



Ioanna Karystiani
BACK TO DELPHI



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*Translated from the Modern greek
by Konstantine Matsoukas*



May. Outside, the sun behind clouds, a butterfly. Inside, the living room with no carpet, the boxes, two eggplants in the platter, half a canteloupe.

Anxious again. That's why the invasion of the r's into what she was looking at, the sun at dusk, the balcony, the floor, the household objects and what she thought of momentarily, having had nothing to eat since morning, eggplants and canteloupe.

For the best part of ten years she only cooked once a month, roast beef usually, and took it to Linus. On several occasions, he had refused to appear behind the square of glass and she took the Tupperware back to her place, didn't touch it, the food was left in the fridge and forgotten.

She never put on a pot or pan for herself, her place shuttered down for all visitors as well, never did she wine and dine relatives, never invited a soul over for as much as a coffee, she made do with bread and cheese, a tomato every now and then, a piece of fruit.

A lack of desire for warm food, a voluntary deprivation of the right to pleasures, if negligible one and, above all, frugality, for years she had not thrown out even a sprig of dried up parsley.

Thursday, May 3, 2007, dusk.

The wound up Vivian Koleva, who carried fifty-two years of weariness and seventy-eight kilos of sadness, shoved three white work robes in the washing machine; she poured a bit of the remainder of the plant food into the two pot plants, watered them, used a pair of scissors on the bits of the balcony tent that were frayed, called the Bulgarian replacement—the old woman's all right—went to the bathroom, finally, is now all cleaned and spruced with cologne, she'll go to sleep like a baby, she called the general's sourpuss of a granddaughter, Annie, darling, go to the Public Health Fund tomorrow because you are entitled to free creams and nappies for bed sores, we can hardly catch up with grandpa, third bloody phone call to Castoriani about the milk from Alexandria, you go ahead, my precious, and have two spoonfuls and I promise you I will pray to the Good Lord in churches high and low for your normal ingestion, there's my career, right there, from tulle to turds, she thought.

She didn't feel comfortable leaving her clients in strange hands for all those days, she was hard pushed doing it, up till now she was always available, every minute of every hour, day or night, to rush to the side of those creatures with their mouths open like a pocket with a hole through which the money had fallen out, and their jaundiced eyeballs which at some time must have been like everybody else's, as cool and transparent as an almond flower.

She called the lovebirds at Exarcheia Square, spoke with the husband, be good, she asked of him, she also called the Cretan Methuselah, he had his improvised limerick all ready. *Make of your life a song and delight, for death has you in his sights*, he wished her a good time at the wedding, and to give his best to her relatives getting married, and she thanked him in a way that pleased him, yes, my handsome, and when your time comes, I'll make sure to yell out, shit on your grave.¹

She finished with the clients but didn't put down the receiver, she called the janitor of the apartment block for the utility bill, it's not out yet, Viv, you the only one can't wait to pay up, she also called Yukaris, everything's arranged I'm telling you again, be there at seven in the morning, have n

fear, Viv, just keep yourself in check and keep your eyes peeled.

~~Yes, peeled all the way back, she thought and got up. She folded the clothing and underclothes~~ her traveling bag, prepared Linus's knapsack, the hard part was laying hands on the new shoes, she s the two pieces of luggage next to the front door.

She took out the wallet from her purse, counted the money again, eight one hundred bills, fo fifties, change, the bank card, her two id cards. She put it back in its place, in the two side pockets h sunglasses, the two ancient booklets, the three receipts folded in two, the four photos inside the envelope, some womanly tidbits and the small agenda with the useful phone numbers, few that th were, she knew them by heart.

She went to the kitchen and fetched the iron pestle and the cheese knife, put those in the bag, the was plenty of room for both, but in the end, she only kept the one, returned the knife to its drawer.

She had bought the pestle up north, in Komotini during a three-day holiday, over twenty years ag she never did make garlic paste or roe paste, she'd set it along with two more bronze ornaments, an c lamp and an oil carafe, up on a high shelf, no time to dust, let alone polish them, they'd gone all motle Though they were souvenirs of a happy outing, she would have gotten rid of those as well in th general household clean-out or while moving house, but they were saved every time by a high shelf.

She went back into the hall, hung her purse over the two pieces of luggage and thought, not for th first time, that through all the years the coat hanger's four hooks only ever bore her own clothes an knickknacks, her coat, her raincoat, her umbrella, her bags, the worn wraparound for the cool nig shifts on the narrow balcony.

From that position she now craned her neck and she gazed over her shoulder at her living room, warehouse. The way things had turned out, there was no way she would lighten it up for the sake appearances, embroidered curtains were out of the question as were flower vases.

Where does one, at this point, find the courage to steer one's life in a new direction, she thought an checked the time, nine in the evening, all set, now for the kitchen.

She put on the boiler, dipped in the scalding water the same tea bag for the third time, as she was the habit of doing since the year before last, took the cup with the watery liquid and a piece of bre and went to the couch. In a low voice, diligently she recited the memorized phrases, a sip, a bite, paragraph, the Amazon battles on the six decorative panels of the Treasure of the Athenians, th famous Sphinx of Naxos raised on an Ionian pedestal.

Possible questions: Who were the parents of the Sphinx? Typhoon and Echidna. Who were h siblings? Cerberus, the Lernaia Hydra and a coterie of other monsters. Very good.

She leaned into the back of the couch, brought her pinkie gingerly to her upper lip, there was th familiar business fermenting there, she would see the new day with herpes again. The blood w leaping through her arteries like a frog, her head a peeled cabbage, her mind eaten away by th caterpillar, she could feel it crawling, sucking away, getting fat.

She needed to give herself over to other thoughts, the mind cannot be emptied, it takes no days off.

So, then. From the Baltic comes amber. Twelve feet below the surface of the water there a transparent stones, yellow, red, brown ones, with enclosed tiny leaves or insects from the distant pas The pale ones always fetch a better price, one thousand five hundred drachmas for a good piece.

When the sea freezes over, the wild amber collectors drill holes and stick in hoses, the water pourin in at high pressure and dislodging the bottom layers so that the precious weightless sun stones a thrown up, that's what they call them. The Poles of the Gdansk thread them into necklaces and p those on their babies. Rhoda, the maid of honor at her wedding, had brought them one, there wasn't place on earth she hadn't been to, seminar after seminar, journey upon journey. And truckloads

fucks as well, a connoisseur of dicks the world over.

Vivian Koleva's mind wrapped itself around amber at ten, unwrapped itself at ten thirty, chased after other alternatives, fixed for a while on the cost of getting a car serviced, a round two hundred paid up front, seized on changing the electric water heater, another two hundred for the plumber fee, plus one hundred and eighty for the son's latest expenses plus fifty for the wedding bonbons, and painstakingly, by means of the expense accounts, she expedited time.

Till two in the morning she didn't stir from the couch, rigid in the same spot, scrunched between cardboard boxes and bags, next to the silent radio, facing the switched-off TV, pinned to the silence of her own apartment and the scratching sounds from the one next to hers. The seventy-eight-year-old neighbor, with full-blown Alzheimer's, was struggling to let himself out the door to wander the street. At one time a wealthy man in Africa, ivory and wild animal skins, then a business executive here, now with most of the big money whittled away, a widower, in the care of Juliana, a Ukrainian who, having grown tired of looking for him in the surrounding squares, put on security locks, hung the new keys around her neck and gave Tiger the old ones so he could scratch at the door, trying one after the other again and again, for hours on end, days and nights, weeks and months.

It was always an issue at the building residents' meetings, Viv did not attend, from the first floor she could hear from the foyer fifteen or so irate voices berating the Ukrainian. Viv herself had grown used to the sound through the thin walls, like the woodworm eating through the furniture, a kind of constant company in her empty evenings when she got in from work, put her swollen feet up on the armrest of the couch and gazed at her belongings, piles of nappies, some fancy puff-sleeve outfits, leftovers from the *Titi* saga and a wealth of other objects, each hailing to a donator, the last that remained till she got rid of those ones as well.

