

HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN AWARD

ANDRI ANTONIOU



Nominated by The National IBBY Section of Cyprus



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ONCE UPON A DREAM



Once upon a time there was a six-year-old girl. The girl went to school for the first time and there she learned how to read and write. A whole new world unfolded before her eyes. She was devouring all fairytales she could get her hands on.

That was the time when she decided she would be a writer too. She bought a blue notebook and started writing her own fairytales. She told everyone that one day she would become an author.

Time went by and the little girl grew up. She read, wrote, and dreamt. She dreamt that one day she would hold her own book in her hands. She believed in herself and worked hard. She would write then erase, then would go on writing and erasing again and again.

And then, one day, ... actually, it was a night... and then one night, a Christmas cold night, when the girl wasn't a girl anymore but a woman, something wonderful happened. Her childhood dream begun to come true.

That very Christmas cold night, a ten-year-old girl, appeared in the woman's head and demanded to tell her story. The woman wrote one word after another, one sentence after the other, one chapter after another. One of Mirto's - that's the protagonist's name - trouble after the other.

Six months later the woman finished the story and entitled it "Trouble magnet". She posted it to Psychogios Publications in Greece and waited. A few months later she got an answer. And the answer was - what joy - a "yes". It was a positive answer and the woman, who once was a six-year-old girl who dreamt of becoming a writer, wept.

Tears of joy run down her cheeks as soon as she realized that her childhood dream had finally started to become reality; twenty-five years after she first dreamt of it.

And so, her first book got published, and then her second, her third and after some time her thirteenth even. And if there is one thing this woman - who can now call herself a writer with such a joy - is absolutely positive about is that us humans have the ability to achieve anything in life as long as we have faith in ourselves and work hard towards our goals. If there is one thing this woman is absolutely positive about is that our childhood dreams have the power to sprinkle our lives with stardust.



MY STORY SO FAR



My name is Andri Antoniou. I was born in Cyprus in 1980. I was raised in Larnaca, a beautiful seaside town where I live until this day. My family was of low social and financial background. Since a very young age I fell in love with words. I fell in love with stories and books. I bought my first notebook and started writing my own stories. I told everyone that one day I would become a writer.

Books became my passion. I may not have had many of them, but the ones I had, I treasured. I read them repeatedly and found in their words a dear friend to keep me company when I felt bored and lonely.

As I was growing up, my desire to become a writer grew as well. I remember in high school, when our Greek teacher asked us to write on a piece of paper how we imagine our future, I immediately wrote "I dream of becoming a writer". I don't think she believed me!

From 1998 till 2002 I studied at the Department of Educational Sciences of the University of Cyprus. From 2002 until today, I work as a teacher in public primary education. Free public education has been a catalyst in my life. It shaped me, put wings on my back, made me what I am today. I feel grateful that I was born in an era that free public education is a privilege for all. I'm glad I have the chance to work as a teacher and therefore have the chance to put wings on the backs of so many children.

Both my grandmother and my mother were born with the gift of telling stories. Sadly, they were unlucky enough to be raised in a time when free public education was not a given. So, my grandmother did not go to school at all while my mom could not move beyond basic primary education. Remembering the stories they were telling me

when I was a child, I am positive that, if they had the opportunity to be educated in the way I have, they would have made their own path in the field of writing. Therefore, I do not write only for myself. I write for them too.

In 2012, after many years of experimenting in various types of writing, after many rejections and disappointments, my first book entitled "Beladomagnetis (Trouble magnet) was published by one of the largest publishing houses in Greece, Psichogios Publications. That book will always have a special place in my heart. It was the book that made my childhood dream come true. It was also the book that put me in the magical realm of children's literature.

The book won the National Award for Literature for Older Children and Adolescents in Cyprus. A huge recognition, a huge encouragement, a huge responsibility. Since then, I have written twelve other middle grade and young adult books, all published by major publishing houses in Greece. Many of them won important awards and distinctions both in Cyprus and in Greece.

In 2017 something unexpected happened. I was chosen to participate in a project called Aarhus39. That year the city of Aarhus in Denmark was the cultural capital of Europe. One of their cultural projects was to organize a children's literature festival that took place in Aarhus in October 2017. Thirty-nine promising European writers under the age of forty were chosen to participate. One of them was I. Each one of us thirty-nine wrote a short story that was included in the "Quest" and "Odyssey" anthologies that were published that very year. It was such an important experience, having the chance to work with other European writers and translators. A moment I will always cherish.

In 2022, I had the big honor to be one of Cyprus nominees for Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award. For me, the participation among titans of the world's children literature was a victory on its own. The cherry on the top of my writing path until then. And this year, I was preparing my participations, as Cyprus Nominee for Hans Christian Andersen Award, again amongst the world's most amazing children's literature authors. What a privilege to be a tiny teeny part of that.

All these years I have worked in the field of children's literature, I met important people, met dozens of children and teachers. I tried

my best to bring children and teachers in contact with children's books. I found a place to belong, I became a part of a group of people, in Cyprus, Greece and the world, who passionately love children's literature and do their best to make it flourish and include all aspects of children's life. In this time, I became a part of a world I have always wanted to belong.

I hope to continue writing for all the remaining years of my life. I hope to write books that will touch the souls of children and adolescents, books that will make them laugh and cry, books that will become their refuge, as books have always been a refuge and a sanctuary for me.

I hope with all my heart that one day I will see my books being translated into other languages; it's a big dream of mine! I firmly believe that literature has no borders and that we humans need to read stories not only from writers who write in our mother tongue, but also from writers who originally write in other languages. This strengthens our empathy and helps us feel like citizens of the world.

Let us all be united by the magic and power of children's literature!



Recent workshops presenting my latest book "On the way home"

CONTRIBUTION TO THE CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Written by Dr Marina Rodosthenous – Balafa

*Head of Department, Associate Professor in Modern Greek Literature,
School of Education*

University of Nicosia

Andri Antoniou is an inspired and inspiring writer whose work speaks to readers of all ages—children, teenagers, and adults—thanks to its multigenerational appeal. She addresses challenging topics in an engaging, authentic and deeply realistic way. Through her unique style, inventive narrative techniques, and creative adherence to literary conventions, Antoniou fosters a deep sense of empathy and compassion in her audience.

Antoniou stands out as one of the boldest voices in Greek literature, fearlessly tackling rarely explored subjects such as sexual abuse, domestic violence, the death of a sibling, and the loneliness of old age. Yet, she also has the versatility to infuse her work with humor, crafting purely comic stories or weaving humor into her more serious narratives. This ability to balance both the tragic and the joyful elements of life reflects her belief that art is an inseparable blend of light and darkness. It is this skillful blending that makes her work so compelling, drawing readers in and holding their attention despite the often-difficult themes she explores.

Some of Antoniou's greatest strengths lie in her simplicity, directness, and her talent for creating characters that readers can easily identify with. Her works are true to life, magnetic in their honesty, and irresistibly engaging. This combination of qualities is what makes her stories not only powerful and thought-provoking but also a source of comfort, enabling readers to reflect on their own complex emotions.

AWARDS AND DISTINCTIONS

1. Cyprus National Book Award – Young People’s Literature for 2012, 2017, 2018 and 2021
2. Shortlisted for Cyprus National Book Award – Young People’s Literature for 2013, 2016 and 2018
3. Awarded by Women’s Literary Society of Greece 2015 and 2016 (for two books)
4. Shortlisted for Greece’s National Book Award – Young People’s Literature for 2019 (second place)
5. Shortlisted for Greek’s IBBY Award– Young People’s Literature for 2019
6. Shortlisted for the Literature Awards of literature magazine “O Anagnostis” – category Young People’s Literature for 2017 and 2018
7. Included in Aarhus39 project
8. Included in IBBY’S Honor List for 2020
9. An Astrid’s Lindgren Memorial Award Nominee for 2022



**Cyprus National
Book Award for
“Trouble magnet”**



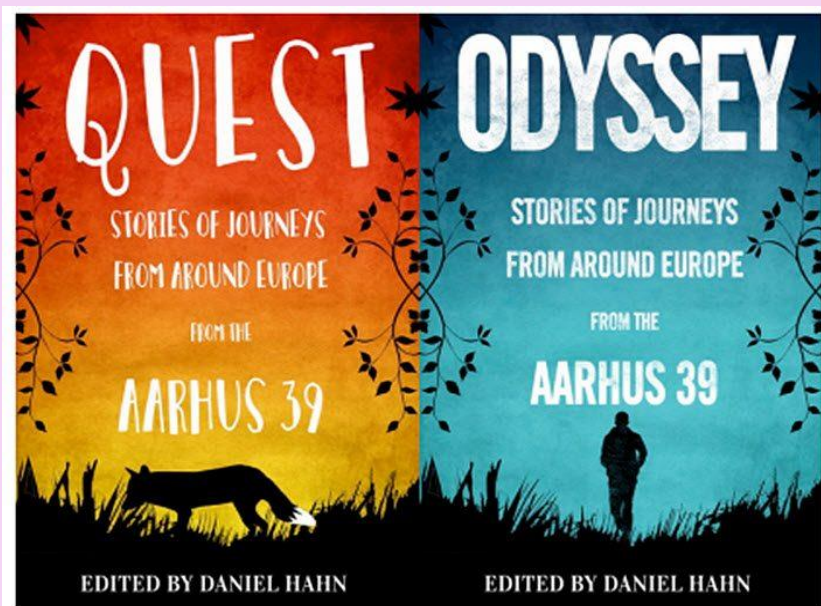
**Cyprus National
Book Award for
“The summer
I grew up”**



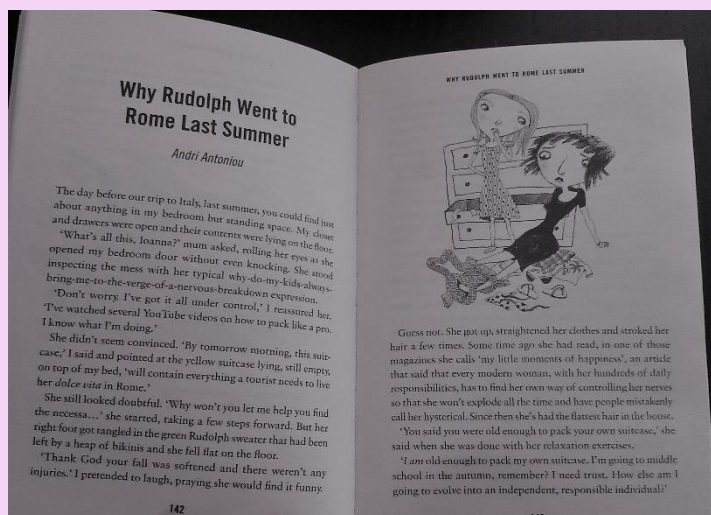
**Cyprus National
Book Award for
“Where did your
laughter go, Orsalia?”**



**Cyprus National
Book Award for
“Pictures on a black
Background”**



**Participating in the Project Aarhus 39
with the story
“Why Rudolph Went to Rome Last Summer?”
(Published in English and in Danish)**





CYPRUS (Greek) 15

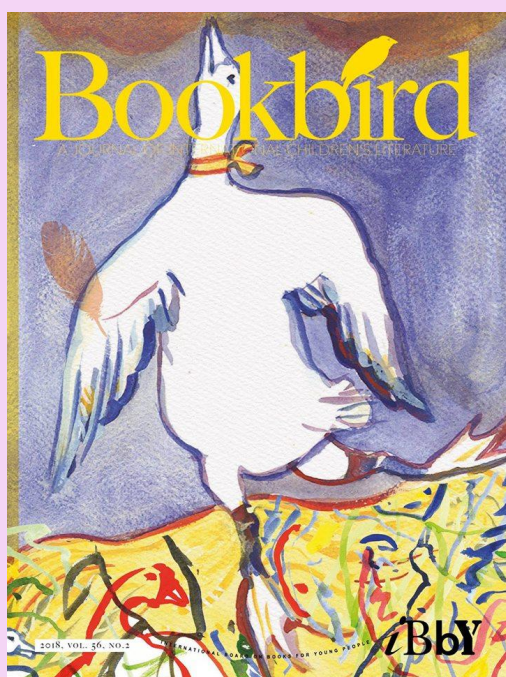
Antoniou, Andri
To kalokeri pou meyalosa
 (The summer that I grew up)
 Athens: Kedros, 2017
 119pp; 140x206mm
 ISBN 978-960-04-4742-2, Ages: 12+
Family, secrets, domestic violence



Anna is a fourteen-year-old girl trapped in a vicious cycle of domestic violence. Her father's outbursts are becoming more violent as time goes by. Keeping his behaviour a secret feels like such a burden for Anna when what she really wants to do is to cry out loud for help. Her mother

on the other hand hopes that things will soon change and they will become a normal family like all others. How dangerous is it not to be able to face the harsh truth? What amount of strength does it take to react to violence? But how can you move on with your life, if you do not? Through Anna's first-person narration the story unravels in a breath-taking way over one summer.

“The summer that I grew up” In IBBY’S Honor’s List of 2020



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Interview for Bookbird

2018, vol. 56, No. 2



You are a candidate

Congratulations! This email is your confirmation that you have been nominated for the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award 2022, and that this nomination has been approved by the award jury. The list of candidates will be made public later today, on October 21. We kindly ask you not to spread the news until the list is published on our website at 1 pm CET.

Please read the information below and do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

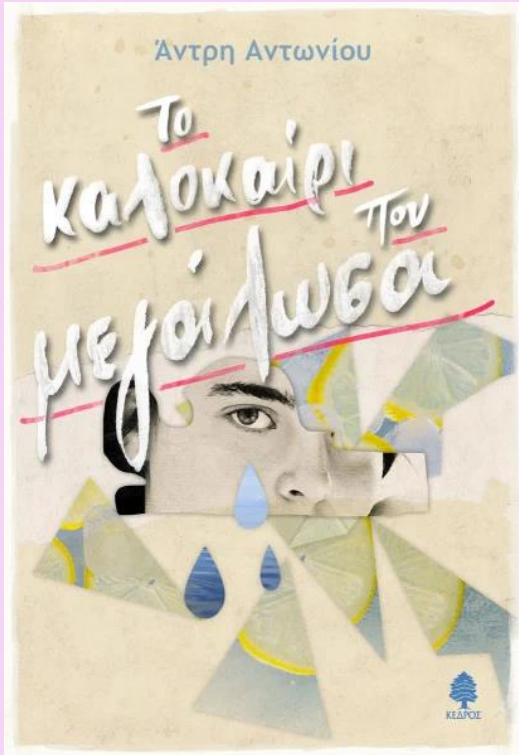
Yours sincerely,
Boel Westin, Chair of the Jury

An Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award Nominee for 2022

FIVE REPRESENTATIVE BOOKS

THE SUMMER THAT I GREW UP

(Full translation of the book in English at the Appendix)



Book title in Greek: Το καλοκαίρι που meyalosa

Published by Kedros Publishing House (Athens, April 2017)

Cover: Elita Sidiropoulou

Category: Young Adult

Pages: 119

Distinctions

- (1) **Cyprus National Book Award – Young People’s Literature for 2017**
- (2) **Shortlisted for the Literature Awards 2018 of Literature Magazine “Ο Anagnostis”(Greece) – category Young People’s Literature**
- (3) **IBBY’S Honor List 2020**

Blurb

How easy is it to keep a secret of what's going on in your house? Especially when all you want to do is to get out and ask for help?

Anna, a fourteen-year-old girl, feels that what she and her mother are experiencing is getting out of control. Her father's behavior has already gone out of limits. His violent outbursts have become a daily nightmare.

But her mother still hopes. She is expecting soon things to change.

How dangerous is it not to be able to face the truth? And how much strength does it take to react? But what if this is the only chance you have to keep on going?

My thoughts on the book

"The Summer I grew up" is a very special book to me. It's the story of two women, fourteen-year-old Anna and her mother Sophia, trapped in the vicious circle of domestic violence. Anna lives with her parents in a house on the outskirts of a city. Their seemingly ordinary life is indelibly marked by her father's outbursts of rage, which frequently lead to violence towards her mother and, at some point towards Anna as well. Through a series of events that take place during a difficult summer, the teenage protagonist and narrator of the story, struggles to liberate her mother and herself from the violence they have been experiencing all their lives. During this difficult summer Anna is coming of age.

I always wanted to write a book about domestic violence. It's a serious problem that many people-neighbors, relatives, friends- may deal with and surprisingly most of the times the rest of us haven't got

the slightest idea about. In small societies like the ones in Cyprus and Greece, such an issue is still considered a taboo.

One Saturday afternoon during the summer of 2014, at dusk, I was sitting at my veranda with the laptop in front of me. A few sentences came to me. I typed them and then read them out loud. *“Mum and I keep running. She holds me by the hand, and we keep running. We run to escape, to disappear, to be invisible. We run to be happy. To stop crying and to stop being afraid. Especially, to stop being afraid.”* This is a part of the text that ultimately formed the book's prologue. Reading it out loud made me realize that the time had come to write a book on domestic violence. Within the next six months I read as many books on the subject as possible to be able to put myself in the place of both the perpetrator and the victim. To understand the vicious cycle of domestic violence.

Writing this book wasn't easy. There were times I felt like I was walking on a tightrope and that with the first twist I would fall and crush. It was a delicate issue that needed special handling. I did the best I could to become the voice of all people who experience such situations and might be afraid to speak up. Writing it was a big challenge and that is why I love it so much.

I was moved several times writing this story because Anna and Sophia might have not been real people, but dozens of people trapped in this vicious cycle exist out there. I wish the story has managed to reach some real Annas and some real Sophias all these years. I wish it had become a breeze, a wind to push them further from silence, to encourage them to break the cycle of violence and find the peace they deserve.

I also hope it has made teens and adults, who may not be experiencing such a situation themselves, reach out to neighbors, relatives or friends who might need help in this matter and support them. More than anything, I wish with all my heart that my story has made people realize that violence is not acceptable. And what you should not do, when you hear about such an incident, is to blame the victim. Otherwise, you become their second perpetrator.

Two published reviews of the book

1) Reasoning for State Literature Award of Cyprus for Children and Adolescents for the 2017 editions by the Prize Committee.

