other children in the future, does it? At times when you are not alone, I mean. Without the aid of science then."

Ileana's look hardens for a moment; then it softens

again before she replies,

“No, it doesn’t rule it out, Ayinzini; it doesn’t rule it out.”

Ayinzini takes his cue from her reply and urges,

“That’s what you should do then if you want people to stop calling you a goddess; that’s what you should do, and everything will return to normal!”

Ileana smiles at him. Her attitude towards him has softened completely. Then she says,

“I’ll consider your suggestion, Ayinzini. But until I reach a decision, I beg you to help me gradually put an end to this belief that I am a goddess. My absence would be a great opportunity. And I’m absolutely certain you’ll prove an even better headman, therefore your word will carry more weight. Can you promise me that, please?”

Ayinzini’s initial joy over Ileana’s first statement, about the child, is quickly eliminated by her request. He seems distressed. He is visibly shaken when he speaks again.

“Who am I, Master Ileana, for you to beg me! God forbid! Would any of this be possible if it weren’t for you? None of it would. So who am I for you to beg me? That can never be.”

Ileana casts another harsh look at Ayinzini.

“Of course it can be! Not only can it be that I beg you, but another thing can be, as well. It can be that I beg you and you snap your fingers at me. Unfortunately, that can be, too!”

Ayinzini is totally dismayed by her words.

“Why do you say that, Master Ileana, when did I ever ignore you? When did I do such a thing? Is it because I disobeyed your order and came looking for you earlier?” he

asks, greatly distressed.

“You did it then and you’re doing it again, Ayinzini. You’re doing it again, just now! Not only did you come looking for me when I specifically told you not to. But, what’s more, you continuously ignore my request to quit that ‘master’ all the time. How many times have I asked you to drop it? But apparently that can never be, either,” she shouts at him, sternly.

Ayinzini’s face darkens.

“That’s impossible, Master Ileana! You might not be a goddess, but you’ll always be Master to everyone here. Everyone! No, it cannot be, I’d rather die. Do what you wish with me, but I can’t call you anything else,” he replies with resolve.

Ileana shakes her head.

“Some years ago I would’ve given you the boot, Ayinzini. I don’t like no for an answer. But now, it seems I’ve changed a lot, and I let you jabber on, ‘master this’, ‘master that’, and listen and put up with you.”

Then she turns and looks at Ayinzini.

“Have I changed so much then, Ayinzini, all these years down here? Tell me. Have I changed so much?”

Ayinzini’s attitude softens. He answers her question.

“Master Ileana, you were always like this, sent by God. Only, I think you are a bit calmer now. You don’t have that anger you had in the early days.”

“Anger, Ayinzini? When did I have anger?” she asks.

“When you first came here, Master Ileana, in the early days. You shouted and got very angry, in the early days. You were right, of course. You had a hard time getting through to us. You worked very hard to get things going;

it took time to make the earth yield a crop. You were alone back then, no one understood you, no one believed in you. And, I guess, that made you angry,” Ayinzini recalls.

Ileana’s expression changes. She looks puzzled. As if Ayinzini is totally off the mark.

“You’re wrong, Ayinzini, I wasn’t angry with any of those things. I wasn’t angry with you or the loneliness or the hard work. Back then I needed you more than you needed me. That’s why I shouted; I shouted for joy and gratitude. Shouting was my way of saying thank you, not expressing anger. You’ve got it all wrong,” she replies. Then she adds,

“Same as now. See how you call me Master and feel so happy about it, but drive me up the walls when you do? The same thing happened back then, with my shouts and my anger. You, all of you, saw it as anger and rage; but for me, it was my way of saying thank you. A huge thank you, the greatest I’ve ever said.”

Ayinzini is puzzled; he smiles. Then he replies, without being entirely honest,

“Right. It sounds odd, but I guess it must be so.” He pauses a moment. First his face darkens, then it lights up.

“By God, I never thought of it that way – silly bugger!” he exclaims.

Then his look changes again. Now he’s upset.

“So now you don’t get angry, you don’t thank us I mean, what does that mean, Master Ileana? Does it mean you don’t love us anymore?”