A pink opaline vase, enormous like a pregnant belly, from her maid of honor, now in service as a carryall for small change, tacks, paper clips and phone cards, the handmade Cretan chair, a wedding gift from coworkers of his, she didn't use it because it gave her back pain, the Canadian lamp with the red leaf, turned upside down so the bump couldn't be seen from the punch, hers, the day before yesterday, during a solitary outburst, and a couple of knickknacks, a cigarette case with Saint Sophie and a cat-shaped ashtray, bequests from a client's heart failure, a fervent smoker who was bound to continue puffing away in the eternal pastures as well.

The trajectory of the gaze was the same tonight as ever, a little like a routine check to make sure the evidence of a forfeited life was in place.

Next door, the old man was getting his face slapped, the Ukrainian had a heavy arm, the night grew quiet and Vivian Koleva breathed deep. Before getting a blanket to throw over herself in order not to truss up the bed and waste time in the morning making it, she went into the kitchen, opened the cutlery drawer, trying one by one the sharp knives against her hand, the serrated bread knife, the razor sharp meat knife, she chose the small cleaver, took it to her bag, fitted it smugly in at the bottom under the booklets, the tissues, the keys and the lipstick. Still, she didn't go back to the couch, she stood right there on the spot with her mind working at high speed.

Hold on, what if I stumble and take a fall and the contents of the bag spill on the floor, I'm done for. I won't have anything convincing to say, thank goodness I thought of it in time—there, she hadn't spent up the five-day outing in every detail, after all. For a moment she thought of packing a plastic bag well, so she could say that she intends to gather an armful of wild medicinal weeds, that get rid of white spots from the nails, wild oregano for dyspepsia, roots and herbs for cough medicine, on orders from her clients—old folks do require their elixirs and panaceas.

But, then, she had to change the cleaver for a common knife, she'd take the watermelon knife with

the nine-inch blade. To be on the safe side I might as well change the bag too, might as well take the o
brown thing with the zipper and make sure it's kept shut, she whispered to herself and then, whi
emptying the wide beige canvas bag, she got an even better idea. She went to the drawer and got
yellowing, uncut tome of Sikelianos from the terrible period when she had bought a dozen differ
poetry collections. There were three left, all uncut, thankfully, sometimes while rummaging fo
contracts, old bills or pens, she would stumble on the slim books, remember the accompanyin
circumstances, open one at random and read the beginning, the middle or the end of some poems.
few, the slimmest ones, she had read from beginning to end in fleeting moments, all forgotten now.

In five minutes, the brown bag with the zipper all set, Vivian sighed and returned to the checker
couch, to cover herself with the checkered blanket, to stretch out for a few hours, get her strength u
for the five-day sojourn. Her courage, too. Enough of it for two people. Herself, she was an old hand
endurance, with any number of sunny days to waste still before her, but he, faced with th
spaciousness of May, might lose his marbles and start banging his head against the ancient ruins.

The truth is that she had, in fact, entertained just such a possibility. Several times. Sometim
fleeting, on two or three occasions her thought got stuck there for days and nights on end.

The first unbearable year, whenever the phone rang, rarely, her heart skipped a beat—they'll tell n
he's hung himself, she steeled herself for the news from an officious voice, slightly softened an
wavering for the occasion, with an imperceptible stammer and appropriately compassionate.

She would grasp the receiver, glue it to her ear and, after putting it back down, she would virtual
collapse in the armchair, deadened for ages, though the call may have been from the Express Servi
guy, asking when to come by for the renewal of the biannual contract, or from the diligent tenant
the office space in Pangrati, informing her that he'd put the rent in the bank.

She had asked herself, certainly, if she was afraid of such a turn of events or maybe even, deep down
wished it—suicide brings out people's pity and also acts as a detergent. It would be the only real end
their hell, an act of desperation and simultaneously of courage, of release when it's all said and don
and of justice, too.

The years kept passing, the hanging wasn't eventuating, that awful feeling in her of mixed dread an
expectation faded, until in recent months a plan had again asserted itself in her mind for their joy
redemption.

In order to decide on a destination and stay during the five days, she had used up eleven Sunday
January 7, 14, 21 and 28, February 4, 11, 18 and 25, March 4, 11 and 18, venturing in her dilapidated bl
Fiat at one point in the direction of Nafplion and surrounds, towards the mountainous Akrata and
Dimitsana, at another in the direction of Evia, towards Calambaka and Mt. Pelion, in order to overs
the environs, appraise the landscapes and hotels, spy on the people and their doings, and in coverin
several hundreds of miles, she had checked out the sharp turns thinking that, even unintentionall
due to the shakes she might get at the right spot, she could lose control of the steering, smash into
rock, send them tumbling down over and over till they ended up in pieces at the bottom of some gorg

Once she was back on to a straight piece of road, she would pull over for a while and bang her hea
on the steering wheel at her leisure, there was nobody watching, so she owed no explanation and n
apologies, afterwards she wore a bandanna low on her forehead to cover up the bruising and th
scratches.

Scented pine forests, verdant fields, hillsides with olive groves, orchards with citruses which she ha
no right to peruse with pleasure, years now with not a half an hour of ease and recreation.

No company, either. She could barely muster the courage herself to think directly of events
themselves, the routine, strictly, of consequences, the unfinished business of each day, the duti

concerning the probably grim and hopeless future, how could she possibly share the burden, how could she voice the details required by third parties in order to get their fill of someone else's consternation and how stoop to the mercy they would halfheartedly offer?

On account of the creature, about whose misshapen form she still wondered out of what bellows and what anvil it had emerged, she'd had four changes of address in a decade, increasingly smaller and increasingly cheaper, from the four bedroom at Kato Patissia, to the three bedroom in Kypseli, to the two-and-a-half bedroom in Ambelokipi, to the two bedroom in Gyzi, a Spartan life in aged apartment blocks, not wasting money on herself and not bonding with butchers, hairdressers and supermarket cashiers, so that they wouldn't single her out and start getting intimate, what and how and whence, so too, that she wouldn't feel the need to lay her load down somewhere, wouldn't let some half-work escape, wouldn't blow it.

Her scarce sleep, that strange sensation of her bones being constantly cold, dated back to then.

The poplar across the way signaled dawn, at dawn birds give their art form their all, warbles like piano scales and chirps like plucked guitar strings.

She got up before the alarm clock went off, sore and stiff-necked, folded the blanket, washed, pasted on the Cyclovir, had coffee, put on a colorful chemise to fool him and herself, loaded herself up with all the bits and pieces and was out in the street at five to six.

World of the morning. She walked around the back of the block, where she was parked, tried to unlock the car with the house keys, in the manner of her senile neighbor, the two hours she had anticipated the special process to take with all the checks and signatures, were baffling her in advance. Her anxiety over the five days which were now a fact was peaking, she broke out in cold sweat.

She put in the things in order, the luggage in the trunk, in the back seat the bag with the two Tupperware, treats of milk pie and spinach pie, snacks for the trip, she collapsed into the driver's seat like an empty burlap sack and started up awkwardly, she was in a hurry to get cigarettes and water and then be done with the bureaucracy and the procedures, put some urgently needed distance between herself and the buildings, highways and rows of cars because she suddenly got the idea that today or now, on her way to Linus, she might have her first car crash ever, all upset in this beehive of one-way streets, crossings and street blocks, she might bump into a car in front, veer into the oncoming traffic, even worse, hit some pedestrian and lay to waste all these months' preparations.

To pace herself and calm herself down she turned to her subject, the Sphinx of Narxos, raised on a Doric pedestal. Damn you, r's, until the age of six she said water instead of water and she never dared ask for mandarins or strawberries though she liked them, there were r's in them which could go wrong, she only ever had apples though she didn't care for them and in her small hand she always held a lemon, those ones didn't have any bloody r's. Now, here they all were, a barrage, blasting their way into all the needed words.

She gave up on the r's, took consecutive deep breaths, if nothing went wrong, in a couple of hours on top, she could get some comfort from the straight lines of the national highway and the poppy fields.

After all, how hostile can flowers and grasses be?

Feckless world.

They were her mother's last two words early yesterday afternoon, in the short phone call when she was apart from the high note at the finale, unexpected from the measured lips of seventy-five-year-old Stavroula Sotiropoulos, and Viv's thank you for the parcel with the spinach pie, the exchange with

familiar, safe and beside the point, end of the season now for wild winter cress and radish, come tomorrow the old woman would be gathering charlock and grapevine shoots, waiting for May to end. she could collect rose petals for the making of rose-sugar.