A social, realistic novel addressing domestic violence. With concise and direct language, in a first-person, co-narrative style, the fourteen-year-old Anna describes dramatic everyday situations experienced by both herself and her mother with a tyrannical husband and father-master, transforming their lives into a hellish existence.

Through the heroine's narration, the author presents different perspectives and attitudes towards the events, those of the three main fictional characters, shockingly highlighting the mental state of the two women as victims of senseless male violence. The distinct reactions of the two women - the mother's tolerance and submission, the daughter's silence and anger - underscore the significant influence of the different social and cultural environments in which each was raised, a fact further emphasized by the grandmother's stance.

The narrative is asthmatic, a product of increasing narrative intensity structured in the descriptions of violent scenes, the emphasis on painful mental issues, and the emotional conflicts of the heroines. Silence, as a choice, conceals a series of internal processes expressed through segments of the teenage heroine's internal monologue. A heartbreaking novel that touches the souls of both adolescent and adult readers.

2) Vasilis Koutsiaris- "Thessalia Newspaper "(Greece) 10. 09.17

"One of the most beautiful books released in 2017 is the young adult novel titled "The summer that I grew up" by Andri Antoniou. The author deals with the harsh topic of domestic violence. The victims are two women, Sofia and her daughter Anna. Through Anna's gripping first-person narrative, the veil of the story unfolds, making readers feel a powerful punch in the gut. No! Violence is not love. Fear is not love.

Promises do not change a person. From the moment someone lays a hand on their defenseless victims, they will do it again.

Realistic description, breathtaking short sentences, powerful message. Yes, there is a solution. For all victims of domestic violence. They just need to shout in a loud voice. To ask for help. Like the protagonist. Fourteen-year-old Anna.

Let's not forget... life can be beautiful. The things that hurt will be left behind. The darkness will cease to exist because soon the light will come again.”

**The book was translated in Italian Language and released
by Besa Muci Publishers in June 2024.**



Rendez-vous 19

A 14 anni Ana vorrebbe solo essere felice e vivere una vita come quella dei suoi coetanei: vorrebbe essere libera di dire, di pensare, di agire. Invece da sempre vive un incubo costante: quello di un padre irascibile e violento, geloso e possessivo che spesso picchia la madre e non permette ad Ana di uscire o partecipare alle feste dei suoi amici. La loro situazione è un segreto racchiuso nelle quattro mura di casa, un segreto che sua mamma vuole che resti nascosto, perché, in cuor suo, spera che l'uomo possa cambiare. Del resto gli altri non si accorgono comunque di niente, nemmeno Nefeli, la migliore amica di Ana, che pensa che lei sia solo esagerata e non voglia fare mai niente.

Ana però non ci sta più: vorrebbe urlare al mondo quello che stanno vivendo, chiedere aiuto, scappare, se necessario. Ne va della sua felicità, della loro felicità, quella sua e di sua madre. Ci vuole solo tanto coraggio e la forza di reagire...

IBBY HONOUR LIST 2020

PREMIO NAZIONALE DI CIPRO PER LA LETTERATURA
PER RAGAZZI E ADOLESCENTI

www.besamucieditore.it



euro 15,00

A SEVENTY-YEAR-OLD AGED TEN

(Full translation of the book in English at the Appendix)



Book title in Greek: Evdomintachroni eton deka

Published by Psychogios Publishing House (Athens, October 2018)

Illustrations: Liana Denezaki

Category: Middle Grade

Pages: 74

Distinctions

- (1) Praise by Women’s Literary Society of Greece in the Literature Competition for unpublished work in the category Middle Grade Novel for 2016**
- (2) Shortlisted for Cyprus National Book Award – Young People’s Literature for 2018**

Blurb

Who is the mysterious woman with the blue, glass-like eyes, and why does she always appear in the same places where Stavros, Margarita, Daniel, and Irene often meet? How will the four children react when she reveals her terrifying secret to them? Will they believe her? And if they do believe her, will they be able to help her?

Heartbeats, mystery, and countless shivers in a story that will skyrocket your suspense levels!

My thoughts on the book

They say there are two types of writers. Pantsers and plotters. Plotters outline their stories before writing them. Pantsers, on the other hand, fly by the seat of their pants and just write. Personally, I belong to the category of pantsers. I usually do not plan my work in advance. I let the story carry me away. I let my heroes talk to me. Most of the times, planning in advance feels like it's limiting my creativity.

However, my book "A seventy-year-old aged ten" was the one to put me in the category of plotters even for once. Things happened like this: On a Sunday fall night, I was sitting on the couch relaxing, not even trying to think of a story to write. Suddenly, the whole plot of the book, from beginning to end, all the main characters, the mystery and the twists, appeared in my mind in a flash. I was surprised. I opened my computer and wrote in all detail the plot of each chapter. In the week that followed I managed to complete the whole story, realizing that being a plotter can have its benefits too!

In the story, a woman in her seventies keeps appearing in the same places that a group of children hangs out. When the children threaten to call the police, she explains to them that she is a ten-year-old trapped inside her seventy-year-old grandmother's body. An exciting adventure begins for these five people. An adventure that will make them realize that no matter how much our body changes, or our hair turns white, or even our face wrinkles, there is something that never ages and that is our soul. This very thing is something I realize every morning when I look at myself in the mirror. I may look forty-four but inside I feel ten!

Two published reviews of the book

1) Comment from the judging committee of the Women's Literary Society competition.

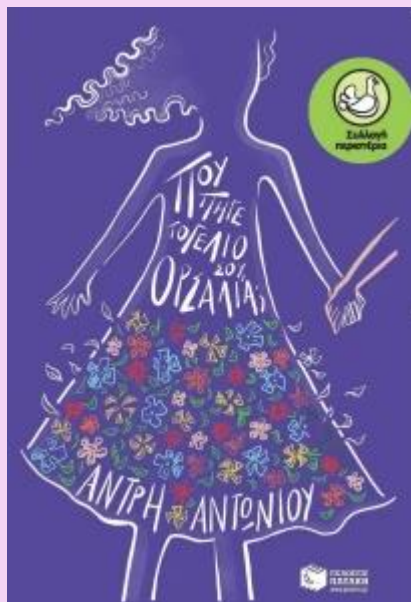
"The themes of friendship, family, and the loneliness of age are conveyed effortlessly to the reader through a cleverly structured story with doses of mystery."

2) Apostolos Pappos - Elniplex (Greek site about Children's Literature)

"The way the writer unfolds her story, the methods by which she conceals her seventy-year-old heroine are excellent, creating even greater mystery until the emotion comes and knocks you down, making you wonder, 'How did the writer manage to do that?'. It's about friendship old age and love."

WHERE DID YOUR LAUGHTER GO, ORSALIA?

(Full translation of the book in English at Appendix)



Book title in Greek: Pou piye to yelio sou, Orsalia?

Published by Patakis Publishing House (Athens, March 2018)

Cover: Katerina Siskopoulou

Age group: Middle Grade

Distinctions

- (1) **Cyprus National Book Award – Young People’s Literature for 2018**
- (2) **Shortlisted for the Greek National Book Award – Young People’s Literature for 2019 (second place)**
- (3) **Shortlisted for the Literature Awards 2019 of Literature Magazine “O Anagnostis” – category Young People’s Literature**

Blurb

Solonas, at the tender age of ten, faces one of the hardest events in a person's life: Loss. His beloved sister, Orsalia is no longer with him.

Her death shakes the balance and affects the relations within the family.

Everyone finds their way to deal with it: mom is closing up on herself, dad is constantly cooking and Solonas is looking for comfort in his good friend Lydia and in Alexia, the psychologist who is tending him.

Months follow one after the other and time passes. Will these three people be able to overcome the loss and find the strength to continue? Or some wounds can never heal?

My thoughts on the book

I had never thought of writing a book about the loss of a sibling. However, a few years ago, on a winter night, the protagonist of the story, a ten-year-old boy named Solonas, whispered in my ear: *“Orsalia, often comes in my dreams. She wears a white floral dress and takes me by the hand to dance. She has such a big smile that seems to be smiling with her eyes”*.

I turned on my computer and started typing. As the first chapter unfolded, I realized that Solonas was dealing with the loss of his twin sister, Orsalia. That night I turned off the computer perplexed.

Some years before, I had read Katherine’s Paterson interview about her book "Bridge to Terabithia" which was published in 1977. In this story the ten-year-old protagonist drowns in the river. The book is now considered a classic book of children's literature, but when it first came out, its author faced reactions from parents and librarians because of its subject. The book had even been banned for some time because death and loss were considered provocative topics for the time. The tragic irony is that Paterson wrote this book shortly after her son's best friend was struck by lightning at the age of eight and got killed. So, I could not but wonder: What are we trying to protect our children from? Events that, no matter how difficult, are part of life?

Although my own book was written forty years after Patterson's, I was still worried that the loss of a sibling would still be a taboo in Greek Children's Literature. For a while I was reluctant to send my manuscript for evaluation to a publishing house, feeling almost certain that it would be rejected. When I changed my mind and sent it to Patakis Publication House, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that my story was approved. And not only did it get published but it also received distinctions and appraisal.

So, should we give children books that deal with difficult subjects or is it better to protect them from painful topics, until they are old enough to find ways to manage them on their own? Well, if life waited for children to come of age to bring painful events into their lives, then I would say let us wait too, let children's books wait too. But because reality is different, because life does not wait, because we need to learn to manage difficulties and sorrows from a young age, I think that it's necessary for us authors to write such books and for children to read them.

When children read stories, regardless of whether they experience a similar problem to the one the protagonist experience, they can benefit tremendously getting to know how their peers dealt with various situations. I am a firm believer, that children need to be told the truth, in a way that they can understand and grow. Having them locked in the golden cage of ignorance does not really help them. After all, children are much stronger than we think, often stronger than ourselves.

I want to emphasize that I believe it's important - no matter how distressing or sad a subject is - to have a finale that will give hope to children. That is why in my book "Where did your laughter go, Orsalia?", in the last chapters of the story, Solonas' heart slowly begins to fill with hope and optimism. And with this hope and optimism he moves on in life, even without his beloved sister, Orsalia.

Two published reviews about the book

1) Reasoning for State Literature Award of Cyprus for Children and Adolescents for the 2018 editions by the Prize Committee

This particular work explores the theme of loss within a family. It highlights and discusses challenging topics, such as the death of a child, which is not commonly encountered in Greek-language youth literature. The desired balance in the family is achieved through the realistic handling of the event of death by its members. Narrative elements, dialogues, selected incidents of thought and action, and the efforts of the characters emerge through different and creative ways of processing grief and human suffering, with authenticity and without melodrama. The book is optimistic, yet sincere. Essentially, it is a psychograph of authentic moments. The subtle expressions of the drama and moments of authenticity are realistically outlined, including the perspectives of those experiencing the loss. A loss that ultimately transforms, sanctifying life and its continuity. The writing flows smoothly, and readers effortlessly engage with the tactile snapshots of the plot.

2) Apostolos Pappos-Elniplex (Greek site about Children's Book Literature)

Andri Antoniou's book is not only well-written and moving, nor just a challenging endeavor that she truly managed to tame and make beautiful. Beyond the excellent narrative that places you in its own particular, nostalgic atmosphere, the book naturally brings forth people who suffer, gradually reveals ways of dealing with loss, de-stigmatizes pain and sorrow, and reveals to every reader a strong conviction: that death can only be physical because memory keeps our loved ones always present. *'Even if I cry, I never want Orsalia to stop existing in our conversations,'* says the mother to Solonas towards the end of the book. Just as Professor Liadines urged us all: *'Just as you can't hide from death, don't hide it either. Death is oblivion.'*

PHOTOS ON A BLACK BACKGROUND

(Full translation of the book in English at the Appendix)



Book title in Greek: Fotografies se mavro fonto

Published by Patakis Publishing House (Athens, March 2021)

Cover: Theda Mimilaki

Age group: Young Adult

Pages: 110

Distinctions

- (1) Cyprus National Book Award – Young People’s Literature for 2021**

Blurb

Claustrophobic darkness. Horror. My legs stuck in the red, thick surface. I was trying to remove them, I was trying to swim, to move my arms and legs with abrupt, hasty, despaired moves. I stood still at the exact same place. The red liquid was thick, I was unable to move. I was sinking. I was

unable to breath, unable to live. In this thick and bloody stream of my life the only thing I could do was to keep sinking.

Amalia tries to balance between the age of eight and the age of sixteen. Like a ritual she unavoidably goes back to the horror of that day, to the horror of that action. Like the heroine of the myth, she gets swallowed by the black pitch darkness of Hades. Till the time, Orpheus, a young boy with round cheeks and sad eyes enters her life.

This is a journey to the deep end of the soul after its ultimate violation, to the agony of the wound that keeps bleeding, to the shutters of a childhood that ended abruptly. How do you move on when the scar is a part of yourself? When spring does not follow the endless winter? When forgetting is not and cannot be an option?

My thoughts on the book

My need to address the issue of sexual abuse goes back a few years. Every time I read an article in the newspaper about a child who was sexually harassed, I felt indescribable anger, sadness, and frustration. I made many efforts to express and manage my emotions through writing, but none of the stories I tried to create seemed to work.

Until some years ago, when Amalia came in my mind and when I wrote her first thoughts on my computer, I felt like I was listening to a real Amalia. I felt like I was listening to a real girl carrying the heavy trauma of sexual abuse on her back.

I decided to write her story without following a linear course. Instead, I wrote short fragments from her life then and her life now. I tried to capture her past, when she was abused at the age of eight, and her present as a sixteen-year-old adolescent. I tried to show "pictures" from different phases of her life.

I consider it to be one of the most important books I have written so far. It is a story that moved me deeply. At one point I became so attached to Amalia that her pain became mine, the burden of her soul felt heavy on my soul too. I felt like I became the girl who was sexually abused as a child, even if this is not something that actually happened to me. I went so deep into her psyche that there was a period, just

before finishing the book, that Andri and Amalia spoke in the exact same voice.

Writing "The End" in the book made me feel empty, something deflated inside me, I felt an indescribable loneliness for a long time afterwards. It was as if I lost a close friend, a loved one who confided in me her darkest secret. I bonded with Amalia more than any other character I have ever created. I will always carry her inside me - this girl will be a part of my heart forever.

A couple of months before the book was published, Sofia Bekatorou, a Greek sailing champion, dared to talk about her own experience of sexual abuse when she was younger. What followed was a flood of people from the fields of sports, theatre, and culture, both in Greece and Cyprus, that found the strength to speak up about their own experiences of sexual abuse. The #metoo movement that started a few years ago abroad finally came to Greece and Cyprus.

At first, I was in shock realizing that sexual abuse is a trauma that so many people around us carry. Afterwards, I felt relieved. Relieved, because I believe that the people who find the strength to speak about their trauma, take a step to heal and at the same time pave the way for other victims to speak as well.

The perpetrators come before their responsibilities. The perpetrators, who for so long thought they could violate the body and soul of others without any consequence, are now being treated as they should be. Justice will impose its punishment. The conscience of people will impose its own.

I consider it extremely important to educate children about sexual abuse. I feel that not all parents and teachers are fully informed and ready to approach the issue properly. I believe that we need to be educated first, so that we can educate our children as best as we can. I am glad to see great books on the subject getting published. Once again, literature has the power to bring to light all the issues that we adults consider dark and inaccessible.

Two published reviews about the book

1) Reasoning for State Literature Award of Cyprus for Children and Adolescents for the 2021 editions by the Prize Committee.

“Andri Antoniou's book *Photos on a Black Background* focuses on the deeply wounded psyche of sixteen-year-old Amalia, who at the age of eight experienced sexual abuse by her mother's partner. In a claustrophobic, non-linear narrative, the wounded today's teenager keeps meeting her eight-year-old self, reliving the nightmares of her past. Beside her move a series of motley figures; inadequate parents, absent peers and little Orpheus, the only one who seems to be able to retrieve her from gloomy darkness of Hades. Apart from the particularly interesting and bold subject of the book, which will probably initiate discussions between teenagers and adults, most positive elements of it include the fragmented writing that tries to manage post-traumatic stress, the structure of the narrative, the high aesthetics of the book, and the interiority with which the tragedy of a rape is presented, which leaves indelible marks on the body and the soul.”

2) Pepi Nikolikopoulou - Elculture (Greek site about Literature and Arts)

"Andri Antoniou, in an artistic manner, approaches an extremely sensitive subject, that of childhood sexual abuse. With a deceptive quality and daring, takes us back and forth between past and present, flowing like water between words and pages. Forward, backward, sometimes slowly and sometimes sharply and quickly. The event is not revealed to us from the beginning and when it happens, the details no longer matter. Only chilling meanings, words whose unexpected combination creates shocking images of horror. An exceptional book written with sensitivity but also tenderness."

ON THE WAY HOME

(Full translation of the book in English at the Appendix)



Book title in Greek: Ston dromos yia to spiti

Published by Psychogios Publishing House, January 2024

Illustration: Ourania Makrygianni

Age group: Middle Grade

Pages: 88

Blurb

A girl on an island. The island is surrounded by azure coasts and golden beaches; however, the girl cannot splash in all its sea sides or play on every sandy shore. Because one summer, enemy ship washed ashore on the island, and since then, the lives of its inhabitants crumbled like a castle on the sand.

The girl will learn early in her life the meaning of words like refuge, barriers, missing people, wires, occupation. Words she often hears on television, learns daily at school, but above all, feels deep inside her heart.

The girl will grow up and meet children who abandoned their own homeland in order to survive. She knows firsthand what these children need; what every person who suddenly becomes a refugee needs. Security, peace, love, hope, acceptance. Until they take root in

the soil where they were forced to be, until one day they can feel it as home.

My thoughts on the book

It was the news on television that inspired me to write my latest book titled "*On the way home*". It was February 2022, and the images from Russia's invasion to Ukraine were overwhelming: bombings, destruction, refugees. What affected me the most was a photo on the internet of Ukrainian refugees holding their suitcases, waiting for transportation to flee their homeland. The image of Greek Cypriots with hastily packed bags on the road of displacement during the Turkish invasion of 1974 came to my mind.