Ileana stops, looks at her attendant and then says,

“My dear Ayinzini. I’ve never had a guardian angel like you by my side before. No one has ever taken such good

care of me as you.”

Ayinzini is unsettled.

“Master Ileana, what you say is impossible; I’ve simply been your humble and unworthy slave.”

Ileana frowns angrily but her look soon changes. She realizes how hopeless it is to try and revamp that image. If she could at least be brought from the heavens down to the earth, where she belongs, she could put up with being a Master! After a pause she says,

“Ayinzini, now I’m going away for a brief period I’ll find the time to see some lawyers. I want to ensure that, after I’m gone some day, the plantation will remain as it is today. A co-op: that it won’t fall prey to a handful of operators.”

Ayinzini looks deeply puzzled. Then he asks her,

“How could that happen, Master Ileana? Since you have the most shares, how could something like that ever happen? And when, after a thousand years, you’re gone, you’ll share them with the others, isn’t that what you told me?”

“And how do you know the others won’t sell them in less than a thousand hours to a handful of people, Ayinzini?” Ileana readily replies with conviction.

Ayinzini nods his head. Apparently the conversation is beyond him. Then he has an idea.

“And why not give your shares to little Master Antonin, Master Ileana?” he urges.

Ileana is surprised. She looks at him, then answers calmly,

“Because little Master Antonin might not want them, Ayinzini! Because he may wish to follow a different path

in life, he might not be enamored of corn like us. But the company must remain the way it is today. And that's something I can ensure only with the aid of some good lawyers."

Ayinzini looks puzzled. He remains silent.

\* \* \*

"Where will you go, Master Ileana, now you're leaving for a few months?" he asks her a little later.

The jeep's shadow is now huge. Ileana is the one behind the wheel this time. The sun has almost touched the earth. The day is ending.

Ileana replies,

"I'll return for a little while to another of my home countries. You see, I have three countries, Ayinzini. I experienced the miserable, wretched side of one, the harsh and appalling side of the other and in this one here I experienced love, the love of all of you. I'll escape briefly to an island, Ayinzini; it's called Amorgos. I have a house there with my cousin Mirella. That's what I'll do. For a spell; for a few months."

Ayinzini looks at her. He's deeply puzzled.

"What's an island, Master Ileana?" he asks.

"An island... an island... an island is a piece of land that revolted and escaped from the harsh land, Ayinzini: that's what an island is, and I'm going to such an island. I'm an escapee, it's an escapee, we're a match!" Ileana replies with a smile.

"Why escape then, Master Ileana? Since this is your favorite country, why escape to that island?" asks good-

natured Ayinzini.

Ileana smiles at him. That's a difficult question he has asked. Then she replies,

“Because that's what I've learned to do all my life, Ayinzini. Chase after time, return to a few moments which – some good, others bad – stand out, are special to me. It's something inside me; I can't run away from it. I'm good at it. And that brings me a great, a deep feeling of joy, even though I have no reason to escape anymore.”

Ileana looks at the sun setting behind them. She stops and makes a u-turn, then drives westwards. She accelerates, speeding toward the huge sun. She turns on the music, some indifferent melody. She leaves it on. Then she speaks to Ayinzini:

“But now, at present, I don't want to escape. Let's chase the sun then, Ayinzini! You have a point. We've had the sun behind us so long, he'll think we're trying to escape him!”

“Master Ileana, will you forgive what I did earlier, coming to find you and disturbing you? And the other thing, calling you in a way you don't like at all? Will you ever forgive me?” Ayinzini asks as Ileana accelerates the jeep.

Ileana stretches her hand towards him and strokes him. Then she says with a smile,

“If you knew all I've forgiven in my life, my dear Ayinzini, you'd cry and wouldn't ask me that question at all. I've already forgotten all the things you said.” Then she grows serious again.

“Provided, of course, you won't do it again, OK Ayinzini?”

\* \* \*

The jeep dives straight into the ripe, red color of the sun. A cloud of dust rising behind it obscures Ileana's white-clad figure and Ayinzini's dark silhouette as they recede into small dots and disappear in that huge crimson light.