For the two of them to pick up the phone once every fortnight or so, sometimes the one and sometimes the other, they needed an alibi: I called because, while cleaning out the wardrobe, I found the knitted shawl you said had been stolen, because the sleet scraped the bark of the lemon tree because the plentiful rain has given us some nice sow thistle, on the mother's part, I called in case you want me to send some vitamins to help with your memory, in case you need to hire an Albanian to dig up the garden for you, on the part of the daughter.

For them to meet once every three years, always in Athens, for two days at most, the alibi had to be airtight.

The daughter never did ask, come, I need you, I am harrowed by loneliness, the old woman would arrange it tactfully, either because she needed a new prescription for her reading glasses, or because she had a buzzing in her ears and needed to come up to the capital, as if there weren't eye doctors and ear doctors half an hour away by bus from Alonaki to the city of Patras, they were both careful not to draw attention to the big city where solutions to ordinary problems could be found.

Viv Koleva no longer went to the village, how could she? And in 2001, when her father had sat like a vegetable at the intensive care unit of the University Hospital of Rio for twenty-eight days until encephalitis decapitated him for good, she hadn't dared show up at her native parts, she might be nursing strange old men but not her own, she sent some money and a pair of pajamas, she called the head of the intensive care unit, but absent she remained even from the funeral.

Had she gone, the leading part would have been hers even though it was the afternoon of September 11, with the sixty or so relatives and villagers following the coffin screaming themselves hoarse at each other and on their cell phones about the planes that fell on the Twin Towers, same thing over the freshly dug grave, with the priest among the interested parties, naturally, and as for the consolation coffee afterwards, there too, not a single word about the all but forgotten dearly departed, everyone glued to the cafeteria's TV, speechless before the fiery hell, the clouds of dust, the deranged American and Bush at the kindergarten.

Had Viv been there, her presence would have probably overshadowed both al-Qaeda and the President of the U.S.

She didn't go the village but she did buy a wreath which she hid under a blanket in her car, took up to her place in the dark and stayed up the night dislodging one by one the white carnations from the frame and hurling them at the window, the screen of the lifeless TV and the carved wooden chair, then she was left fingering the purple ribbon, *For my father, Vivian*.

Two weeks before her fortieth birthday, with the wind screaming at the highway, she went in her car to the village, alone, secretly, climbed the iron gate of the cemetery and spent half an hour by his side, plucking the withered flowers from the two wreaths laid out on the grave, her mother's and her sister's, and struggling to remember his hands, his shoulders, his chest, his mouth and his voice, everything a blur inside her head except for his eyes, always, whether near him or far from him, she could not put those aside. As a child she was scared of them, so huge, so black, later they kept getting smaller and more faded, washed over and over in life's laundry. One wondered, what happened to those eyes in the summer of 1997? And what about afterwards? His eldest daughter knew not, she had been away. High time for me to pass on to other hands, had been his last words and everyone in the village had heard of the thing he'd said and was in agreement.

You have now, Viv told him and got off the flower petals and the dirt, she didn't want anyone to see

her car nearby, the village to get a whiff of her nightly escapade. Her mother had sensed it the next day when she went to light the oil lamp, she told her on the phone, I saw your traces, no, you didn't do anything, that's not what I meant. She was like that, her mother, she drew out of thin air the words and deeds that couldn't be spoken of.

Yesterday's call had most certainly not to do with the charlock, but the anticipated five-day trip, even though it didn't get mentioned even in passing, what with the smell of fresh lime paint in the kitchen and the toilet and the smack with the slipper to the tomcat for trampling the herb patch.

Driving in the blue Fiat, Viv brought to mind her aged mother hugging the most precious object in the house of her childhood years, the bucket. With it, she drew water out of the well, in it she stuffed the leeks she unearthed from the garden, that was where she put the wild radishes from the field, that's what she used to step on and reach the frankincense on the shelf with the icons, that is what she turned over to sit on in the courtyard of an afternoon, to have her coffee.

For Viv Koleva the sadness of her great grandmother, her grandmother—she had heard of the fortunes, as well—and of her mother, was her female dowry. It grew with the passing years and the colorless trivia of poverty, it swelled like a river that, from time to time, dashed her progenitors on the sharp-edged banks, their lives spoken for like every woman's of their time, though her it hadn't been washed upon some turn but dragged her on through life, until in 1997 it drew her out into the open sea, far from any shore of salvation or respite.

Had she put in the small suitcase his camera, an expensive gift from his godmother at fifteen? No, she'd forgotten, she had probably decided his lordship would object.

This is what he'd say, Viv Koleva imagined the whole thing, she had to be right about some part of it. What exactly do you want to photograph? The wonderful landscape? Your wonderful son? Do you want to be able to show left and right what nice holidays the two of us had together? You want to give grandma my photograph to feast her eyes on? You want me to pose on my knees plucking a daisy? Lying in the fields on my back? Hug romantically a tree trunk? Give me instructions, Mom, and I'll do whatever you say, so you can get the desired effects.

She decided, play it by ear, if he was tame, they'd buy from the tourist shops one of those cameras that only take a film with twelve frames, so she can have something afterwards to look at of an evening. Plus, in case her plan worked, he too would have use for a nice series of photos from which to draw inspiration in future times.

Athens had been left behind.

To the left and right furniture dealerships, exhibition halls, factories of bathroom accessories, spare car parts, striptease palaces, garden furniture, Asopos Steel, Monyal, Fournalis home appliances, vacant lots, vacant hillsides and enormous advertising billboards, pieces of land in sixty no-interest installments.

It was nearly ten.

There's pies in the bag at the back, she said. And water, she added after a bit.

Linus on the passenger seat showed no signs of interest, he was leaning back with his dark glasses hiding his eyes from the front and the sides, like a hostage's blindfold.

Earlier, on this day unlike the rest, she had noted his eyes, had well and truly scrutinized them, veiled hollow now, as if they had moved farther back, half an inch deeper in their sockets. His whole look was terrible, the look of someone wounded, someone irredeemable. His cheeks pale and lifeless, as if run over by a bulldozer. Most of his hair gray already, grayer than hers, its blond light gone out, and now thick, either, like it used to be, its bulk listless, with no vigor to it, no spring.

She thought for a moment of caressing it, of turning her hand into a skullcap and cupping the back

of his head, she didn't dare. It seemed strange to her that she could, if she wanted to, take his hand. ~~she'd do that later. Still, she couldn't help making up two or three pretend awkward movements with~~ the gearstick, just so as to momentarily brush his arm, live, cold and perfectly white, hanging down from the short-sleeved black T-shirt.

When earlier the two found themselves side by side, with nothing separating them, they didn't hug. They didn't kiss, they didn't touch, either. They walked towards the car keeping a distance of six feet between them, with her leading the way, him falling in step behind.

Silent from the very start, constantly the cigarette, he'd smoked ten already. She suggested music. She had brought along a load of CDs, she had paid up at a central music store for half a shelf-load of new hits, he didn't as much as cast a glance, only made a vague gesture which probably didn't mean late but, leave me in peace.

Viv let ten minutes go by and, because she considered that every initiative was on her and that she ought to take some, she turned on the radio, searched through the stations, dialed past the high rhetoric about politics, Putin and bonds, drew away from some testimonials about the Sea Diamond wreck a month earlier near Santorini, skipped jingles for air-conditioning and bank loans, hesitated slightly before an island tune of the kind that evoke pure joy for the duration of three minutes, though even a ten-second happiness would be an unrealistic ambition for those two, and finally latched onto a local station, a dynamic woman's voice, *Sleep, Persephone, in the earth's arms, never show yourself again on the world's balcony*, etc. They, too, were now heading toward an ancient lookout.

- Ah, nice, she said very softly, with some anxiety, but before the song was done, Linus abruptly pressed the button, silence again, a silence that was fearful despite the sunny day with the myriads of golden points of light shimmering on the expanse of cool crops, with joyous swallows dovetailing across the fallow fields studded with wildflowers, their playful colors surrounding the car and the scene as they traveled alongside them.