Talking with friends and relatives at that particular time, I noticed that the television images of the Russian invasion in Ukraine had awakened intense emotions in many Greek Cypriots, especially those who experienced the events of 1974. Grief for what they had went through then, unbearable nostalgia for their occupied villages and towns, sorrow for the new refugees they now saw in the television.

With my heart filled with emotions and my mind full of thoughts, I found an outlet once again on paper. I took a notebook and started writing, beginning with my own experience as a child and grandchild of refugees. I wrote about the situation in Cyprus when I was a child, when the trauma of 1974 was fresh, and the wound was deep and bleeding.

At some point, I realized that the story I was writing transcended the borders of Cyprus and reached out to children from other countries—children who had to leave their own homeland and seek refuge on foreign countries.

I didn't know what title to give to the book. No matter what I thought of, it didn't seem good enough, representative enough of the text. Until, while writing the chapter "*On the way home*," I felt that, aside from being the title of that specific chapter, the phrase was also the ideal title for the entire book.

The summer of 2024 marks fifty years since the Turkish invasion of 1974 to Cyprus. The July of 2024 marks fifty years since we, the Greek Cypriots, cannot take the way home...

Two published reviews about the book

1) Sissy Tsiflidou (Primary Education Teacher holding a PhD from the Faculty of Primary Education of the University of Athens) at Elniplex (Greek site about Culture and Literature)

We will focus on the particular case of Andri Antoniou's text, which constitutes a secondary testimony since she is a descendant of refugees. She grew up in a refugee settlement and is a recipient and participant in the post-traumatic stress caused by her relatives' experiences. At the same time, it is also a primary account, as she becomes a witness to other events in the aftermath of the invasion, such as the violent death of Tasos Isaac in 1996 by the Grey Wolves, proving that the precarious situation sustains a boiling cauldron. The unresolved political impasses fail to provide a permanent solution to the problem. Furthermore, the influx of new refugees to Cyprus or other European countries brings the issue back to the forefront, giving it a universal character.

Nevertheless, the book does not aspire to be a non-fiction book with sources and photographic material, nor a work of fiction. The thematic centers in all the small chapters remain focused on refuge and the concept of home, with smaller related conceptual groupings developing around them: school, settlements, play, landmarks like the turquoise waters and orchards that signify both literal and metaphorical uses. Just as in the history of the invasion, there is a before and after: The soil that blooms, that bears fruit, the soil that covers the dead bodies of impulsive and brave fighters.

The narrative transforms into a hymn for the love of the homeland and birthplace, as suggested by its dedication at the beginning: *To the refugees of Cyprus. To the refugees of Earth.*

The road home becomes the agony of return, expressed through uprooted trees that cannot move any further once dislodged, signified in the anguished cry in the chapter “Larnaca - I left my soul inside, open up!”, finding solace in dreams that bring the missing person to sit by the armchair, in the DNA identification of bones, and it shakes the foundation of our inertia with children who fall into comas when in a foreign country, feeling threatened by the danger of deportation, unwilling to wake until they feel safe.

The writing effortlessly fulfills its purpose, as nothing is lacking or understated; there is a clarity of thought and emotion expressed with the power of words. The narrative is not illustrated; Andri Antoniou focuses on the human condition. And rightly so, in my opinion, this text was not illustrated; it would be like adding musical accompaniment to a Byzantine hymn, affecting the reception and direct communication with something beyond emotion that it does not provoke. The language is simple, concise, and does not digress. The writing is solid, well-crafted, with a carefully structured composition, dialogues, and descriptions powered by the strength of nouns, the majesty of nouns, the difficulty of nouns that stand dominantly on their own, carrying significant weight without needing adjectives.

Everything is bathed in the light of deprivation and love for the homeland, the one you left behind, the one that received you, and the one that becomes the new homeland for your children. A contrasting space of imaginary and real, the bodies are the signs of a memory.

Rarely do I dwell on the mental images of a text, and it's not by chance since those evoked in my mind by the text possess extraordinary power, sweeping you away like immense waves

cresting and throwing you onto new shores, giving specific conceptual nuances to the term empathy. In a world that inundates us with images of refuge, it encompasses us.

The reason I find it very moving is because the author presents her personal truth. In her books, Antoniou has tackled difficult subjects, such as child abuse, and has proven to approach them with knowledge, sensitivity, and an educational method.

I like it because it is a book that a child can read without making identifications or transfers with didactic purposes like: appreciate what you have today, your parents, your home, etc.

Antoniou approaches the topic of the invasion through an experiential lens filtered through the eyes of a child born in refugee settlement, with respect, discretion, and appropriate knowledge. The book follows a journey that doesn't end in a happy conclusion but in the articulation of a deeper optimistic perspective, as the essential terms refugee and human align and coexist, not contrasting: *However – come what may, even with wars and bullets and painful words – we, the people, we, the refugees, will continue. We will dream and chase those dreams until they become our daily reality. We will start from zero and reach ten, a hundred, a thousand. [...] We, the people – we, the refugees – will chase color, light, love. We will fight for peace and freedom. We, the people, will always choose LIFE.”*

2) Fytoula Vakana (Primary School Teacher and Children's Book Author at her site Poua Blogaki)

This book is Andri Antoniou's truth. It holds her thoughts, feelings, and the things that keep her awake at night, inherited from the life she lived as a child and grandchild of refugees.

The remarkable Andri Antoniou gives us a precious gift on the 50th anniversary of the Turkish invasion and the occupation of a large part of our island by the Turks. It is a gift because she shares with us memories from her childhood in the refugee

settlement and the impact that the tragedy of Cyprus had on her life.

No matter how empathetic one is, how can they truly step into the shoes of a refugee, someone who suddenly finds themselves running away from their home and everything they love to save their life? To be cramped in tents without necessities, to be crowded into settlement apartments, and to see the village or city where they grew up only through a TV screen or on the cover of a school notebook with the “Never Forget” written underneath. But how can you forget when you’ve been violently uprooted from your roots?

In twenty-eight short chapters, Antoniou outlines the heavy imprint left by the invasion and its tragic consequences on our generation. On those of us who did not experience it but lived under the constant threat of a new war hovering over us daily. A generation that grew up learning new words that left a bitter taste and a knot in the stomach: refugees, missing persons, green line, enclaved, occupation army...

Antoniou conveys, in her unique way, the daily life of her family in the settlement, where their bodies may be, but their thoughts and souls remain in the place where they were born and grew up. The longing for return gives them the strength to continue, and they utter at every opportunity: “*Next year, in our homes!*” What a feeling it is to live waiting to return to where you belong... Waiting to take root again...

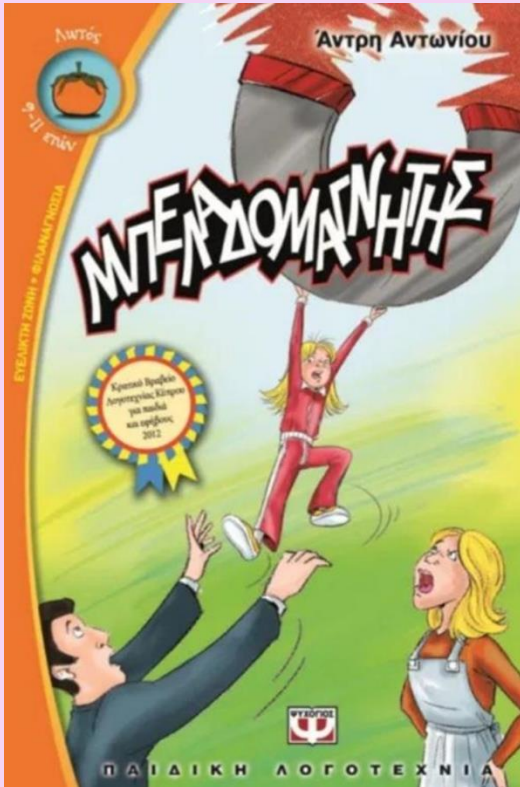
Andri Antoniou manages not only to cover calendar events that are milestones for the Cypriot people in the period following the Turkish invasion, such as the murders of Isaac and Solomou, the opening of the barricades, the image of women holding a photo and asking: “*Have you seen him? Do you know if he is alive?*”, but with the skill and sensitivity that characterize her, she touches on the trauma of her family, the collective trauma of an entire people, and elevates it to the universal tragedy of the refugee, the persecuted, the one who is denied the obvious: to take the road home. In her book, she speaks of the Ukrainian student who is a refugee, of the resignation syndrome of refugee children seeking asylum in Sweden, and of lost

refugee children in today's Cyprus, just a few kilometers away from us.

A deeply emotional book. Antoniou's memories are not my own, but they marked my generation, tore apart the previous ones, and the following generations need to be aware of them. Because only by learning history can we choose not to repeat it. Because peoples must always and under all circumstances choose peace.

THE REST OF MY PUBLISHED WORK

TROUBLEMAGNET



Book title in Greek: Beladomagnitis

Published by Psychogios Publishing House
(Athens, May 2012)

Illustrations: Katerina Chrysochoou

Category: Middle Grade

Pages: 173

Distinctions

**1) Cyprus National Book Award – Young People’s Literature
for 2012**

Blurb

The life of the ten-year-old Mirto is simply a drama. She has absolutely no idea how she is always in some kind of trouble. Even though she has the best of intentions, the others keep putting obstacles in her way.

Orestis, her five-year-old brother, is the biggest brat in the world. He messes with her things all the time and then goes and hides behind their mom's skirt. Even her dog, Jack, gives her a hard time. He's so stubborn and constantly does whatever he pleases.

Then there is her classmate, Iakovos, who makes her heart race. Her parents who obviously hide a terrible secret and Mrs. Voula, her neighbor, who complicates everything with her whims.

Mirto makes a brave decision; to do everything she can in order to avoid troubles. Will she succeed or will she continue to attract them like a magnet?

A story filled with humor, adventure, and unexpected twists.

PENELOPE



Book title in Greek: Pinelopi

Published by Psychogios Publishing House (Athens, May 2013)

Illustrations by Liana Denezaki

Category: Middle Grade

Pages: 103

Distinctions

- 1) Shortlisted for Cyprus National Book Award – Young People’s Literature for 2013

Blurb

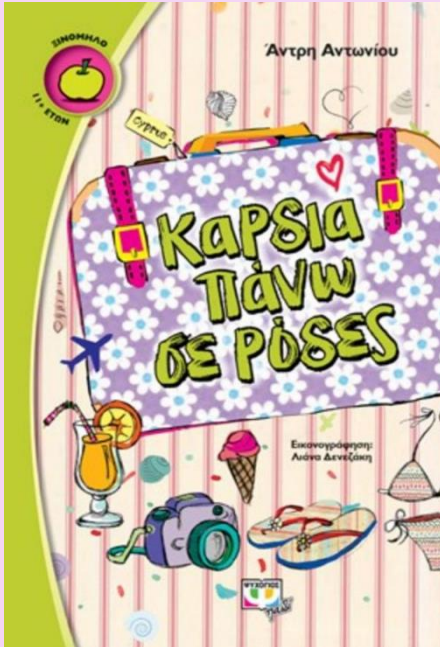
Penelope is a fifth grader who really loves food. Chocolates, chips, and hamburgers are all on her favorites list. Her life would have been much easier if her mom were not so keen on healthy nutrition.

Her big dream is to someday own a tree house. A dream that she puts all her effort to make it come true.

When someone tries to have the school's talent contest cancelled, Penelope finds herself entangled in a very strange and mysterious story.

Flying umbrellas, threatening messages, diets, and scales in a book full of humor, emotion, and unexpected twists.

HEART ON WHEELS



Book title in Greek: Kardia pano se rodes

Published by Psychogios Publishing House
(Athens, October 2016)

Illustrations: Liana Denezaki

Category: Middle Grade

Pages: 132

Distinctions

- 1) Shortlisted for Cyprus National Book Award – Young People’s Literature for 2016

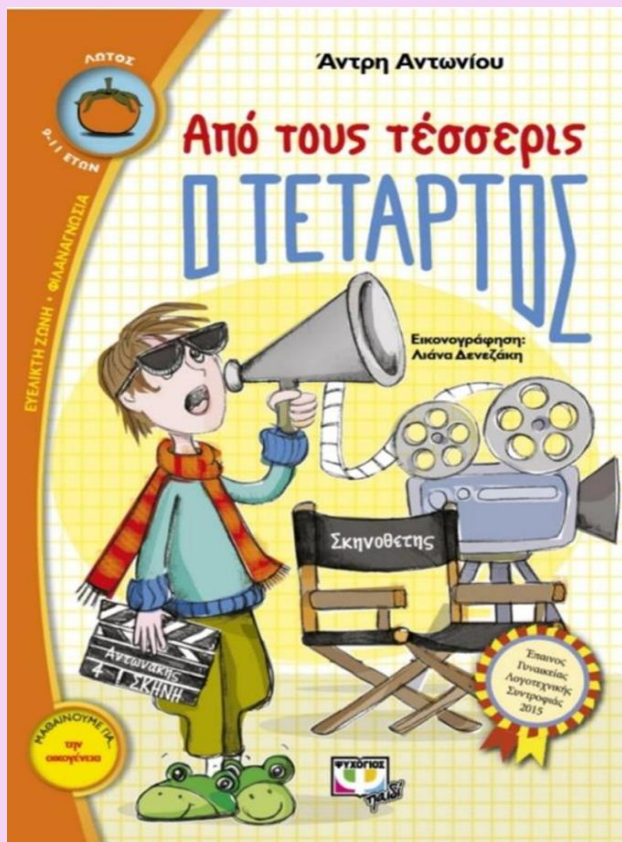
Blurb

They say that when you enter adolescence, several peculiar things happen to you. Hara, however, hasn’t noticed any change.

During summer, before starting junior high, she goes on vacation with her family. There she meets Andreas, a boy her age. Things are going relatively well, until her cousin, Elena, arrives.

And at that exact point, adolescence strikes resulting in a crazy adventure that will leave nothing standing.

FOURTH OUT OF FOUR



Book title in Greek: Apo tous tesseris o tetartos

Published by Psychogios Publishing House (Athens, November 2017)

Illustrations: Liana Denezaki

Category: Middle Grade Novel

Pages: 70

Distinctions

- 1) Praise by Women's Literary Society of Greece in the Literature Competition for unpublished work in the category Middle Grade Novel for 2015

Blurb

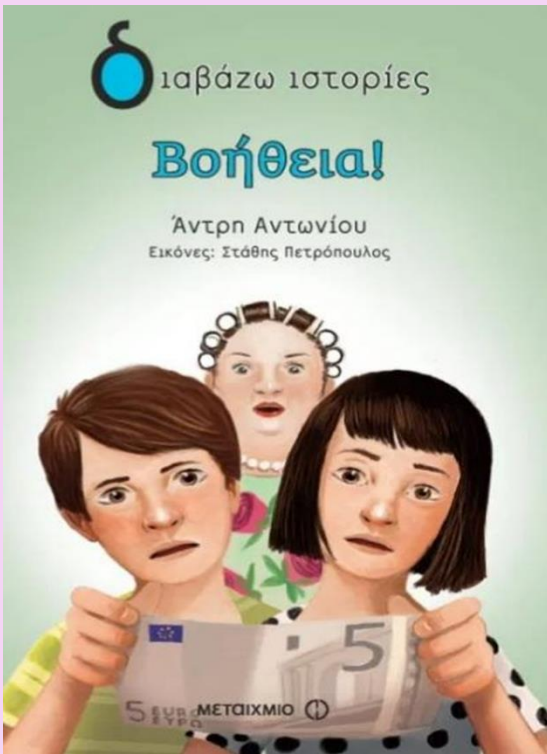
How would you feel if your dad were a famous writer and your mom a glamorous TV presenter? If your older sister was a gifted ballerina, your brother one of the few mathematicians and your other sister a great pianist? How would you feel, especially if you did not have any other special gift?

Antonakis Aristidis feels extremely awkward with this situation and decides to do his best to finally hear the "Well done" that he so much longs for.

Things are quite simple. All he needs to do is to succeed in any area. Maybe he could save someone, find something important that was lost, come up with a solution to a problem that no one else would be able to solve.

Sounds like a very good idea. And quite easy. What could go wrong anyway? Right? Or perhaps not?

HELP!



Book title in Greek: Voithia

Published by Metaichmio (Athens, November 2017)

Illustrations: Stathis Petropoulos

Category: Middle Grade

Pages: 65

Distinctions

- 1) First Prize by Women's Literary Society of Greece in the Literature Competition for unpublished work in the Category Mystery Stories for 2016.**

Blurb

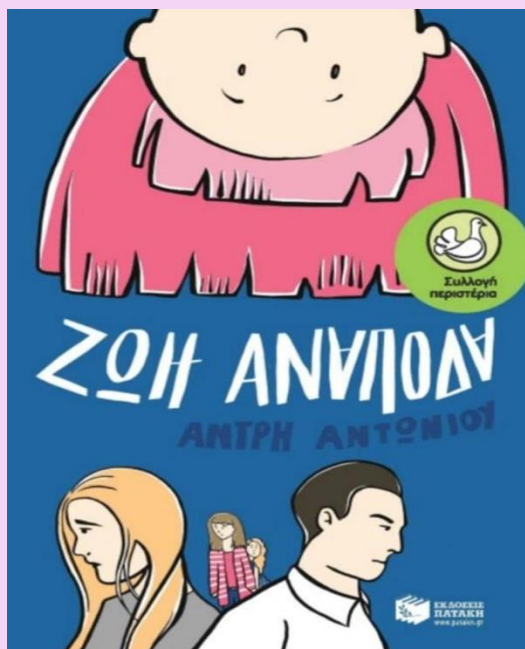
Iphigenia and Alexander want more than anything a new bicycle. So, they set up a counter with homemade lemonades outside their house, selling them to neighbors and passers-by.

Their business is proving to be quite profitable from day one. A small mountain of coins and a five-euro banknote is quite an amount.

But wait a minute? What does it say on their one and only banknote? Who could have written "HELP" in red capital letters and why?

The twins will join forces in order to discover the truth. Will they succeed, or will they put themselves in danger instead?

ZOE (LIFE) UPSIDE DOWN



Book title in Greek: Zoi anapoda

Published by Patakis Publishing House,
July 2018

Cover: Katerina Siskopoulou

Category: Middle Grade

Pages: 89

Blurb

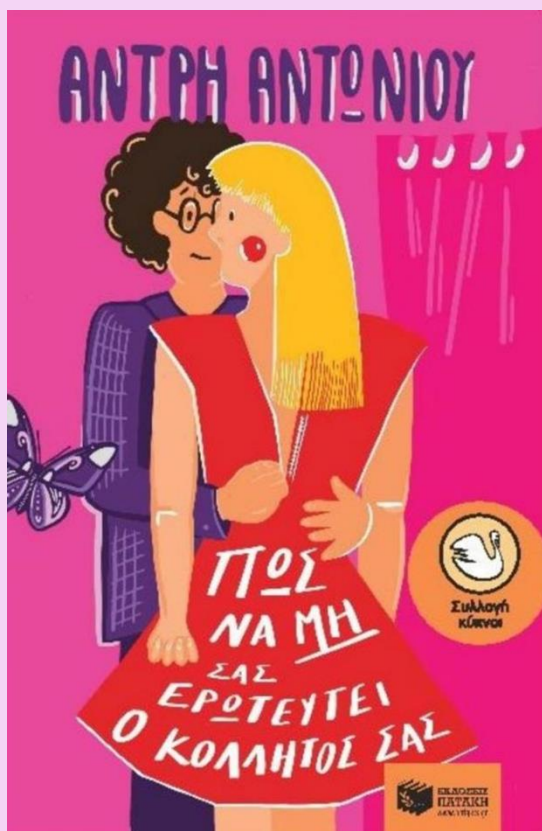
The picture in the frame that used to decorate the buffet table in Zoe's living room isn't the same as always. It's not the picture with her family - her dad, her mom, her younger sister and herself. Zoe's daily routine isn't what it used to be either.

Her dad left their house some time ago and went to stay in a hotel room. Zoe is longing for the day he will come back.

When finally, her dad moves into a small apartment, Zoe feels the same way as the new picture in the living room shows her. Like doing a cartwheel in the park and seeing everything around her upside-down.

With her mind and heart bursting with thoughts and feelings, Zoe writes in her diary what went on those first few months that her parents got divorced. Those first few months that her life turned upside-down.

HOW TO PREVENT YOUR BEST FRIEND FROM FALLING IN LOVE WITH YOU



Book title in Greek: Pos na mi sas erotefti o kollitos sas

Published by Patakis Publishing House (Athens, July 2019)

Cover: Katerina Siskopoulou

Category: Young Adult

Pages: 134

Distinctions

- 1) Shortlisted for Greek Ibbly Awards – Young People’s Literature for 2019

Blurb

Alexandra and Emilios are classmates since kindergarten. They are best friends. They are soul mates.

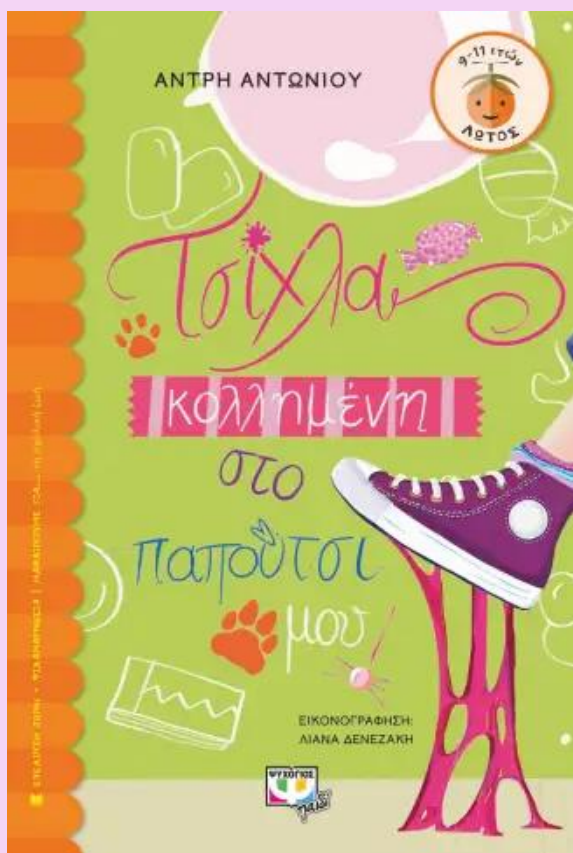
Every day and everywhere hanging out with each other - in class, at leisure, at home. Cutting school together and staying up late at nights. Inseparable. Until the day that everything changes.

Alexandra, suspects that Emilios doesn’t see her only as his best friend anymore. Emilios is in love with her! Could that be possible? No

way! Alexandra decides to do everything in her power to not let their friendship ruin for the sake of a -possibly- disastrous love. Will she succeed?

This is the story of the book. It could also be the story of yourself or the story of your best friend. You can never be sure, right?

GUM STUCK ON MY SHOE



Book title in Greek: Tsichla kollimeni sto papoutsi mou

Published by Psychogios Publishing House, November 2022

Illustration: Liana Denezaki

Age group: Middle Grade

Pages: 61

Blurb

Theodora: Ten years old, a fifth-grade student, loves cats, leaves nothing to chance, dreams of changing the world one day.

Vangelis: Ten years old, a 5th grade student, loves dogs, leaves everything to chance, dreams of getting away from his mom's nagging one day.

Can two completely different characters ever find common ground? A pair of stinky sneakers, a chewed pink bubblegum, and some improvised verses that go viral will be the reasons to answer this burning question.

And all of this on a Saturday morning at a School's Innovation Day.

TWO INTERVIEWS

1) Bookbird 2018 Vol. 56 No. 2

Interview with Andri Antoniou a young writer from Cyprus by Demetra Charalambous (P. 67)

How did writing come to your life? Was it a lifelong dream for you?

It was indeed a lifelong dream. One of my earliest memories in life is my attempts to write fairy tales when I was six years old. And it wasn't just about writing fairy tales. I kept saying over and over again that when I grew up, I would become a writer. I don't know how or why this need arose so early. A need that accompanied me in all phases of my life. Literature has always been a constant value for me. I read a lot and wrote. Poetry, short stories, articles, plays. I don't remember ever being interested or fascinated by anything else in my life to such a great extent.

What difficulties did you face as a new author in a small country?

At first, I didn't know anyone in the field of children's literature, and nobody knew me either. So, I didn't have people to share my concerns with and get advice on issues I didn't know about. Gradually, that changed. Now, I maintain friendships with several Cypriot writers, and being a member of Cyprus' IBBY has proven to be quite helpful. However, I still feel disconnected from the Greek scene. So many events take place in Athens that I would like to participate in. I think it's also more helpful for your career to live at the center of things. It's somewhat more challenging for us writers who live in the periphery.

How difficult was the beginning for you? Publishing the first book is an insurmountable obstacle for many aspiring writers...

It was quite challenging. For several years, all my efforts revolved around writing short stories for younger children. I was trapped in the

belief that this was my inclination. Which was a big mistake. The stories I wrote were all mediocre. I couldn't finish many of them. Most of the publishers I sent my work to didn't even respond. However, the thought of changing course and writing a children's novel never crossed my mind. One night, in December 2010, completely by chance and unplanned, I wrote the first chapter of "Trouble-magnet". I remember feeling an indescribable sense of joy and anticipation for its continuation. Within the next five months, I completed its 30,000 words. I sent it to Psychogios Publications, and shortly thereafter, I received the first "yes" in my writing journey. It was one of the highlights of my life.

Where did you find support and inspiration?

The Cyprus' IBBY was one of the first to show interest in my books and support me. Also, getting to know other Cypriot and Greek writers is very helpful because it makes me feel like I belong to a group. And the educators who work with my books in their classrooms encourage me in their own way to continue. Many of my books have been inspired by my students and conversations I've had with them. Others have been born out of experiences I've had; from thoughts I've had. The books I read, the movies I watch, anything that happens in my daily life, everything can be a source of inspiration, everything can create stories in my mind.

Which authors do you admire?

I would say that I now admire books more. The books I admire are those that make me impatient to go home and continue reading from where I left off the previous day. Those that, when I finish them, I feel the need to reread them to enjoy them more and more and discover hidden meanings that I may not have noticed the first time. Books that make me say to myself, "What a wonderful writer this person is." Some books I've read recently and singled out are "To paliopedo" by Angeliki Darlasi, "To sklavaki tis Knosou" by Eleni Katsama, and "I Aliko stin poli" by Argyro Pipini.

Do you read translated literature? What?

I read a lot of books by foreign authors, either translated in Greek or in English. I feel that foreign writers are more daring in handling their themes than we are. Of course, this also has to do with the fact that they have publishing houses behind them that dare to publish such books and generally live in more progressive societies. I feel that reading books by foreign authors has greatly broadened my writing horizons and has positively influenced my writing. Some books I've read and singled out recently are: "The Bone Sparrow" by Zana Fraillon, "One" by Sarah Crossan, "A Monster Calls" by Patrick Ness, and "We Were Liars" by E. Lockhart.

How quickly and easily did books followed "Trouble magnet," your first book published in 2012?

My second book, "Penelope," was published very quickly and easily. Just a year after the release of "Trouble-magnet," it was already on the shelves of bookstores. Then, a failure brought me a step away from giving up. The third book I wrote, a humorous children's novel about bullying, was rejected by various publishing houses, leading me to believe that perhaps the publication of my first two books was just a coincidence. I started to think that maybe I didn't belong in the world of children's literature after all. For a long time, I stopped writing. Until I realized how empty my life was without writing. So, I started again. I wrote more, I wrote better, I experimented, studied, worked hard. And fortunately, the hard work paid off in the following years: contracts with four major Greek publishing houses, awards in literary competitions, and an unexpected European distinction. I think that no matter how many rejections I receive in the future, I will keep going. Literature brings balance to my life.

Your latest book, "The summer that I grew up" (2017), moves in a completely different style from the previous ones. The theme and tone surprise the reader. How did this change happen?

Through writing, I feel above all the need to experiment. I want to write in many different ways. I would like each of my books, if possible, to be different from the previous ones and to take my writing one step

further. For years, I had in my mind the idea of writing about domestic violence. Also, at that time I wrote this book, I wanted to write a book that was not in a humorous tone like my previous ones. Somehow these two desires intersected. One evening, the prologue of the book came to my mind randomly, and so I started writing it. It wasn't easy. I had to study many books and articles on this topic to be able to complete it. But I learned a lot. I think its writing opened up new avenues for me.

What can we expect from you in the future?

At the moment, five of my children's novels are under publication, starting from this November and continuing over the next two years. Three of them are texts that have been awarded in competitions of the Women Literary Society. Now some ideas are swirling around in my mind, but I haven't decided yet which ones to continue with. Generally speaking, I am interested in contemporary, social theme novels. Children's and young adult literature. I think my future works will be of a similar nature.

How closely do you follow Greek-language children's and young adult literature? Are you a regular reader of it?

Very closely. I read a large number of the new books published every year, especially children's and young adult novels. I believe that if you don't read, you can't evolve as a writer. We learn from each other. Our ideas are born based on everything we have read throughout our lives. I love Greek children's literature, and I think it's a shame that it's not translated as much internationally.

What is your opinion of the literature of your homeland, Cyprus? How do you see its present and future?

I am particularly pleased because I believe that Cypriot children's literature is worth mentioning. In recent years, there has been a satisfactory number of new authors who write and publish books that can compete with the rest of the Greek-language production. I am optimistic. I believe that in the coming years, these authors will evolve

further, and new names will emerge in the field. Cypriot children's literature is in a good phase.

Do you have contact with your young readers? How important do you think it is?

Not to the extent I would like. I receive many invitations in recent years from primary schools throughout Cyprus to speak to children about my books. Unfortunately, it is not easy to respond to these invitations often. I also work in a school myself, and it is not feasible to leave my job often. Fortunately, there is electronic communication that has brought me numerous time close to children who would otherwise be impossible for me to visit.

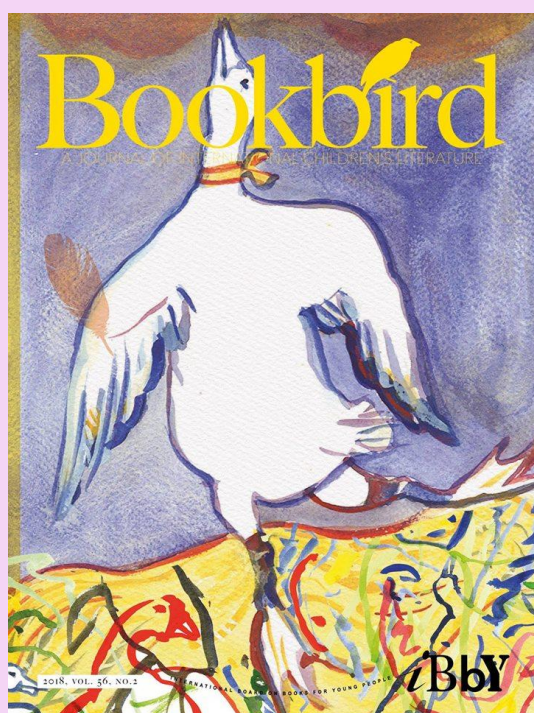
Can you tell us about an incident with a young reader that has marked you?

At one point, as an author, I visited a school where I had worked as a teacher a few years earlier. I entered the fifth grade to talk to the children. These children had been my students in first grade. At that time, my books had not yet been published. However, I often told the children that this was a big dream of mine and encouraged them to chase their own dreams. That day, an old student of mine said to me, "Miss, you finally became a writer!"

To what extent do children in Cyprus read? What can be done to further increase reading levels?

Unfortunately, I believe that few children read in Cyprus. This is because few parents consider books a fundamental good that they should provide for their children from infancy. Therefore, I consider the role of teachers very important in instilling a love of books in children. And how can this be achieved? Certainly not by forcing the child to read a book to write a summary. Nor through a reading event that we do formally once a year and then forget anything related to the book. Children need daily interaction with books. The teacher should read to the children every day. They should read them many different books. Books that revolve around topics that interest children. They

should organize fun activities around books. If the teacher loves books, they will certainly make many of their students love them too. Of course, we cannot win them all, but we certainly do not want to force anyone. Our role is to show the magic of books and to open the door. Those who want to enter will enter.



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**2) Interview to Antonis Georgiou- "Haravgi Newspaper"
(Cyprus)**

Sunday 29 January 2023-Column "Open horizon"

**Andri Antoniou: The children are more open-minded and
*receptive than us.***

Antonis Georgiou meets author Andri Antoniou and they discuss children's and young adult literature, her books, and the sensitive topics she deals with.

Why children's/young adult literature? What is its main difference (if any) from literature in general?

It comes completely spontaneously and effortlessly for me to write stories for children and adolescents, instead for adults. I can better narrate a story if I tell it from the perspective of a child or a teenager. I don't know why. Personally, I would categorize literature into good and bad, rather than into literature for children and literature for adults.

You deal with sensitive issues in your books, as you did in your latest one (Note: he was referring to "Photos on a black background") regarding children's psychological well-being. How do you handle them, what is the "goal" of such books?

I would like children who have experienced difficult events in their lives to be able to "see" themselves in books, to have representation in literature. I would also like my stories to prompt children who haven't experienced such events to put themselves in the shoes of those who have and to understand them better. And finally, to help parents and teachers initiate discussions about these issues. Before I write them, I study many books by experts to better understand the mental state of someone experiencing what I intend to address.

You've probably had conversations with children and adolescents who are readers of your books. How do they perceive your books/the issues you address?

I'm struck by how calmly they approach them, without making it a 'big deal,' as adults often do in our minds. They take what they need from each story - if they need anything. When I read my book 'Where did your laughter go, Orsalia?' which deals with loss to a fourth-grade class, I had some concern about how the children would react. They reacted perfectly normal, just as they would to any other story. At one point, a girl raised her hand and said to me, 'Miss, that's how I felt when my grandpa died.' Children are more open-minded and receptive than us.

Tell us about your last book “Photos on a black background” recently awarded with the State Literature Award.

The protagonist of the book is sixteen-year-old Amalia who in a non-linear first-person narration narrates her life from the time she was a child until now. Through her narration we learn that she was sexually abused by her mother's boyfriend. The psychological trauma she carries is evident and shapes her life from the day one of being abused and forward. I have written this book to show how deep is the psychological trauma of sexual abuse and that the victims need the absolute understanding of the society and the state.

Was it difficult (psychologically) to write this book because of the subject matter?

Yes, it was. Mainly because before writing it, I studied several cases of adults who had been sexually abused as children. Nevertheless, writing is always therapeutic for me. While I was writing this book, I was going through a challenging experience in my professional life. Until the time I finished it, I felt like I had entered into a protective bubble, inside of which reality couldn't touch me.

Has the behavior of Cypriot society towards victims of sexual abuse changed?

To some extent, yes. However, we remain a small, close-knit society. We tend to often blame the victim or... as well and the victim in cases of domestic violence or sexual abuse. The fear of "what will people say?" hangs threateningly over our heads, which I believe makes it difficult for victims to come forward. It is necessary to educate the younger generations in order for our society to truly and fundamentally change.

You work as a teacher. How does literature fit into the school curriculum, into school life? Is that enough, what more can be done?

There isn't any particular provision for it, apart from the Literary Anthology, which includes excerpts from literary books and not complete stories. It's up to the teacher to integrate literature into the classroom, and it's really easy to do so. You choose great books and read them to your class whenever you have the chance. It's that simple. Personally, I dedicate the two-periods of Greek lesson every Friday to read literature to my students. Throughout a school year, we have the opportunity to explore several books in depth. Many children catch the reading bug by the end.

In the age of technology, is it not normal for children to struggle to read a book? How do we promote reading enthusiasm?