Spring, yes, but Viv's innards were two scoops of rotting yellow leaves and her mind a hand-grenade with the safety catch drawn, ready to blow up the Fiat in front of the Vlachakis egg farm, on the eightieth kilometer of the Athens-Lamia national highway.

Does he not want to see and to listen? she pondered. Does he not want his fill of buildings, street movement, hills that go up and down, rhododendrons and wild thistle, such nice sights to edify his way of thinking? Does he not want to avail himself of the generous possibilities of the numbered days ahead?

He might be afraid that all that will only make for a more difficult return, she thought.

That, too, had crossed her mind, last year, the first time she arranged for time off work but didn't use it, she changed her mind at the last minute, there were too many things she had been scared of. This year she did find the courage, though here she was, feeling like sighing and not daring. Her heart was beating furiously, she was driving at a hundred and twenty pulses per minute, she was a veteran of palpitations and, because of her work, could calculate them without even touching her wrist.

- Porppies, she burst out suddenly.

A forceful gust of wind was ripping the flowers off their stems and in the fields to their right a small red storm was rioting with thousands of red petals swirling against the May sky.

- Poppies, she corrected.

Linus didn't blink an eye. The wind died down, the spectacle ended.

At eleven on the dot her cell phone rang. Yukaris.

- Much traffic?

- Middling.

– Can I talk to him?

– Later.

– Everything all right?

– I think so.

– I'm glad. Make good use of it. Seize today, do not trust the morrow.

– What are you implying?

– Me, nothing. It's Horatio who says so.

– Spare me, for once.

She didn't tell Linus who had called, he didn't ask, only lit up another cigarette.

– I bought you a carton, she told him almost sweetly, determined to keep up her morale, if one of the two had a right to fall apart, Linus was first in line and she would try by hook or by crook for that not to happen, but if in the end the meltdown did take place, she would do all she could to reverse the situation at any cost.

She had never slapped another person, had never raised the neighborhood with her screams, had not been driven berserk by any savage thought, or act or situation, to the point of tearing out her hair and beating her breast, nothing had thrown her off track, she knew that she didn't have the facility most people to become sad for a while and then get over it, smash things up every now and then and get back to their normal self afterwards with no consequences, she was permanently immersed in pure blackness, weary but also experienced and enduring, and, above all else, obligated to remain upright so she could help out the creature she was now dragging willy-nilly through the countryside.

– Why don't you say something? she asked him with forced naturalness.

– Words are cheap.

– Why don't you look around?

– Pine trees move along, clouds sail together.

– What's that mean?

He didn't answer her.

Could May's feast be making him numb or, worse still, upsetting him? April, before, and March before that, would be safer months, but what if they had cold and rain and were forced to keep indoors? The bright, smiling and lukewarm May was the final temporal frontier, so that everything could happen before the arrival of summer, before June's acceleration began, before July's lack of constraint and August's extravaganza.

She turned to face him.

– You haven't a bone to pick about where we're going have you?

A good question, timely, but that, too, was left unanswered. The eventual destination had given her much trouble. First off, she had looked into the possibility of the ten National Forests. Then, she had recalled and assessed random comments by admirers of caves, estuaries, artificial lakes and hot springs.

A sort of colleague, one of those women with whom she did alternate shifts tending the infirm whenever someone got sick or had other business to attend to, was waxing lyrical about her stay in the township of Orchomenos last July, during the celebrations of the trout season—fish cooked in the oven, fried and smoked, this last with a Golden Award in Germany—which took place at the spring of the Three Graces in tandem with a concert by the incomparable Kostas Makedonas. The spinster had a crush on the artist, great crowd, lots of spirit, she affirmed. Another colleague was committed to the yearly festival at her place of origin, the Prespes lakes near the northern borders, a free-for-all with a parade of musicians and ministers. The now deceased brother of the elderly Cretan swooned with

nationalist fervor over Arkadi, in the Peloponnese, the niece of another client, even further back swooned with revolutionary fervor over the Mikro Chorio, home of the heroic community Velouchiotis.

Paros, Syros, Zagoria, which she knew herself from sneaky three-day excursions in the past, nice places, but they required planes and boats.

Crowds, holocausts, bloodshed, long distances and the sea were not suited for the Vivian-Linus pair.

Yukaris, the only one in the know about the whole endeavor, advised her, not an island, not impossibly far, keep it sensible, dear Vivian, Viotia, Phthiotida, Corinthia, Argolis,² take your pick, let's stick close by, just in case.

He suggested she should consider a quiet place, with open views, comfort and cleanliness, with good meals to be had, and walks, for the sake of detoxing, even temporarily, from being cooped up, and from crowds and spittle on the streets, in short, a country pension at the beginning of May would be perfect as the customers are few, usually mostly foreigners.

Vivian Koleva had been mulling it over, she'd grown unaccustomed to recreation, the past ten years she didn't as much as thumb through the pamphlets that were lying in wait everywhere, for everyone with offers for unforgettable holidays in illustrated Edens.

Her final choice had to be focused. Be an investment for the future.

The parking lot of the pension Amphictyonia, buried in greenery, everywhere bougainvillea and honeysuckle, had six car spaces, only two were occupied, the bookings were minimal, thankfully, the crowds wouldn't pour in until a couple of months hence.

Not a soul in sight.

- Wait a bit, I'll go in first, said Viv, took her bag, got out of the car, shook her arms and legs to get rid of the stiffness, looked up at some birds frolicking from branch to branch, admired them, taking care that Linus noticed, as if prompting him to do the same, for the sake of a proper start in this beautiful environment.

For the sake of acting carefree, she walked slowly, even lazily, towards the entrance, went up three steps, looked inside and signaled to Linus, no rush.

A couple around forty-five was settling their bill, looking overjoyed as did the fat, middle-aged owner, a German woman, the fourth reason Viv had selected this hotel; that is, it was isolated, had a view, its décor discouraged depression and the receptionist was a foreigner, which definitely reduced the chances that she might be familiar with or remember Greek faces and events.

The couple came out dragging an overly sophisticated piece of luggage on wheels, personal articles at the bottom, computer on top, in a mood so jolly it verged on exhibitionistic, they both said good morning to Viv, have a lovely time, said the man, just like we did, seconded the woman, looking with some curiosity at Linus who was still sitting in the car, unimpressed. She drew a short step, thought of something, started towards the Fiat that was moored at the edge of the property, but finally turned back to Viv who was standing nervously on the lower step and opened before her the top button of her shirt. There were red marks on her neck and her cleavage was pasted with generous amounts of cream.

- Allergies have been the death of me. There's still pollen, the only drawback to this place. Make sure you get some antihistamines on time if you have a problem, she said, and acting youthful, she strolled sprightly towards the Golf.

They drove off to the accompaniment of classical music, at full volume at that, the piano bellowing

In two minutes Vivian and Linus were inside the cool spacious hall, their luggage resting on the ceramic tile floor but the frau was nowhere to be seen, the reception desk empty but for a square glass vase chockablock with freesias, that's where Linus thought to put his cigarette out, and next to it a purple New Testament with a protruding piece of paper as a page-marker on which Viv read a shopping list, soap-crème, insect repellent, air freshener, feta cheese.

They waited. He with his elbows on the bench, she with her gaze bouncing off the partitions with the keys, all there, twelve rooms, to the framed local flora, tobacco leaves, clovers and horsetail, then on the shelf with the foreign titles, then to the Scrabble set on the low table in front of the fireplace, then to the fireplace itself, made of stone and imposing, she hadn't managed in her lifetime, finally, to own an apartment with a fireplace, not even that.

- If you use the American kind of almonds, the cake breaks up in the oven and then it gets mildewy.

That's what the German said as she walked in with her mouth full, fine sugar around her lips, her Greek fluent, the heavy accent matching her body type.

She said hello, of course she remembered Viv, she even seemed glad, because she did like to chat, she showed, and a client the same age as her would be the ideal partner for a beer if she needed to play up the German side or an ouzo, if she was required to be Greek.