Certainly, it is. The family of the child will play a significant role, followed by the school, in whether a child will love or not to read. If parents read to their child from infancy, if they themselves love reading, if they visit libraries and bookstores together with their child, then they make books a part of the child's life. However, even if things aren't like that, if educators incorporate literary books into the daily routine of the classroom - and not just once a year, based on a book celebration - then the chances are high that the child will seek out books on their own in the present time and in the future.

Did you read as a child? What books from those you read as a child do you remember vividly until today?

Yes! I loved books from the moment I learned how to read, and my love for them only grew stronger, fueling my desire to become a writer someday. I remember Enid Blyton's books, full of mystery and adventure. They definitely shaped me; many of my own books contain mystery and adventure. I also loved Louisa May Alcott's "Little Women," as I had boundless admiration for the rebellious teenage heroine Jo March, who dreamt of becoming a writer.

Have children's books changed over time?

I think they have stopped being as prim and proper as they were decades ago. Good children's books these days are bold, sincere, they don't talk down to children, nor do they underestimate their intelligence.

Why is it exciting to write for children/young adults?

Because you have the chance to relive your childhood many times over and shape it each time in a different way! What could be better than that?

Ημερήσια ΧΑΡΑΥΤΗ | οριζόντιος | ΚΥΡΙΑΚΗ 29 ΙΑΝΟΥΑΡΙΟΥ 2023 | 25

ανοιχτός οριζόντιος

Άντρη Αντωνίου: Τα παιδιά είναι πιο ανοιχτόμυαλα και δεκτικά από εμάς

Ο Αντώνης Παυλίδης συνοπτάει τη συγγραφέα Άντρη Αντωνίου και μιλάει για την παιδεία και νεανική λογοτεχνία, για τα βιβλία της και το ευαίσθητο θέματα με τα οποία ασπάζεται.

Τα παιδιά που βίωσαν δύσκολα γεγονότα στη ζωή τους να έχουν εκπροσώπηση στη λογοτεχνία

Τέτοιους φορές σε περιπτώσεις ψυχοπαθολογικής βίας ή σεξουαλικής κακοποίησης να ρίχνουμε ευθύνη στο θέμα ή... και στο θέμα

Γιατί παιδική/νεανική λογοτεχνία; Ποια η βασική διαφορά της (αν υπάρχει) από τη λογοτεχνία γεννητάρα;

Μπού θυμάται απλά: «Ολόκληρα και εφήμερα να γράφω ιστορίες για παιδιά και εφήμερα, αντί για ενήλικες. Μπορώ καλύτερα να αφήνω μια ιστορία, αν την αφήνω από την παιδική ή εφηβική ηλικία. Δεν ήθελα γινεί προσωματά δε διαταρξία τη λογοτεχνία σε καλή και κακή, παρά σε θέματα για παιδιά και λογοτεχνία για ενήλικες.

Καταπιάνεται στα βιβλία σου, όπως και στο τελευταίο, με ευαίσθητα θέματα για την ψευδοσύνθεση των παιδιών. Πώς τα θεαματίζονται, ποιος ο «στόχος» τέτοιων βιβλίων;

«Θε ήθελα τα παιδιά που βίωσαν δύσκολα γεγονότα στη ζωή τους να μπορούν να «δουν» την αλήθεια τους μέσα σε βιβλία, να έχουν εκπροσώπηση στη λογοτεχνία. Μια άλλη να βιώσουν γρήγορα και δύσκολα να συνδέουν συνθήκες γύρω από τα θέματα αυτά. Πριν τα βιβλία, μερικά πολλά βιβλία από εμάς για να κατανοήσουν καλύτερα την φυσική κατάσταση ενός σώμα που βίωσε αυτό με το οποίο λογαριάζω να ασπάζομαι.

Ένα πόδηλα τα παιδιά που βίωσαν δύσκολα γεγονότα στη ζωή τους να μπορούν να «δουν» την αλήθεια τους μέσα σε βιβλία, να έχουν εκπροσώπηση στη λογοτεχνία

Ποιες;

Ήταν δύσκολο (φυσολογικά) να γραφτεί αυτό το βιβλίο λόγω του θέματος; Ναι, ήταν. Ήρθαν επιπλέον πριν το γράψω μελέτες σχετικά με παρωμένες, επιπλέον

ποιος, εφημερο που είναι αναγνωστές/αναγνώστρες των βιβλίων σου. Πώς αντιμετωπίζουν εκείνα τα βιβλία σου/τα θέματα με τα οποία ασπάζομαι;

Μου είναι σύντομο που το αντιμετωπίζουν φέρωρα, χωρίς να το κάνουν «μια θύρα», όπως είναι συνήθειά στο μυαλό ενός ενήλικου. Πάντως, αυτό που κερδίζονται από κάθε ιστορία -αν κερδίζονται κάτι. Όταν διάβασα σε μια α' τάξη το βιβλίο μου «Από τη γη του γένιου σου, Ουρανού που αναρρέει» στην απόλαση, είχα μια σπουδαία για το πώς δε σπάζονται τα παιδιά. Αντίθετα από τους ενήλικες, είναι πολύ πιο ανοιχτά με τα οποία ασπάζομαι. Ένα κομμάτι, κάποια στιγμή, πήγα να λέω και μου είπα: «Από τότε που είχα, όταν είχαμε ο παππούς μου. Το παιδί είναι πιο ανοιχτόμυαλο και δεκτικό από εμάς.

Πες μας λίγο λόγια για το τελευταίο και βραβευμένο με Κρατική Βραβεία Λογοτεχνίας «Φωτογραφίες σε μαύρο φόντο».

Πρωταγωνίστρια του βιβλίου είναι η Δανά, είχαμε ένα θέμα, η οποία σε πρωταγωνίστρια αφήνει και χωρίς να ακολουθεί προγράμματα εξιστορεί τη ζωή της από παιδί ως σήμερα. Μόλις από την αφήγηση μεταβληθεί με τις καλές καταστάσεις σεξουαλικής ήταν ήταν κατά καιρούς από τον σύντροφο της μητέρα της. Φορούσε είναι το φαντάσμα προτού του κομμάτι και που διαγράφεται τη ζωή της από τη μέρα της κακοποίησης και έπειτα. Ήρθα το βιβλίο για να δείξω πόσο βαθιά είναι το φαντάσμα της σεξουαλικής κακοποίησης και πως τα θέματα κερδίζουν την απόλυτη απάντηση της κοινωνίας και της

μεταπολεμικής γενιάς παρωμένης επιπλέον που ως παιδί είναι καταπολεμικά σεξουαλική. Παρ' όλα αυτά, η γρηγορία για να είναι πάντα σωστή. Ένα έργο από το βιβλίο, όμως για δύσκολη εργασία στον κλάδο του κώλου. Μόλις να το ολοκληρώσει και την αίσθηση πως είχα μια σε ένα προσωπικό κομμάτι, μέσα στο οποίο η πραγματικότητα δεν μπορούσε να με αφήσει.

Έχει αλλάξει η συμπεριφορά της κυριακής κοινωνίας απέναντι στα θέματα σεξουαλικής κακοποίησης;

Σε κάποιο βαθμό, ναι. Όμως, παραμένουν για μια μικρή κλειστή κοινωνία. Τέτοιους συνδέει σε παρωμένες ενδοκοινωνιακές βίαιες ή σεξουαλικής κακοποίησης να ρίχνουμε ευθύνη στο θέμα ή... και στο θέμα. Το ότι δε παρ' ο πόσο κέρματα απειλητικά πάνω από τα κεφάλια μας, γρήγορα που γρήγορα δουλεύουμε τα θέματα να ανακαλύψουμε. Χρησιμοποιώ να διαπιστωθούν οι νέες γενιές, για να αλλάξει η κοινωνία μας πραγματικά και ουσιαστικά.

Εργάζομαι ως δοκίμια. Πώς εντάσσεται η λογοτεχνία στο σχολικό πρόγραμμα, στη σχολική ζωή; Είναι ορατό αυτό, το περισσότερο γρήγορα να γίνεται;

Δεν υπάρχει ιδιαίτερη πρόνοια γ' αυτό, πήρα από τη Διεύθυνση Λογοτεχνικών Κειμένων στο οποίο έγινε περιληφθέντα αποσπασματα από λογοτεχνικά βιβλία και ότι ολοκληρωμένες ιστορίες. Είναι στο χέρι του δασκάλου να εντάξει τη λογοτεχνία στην τάξη του και πραγματικά είναι ποικίλο να το κάνει, διαφέρει χωρίς βιβλία και τα διαθέσιμα στην τάξη του με κάθε ηλικία. Έτσι

Είναι στο χέρι του δασκάλου να εντάξει τη λογοτεχνία στην τάξη του και πραγματικά είναι ποικίλο να το κάνει

Τα καλά παιδικά βιβλία είναι τομή, ευλαχέρη, δεν κουνούν το δάκτυλο στο παιδί και ούτε υποτιμούν τη νοημοσύνη του

«Είναι στην ηλικία του παιδιού που θέλουμε να είναι μέχρι σήμερα;»

Ναι! Αλλά τα βιβλία από τότε που έμαθα να διαβάζω και η αφήγηση για να αυτό δένονται και την απειρία μου να γίνω κάποια συγγραφέας. Θέματα τα βιβλία της Έντι Μπλόου με το μυστικό και την περιπέτεια τους. Με κέρδισαν μερικά πολλά από τα αυτά που βιβλία παρωμένη μυστικό και περιπέτεια. Απομνημόνιο μου ήταν και ο Μπαρτ Κλαρκ της Λουίζ Λάσε και απειρώσε ο θεαματικός μου για την απειρώσετη αφήγηση ηρωική της Τζο Μάρς, που ανεκμετάλητο για γρήγορα συγγραφέας.

«Έκον αλλάξει τα παιδικά βιβλία διεκρονα;

Ναμύνη έπαιξαν να είναι τόσο καθωπευμένα, όσο μαρμαίει δεκαετίες πριν. Τα καλά παιδικά βιβλία της γρήγορα που είναι ταμπαρά, ευλαχέρη, δεν κουνούν το δάκτυλο στο παιδί και ούτε υποτιμούν τη νοημοσύνη του.

Ποιες είναι συννοητά με γρήγορα για παιδική/νεανική;

Επιπλέον είναι τον κωμικό να (ήσας) πολλές φορές την παιδεία του πλάκα και να τη διαγραφόντες κάθε φορά με έναν αλλιώτικα τρόπο ή καλύτερα από αυτό.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe enormous gratitude and countless thanks to all people, who in their own way, contributed so I would become one of the nominees for the Hans Christians Award.

First, to my family and friends who have endured me all these years, especially the times they talk to me and I totally ignore them because my mind is on a story I write. Thank you for accepting the fact that I lead two lives: a real and an imaginary one.

I thank my teachers who educated me and helped me find my path in life. To the Cypriot, Greek and foreign writers whose stories have accompanied and inspired me from childhood till this very day.

To the four Greek Publishing Houses with whom I collaborate these years, Psychogios, Patakis, Metaichmio and Kedros. Opening the door of their publishing house to me, they opened at the same time the door to a place I have forever wanted to belong; children's literature. Working with so many professional publishers, editors and illustrators has taught me valuable lessons on how to be professional too. To Besi Muci Publishers who made me the great honor to translate one of my books in Italian and made my dream of seeing my words in another language a reality.

The Cyprus' IBBY department has been by my side from day one of my career, supporting my work. I would like to thank both the former president, Mr. Costas Katsonis, as the current President, Mrs. Elena Perikleous, and all the members of the Council, who have always been encouraging my work in so many ways. Choosing me to be Cyprus' candidates for the Hans Christian Andersen Award is the biggest honor ever.

I am grateful to my country for honoring me four times with the highest honor a writer can receive in their country, the National Award for Literature. I am also grateful to Greece for awarding me all these years with other awards and distinctions.

I thank with all my heart all the teachers who introduced my books to their students; all the parents who read my stories with their children and, of course, all the children who come to my book

presentations and encourage me with their sweet words and wide smiles to continue do what I love most in life; writing books for them.

And last but not least, thank you dear members of the Committee of Hans Christian Andersen Award for taking time to read my portfolio.

Thank you all! Thank you, thank you, thank you!

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THE SUMMER I GREW UP
(Translated in English by the author)

Prologue

Mom and I keep running. She holds me by the hand, and we keep running.

We run to escape, to disappear, to become invisible. We run to be happy. To stop crying. And, to stop being afraid. More than anything to stop being afraid.

Mom is so afraid. I'm more afraid. Because if something happens to mom, then I'll have no one. Will I dare to run on my own, without feeling the warmth of her hand in mine?

We run to escape, but we always return. Because she believes his promises. She believes he can change; she believes that all people can change if they truly want to.

However, I know that this will never happen. I know it, because I've lived it a thousand times. That moment, the same, over and over again. The anger, the shouts, the hitting. Especially the hitting.

That moment has the power to erase all the other moments of our lives. He will never change. And we will keep running.

One

Today, for the first time, I noticed how red the traffic light is. Like a banner waving in a bullfighting arena. That's what I thought as I observed it while waiting for it to turn off. I wonder how they haven't realized by now that red is not the right color choice for a traffic light that one way or another turns drivers into raging bulls.

Red. As if the irritation of thirty-five degrees Celsius and the stifling humidity weren't enough. Father rhythmically tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. Slowly, fast, faster. Mom, seated beside him, held onto her seat, as if the rhythmic tapping had the power to unstick her from her place and catapult her onto the scorching asphalt.

Fast. Faster. A few more curses, and then the light turned green. As he maneuvered through parked cars, trying to find a parking spot, I silently begged he didn't feel upset and turn us back. I wanted so much to get into the sea.

Luckily, a parked Mercedes reversed and vacated its spot. We parked and got out. Just as father opened the trunk, a pile of beach stuff mom and I had loaded while he was inside the house spilled out. I looked at him from the corner of my eye. He was annoyed. I knew. I knew it from the way he passed his fingers through his hair. He wanted to yell, but there were too many people around, so he avoided it.

At the beach, mom spread our towels and then applied sunscreen to me.

"Want me to put some on you?" she asked father.

He brought his right hand forward and stopped her, like traffic wardens stop traffic.

"I'm not putting this disgusting thing on me," he commented.

He opened the cooler and took out a beer. He handed me an orange juice. I took a few sips and then let it on the sand.

"Come on, mom, let's go for a swim," I said and grabbed the swimming goggles from the bag.

Mom took off her dress, folded it carefully, and left it on the ground. "Let's go," she said, giving me her hand. We held hands tightly

and walked towards the water. The sun rays glittered on the surface of the sea like small diamonds. I wanted to run and immerse myself up to my neck inside them.

"One moment," we heard father's voice behind us. We turned. He stood upright, looking towards Mom's direction. As soon as I saw him, the image of the bull preparing to charge at the red banner flashed in my mind, even though mom's swimsuit was floral.

"Is this the swimsuit you chose to wear, Sophia?" he asked. "Out of all the swimsuits you have in your closet, you chose this one? Haven't you realized yet that I don't want you to wear this swimsuit in front of everyone?"

Mom lowered her head and looked at her swimsuit. She seemed to be wondering the same thing I was. What was different about this swimsuit compared to the others in her closet? Her hand squeezed mine. She seemed about to say something but changed her mind.

Next to us was a family with three small children. They were laughing so loudly that for a moment, I thought their laughter could overpower father's anger. I wished I could only hear them. I turned my head to the right and watched them. Their dad filled buckets with sand and helped them build sandcastles.

I felt mom's hand in mine, trembling. I turned. She was crying. Father wasn't shouting. He didn't want others to hear him shouting at us. However, what he said could make you cry even if he didn't shout.

"Pack everything. We're leaving," he said.

In a few minutes, mom and I put everything back into the bags and followed father to the car. I turned my head back one last time. The sun rays were still sparkling on the blue water. And that family was still laughing.

Two

The next noon, while we were eating in the yard, I was thinking about how different our life would be if father only had this cheerful side. After lunch, he brought a huge watermelon from the kitchen, cut it in half, and gave mom and me the juiciest slices to eat.

"I know how to pick the best watermelons, girls," he winked at us and continued to distribute generous slices and smiles as if nothing had happened the day before. As if he were the father who laughed and built sandcastles on the beach.

"It's indeed very good," mom smiled.

I don't know why mom smiled. Whether she smiled because she liked the watermelon or because she liked how father was at that moment. Sweet as a ripe watermelon slice. I tried to smile too, but I felt the smile as an awkward shape on my face.

Luckily, at that moment, I saw Nefeli passing over the low fence that separated her house from ours and entering our yard.

"Watermelon treat, Mr. Giannis?" she asked father.

"As much watermelon as our dear Nefeli wants," he said and cut her a large slice.

I pulled a chair and asked her to sit next to me. Nefeli was the best friend in the world, and I didn't know what I would do without her. We talked about everything since we were little. Or almost everything. I had never told her about father.

"Is everything okay, Nefeli?" mom asked while filling our glasses with cold water.

"Yes," Nefeli replied, chewing her slice. "Dad told me to ask you if you want to come over tonight for dinner. We'll have barbecue."

Nefeli looked at mom and waited for her to respond. However, mom remained silent. Both of us knew well that the only one who gave answers in our home was father. He hesitated for a moment. It seemed odd, because I knew he really liked barbecues. Then, of course, I remembered that he might have liked stakes, but he didn't like Mr. Savvas, Nefeli's dad.

"Tell your dad that not only will we come, but tonight we'll also have a competition," he finally said. "Let's see if this time he can eat more steaks than me."

Nefeli was delighted, and I was too. Or almost delighted. It was as if something always stood above my joy, casting its shadow over it.

That night, around eight, we closed the door of our house and headed towards Nefeli's house; father holding a crate of beer and mom holding a homemade apple pie. Mr. Savvas was already in the yard, grilling the steaks. They chatted, and I went inside the house to find Nefeli.

She was in the kitchen, chopping vegetables for the salad. I took a knife from the drawer to help her.

"I have news for you," she said. "Haris is having a party this Friday at his place. He invited the whole class. He told me to tell you since you don't have a phone."

As soon as Nefeli mentioned Haris' name, my cheeks blushed. Of course, I wanted to go to the party. Like crazy. I hadn't seen him since the day we finished our school exams.

«Dad won't let me», I said.

«But why wouldn't he let you? » Nefeli wondered, pouring olive oil on the salad. «His parents will be at home too. We won't be completely alone».

«He won't let me», I repeated. «He doesn't want me going to places with lots of boys».

«Ask it as a birthday gift then», Nefeli suggested, taking the salad bowl in her hands. «You'll be fourteen in three weeks. You deserve it».

I didn't know if I deserved it or not, but I knew, beyond any doubt, that my father wouldn't let me go to a party full of boys even if I begged him on my knees.

Outside, the three of them were talking loudly and laughing. I looked at Nefeli's dad and for a moment, I thought about how easy life was for her. Her dad rarely said no to her, never raised his voice, and the harshest words she had heard from him were: «Nefeli, I am disappointed in what you did. We need to talk».

At that moment, my mom came next to me, stroking my hair, and immediately, guilt overwhelmed me. Guilt because I had thought that Nefeli was lucky, while she had lost her mom's presence years ago.

«Dig in», Mr. Savvas signaled as we sat at the table, and plates and cutlery got to work. The steaks were delicious; we ate as if we hadn't had a meal in a week.

«Sophia, could you come over some afternoon? » Mr. Savvas asked my mom. «I would like some decorating advice for the living room. Whatever we say, you women always excel in matters of taste».

Mom nodded approvingly and added some salad to her plate. I instinctively looked at my father. He noisily left his utensils and opened another beer. For the rest of the evening, he didn't seem to enjoy himself much, and I lost my mood along with him.

Because in his mind, he always fabricated stories. How Mr. Savvas was interested in mom, how the entire male population was interested in mom, how he had to restrain them all as not to lose her. And in the end, all he managed to do was drive her away. Me, as well.

These thoughts occupied my mind for the rest of the evening, and I couldn't swallow a bite. I couldn't smile again either.

Three

We said goodnight, and I reluctantly dragged my feet from Nefeli's house to ours. I tried to convince myself that I was worrying for no reason. Father wasn't angry, or even if he was, he would have forgotten it by now. We would go home, go to sleep, and my dreams that night wouldn't have to be dark and tangled. However, my instinct was rarely wrong.

«Go to your room now», he told me as soon as we went inside. He was furious. I could see it. I was determined, though, not to leave her alone this time. Mom gestured with her eyes for me to leave. I shook my head negatively many times. I stood in the same spot and looked at them. Why did everything always end up like this in our home?

«Go, Anna», father shouted, and his voice had such intensity that I felt it like a forceful wave pushing me onto sharp rocks to be shattered.

I ran. In the hallway, I stumbled on the rug and fell. I got up and ran again. I slammed the door of my room and covered my ears with my hands. I immediately regretted it. I should listen. I had to listen. I owed it to her. Mom was out there, and she was alone. At least, I had to listen. I half-opened the door and knelt on the floor.

«Why did you tell him you would go? Why? » father shouted.

Thuds.

Mom replied that Mr. Savvas was our friend. He had been our friend for years. She just wanted to help him. It didn't mean anything else. He accused her of sweet-talking him. He insisted that surely, they were playing some game behind his back. That he was no foolish to be mocked like that.

Thuds again. I lay down as if the cold floor could cool the fever spreading rapidly through my body. If he dared to go, she would wish she had never been born. That's what he told her. He kept yelling it over and over. His voice was trapped and echoed in every inch of my brain; I couldn't get rid of it.

I dug my nails deep into my palms. I applied as much force as I could until it hurt. Until I deceived my mind into thinking about this pain and not the one feeling in my heart at that moment.

At that moment, and every moment father yelled at mom, hit her, made her look like a frightened little animal. Only when I dug my nails so deep into my palms that they bled, then, I managed to find relief. Because now I knew it wasn't just mom who would bleed. I would bleed with her. And that at least seemed fair.

A few more thuds, then silence. Quiet. I closed the door to my room and fell asleep as I was on the floor with my clothes on.

Four

When I woke up, I was still on the floor. The air came in through the half-open window, moving the curtain and revealing the first rays of the sun. Light. I needed it that morning. Every time I closed my eyelids, all the images from the previous night passed in dark colors in front of my eyes.

My body was like a piece of wood. No matter how hard I stretched, I couldn't manage to fully wake up. I felt my throat dry. I was thirsty. My gaze fell on the clock on the opposite wall. Seven thirty-five. Normally, at this time, father would have left for work. Mom? Was she okay?

"Mom," I called out and entered the kitchen.

He hadn't left yet. His hand was on her shoulders, whispering something to her. I couldn't hear what, but Mom nodded several times, as if she wanted to tell him that she agreed.

"Good morning," I said. Father let go of mom and came over to hug me so tightly that I thought I would suffocate. His hands were like hooks around my body.

"I hope you know how much I love you. I would do anything to ensure that our family stays united forever. Nothing will come between us. Never. Do you trust me, my little one?" I swallowed the knot in my throat as if I were swallowing a ball of thorns.

"Do you trust me?" he repeated, squeezing me tighter.

"I trust you," I whispered, while a voice inside my head was screaming, "I'm afraid of you."

He hugged me again and kissed my forehead. Then, he went and embraced mom, grabbed his briefcase, and left for the office.

"Are you okay, mom?" I asked when I heard the car moving away from our entrance.

"Yes," mom replied, smiling with that smile that I couldn't easily decipher. She took a bowl, filled it with cereal and milk, and gave it to me.

"You don't need to pretend in front of me," I said, taking a spoon from the drawer. "I know he hit you last night. I heard it."

Mom abandoned the oranges on the counter, which she was about to squeeze, and came to sit next to me.

"He doesn't mean it, darling. He loves me a lot. He can't live without me. Without us. Sometimes, his anger is just more than he can control. But he loves me. I'm sure he loves me."

"Let's tell someone, mom. We have to tell someone."

Mom got up abruptly. Her chair fell with a noise on the floor.

"No. What happens inside our house is nobody else's business. It will pass. It will pass with time. He's making efforts to change, and he will."

She lifted the chair from the floor and went to squeeze the oranges as if we were the most normal family in the world. As if we woke up happy and smiling every morning, drinking orange juice and eating honey-coated toast. Or as if we embraced each other every night before going to sleep, saying "goodnight" and kissing each other gently on the cheek.

However, I wasn't a child anymore. I knew that hitting wasn't love. That's why father always made sure not to leave any marks on mom's face every time he hit her.

Five

The next evening, while we were setting the table with mom, I glanced at father. He seemed calm. I was trying to find the courage to talk to him about Hari's party. Maybe if I made him understand how much I wanted to go, he would let me. I was almost fourteen. If not now, when?

Mom brought the chicken and the potatoes to the table.

"It smells good," father said and filled his plate with food.

Mom, always in need of his approval, smiled.

I didn't know how to start the conversation. I picked up the knife and fork and cut my chicken into tiny pieces, trying in my mind possible dialogues.

"You know, father," I finally said at some point, "a kid from my class is having a party at his house on Friday."

He turned to look at me.

"That's why I always say that our society is ruined," he commented, shaking his head. "Young kids to throw parties on their own? Unacceptable."

He looked down to his plate and continued eating, as if the sole purpose of the conversation was to inform him of the event. I took a bite of the chicken, and although it was very tasty, I struggled to swallow it. Even though it was challenging to continue the conversation, I had to if I would at least have the slightest chance of going to this party.

"He's not doing the party alone; his parents will be home too," I added.

Mom seemed unable to continue eating. I saw her trying to signal me to stop with the corner of my eye, but I ignored her. Father turned his gaze back to me perplexed, as if he couldn't understand the purpose of this discussion.

"He invited me too. I would like to go."

Father laughed.

"As long as I'm alive, my daughter will not go to any party alone. If I have a responsibility in this life, it's to protect you from all those out there who want to harm you."

I felt tears welling up in my eyes. It was so unfair and irrational.

"But all my classmates will be there. Nefeli will be there," I tried to explain, and my voice broke.

Father laughed loudly.

"It doesn't surprise me. With Nefeli's father being who he is, one shouldn't wonder about the path his daughter will take."

I knew there was no point in continuing the conversation. And I wasn't able anyway. Tears were already running down my face, and some ended up in my plate. I took the napkin, wiped them away, and forced myself to continue eating.

I didn't know if there were bad people out there who wanted to harm me. Possibly. Possibly they were and there might always be. However, I had the feeling that the one who would cause me the most harm was inside my own house.

Six

The next day, Nefeli arrived at my house holding a large bag.

"I brought clothes for us to choose for the party," she said and emptied the contents onto my bed.

"But I won't be going," I informed her. "Father doesn't allow it. I told you he wouldn't allow it."

Nefeli picked one of her dresses, a blue one with white stripes, and tried it on me.

"Well, don't tell him then. That's what I would do in your place."

Apparently, Nefeli didn't know that our fathers were two completely different people and that even thinking such a thing could have painful consequences for both me and mom.

"I can't do such a thing," I said, handing her the dress back.

"Come on, Anna. We've never been to a party together. I always find myself hanging out with people I don't like just so I won't be alone."

"Do you think I don't want to?" I said, moving aside some clothes to sit on the bed.

Nefeli took out her phone and came to sit next to me.

"Look," she suggested, showing me one of the incoming messages. It was from Haris. It read: Have you told Anna? Should I count her in?

My stomach flipped as soon as I read Haris's words. He was thinking about me, wanting me to go to his party. And here I was forced to refuse, making him think I didn't care about him at all.

"What should I reply?"

"I can't go, Nefeli. I already told you. How many times are you going to ask me?" I raised my voice, immediately regretting it.

"Okay, let me know if you change your mind," Nefeli added.

As I watched her gather her clothes from my bed and leave, I thought about how different my father always made me feel. Like he was forcing me to stand in a dark corner and watch others having fun

under the bright lights of a party. As if I were allowed only to observe from a distance what others had the right to experience. Alone in the darkness while the rest were together in the light. And I felt an intense longing for it. The light. A longing for just a little light.

Seven

The next morning, my voice of reason tried to console me with the thought that Haris was asking about me just to know how many guests he'd have at his party, in order to figure out how many pizzas to order. He wasn't asking because he genuinely cared if I would be there or not. So, there was no need to be upset that I couldn't go.

But the problem was that, no matter what I thought, I couldn't console myself. If I had a phone, either me or mom, I would send him a message, explaining or at least finding some excuse for not being able to go. But I didn't have a phone or a computer. And father always checked the calls made from the landline, so there was no way to call him from there.

Late in the afternoon, when father returned home, he grabbed mom from the waist and spun her around many times. He told us that he had received a promotion and finally had the position he deserved in the company. Mom, excited, hugged him and gave him a kiss on the lips.

I stood next to the couch, unwilling to react in any way.

"Are you proud of your father, my girl?" he asked me, and I nodded my head several times like a robot.

"Get dressed. Tonight, we're dining at the town's most expensive restaurant."

I had no appetite to eat at any restaurant, even if it was the most expensive one on the planet. All my classmates would be at Haris's party, and that's exactly where I wanted to be too. But I had no other choice.

The restaurant was full of well-dressed people. I was the only child in the entire place. Father showed us the prices on the menu, saying he always chose the best and most expensive for us. Mom reached out and touched his hand.

There was nothing on the menu that I liked. I reluctantly ordered some fillet, and while we waited for our order, I played with the straw, stirring the ice cubes in my glass. Father constantly clinked his glass with mom's and kept repeating how high a position he now held in the

company. Mom seemed proud of him. All I could think about was that my classmates at that very moment at the party would be drinking sodas, eating pizza, and laughing.

'Why aren't you eating?' father asked when he saw me aimlessly moving my fork around on the plate.

'Eat, Anna,' mom encouraged, lightly tapping her shoe against mine.

I got angry. Why did I always have to do something other than what I really wanted? Why did I always have to suppress myself and hide my true desires? Why couldn't I be myself even just once?

'No. I don't like it,' I said, abandoning my fork on the plate with a noise.

Father goggled his eyes.

'I work like a dog all day so that you can have everything, and I won't tolerate such behavior from anyone. Got it?'

He didn't wait for me to respond or react. He urgently asked for the bill, told the waiter that we had an emergency, and drove like a maniac, crossing congested streets and violating all traffic rules. The thought that we might crash crossed my mind, and for a single moment, I wished for it.

When we got home, he told me I would stay punished in my room for as long as he deemed fit. Then he started yelling at mom. That it was her fault for spoiling me, for making me think I was a princess, for never telling me no.

I ran to my room. I heard glass breaking, furniture being moved, voices. I cried. I cried more than ever before. It was my fault. It was my fault, and now mom was paying for it. I didn't want to hear anything else. I buried my head under the pillow and cried as loudly as needed to only hear my own crying.

Why? So much anger. Why? Where did all that enthusiasm and cheerfulness go? I could never understand how he always managed to navigate so easily between two diametrically opposite situations. To transform absolute sunshine into clouds, words of love into curses, hugs into blows. How did he always turn fireworks into explosives?

Eight

All these thoughts were swirling in my mind when I made the decision. I don't know exactly what pushed me to do it. For the first time in my life, I felt so brave. I escaped. I jumped out of my room window to the yard and then out onto the street.

It was already dark, but I wasn't afraid. Haris's house was only ten minutes from mine, and I could find it even with my eyes closed. I was sure he would never let me do what I really wanted, and there was no reason to try to please someone who would never be pleased.

Outside Haris's house, loud music could be heard. I felt embarrassed; I didn't know how to enter or what to say to the others. I stood outside the large gate for a while until Haris saw me from afar and came to open it.

"Anna, you came", he said and friendly patted me on the back.

I followed him into the central courtyard, where the guests were gathered. Everyone seemed happy to see me.

"Annie", Nefeli cheered and hugged me.

The rest felt like a dream. Laughter, dance, food, songs, laughter again. This is how I would like my life to always be. Like an endless party. My eyes fell on the watch on my wrist. It was past eleven, but I didn't care. Nothing mattered to me except that this was the most beautiful night of my life.

I saw Nefeli waving her hands from a distance. I waved mine too. It seemed like she was trying to tell me something, but the music was too loud, and I couldn't hear her. Haris approached me.

"I'm so glad you changed your mind", he smiled, and I realized he had the most beautiful smile I had ever seen. I could sit all night across from him and stare. I wondered how it would feel if he kissed me.

"Anna? "

The voice made my blood stop. It was him. It was his voice. He had found me. He had discovered that I had escaped from home and came to the party. I turned my head towards the direction of the voice.

The lights, the laughter, the smells, everything wrapped around my neck like a noose, causing me to suffocate.

He approached me, and I stood still.

"Let's go", he said and grabbed my hand.

We passed through the crowd, which had suddenly fallen silent; everyone just stood there watching my humiliation. I felt tiny. Everything around me seemed enormous, and I felt like a microscopic dot in the infinite. The last thing I remember before he shoved me in the car was Haris' sad face.

Nine

We found mom sitting on the edge of the couch when we entered the house. She stood up and ran towards me.

‘Thank God you're okay,’ she said and hugged me.

‘Back off,’ he ordered and pushed her away. ‘Spoiled brat, did you think you could fool me? Did you think I wouldn't find out what you did? Do you want me to let you be a slut? Is that what you want?’

He held me by the shoulders and shook me. Each shake gradually erased the memory of the wonderful previous hours. Each shake moved me away from what I wanted my life to be and brought me closer to what my life was in reality.

‘Don't you know that only what I say happens in this house? Who are you to defy me? Who?’

I said nothing. I felt empty. I felt nothing. It was as if I wasn't experiencing all this. As if it was someone else's life, and I was watching it from a corner of the living room.

‘If you dare to do it again, you're dead. Understand? You're dead.’

He shook me even harder.

‘Leave her alone; she made a mistake,’ mom said and stepped between us.

‘Shut up,’ he yelled and slapped her.

‘Stop hitting mom,’ I shouted and stepped between them.

‘You both are the same crap,’ he yelled and slapped me.

He slapped me.

For the first time in my life, he slapped me.

In that moment when his fingers landed on my cheek, I understood how mom felt all these years. That slap turned into images everything I had been hearing behind concrete walls and closed doors all these years. And it was as if the complaint that had been accumulating in my soul for so many years overflowed.

I felt ashamed. Ashamed for him, who knew no other way than violence. Ashamed for mom, who accepted such injustice hidden

behind four walls. And ashamed for myself. For loving him. For loving him even when I hated him.

Ten

I didn't know if it was morning or evening when Mom pulled the sheets off me. I didn't even know if I had managed to sleep at all the previous night. I remembered tossing and turning in bed for a long time, and a swirl of nightmares vaguely came to my mind.

It was morning. Mom had opened my closet, grabbed whatever was in front of her, and stuffed it into a large brown suitcase. A few minutes later, the suitcase was ready and stacked on top of another suitcase in the living room.

'Where are we going?' I asked when it seemed like she had calmed down a bit.

'To your grandmother's. We'll stay there for a while until I figure out our next steps.'

'Why? Why now?' I wondered. 'So many times, I begged you to do it.'

'Because from the moment he laid a hand on you, he will do it again. And I won't allow that to happen.'

We took a taxi to the bus station.

'Luckily, I had some money saved,' she said while buying two tickets to grandma's village.

I took a seat by the window, and as long as the bus was in motion, I looked outside, trying to imprint in my mind the landscapes, nature, beauty, instead of the madness of the previous night. But in vain. Haris' sad face, my humiliation, the slap kept coming back to my mind and covered everything.

'Everything will be okay,' Mom said, holding my hand.

I knew she said it just to comfort me. I knew she was also anxious and uncertain. I tried to appear strong for her sake. However, inside my mind was chaos. Would I ever see Nefeli, my school, my neighborhood, my room again? Haris? Would I see him again?

Three hours later, the bus arrived at its destination. We got off and stood there, each with her suitcase in hand, looking around as if

expecting someone to come and pick us up, open their arms, put us inside, and say, 'Welcome, I've been waiting for you.'"

'How will we get to grandma's?' I asked when I realized that mom didn't seem to know what our next move would be. She put her hands on her waist and looked around.

'We'll go to Mr. Kostas' grocery store, and I'll call my mother from there. It's about a quarter mile away. Can you handle it?'