On her neck and in her ears hung handmade jewelry with strings, pips, screws, straps and tin tulips. Vivian Koleva had sold off all hers, four golden pieces, bracelet, ring, cross, brooch, had gotten rid of them for a ludicrous one hundred and ten thousand drachmas, after she had already stripped her living room of the silver. Five pieces, two candleholders, two small frames, a bowl, another seventy thousand to get the money together for the deposit for the first piece of property in Pangrati.

It was true, certainly, that the lost treasure hadn't meant all that much, a fat lot of a treasure, to say more or less what can be found at every home, not at all priceless, emotionally or financially, wedding gifts that didn't suit her character, surrounded her and weighed on her against her will, she neither wore them nor polished them to a shine. Their remembrance, though, was more proof that she persisted in remembering everything unsavory, deaths, poverty and famine, her past was useful only as punishment. The happy memories were short-lived interjections, once in a blue moon, that dropped in like ghosts from thin air and then were gone.

The German drew attention to the fair weather, took down two keys, to Viv's question, which is the room with the better view, number 10 at the corner, she said, let Takis have that, he's in need of a rest, a bit pale, Takis, on the delicate side, ascertained the foreign woman jocularly and handed him the keys. On the first floor to the left, she called to his back, as he'd already grabbed his traveling bag and was climbing the stairs three at a time.

- My nephew, Viv spoke, she owed the clarification, from abroad, she continued nervously digging into the depths of her bag, that's where his folks live. He's finished his studies and is undecided as yet about the next step.

- Is he an archaeologist too?

- Something along those lines.

- So pale. Doesn't he get any sun at digs?

The German goggled her eyes in a funny way, shook, used her whole body to express herself, wince after intimacy at all costs, sought to establish a relationship on the double, stumping the unprepared Viv, who put together an explanation any old way.

- He was sick for a long time.

- It shows. I could tell from the first moment.

Viv took her id card out of her wallet and walked it along the bench to the form the foreign woman

was filling out enunciating the particulars, two single rooms, four nights with breakfast.

– Your eggs are bought or your own? Viv interrupted.

– I adore chickens. The chicken and the horse are my favorite animals.

– So the eggs are your own. I'm thinking of getting him back on track with proper food, you see.

– In this place, he's sure to perk up, Mrs. Alifraggi, Xenia Alifraggi, the German spelled out the full name on the id, as she wrote it down in her files. So, then, I'm Sabine, if I may introduce myself again.

– Xenia, said Viv and reached out for the handshake and to pick up the key for number 12 and the id.

Sabine turned to a drawer, let me give you two remote controls for the TV, she said and Viv got the chance to pick Linus's soaked cigarette butt out of the vase with the freesias.

When she went up to the room it was twenty past eleven.

She flew into the bathroom and spent five minutes splashing cold water on her cheeks and neck, to freeze them, to anesthetize them.

She didn't open the balcony door, she hung no clothes in the wardrobe, she didn't take off her shoes, she fell to the bed on her back with arms open wide like a prone Jesus on the cross.

The simile was adversarial to her in its own right, she had no traffic with gods or saints that come marching in retrospectively, especially given that then, as events were peaking, the parish minister had knocked on her door, a stranger's unfamiliar face, a thirty-five-year-old terribly composed and mighty sure of his technique, willing to support her, even wash her conscience clean, she stoical heard through the introduction, according to St. Makarius, the sinners in hell are tied back to back so that they may not gaze upon each other's faces, she then listened to his personal spiel, full of poetic embellishments, installments of repentance and checks of forgiveness and then she decisively pushed him to the door and sent him on his way with a curt good-bye.

If there was a God and he had targeted Linus, let him grab the boy from her like so many who crash on motorcycles and die on the spot, making a clean exit rather than feeling life fade on their skin with every passing day and having this business drag on for years.

In the end, she did feel for Linus, she used his first name in her mind, ever since 1997, she hadn't once been able to think, let alone say before others, my son, and when they, either unsuspectingly or with a vestige of sympathy, said, your son, she jumped like some wild thing, the word alone affronted her.

Yukaris had weaned her from it after the second meeting, her father afterwards had never asked about anything to do with him, her mother was chomping at the bit for news yet very rarely in the awkward and summary talks about pills and wild herbs did she slip in out of the blue some epilogue about the poor wasted boy, and her younger sister, Xenia, barricaded with her family in Canada, she obeyed her husband who forbade any reference to the nephew, a condition backed by the threat of divorce, their two little girls, twelve and eleven, didn't even know they had a cousin.

Xenia's Greek ID had been mailed from Toronto, only don't let Spilios find out about it, her sister had moaned in her half-page letter, it was common knowledge that Doctor Alifraggis had on several occasions given her severe beatings and the last time, being an orthopedic surgeon, he had himself set her arm in plaster.

Viv considered the Kolevas surname as famous among Greeks as the surnames Karamanlidis, Papandreou, Mouschouri and Onassis and she needed to guard the five-day excursion against any resurgence.

Neither Linus nor herself resembled themselves of ten years ago as they had been plastered across the pages of the press, he was half his size and had gone white, she was double and had molted.

While still in the car, she'd asked him to meet her outside the reception at twelve and he hadn't to

her to go to hell, which meant he was amenable.

~~In his travel bag, there were new underwear, new clothes, new sports shoes. When yesterday afternoon at her house she took them out of the box and retrieved the bunched up paper tissue in the interior, she had replaced their black laces on the spot. As she was pulling them out through the hole and they snaked around her finger, she got short of breath, saw them elongate, turn into sleek, coiled serpents and wind themselves around her arms, preparing to wrap around her throat, which naturally was instantly drowned in saliva and in r's, she started coughing and spitting again in the arshtray and on the morsaic floor, the words were being thwarted inside her head.~~

Just like last year when, during the general siesta, she heard from the apartment block across the street a voice, same as Linus's, rage, I told you, Mom, didn't I bloody well say, I need my running shoes washed?

The same distress then, too, the same craziness all over, even though she did at some point steal a glimpse at the irate bully, she nevertheless spent the whole afternoon in a tease over the damned sports shoes.

I wonder what happens to him when he lays his hands on a shoelace?

She couldn't afford to ask him, naturally, for the next few days' plan to work, the past had to be crossed out with an X.

Whenever she slipped out of reality, imagined things, grew fearful and was then preoccupied exclusively with fear, she felt contempt for herself.

Well, then, time to kiss the wasting of energy good-bye, time to focus.

Ten to twelve. She got up, rapidly skimmed through her two little books to quickly freshen her memory with the difficult names, she put some ointment on the herpes, redid her lipstick, pulled the comb through her hair, stuffed her bag under her arm and, clutching the strap, she went out.

On her way down she was welcomed by the local radio station with news from Livadia and its surrounds.

The German woman at the reception hall was looking through the New Testament and she extrapolated on the Word to the client, though she hadn't asked for it, she favored a wide spectrum of knowledge, something of comparative religion, something of space science, something of ancient Egypt, something of genetics, something of sea lions—they consume twenty kilos of shrimp daily, she said, giving a sample of her encyclopedic aptitude.

For her, Vivian-Xenia would become the perfect alibi for uncontrollable soliloquies, Thanos who spends day and night at the card table, brought me here while I was a flower and I've now become cauliflower, she mocked herself in impeccable Greek, pitying herself with a warm applause, her thin arms shaking like beams in an earthquake.

– We haven't been able to have kids, this in an apologetic tone and immediately the question, you Mrs. Xenia, do you have kids?

– It didn't come about.

The client's answer imposed a short silence. Everyone carries their sack and for as long as one lives it will keep getting filled with insults and sorrow, Vivian thought, waved good-bye and walked out into the yard.

While waiting for Linus she took to examining the flower boxes with the gaudy petunias though, times like this, and generally, in fact, she couldn't care less about flowers and trees, the two flowerpots on her balcony in Athens were there because any fifty year old woman on her own who doesn't have at least two potted plants is cause for suspicion.

There they were trespassing on strange property, the navel of the Earth.

They zigzagged among the increasing crowds in the streets, tourists mainly who stopped to browse ancient souvenirs and mock-traditional bric-a-brac on stands, benches and coffered in small shops.

It was hard to evade a horde of seventy-year-old Scandinavians, some wore wide ties with piano keys, probably bought at the Salzburg stopover, on others ties with prosciutto, trophies from the Parma stop, and almost all the women had draped themselves in the folds of ancient-style chiton shirts, they must have bought out half of Plaka.