I nodded, and Mom started walking ahead, with me trailing behind. The sun was overwhelming, so I shielded my eyes with my hand, trying to protect them. My mouth was dry, and I strongly felt the need to use the bathroom, but I endured it because I didn't want to add more worries to mom's mind.

Inside the grocery store, there was no one except the grocer and a few flies casually flying around. After the necessary explanations like "we came to surprise grandma," satisfying Mr. Kostas' curiosity, mom made the call to grandma. A few minutes later, she stopped her car outside the grocery store.

Inside the car, the only sound was the buzzing of a fly's wings desperately trying to find an exit and fly freely again. I understood it. Because that's how I felt my entire life. This claustrophobic feeling of entrapment followed me my entire life.

Grandma's silence magnified the sound of the fly's wings. Grandma wasn't the easiest person in the world, and it was hard to see a smile forming on her lips. I felt almost uncomfortable every time we met because, while mom had missed her a lot, she always found something negative to say. I felt sorry because I knew how much mom needed positive words, acceptance from others. And most of the time, she didn't get it from anyone. Not from her husband, not from her mother.

'Clean sheets are on the top shelf,' was the first thing she told us when we left our suitcases in the guest room.

'Thank you, mother. We just needed to get away for a while,' mom tried to explain, but grandma interrupted her before she could finish.

'I have a headache. I'll lie down,' she said and left the room.

That night, as I lay in another bed and another house, I thought about him again. If he was okay, if he was alone, if he regretted when he realized that mom and I had left. And if he could turn back time and change the previous night, would he?

Eleven

In the morning, I made sure. Grandma didn't want us. At least, that's what reached my ears when entering the kitchen. As soon as they saw me, they changed their tone.

'Good morning. Did you sleep well?' grandma asked and started preparing my breakfast.

I said yes because I didn't feel like explaining about the nightmares that made me jump so many times from my sleep.

Mom had opened a newspaper in the Help Wanted section and was noting something.

'Can I borrow your car?' she asked grandma. 'I'll go look for a job.'

'What job? There are no jobs anymore,' grandma said, taking a chicken out of the freezer. 'Half the world is unemployed. Where do you live?'

'I'll look, mother, and I'll find something,' mom insisted and bit the pen she was holding in her hands.

'Work finds whoever has worked in their life before. Do you think they'll hire you, who never worked? Anyone who gives up their certainty and security, the day comes when they regret it,' grandma continued, and mom slammed the cup she was holding onto the table.

'I've made my decisions. And please, I don't want to discuss it anymore in front of the kid.'

'I'm not a kid,' I said and went out to the yard.

Grandma's cat came and rubbed against my legs. It seemed to be happier to see me than grandma was. While they were still talking inside, I started singing a silly song about a cat as loud as I needed to cover their voices and not hear anything anymore.

During the hours when mom was absent, grandma and I did the household chores.

'Your father is a good person,' she said while we were peeling potatoes for the roast. 'And so was your grandfather. Nervous and

irritable, but what man isn't? Especially when he has to work all day to make sure nothing is missing from his family.'

Grandmother continued her chatter, and I wondered if she was right. If all men behaved that way, and if we had made a mistake by.

In the afternoon, mom returned, and grandmother served her a plate of roast and salad. Mom filled two glasses with water and drank them in one go.

"I am soaked in sweat," she said. "It must have been forty degrees outside today."

"Did you find something, mom?" I asked while I was cutting a large piece of bread for her.

"Nothing," she shook her head and started eating bite after bite. Grandmother took an apple from the fruit bowl, peeled it, and cut it into pieces.

"I, however, cannot afford to support two more people," she said.

"We don't want you to support us," mom almost choked on her bite. "I'll find a job. I'll work wherever is needed. I don't care. I just need some time."

After that, none of us said anything. The only sound for quite some time was the clinking of cutlery on the plate and the sound of bites being swallowed.

I watched mom on the verge of tears, and I wanted to grab grandmother by the shoulders and yell at her, "It's your child. She needs you. Don't you understand? Get up and do something."

But I said nothing because I knew that all I would achieve was to make everything worse.

The doorbell rang, and I got up to open it. I prayed it was a neighbor to fill the house with conversation and noise. I couldn't stand that deafening silence any longer.

However, it wasn't a neighbor. It was father. He hugged me tightly and stroke my hair. When he asked where mom was, I simply pointed my finger towards the kitchen. It was as if I had swallowed my tongue, and I couldn't articulate a word.

Mom looked equally surprised when she saw him. Only grandmother seemed to expect his visit. Father did something I could never have imagined he would do. He kneeled in front of mom, took her hands into his own, and said he loves us. That he had lost control that night, and there was no chance of anything like that happening again. He was crying. He had put his head on mom's knees and was crying. A little later, we packed our things and headed back home.

During the hours we covered the distance from grandmother's house back to ours, all I kept pleading for was that father had truly changed, that he indeed wanted to start anew. I was surprised that he talked non-stop throughout the entire journey. It was as if he hadn't seen us in a year, as if so many things had accumulated for us to say and exchange, that in three hours there was not even room for a few minutes of silence

Mom was talking too. At first less, but as we were moving away from grandma's house and getting closer to ours, her phrases became more rhythmic, and her hand movements accompanying her thoughts multiplied. It was as if she was narrating the most interesting story in the world. For mom, I mostly prayed for the sincerity of father's transformation. As she had always believed in him, loved him. Perhaps she even considered him to be the most interesting story in the world.

Twelve

It had been almost a week since the day we returned from grandma's house. For a week, everything seemed so calm and peaceful, as if some magical spell had suddenly fallen upon our heads, transforming us into the ideal family. However, I was worried. How could all this be real? How long would it last? I feared that something would happen, and everything would fall apart again.

A week later, our suitcases were packed once more, this time heading for a weekend getaway in the mountains, to a friend of father's cottage. A week later, and all that used to separate us seemed to no longer matter.

I felt almost happy as the car covered the miles from the town where we lived to the mountain village we were headed. Sun and nature always had a positive effect on me. Maybe that's why I felt happy. Or maybe because I desperately wanted to believe that this was our new reality.

The cottage was secluded, at the end of nowhere, hidden among tall trees. The last house I had seen was probably two or three kilometers away.

'Me and my girls in the middle of paradise,' father said as we unloaded our suitcases from the car. He took all three of them, not letting me and mom carry any.

He has changed, he has changed, he has changed; the same thought repeating in my mind. I pushed it away, like swatting away an annoying fly on my food.

I opened the shutters, and the sunlight flooded the rooms. All the furniture was covered in dust, and I ran my finger over the kitchen table, forming a heart. Father saw it and smiled at me. We found some cleaning supplies and tidied up a bit.

'I'm starving,' Dad said after a while. Mom rushed to prepare food.

'Leave the carrots; I'll cut them,' he told her, taking the carrot and knife from her hands.

I couldn't even remember the last time he willingly helped in the kitchen, if ever.

I sat at the table, watching them. Even when father was being good, it was still hard for me. It was like sitting in the sunshine and waiting for the storm to break. Because I had learned it by now, I had seen it so many times. Sunshine followed by the most terrifying lightning. Why would it be different this time? I tried to banish the ominous predictions from my mind. People change. Mom kept saying that. I closed my eyes and prayed that she was right.

Thirteen

It was late in the next afternoon when, after a two-hour hike in the woods, we sat exhausted in the kitchen to have some lemonade.

'Eat some cookies,' mom suggested and emptied a box of chocolate cookies inside the plate.

'It's wonderful up here in the mountains,' father said. 'Spending our lives in the hustle and traffic; we forgot what it means to live like humans.'

'It's a paradise,' mom agreed and smiled.

Something inside me said that paradise for mom wasn't just a mountain, a few trees, and plenty of oxygen. Paradise for her was him like this, the way she always wanted him to be.

'What's wrong, kid? Aren't you enjoying yourself?' father asked when he noticed I hadn't said anything until then.

'I'm having a great time,' I said, and I meant it. 'If only Nefeli were with us, I'd want to stay here forever.'

Father's phone rang.

'Weren't you studying anything else?' he said, picking it up from the table.

'Is it Nefeli?' I asked. 'I want to talk to her.'

'No, her dad,' he replied, answering the phone.

They exchanged a few words. Father laughed out loud. A few words again, and then a few seconds of silence. His face tightened, and his hand clenched on the phone.

'No, Sofia can't talk to you right now. She's busy. I have to go now. We'll talk some other time. Bye.'

His eyes were gleaming. My heart pounded in my chest, ready to burst out. I looked at mom. She had lost her color. Her smile had turned into a thin, straight line, like a minus symbol on our until that moment happiness.

I knew it. I felt it. I feared it. He was here. His other self was here. He could never get rid of him. No matter how hard he tried to keep him

hidden, he would always find a way to resurface. I was sure now. In that moment, I was surer than ever.

He looked at his mobile screen for a few moments and then hurl it against the opposite wall. The phone fell to the floor and shattered into pieces.

'Is he calling you, Sofia? Can't stand a minute without you, huh? You thought you could fool me, didn't you?'

Mom didn't respond. She stared silently ahead, as if the slightest blink could jeopardize her life. In seconds, glasses, plates, and cookies turned into a hundred pieces on the floor. Mom grabbed my hand. We ran and hid behind the couch. Father grabbed the knife from the sink, the same knife he held the day before to cut carrots in order to help mom in the kitchen. He took it and rushed towards her.

'No,' I screamed and shielded her.

Father grabbed my arm and threw me to the floor. He seized mom by the neck and pressed her against the wall. She closed her eyes not to see.

I trembled all over. I didn't know what to do. He would kill my mom. I tried to shout, but no sound came out.

'Tell me. How long have you been going behind my back? How long?'

He was yelling. Mom still didn't react. As if she had left her body, as if her essence had evaporated, wandering as a breeze in the space. Father tightened his fingers around the knife, then threw it away, grabbed her shoulders, and forcefully banged her head against the wall. Mom collapsed on the floor like a lifeless doll. He left her lying there, grabbed his keys from the table, and disappeared.

Fourteen

I ran. I shook her. I shouted. I begged. She wasn't waking up. I could hardly breathe. She wasn't waking up. I jumped up and went outside. I had to find someone to help me. I had to bring someone. I couldn't even remember which way I saw houses when we came. As I ran, I realized I wasn't wearing shoes. The asphalt was hot and burning my feet.

The more I progressed, the more trapped I felt. It was getting dark, and I couldn't see well. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know where to go. I was lost. I sat down and started crying. I wanted my mom; I wanted to go home; I wanted everything to stop. I wanted my mom. Only my mom. I cried loudly. I was sobbing. If I didn't find anyone, my mom would die. My mom would die.

'Are you okay?' I heard a voice next to me.

I turned my head. An elderly couple stood there, looking at me. I jumped up.

'My mom. My mom is hurt. She will die. Help me. Please, help me.'

The woman hugged me. The man ran and brought his car. I tried to orient myself to lead them back to our house. I don't know how I eventually found the way.

'Here,' I shouted and jumped out before the car even stopped.

The door was half-open.

'Mom,' I yelled.

Mom wasn't there. She wasn't in the place I left her an hour ago. Mom had disappeared. I searched the whole house. In every room. I didn't know what to think. For a moment, I doubted the clarity of my mind. I wondered if I had imagined all of this. If it hadn't happened in reality. If I had gone to sleep in the afternoon and dreamt it all.

The man and the woman followed me everywhere. They looked at each other and whispered something.

'We need to call someone,' the woman said. 'Should we call your dad? Do you remember the number?'

I showed her the shattered phone on the floor."

'We need to find someone,' the man insisted. 'You can't stay alone here tonight.'

I didn't know what to say to them. I was afraid they would think I was crazy. The man and the woman were discussing again. Then they told me I should go to their house for the night until my parents were found. The man took a piece of paper and wrote something.

'We'll leave it here on the table. I wrote our address and phone number. If nobody contacts us by tomorrow morning, we'll call the police. Everything will be fine. Don't worry.'

I followed them to the car and then to their house. The man warmed up a glass of milk for me to drink, and the woman brought me a sweater. I was trembling. Nothing could warm me up at that moment.

When I said I couldn't drink more milk, the woman took me by the hand and led me to a small room. She told me to sleep and assured me that everything would be sorted out the next day. She hugged me and kissed my forehead.

As soon as she closed the door behind her, I burst into uncontrollable tears. Throughout the night, I slept and woke up. For seconds, minutes, hours? I didn't know. When I opened my eyes again, I saw the woman standing next to my bed.

'Did they come?' I asked.

'They will come,' she said, caressing my hair. 'You were mumbling. Go to sleep.'

She left again, and my thoughts started swirling in my head. I felt dizzy. My eyes closed again.

I didn't want to sleep. I wanted to be awake all the time to hear every step, every whisper, and every knock on the door. I wanted to make sure that no one would hide the truth from me, that I would learn it first, even if I couldn't bear it. However, my mind eventually sank into sleep. Perhaps to save me from going mad.

No matter how many years pass, I will always remember the nightmares of that night. They all had the claustrophobic darkness of the forest, the labyrinthine arrangement of dense trees around my insignificant existence; and the sound of my mom's body collapsing.

Fifteen

It must have been the sound of the doorbell that made me jump. It took me a few seconds to realize where I was and what had happened. I opened the bedroom door and tried to listen.

It was father's voice. I couldn't distinguish what he was saying, but I was sure it was him.

I heard footsteps approaching. I closed the door and tried to run to the bed. Father managed to enter before I could slip under the covers. He told me it was time to leave, without further explanations. Without mentioning mom at all.

I said goodbye to the woman and the man. My father told them that he would be forever grateful, that my mom had had an accident, that I was in the forest at that time, that it was urgent, and he couldn't wait for me to return.

I could hear the saliva going down my throat. The man and the woman exchanged glances. They seemed unsure whom to believe. However, they didn't choose. Why should they? Nobody wants to get involved in other people's mess.

They stood and watched us as we walked towards the car and prepared to leave. Inside, I pleaded for them to change their minds, to not ultimately believe our story, to want to ask more questions. I begged for them to save us. I wished that finally there would be someone who would know the truth without us having to tell it. Someone who would rescue us. But unfortunately, ex machina gods did not exist. After so many years, I knew it well.

For quite some time, the only sound that could be heard was the one of the car's engine. Outside, it was still dark. It hadn't dawned yet. I wished so much for the dawn. It seemed like I was living through the longest night of my life, and I desperately needed the light.

'Is she alive?' I asked, holding my breath.

'Of course,' he replied.

So quickly, so easily, so simply. As if I were asking whether the sun would rise again that day. I didn't know if he was telling the truth, but I had no other choice. I clung to hope and waited.

Sixteen

When I realized we were approaching the hospital, my heart almost stopped. We entered the elevator and ascended several floors. I didn't know what I would face, but I was afraid to ask. Father played with his keychain and whistled, as if there was nothing in the world to worry him. As if some great happiness awaited him around the corner. As if my mom had just given birth, and we were visiting her. The mere thought sent shivers down my spine. As much as I always wanted a little sibling, I wouldn't want another child to experience the terror and madness I had lived through for so many years.

"Here," he said as soon as the elevator doors opened and pointed to the room across the hall.

I rushed to the door with such force that I almost collapsed on the floor. I ran and embraced her. I hugged her and cried.

"I'm fine," she whispered and kissed me on the forehead. "It was just a concussion. It will pass."

A male nurse entered the room.

"Lucky you, you have visitors," he said. Then he took my mother's blood pressure. "Perfect. Don't worry; by this time tomorrow, you'll be home." He turned to us. "And next time, when you go hiking in the mountains, take better care of her," he smiled.

"That's for sure," my father said. "I nearly had a heart attack when I saw her slipping."

My father could always come up with the most imaginative excuse to justify the unjustifiable. My mom tried to smile. I couldn't understand why she didn't tell the truth, why she continued to cover for him. I wanted to speak. I knew I had to speak. But what next? What would happen afterward?

Father poured water into a plastic cup and gave it to her.

"We want you healthy and back with us soon," he said and adjusted her pillow.

Liar, I wanted to scream, but I restrained myself and bit my lips with force.

The nurse smiled, confident that he was facing an ideal family. Certain that he saw another husband rushing to give his wife water and fluff her pillow. How could he imagine what was really happening behind the closed doors of our home? Who could imagine what was happening in reality behind the closed doors of anyone's home?

That's why I always doubted when I saw families on the street laughing. Fathers lifting their children onto their shoulders, and the children screaming with joy. Men bending down to kiss their wives on the cheek or holding their hands tenderly. I always wondered. Did the same thing happen at home, when they closed the door behind them?

Once the nurse left, I realized that my lips were bleeding.

Seventeen

That morning, I woke up drenched in sweat. Three nights in a row, the same nightmare again and again. It was night, I got up from my bed, and I searched for mom in the house. I called out to her, but she didn't answer. I searched for her in her room, but she wasn't there. Her bed was neatly made as if no one had slept there for days. And suddenly, I realized that my mom was no longer alive. That she had killed her. That I had no one.

And then I woke up. Sweating and with eyes full of tears.

Mom entered my room with a big smile and sparkling eyes.

"Happy birthday, sweetie," she said and hugged me. She held a rectangular package wrapped in golden paper but hesitated to give it to me. "It's something very small, but that's all the money I had. "

"You didn't have to give me a gift, mom," I said. I took the package and unwrapped it. Inside was a thick notebook with a khaki hardcover.

"For keeping your diary," she suggested, and I could see in her eyes that she felt uncomfortable because she couldn't buy me something else.

"It's wonderful," I said, and I meant it. I leaned towards her and hugged her tightly. "I don't want to lose you, mom. You're all I have."

Mom held me in her arms. "You are not going to lose me," she said. "I'll always be here for you."

Her voice trembled.

"Let's tell someone, mom. Please. We have to tell someone. He will kill you. One day, he will kill you."

She didn't answer. She told me to get dressed because we had a wonderful day ahead.

We baked a chocolate cake to celebrate my birthday when father would return from work. I didn't want to celebrate with him at all. You celebrate with people who bring you joy; he only brought me sorrows.