Tired faces, looks of incomprehension, it was more than certain that they didn't care all that much where they were travelling to, where they stopped on each occasion, to what sights the travel agencies dragged them, anything was fine, as long as they kept moving, simply remained in motion, in order not to get immobilized already in the familiar stillness before the end, visible in their case with no need for binoculars.

They overtook the tourist groups and they also overtook two groups of five folded canvas umbrellas each, standing upright, side by side and white, like groups of Arabs loitering on the curb.

Linus, with his dark glasses on, facing unwaveringly straight ahead, saw to reason to dawdle paying attention to anything to his left or right, followed Viv meekly, and at one point, as if asking for help or support in his uncertain progress, his feet released to a long walk for the first time in years, he even took her by the arm, for mere seconds, but their first bodily contact, a sensation long forgotten, like an electric shock, propelled them apart again.

Viv stumbled, but simultaneously sighed with relief, she had wanted that touch although at times the thought did cross her mind that she should avoid it in case she unwittingly flinches, in case some small cry escapes her and he gets in a rage and all hell breaks loose.

– No museums and oracles today, he turned to her and said.

– Whatever you say. We're in no hurry. For five days, Delphi is ours.

Her choice of place was just right when the scales of her calculations and deliberations had shifted. Antiquities, Mycenae was declared off limits despite possessing a Lion Gate, Cyclopean walls and archaic tombs, the clan of the Atreids was synonymous with a mayhem of murder and lust, same for Olympia despite her prepaying two gym memberships, Linus wasn't the athletic type, the only one of his kind who hadn't watched the European soccer finals and the Olympic Games, the social worker, the saint. Mrs. Afroudakis, had noted his refusal, staunch and unexpected against the trend prevailing in the two months of July and August of 2004 when her bulls had turned to lambs, penned in front of the TVs and all the more effectively drugged with the national triumphs.

As a kiddie, Linus-Trampolinus walked on the curb to preschool hopping like a spring kid-goat and bleating out the numbers. He couldn't read the street signs yet, but he could broadcast, at 32 we have the bakery, at 34 the Lotto, at 36 the dry cleaner's, at 38 the vet, at 40 the barber.

Now, out of the corner of her eye, she watched him walk as if on a patrol duty, without harvesting the images he had been made to go without, the vibrant sounds that were offered aplenty, with no zeal for the itinerary and impatient for its conclusion, his footsteps crushing heavily on the sidewalks, his shoulders sunk, his body derelict and old, sentenced at thirty to long-term punishment.

Tall and thin, he had his father's build.

Fotis was lucky, after all, she'd been right to call him a scoundrel on a bitter New Year's, he had exited on cue, with everything that happened afterwards, the preceding wreckage was negligible.

Sun that almost burned, light that almost blinded.

Let it also blind anyone obsessed with famous cases and the observant who might recognize them
~~any old acquaintance thereabouts on an excursion who might stumble on them.~~

In recent years, Vivian Koleva had the scenarios all ready for such an eventuality. There had been certain instances to date when she had made use of them and they'd worked.

Mere resemblance, my name isn't Vivian, she had answered chummily to a man her age who had approached somewhat reluctantly at the Syntagma Metro station, I never studied, don't even know the whereabouts of the universities of Athens, born and raised in Argentina.

And, you are mistaken, ma'am, I never lived in Kypseli, I've come from Thrace, here on business, she had cut short a woman waiting in the same taxi line as her, with whom she had once shared a grocery in the springtime one would be going in for strawberries as the other walked out carrying the same.

Every such emergency and the chance of being cornered again by some sharp-eyed and eager-nosed hound, necessitated frequent changes in hairstyle and sunglasses, avoiding rush-hour crowds as much as possible, carrying under her arm evidence from improbable places on the planet and renewing her stock of tales, ready to declare herself a resident of Hawaii, Bogota, Johannesburg, retrieving on the spot a tourist pamphlet from her overseas home.

Johannesburg had come in handy at a shopping mall, when, as she was paying for the plastic shower curtain, the cashier had given her a long, funny look, or so it had seemed to Vivian, who preempted him by explaining she was putting her mother's bathroom to order before getting back on the plane to South Africa.

Four years ago, one tenant at her building had bumped into her at the foyer while she was unlocking her mailbox at ten at night, saw in his look that he had an issue with her and gave him short shrift, a letter from my only daughter doing postgraduate studies in Sweden, she parceled out a ready-made formula and it worked, the guy shook his head and immediately concurred, yes, I know all about children leaving to study and never coming back.

The prearranged falsehoods were her armament against the unexpected, Viv saved herself any further ado while shamelessly admitting that she, who despised lies, was now issuing them forth copiously even if she did so with the sweat of her brow. She devoted hours, usually the early morning ones, to inventing new alibis, embellishing the old ones, rehearsing the words and gestures, stocking up on special renditions, gathering together a fresh crop for the five-day excursion.

She breathed in and caressed her own cheek and throat.

- Thank God you never had any allergies.

That's what she came up with, she was afraid of the prolonged silence, because the despicable carefree attitude of those around was driving her mad and because her bag was a heavy load and even more so was the thought of the things she had buried at the bottom.

But did she well and truly and seriously think that if a dangerous situation developed, she would be able to plunge a stabbing knife into him? That she could use the bronze pestle, which she'd barely ever used for crushing garlic, to crack his skull in two?

Beige wrapping paper bought by the meter and used as tablecloths, tin cans instead of vases, olive branches instead of flowers, the décor of the steakhouse Nectar, crowded with groups of mixed nationalities encircling platters with meat and bowls of Greek salads.

Viv and Linus had seated themselves at the table that was most remote, by the door to the West-facing the wall with the National Tourism Bureau poster, savory marbles and digestive forests.

The waiter planted in their midst a kilo of chops, Viv put the fleshiest and best grilled on the honored guest's plate, since you were a wee thing you loved the white tubular bone with the lam marrow, said she and pulled out with her fork the white tubing from all the rest of the chops and gave him the treat. He accepted it. The shadow of a smile, his thanks. She, too, was pleased.

– Beer? she said and got no answer but filled his glass anyway, a bottle for the two of them, no more relaxation was desired and necessary, tipsiness was not, inebriation was forbidden and not only under the current circumstances.

How old was he when he'd broken every bottle in the house? At ten, fourth grade, and out of the blue. She no longer kept alcohol in the house and the boy had taken it out on the bottles with the cherry juice, the lemonade, the grape molasses and the vinegar, all in pieces piled up in the sink. A miracle he wasn't cut up, she sure got a scare, but that's all over, back to now.

Three lasses, lively and good-looking girls, thankfully were sitting seven tables away, yet the buzz alone of the tavern was by itself a devious stimulant, families that talked a lot, laughed a lot, groups of youngsters that teased each other a lot, *Measure in all things* was out the window and so was *Know thyself*, the overweight clientele were piling orders on the waiters, another round of souvlaki with all the trimmings, and, we're waiting on ten more mince patties and, buddy, grab another five mixed platters, and, bring us another two nectar carafes, good wine, evidently, locally produced by the owner.

The music abated the mood, fresh hits with no real longing, extroverted, trite and ephemeral, that they fitted right in with the ad hoc staging of group revelry.

Viv and Linus were taking the hits of festiveness in the back, as they had elected to be facing the wall, the hanging poster wouldn't be in a position to remember them.

They hadn't decided whether to dine hurriedly and depart or to pretend, primarily to one another, that this was for them what it was for the rest, a meal in the countryside.

They had sought refuge in two or three awkward exchanges, this place must be raking it in, the bread's good, the french fries are precooked, she, they've left out the napkins and, let me squeeze you some lemon, he.

Twenty minutes later they hadn't had their fill, but they'd given up trying, their plates still half full, their forks laid down, the last remaining gulps of beer in their glasses, when the voice broke out in the hall of a three-year-old girl who was running among the tables like a spinning top, loudly singing the latest Eurovision hit "Yassou Maria."

The proud and tender dad was chasing after his girl, who was collecting applause and caresses, she was one of those creatures so blessed with gracefulness that you couldn't find it in you to call them annoying brats. Linus was listening, Viv had turned around and was looking at the child, a mirage of sea-blue swirls, her cheeks blushed a camellia red, her nails painted, her small palms two soft dates, she also looked at the father, a thirty-year-old, her son's age.

It upset her. She waited patiently for the chase to be over, but the jubilant little diva was enjoying her effect on the audience and the power of monopolizing her dad from the ten-strong family gathering, two babies plus grandpas and grandmas. For ten full minutes, the customers, even a couple of foreigners, became the chorus to "Yassou Maria," Linus kept his head down, right above the overflowing ashtray, and Viv, at the end of her patience and not knowing how to stem the obvious associations, his and hers, had a go at, Patriarch Bartholomew, I saw him on the news Easter Sunday, rubbing up against Sarbel and offering his blessing, she said to Linus, hasn't been a single year without him showing up at that Eurovision circus, she added wryly, breaking in two an olive branch from the tin vase.

The barb got no response, the youngster was raking in acclamations, Linus was now surreptitious following from behind his dark glasses the festive, luscious toy-girl that got a rise out of adults making them willing to play for a bit, even act silly.

The receipt under the salt and pepper read thirty-three euros, Viv left a fifty euro note, didn't wait for the change, a gargantuan tip. She stood up, Linus followed suit, they exited with long strides.

- My heard, she moaned, I got a headache she amended posthaste, as they took the road back to the pension. There was no need to consult among themselves to the effect that a siesta, some rest at these events, is a good thing after eating, they were both eager to be on their own, in their respective rooms. It was three and they had fought since just after eight that morning to make it unharmed through the almost seven hours spent together, quite a lot as a trial run at coexisting after years of sparse meetings of twenty minutes, a quarter of an hour, sometimes a silent five minutes.

A while later, as she sat at the edge of the bed, pressing down on her belly with her bag resting on her knees, she wondered how they'd make it through the next four days, the whole business felt like the beginning of a great adventure with an unforeseeable end.

Three years ago, too, she had been so driven to the ground that she felt she was running out of the energy needed for what had to be done. At that time, June, summers always a season of mortal danger, she would get rooted to the spot in front of a green light, without the wherewithal to cross the street, a journey of twenty feet. She would look at the shelves in the supermarket aghast, unable to lift her arms and pick out the chlorine or the sugar.

Days would go by without her washing her hair, she would get to work with crinkles in her skirt and her shoes unpolished. Those rare times when her cell phone or the phone at her house rang, she wouldn't pick up, two clients had her terminated. The fridge had gone bust for a month, she didn't call the technician to fix it, it was July and she drank water from the tap and ate her tomatoes tepid.

As during that time, she turned on neither the radio nor her TV, filled with the festive furor of the Olympics, the objects around her protested the deadly silence and, in her mind, their commentary raged. The riot, the lunch tray murmured that pre-Easter feasting was long gone, the purple pillow on the sculpted chair was saying, I'm done for, the car keys were demanding, come on, let's go for a drive by the sea, the amber stone on the table declared, I want to go back to the Baltic, her id card was nattering mincing words, you're on your way to fifty, the plastic chair in the balcony was complaining, you've forgotten about me lately, come sit and get fresh air.

As no others lived in the house or visited, so that things could hear their name being called out, bring the chair over, you're in my chair, and, wipe down the chair on the balcony with a wet rag to get rid of the rain-mud, several pieces of furniture and objects were throwing their weight around, we're passing comment, were consulting among themselves, they scolded her, shared this or that with her, showed their affection, fought to give the apartment a semblance of life.

Especially the green glass shade around the kitchen bulb that had countless times shed light on Viv at night stuffing herself with stale bread, standing upright like a soldier at his post over the pot with Linus's beef, rummaging in the cupboards and unburying the old Donald Duck cup for his milk, his Batman eggcup and the colored straws for the frappé coffees of his adolescence, that were still being rescued from shelf to shelf and apartment to apartment, during those weeks of collapse, full of fruit flies from the wizened fruit, initially the shade would protest, I turn on and show the scum of the vegetables rotting in the plastic bag, then, later, it would whisper to her companionably, all I now illuminate is your fall.

Day before the seventh of July, feast day of St. Kyriaki, she spent the night circling the block in order to not fall asleep and, as in past years on this date, play the part again in her sleep of that mother with

the all-white hair and the torn lining in her skirt, the one who, under different circumstances, would be celebrating the name day of her eighteen-year-old daughter. All told, tragedies aren't things that pass, they annex the days and nights and subjugate the future.

The finishing touch to the whole business was the visit by Charidemus. Charidemus who? Thirty-five-year-old, retarded, the lovey-dovey numbskull of Aigion and surrounds, the nitwit for some smart alecks, who rang her doorbell one late afternoon, came in, like he did yesterday, with the familiar milk pie in the round baking dish wrapped in a knotted dishcloth and sat, like he did every time, for half an hour, grunting and gesticulating with pleasure, proud of his blue suit.

Charidemus was a man of renown in his native land, a lover of the sound of typewriters, a daily visitor to the local law firms and accountants. They set out a chair for him and let him listen to the rhythmic sound of the keys, the dry tock-tock was his mainstay.

He did not speak, couldn't read except what was typewritten and in capitals, two rows, no more. With a note like that, with an address on it anywhere in Athens, he was capable of boarding the bus and arriving at the right place, let the specialists come up with the scientific explanation. The cousin Petra, a half-mad fellow student of Viv's in high school, he had for years, starting in 1998, made the trip to the capital once or twice a year, just to bring her the milk pie. Viv had allowed her mother to give her address to Petra, hated milk pie, which she gave to the old folks, but she felt compassionate towards the youth, a delegate from the village of her childhood, and each time put a goodly tip in her pocket.

Charidemus with the baby eyes, the crookedly shaven moustache and the black curly hair, had in recent years lost his bearings because the typewriters had been replaced by the comparatively silent keyboards of the PCs and the sound that filled him with joy was no longer to be heard. Someone had made a gift to him of a defunct typewriter and his cousin, single, compassionate and a loner, with no neighborly relations and fixated on her school years, would type Viv's address for him and escort him to the bus.

In the visit the year before last, summer of 2004, Charidemus looked around at the dust and the shells of the sunflower seeds on the floor and the coin-sized oil stains on Viv's robe and took to thrashing on the couch and yelling out at full volume his incomprehensible vowels. Right on top of her came hers, now behave and be good. The apartment block was up in arms, they called the police, the neighbors came out on the balconies, eyes and voices greedy for the details on which feeds the gossip of the contemptuous.

A trying afternoon. One trial among others, it was getting to be four months that she hadn't seen her son, on two occasions he hadn't wanted to, on the other two she hadn't wanted to herself.

Late that night, although in bed since seven, as soon as the policemen left with the milk pie and Charidemus followed in their wake, after spreading out on her bed six packs of aspirin and next to those three bottles of high-pressure pills, stock for her clients, she toyed with them, counted and recounted them, then put them away again saying, sorry, fellows, forget it, it's a no go, I have the strength but I'm not entitled, and she made the decision to at least try and escape by doing very different things, on the off chance she might be able to occupy her thoughts in some other way.

So she visited an institute of podiatry that solved the problem of ingrown toenails, though hers were fine, and let herself listen to the women, with her soles soaking in a tub, as they chitchatted about reflexology, cheesecakes, the perfect tan and Latin dance schools, a lot of tango, a lot of samba, she herself, despite her business at *Titi*, had only ever danced once, on her wedding day, and that was that. She paid and left knowing she would never set foot again in the pretty land of cosmetic parlors and nirvana sold by the hour.

She went to a lecture, too, with the projection of slides from the Galapagos Islands: Darwin, his schooner, his studies on the origin of the species, mounts covered in grass, sea elephants with the cub and birds picking the fleas off giant turtles; she left halfway through, her problem haunted every last inch of her body and her mind, didn't leave a smidgen of space for anything else, it throttled from the start all attempts at even a brief diversion.

Phone call, three rings, on the fourth she stuck the receiver to her ear.

- It's Yukaris again.

His voice against the background of other voices, a dutiful voice.

- Why, who else would it be?

- Anything worth reporting?

- The tour has been postponed for tomorrow. He wasn't willing.

- It's not the end of the world.

- As if he has no response to, takes no pleasure in, or doesn't recognize my effort. His indifference alarming.

- Call it numbness, the numbness of the first day. He'll be right on cue as of tomorrow.

- Spare the irony.

- I'm sorry. But you are asking for rather a lot, yourself.

- I'll spend the night sleepless with worry.

- He will as well. Perhaps even me, he added after a short silence, then he put an order in for a jar of local honey and rang off with the admission, my girl, you are remarkable.

In two minutes he called back, asked if our boy looks left and right, Viv didn't answer, he apologized and ended the call leaving her even more uncertain about the afternoon, the evening, the day that was coming and the one after that.

On opening the balcony door, the pine tree forest appeared before her, dark, thick and silent, on some buzzing, wasps, bumblebees, carpenter bees, the expected soundtrack of any sunny afternoon in the countryside.

Viv rolled back her sleeves and leaned against the warm railing, to test if she was soporific, it would be a godsend if it came over her for half an hour. Besides, from that position, in every respect legitimate and expected from the tenant of an idyllic pension in May, she could stretch one ear to Linus's room and keep an eye on the terrain of the parking lot. If he elected to go out on his own, he wouldn't use the main entrance, he'd go out the back, even though Yukaris had personally pointed out to him in the morning, don't go anywhere without Vivian and don't put her in an invidious position. She has taken on a grave responsibility.

A grave responsibility is what it was all right, which was the reason why every five minutes she stuck her hand in her pocket, making sure the car keys were still there.

Linus didn't slip outside in the afternoon, didn't go out in the early evening, didn't even lift his shutters, he missed dusk and he missed the sweet nightfall, the sound of television was heard for about twenty minutes at around nine and his mother perked up somewhat and in order for him not to go to sleep hungry, she sent a double toast and fruit to his room with the frau, his lordship was unlikely to snap at a strange woman and send her away.

The strange woman, naturally, had been taken aback by her two visitors who, instead of going for strolls and drinks, plenty of wonderful choices all around, opted for staying cooped up in their room.

could Takis be suffering from a love affair gone wrong? she'd asked Viv who, standing by the door the small kitchen, had shrugged, though love affairs have gone by the wayside with today's youth, the split up with one girl today and pick up another tomorrow, the German woman quipped as she arranged chips and three green leaves around the toast. Why don't I put some ice cream with that, no treat, no ice cream, no, he is not at all partial, Viv stopped her.

She invited Mrs. Xenia for a drink, let me treat you then, she renewed her offer, dark beer, very cold she made the suggestion as appealing as she could, I have cherries, too, she upped the ante, and to different kinds of pralines, she labored to hogtie the evening's live target, she failed, the customer had a headache.

- Mrs. Xenia you are condemning me to make do with some book, again, and it's a great sin to spend beautiful evenings on one's own.

Viv agreed, but she had sinned, she was sinning habitually and serially, thousands of evenings on her own like an isolated tree in the wilderness.

Many hours later, daybreak was fingering her shutters, horizontal stripes initially gray, touched in a bit by dawn with pink, then by the day with gold.

In bed, facing toward the closed balcony doors, she was counting the thin slices of the Friday morning, listening to the birds dynamically reporting for duty, smelling the honeysuckle that wound itself on her railing and rubbing her left arm that had gone to sleep, a casualty yet again of her sparrows and anguished sleep, she began to think of people, random strangers, who'd never have to face a day like the one she had coming.

She pondered on how the heck one describes a smooth life and of what it might consist. She came up with a few plausible answers as she washed, dressed, gathered and checked her things and her money, all of it in a hurry, seven minutes by the clock.

A smooth life is one where you open the window in the morning and have the luxury of wanting to gaze up to the end of the sky and where, at night, you turn the lights on feeling pleased to be back home. A smooth life is that of people who eagerly buy a loaf of fresh bread, who enjoy a good haircut, who are talented at frying two eggs, who kiss and are kissed with some frequency, who give or receive a small slap without taking it to heart, who break their leg and friends come to write silly things on the plaster, who always cast their vote no matter what, who know the refrain to the golden oldies, who dream of an exotic trip and slowly put the money together for it, who play with their cat every day and remove one by one the ticks from their dog, who take pride in their children's engagement, who take their grandkids to Halloween parties, who bring the parental home up in the country back from the brink of collapse, who bury their parent with due honors.

- We see here a copy of the navel of Delphi. The decoration in relief on its surface represents the *agrion*, a fabric made of woolen stripes which covered the navel and which in antiquity was placed at the holy of holies of Apollo's temple. According to the myth, Zeus let two eagles fly from Olympus in opposite directions and after they had circled the earth, the two birds met at this point. The navel symbolizes the belief that Delphi was the center of the world, that one you might remember from school, you were a very good student, Linus, up until, the phrase was cut short at that point.

There were no other visitors in Hall I of the Museum, the halls next to that were empty as well, Viv and Linus were the very first to arrive, at eight in the morning, after walking with comparative greater ease along the still sleeping streets of the township and the tiled pedestrian walk that led to the

site.

Earlier, at the small dining hall of the pension, while sitting still in their chairs waiting for breakfast, Viv had presented three articles she had cut from magazines with the mysterious E of Delphi and hieroglyphs, Lilliputian symbols and signs, ancient scripts from Minoans, Black Pharaohs and East Island, which wise experts on antiquity and linguists were still laboring to decode.

She had the forethought while in Athens of collecting a variety of materials, small surprises to break up the awkward silences and to simultaneously fertilize her offering at the Sacred Valley so that it might take root and bear fruit.

Linus would look over it in puzzlement and, surely, would comment on this or that, Viv had counted on two or three responses, like, where did you unearth this, mighty strange writing and, how long have you been involved with this subject?

In actual fact, Linus had lowered the dark glasses for a matter of seconds, just enough to pierce her with a chastising glance.

Immediately afterwards, she was given a different opportunity to improve the mood, with the freshly squeezed orange juice and the free-range eggs which were fully up to her expectations for a bracing breakfast, not for herself, of course, she couldn't care less.

Her first thank you for the great service, to Sabine, came at the serving, the second thank you at the gathering of the plates and glasses and alongside it came the prompting to her son, say thank you, take with her a bit, to freshen up your German.

- You are mad and need to have your head examined, his response in a low, though not angry, tone.

The stroll to the Museum was made in peace, amid the unthreatening racket of the sparrows and swallows minus the unwelcome racket and presence of busloads of people, coming all the way here to have a closer look at the ancient celebrities.

The guards were having coffee and tossing out short exchanges about real estate and construction, what with the antiquities and with the ski resorts in nearby Mt. Parnassus, moneyed folks were drawn to Delphi and to the adjacent village of Arachova from the world of show business, enterprise and politics, and putting up villas and setting up compounds for their weekends of luxury.

The navel of the Earth, the frieze in relief from the first century A.D. with Hercules against the Lernaia Hydra and the Giant Anteus and again Hercules wresting the horses of Diomedes and fighting an Amazon made no impression on Linus, who took the five steps to first this side and then the other next to his mother, stopping wherever she did and listening to her recite the relevant information memorized to a T since a long time ago, for his sake.

No questions at all, neither admiration, nor a second look, the dark glasses did not turn in the direction of the exhibits, as if they rejected them, at certain moments they might rest on the bases of which they were propped, at others they focused on his sports shoes.

- They're not tight, are they? Viv asked, staring against her best intentions at the white shoelaces. Linus advanced half a meter without a yes or a no.

The bronze sirens, the figurines of naked athletes, the small statue of the sheep in the same hall and the statue of the cow, the two bronze griffin heads, the three bronze shields and the remainder of the statues in Hall II didn't affect the young man's mood, though Viv colored her reports with such zeal and intensity that the guards glanced at her puzzled, a fifty-year-old, first thing in the morning, a bit fired up, pointing, insisting, comparing, parroting everything in the relevant publications for the benefit of the unspeaking and morose youngster.

In the Hall of the Sifnians' Treasure the mother sat the son before the Sphinx of Naxos and obliged him to listen to how that enormous marble statue, of a height of seven and a half feet, lion body and

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