When he came back from work, he didn't even remember to wish me happy birthday. Mom seemed very upset that he forgot, and

she did everything to make him remember. She took the cake out of the fridge and placed it in front of him, but he looked at it with the same indifference he looked at the napkin holder.

When the doorbell rang, he ordered me to go and open, and I slowly dragged my steps to the front door. Outside stood Nefeli. And Haris. And ten more classmates of mine.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, trying to find a logical explanation for their presence on my doorstep.

"Happy birthday!" they shouted and started hugging and kissing me. They handed me packages and bags with gifts, and I felt so confused that I couldn't utter a word. How on earth did all these people know it was my birthday today? Except for Nefeli, I hadn't told anyone, and I found it unlikely that Nefeli had invited all these people to my house without asking me.

I started sweating. I was sure I would become a laughingstock in front of half the class. Father had told me many times that he didn't want me to invite anyone to the house, especially boys. He would go mad as soon as he saw them in our house. I tried to find a way to get rid of them before he noticed.

"Welcome, kids," I heard my father's voice behind me.

Before I could find something logical to say, I saw a truck stopping in front of our entrance, and two guys were unloading boxes with sweets, pizzas, and a huge frosted two-tier cake.

"I don't understand," was all I managed to whisper.

"What don't you understand, kid?" my father said. "Did you think I would let my only daughter celebrate her birthday without the party she deserves?"

"Your dad is the best," Nefeli said and made a victory sign to my father. "He called me the day before yesterday, and we planned everything behind your back. We were sure you wouldn't understand anything. He told me to invite all our classmates, but unfortunately, most of them have already gone on vacation. Never mind, you'll have to do with us," she laughed, and her laughter managed to drag the others along.

Only mom and I stood there, speechless, almost frozen, watching the spectacle. A spectacle.

An hour later, everyone seemed to be having a great time. Father went from group to group, speaking loudly and making everyone burst into laughter. If I didn't know him, I would think that his kids were very lucky to have him as a father.

His lie tore a huge wound in my heart. The pretense, the hypocrisy. I grabbed a glass of lemonade and went to sit alone under a tree. On my birthday, with my classmates around, and I preferred to sit alone under a tree.

"Mind if I join?" Haris was standing behind me, holding a glass of lemonade too.

"Sure," I said and forced myself to smile.

I was so angry with what was happening in our house at that moment that I didn't have the courage to smile with my heart, not even to the person who meant so much to me.

"Shouldn't you be with your guests now?" he said and smiled at me.

"They're not my guests. The one who invited them can also entertain them."

Haris seemed surprised by my answer. Several awkward moments followed during which neither of us found anything to say. I wished everything were different. I wished I could tell him how much I enjoyed seeing him and that in reality, I wasn't a quirky, ungrateful creature who despised the company of her friends at her birthday party.

I wish I could tell him that I was like that because, a few days ago, the same person who seemed the most normal person in the world at that moment, tried to kill my mom. How he had hit her so many times that I had lost count, and that inside him lived a violent monster, one that might sleep at times but always woke up in the end. However, I couldn't say anything.

Nefeli came running and pulled me by the hand.

'Come on, it's time to blow out your candles.'

As the fourteen candles lit up on my two-tiered grand cake, all I could wish for with all my soul was for something to finally happen, and mom and I to be saved from all this madness. Soon. Before it was too late for one of us.

Eighteen

I begged for that surreal party to finally end after the cake. From the corner of my eye, I notice father connecting his computer to a projector I had never seen in our house before. Then I saw him take a fork from the table and tap it several times on his glass. The chatter stopped, and all attention turned to him.

'For Anna,' he said, pointing with his hand at the opposite wall.

The air around me suddenly began to thin. As if father, with his actions, was sucking all the available oxygen and condemning me to suffocate. Soft music filled the space, and then boom! Like stray gusts, pictures of me were projected onto the wall. Pictures from my childhood, one after another. I was smiling in all of them. I looked happy. I looked like the child I always wanted to be but never became.

My classmates looked at them and smiled. Nefeli came next to me and hugged me. I realized that no one knew who I really was. Not even my best friend. Everyone had the impression that Anna was a girl who ate chocolate ice cream, laughed out loud, danced barefoot in the garden, and counted her colorful packages under the huge Christmas tree.

I got angry. Furious. Anna wasn't just that. In no way was she just that. If we had the ability to watch photos from the other side of my life, no one would be smiling at that moment.

Some photos of me crying my heart out. Of me hiding in the deepest corner of my closet and covering my ears with my hands. Of me becoming a shield in front of my mom. Surely, no one would be laughing.

I am not just that, I felt like screaming. I was never just that. I wanted to grab whatever cake was left on the table and throw it against the white wall. To cover up the lie that everyone believed to be my reality.

Tears were streaming down my cheeks. The music stopped, and the photo onslaught finally came to an end. Applause erupted from all sides.

'Oh, she got emotional,' Nefeli said and hugged me tightly.

Father was smiling, and I genuinely wondered if he had the illusion that I was crying out of emotion and not anger.

When everyone finally left, mom and I started cleaning up the remnants of the party, still shocked by the turn of events that evening.

'No one will believe us,' mom whispered to me as she washed the dishes. 'If we go out and tell what's happening, no one will believe us.'

I wanted to tell her that it wasn't true, that the truth always triumphs over lies. But deep down, I knew she was right. For years, father had managed to build the image of the perfect father and husband. Most likely, everyone would think we were crazy.

And when I realized that, I felt more trapped than ever.

Nineteen

I found Bebis, Nefeli's dog, in our yard a few days later. I heard him barking while I was having my breakfast. I opened the door and saw him standing on our doorstep, as if waiting for us to open the door to greet him.

'You escaped again, huh?' I said, patting his head. 'Did you escape again, silly?'

'Is that damn dog here again?' I heard father's voice behind me. 'Is it so hard for everyone to keep their damn dogs in their own yard?'

He was about to kick him, but I grabbed him and ran.

'I'll take him to Nefeli,' I said. 'I'll be back in five minutes.'

Nefeli opened the door in her pajamas.

'Did you lose something?' I asked and handed her the dog.

'Oh, Bebis, ' she said, hugging him. 'This dog will be the death of me. I'm telling you. He'll drive me crazy.' She grabbed his muzzle and kissed him. 'Why did you escape again? Do you want to get hit by cars? What will I do without you? Can you tell me?'

She went to the kitchen, and I followed.

'I can't stay long. I told father I'd be back quickly.'

'No, don't go. Today is dad's birthday. I want to make him a cake until he comes back from work. You have to help me.'

When I told her I had to ask for permission from father first, Nefeli shouted 'you 've got to be kidding me' and stuffed her face with her toast.

Back home, I couldn't find him. Mom said he had gone to see a friend and might take a while to come back. She told me to go but to return soon.

Nefeli and I did our best. She had printed a recipe titled The Easiest Birthday Cake, and I read aloud the ingredients one by one.

'Okay, we have everything,' she said when she put the last ingredient on the table.

'Are you sure we can do it?' I asked as I finished reading the instructions.

'Of course,' Nefeli said. 'That's what the title says, after all. The easiest birthday cake. What could go wrong?'

And of course, everything that could go wrong went wrong. The thing we ended up having in our bowl after a few minutes didn't resemble a cake in any way.

'What is this thing, Nefeli? It needs to be thrown away. How will anyone eat this? We'll send your dad to the hospital on his birthday.'

Nefeli was undeterred.

'It hasn't been baked yet. That's how all cakes are before they're baked,' she said and put it in the oven.

I had no doubt that cakes weren't like that before being baked. At least none of the cakes my mom and I had made until then had this awful appearance. While it was baking, a strange smell spread through the kitchen.

'Do you still insist that this thing we're baking is a cake?'

Nefeli put on oven mitts and took out an amorphous mass of indistinct color that in no way resembled a cake. Her eyes filled with tears.

'I thought we could do it. I wanted so much to surprise my dad.'

I felt sad that Nefeli was crying.

'Wait,' I said and ran into my house.

I found mom and convinced her to come and help us.

"Okay," she said, checking the clock. "As long as we don't take too long."

In mom's hands, the ingredients written on our stained paper indeed transformed into a cake that filled the house with a delightful smell.

"Thank you, Mrs. Sophia," said Nefeli, hugging mom.

A loud knock on the door startled all three of us. Mom and I exchanged worried looks as Nefeli went to open the door. We heard father's voice. He was looking for us. Nefeli led him to the kitchen. I

pleaded silently for her not to tell him that we were making a cake for Mr. Savvas.

"Your wife is the best baker," was the first thing Nefeli thought of saying. "My dad will love the cake she made for him."

I panicked.

"Time to go," father said.

I tried to read his face, but as usual, it was expressionless. He showed no signs of what he was thinking or planning to do.

As we distanced ourselves from Nefeli's house and approached ours, breathing became increasingly difficult.

When father opened the door and told us to go inside, I felt like my heart was about to escape my body.

I waited. Like when you wait for the sky, filled with dense black clouds, to release its lightning and drench you in rain. I waited, but father said nothing. He did nothing. Nothing like what he usually did in such situations.

"Set the table," he only said, and we sat down to eat without much talking.

Late in the afternoon, someone knocked on our front door, and mom went to open. It was Mr. Savvas, holding a plate wrapped in transparent cellophane. Inside were three pieces of the cake mom had made earlier.

"It was the most wonderful cake I've ever had," he said and handed the plate to mom. "Thank you."

After hearing the conversation, father went into the bathroom and slammed the door behind him. For the rest of the evening, he didn't say a word neither to mom nor to me.

The TV was on, and my eyes were fixed on it without actually watching. I was thinking. It was strange that he didn't explode this time. That he kept it within him. I had wondered many times if the incident in the mountains was the last one. I thought it resembled a climax. The highest point. And usually, after the peak, the descent began. Was this happening to us too?

Twenty

Nefeli and father were the first people I saw that day when I woke up. They were standing at our doorstep, discussing something. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but from Nefeli's hand movements, I could tell she was very upset.

"Bebis ran away again," she told me as soon as she saw me. "I thought he came to you, but your dad says he hasn't seen him at all."

Father told her that if we spotted him, we would let them know, and I felt he was eager to get rid of her.

"Poor little dog. I hope he didn't get hit by a car," I said after Nefeli left, and father agreed.

Later, he suggested spending our Sunday outdoors. We got into the car and ended up in a small village. It was beautiful. The houses were made of stone, and tranquility prevailed everywhere.

"Breathe oxygen," said father, spreading his hands wide.

At noon, we went for lunch at a tavern. It wasn't crowded, and the food smelled delicious.

"Nice village you have here, sir," father said to the man who brought our order.

"We have our peace here, my son. We can live like humans," the man seemed pleased with father's remark.

A remark that he repeated while we were eating. Again, and again. Until he ended saying, "I've decided to buy a house here," as we finished our meal.

"Here?" mom asked, and I had exactly the same question as her.

"Here. In the village."

"A country house? Can we afford it?"

Father hastily chewed his bite.

"No, not a country house. I'll sell our house and buy another one here. Any money left will be saved for Anna's studies."

"Meaning we'll move up here?" mom insisted.

Father put down his utensils with noise.

"What's wrong with up here, and why do you say it with such a condescending tone? Can't you live anywhere other than the city? Do we have to endure exhaust fumes and noise all our lives? The decision has been made, and it's for the best of all of us."

"But it's too far from your work. Anna will lose her friends. She'll have to change schools," mom said. "As nice as it may be up here, it's isolation. Think about it. I'm begging you."

"I have nothing to think about," father said and asked for the bill. "We'll move by September, and Anna will start school in the area."

I was so shocked that I couldn't find anything to say. We drove back home in silence. Another decision made for us without us. Just as we arrived home, Mr. Savvas and Nefeli were parking outside their house. Nefeli was crying.

"What happened?" I went to her.

She wiped her eyes.

"We found Bebis," she said. "In the empty plot behind our house. Someone poisoned him."

I felt like the sky fell on my head as soon as I heard it. Because I knew who had done it. I was sure. However, I didn't show it to her. I just leaned toward her and hugged her. I let her cry on my shoulder for as long as she needed. For Nefeli, Bebis was family.

When Mr. Savvas took her and left, I went home too. Father was absentmindedly watching TV.

"Someone poisoned Bebis," I said and stood in front of the TV.

"I told you, didn't I? Whoever leaves their child and their dog unattended, the time will come when they'll pay the consequences."

I didn't stay to hear more. My head and stomach were spinning. I rushed to the bathroom and vomited.

Twenty-One

I couldn't sleep at night. The image of Bebis's face kept coming to my mind. What had a small innocent creature done to deserve this? I was angry. Grief took hold of me. I was suffocating. I found everything in my life absurd. I felt that every additional drop was overflowing the glass.

Madness. How long would we be puppets in father's hands? How long would he pull our strings as he pleased? Even the thought seemed terrifying: I would spend my life as a wooden doll used by its owner's wishes.

For the first time, I felt anger toward mom too. I kept telling her over and over, yelling, begging. To leave, to react, to make a change. She didn't listen. It was as if she couldn't comprehend that we had this choice. Or any choice. As if she were under some curse. As if she was meant to never be happy. No. I wouldn't live my life this way.

I jumped up. I opened my closet and found my backpack. I stuffed in some underwear, a few T-shirts, and two pairs of jeans. I saw my hairbrush on the dresser and threw it in too. Then I remembered to grab socks and the teddy bear my mom had given me some years ago. Something to remember her by.

Were these enough? I didn't know, and I didn't have time to think about it. The clock showed two-fifteen after midnight. I had to leave while the others were still asleep. I opened the last drawer of my desk and dug out some money I had collected from holiday and birthday gifts. I folded it and tucked it into the front pocket of my backpack. It wouldn't take me far, I knew. It would barely last a few days. And then what? What would happen after?

I decided not to think that way. If I did, I would be trapped forever in the same nightmare, never having the chance to dream. As I opened the window and prepared to jump into the yard, I turned my head back one last time and looked.

"Goodbye," I whispered, not even knowing whom I was bidding farewell to.

I jumped outside and landed on the grass.

It was chilly. I realized that it was the first time in my life I was outside the house this late, and alone. I don't know if it was my imagination, but the night seemed darker at two in the morning than it did at nine in the evening. Everything was completely silent, as if everyone had vanished from the face of the earth, leaving me wandering with a backpack.

The farther I moved away from home, the more I doubted my actions. What was I really trying to achieve? Maybe I hoped this would be the shock my father needed; the jolt that would make him snap out of it. When he woke up in the morning and found my room empty, he would realize how wrong he had been, understand the consequences of his actions on his child, and change. He would make a real effort to change this time.

A creaking sound made me jump. Someone had opened the window of their room. I quickened my pace. Maybe he would wake up, see that I was gone, and finally realize that he had no more chance to remain the same. Because losing your child is the worst thing that can happen to a parent. There was no way such an event would leave him unaffected.

I walked on, wheezing. I sat on the sidewalk to rest. Whom was I fooling? I definitely knew the truth. I had lived it since I was a baby. He wouldn't change. There was no chance that my departure would soften him, make him change his mind. On the contrary. It would infuriate him even more. It would make him rage, break everything. Blame mom, unleash all his fury on her. I shouldn't have left. It was a huge mistake.

I turned and took the road back home. Running. I was ashamed for myself. I couldn't stay away for even half an hour. Half an hour, and I was returning with my tail between my legs and my soul in my mouth. I was ridiculous. I was a coward. When I reached our house, I saw light in the living room. My heart was pounding. My legs gave in. What would I do? He had caught me. Maybe he was beating mom right now.

I was about to enter the house through the front door when I noticed my bedroom window was still half-open, exactly as I had left it, and the light was off. I approached and saw that my door was closed as if no one had entered. I dropped my backpack on the floor and then

climbed up. I pressed my ear against the door. I heard footsteps approaching my room. I tossed the backpack under the bed and covered myself with the sheet up to my ears. My door opened, Mom turned on the light, and came to me.

"Anna," she lightly nudged me. "Anna, wake up."

"What... what happened?" I pretended to wake up.

"They called us from the hospital. Your grandfather is dying. We need to go. Get dressed."

She left, and I stayed lying for a little longer, staring at the ceiling, wondering what had shocked me more. That my grandfather was dying or that my escape remained a secret.

Twenty-Two

On the way to the hospital, I was thinking that the fact that we never had contact with grandpa had always puzzled me. We never had any particular interactions, even though he lived just two blocks away. I remembered that when I was little, I often asked my father, 'When are we going to grandpa's?' And he always found a reason not to go. Either we didn't have time, or he needed to mow the lawn, or he wasn't feeling well.

It must have been around three-thirty in the morning when we arrived at the hospital. Darkness outside, bright lights inside. They made you lose the sense of time. It felt like it was always daytime in there. Or like it didn't matter whether it was day or night for anyone confined to an uncomfortable hospital bed.

Father went to find a nurse. While she explained, he listened silently. Then she asked him to follow her. They entered a room, closing the door behind them. Mom held my hand in hers.

"It 'll be okay," she said and squeezed it. I didn't know what she meant. If she meant me, yes, I was okay. This grandpa was almost a stranger to me. He was as someone I had seen randomly on the street a few times, and his death wouldn't touch my heart.

If she meant father, I didn't know what to assume. Whether he would be okay or not. Because I never understood what he felt for this old man dying in the room across from us. A father who chose never to see. I wondered if he cared at all about his death or if he was there that night out of obligation.

'Why didn't father like his own father?' I asked when my thoughts couldn't make sense.

'Things are not that simple,' mom replied.

'What do you mean?' I insisted.

She continued to grip my hand.

'He drank a lot. And he used to beat them. Your grandmother left them after a few years. And she never came back. The two of them stayed until your father grew up enough to leave.'

Her words shocked me like electricity would jolt a wet hand. Tears started running from my eyes. I let go of her hand and stood up. I got up to go find him and shout, 'Can't you see you've become just like him?'

I stood outside the room, my fingers trembling, ready to touch the door handle. I heard mom saying something behind me, but I couldn't pay attention. Father opened the door first. His eyes were red and teary.

'We're leaving,' he said and headed toward the exit.

Grandpa had died moments ago. I couldn't say any of the things I wanted to say. A whirlwind of questions was spinning in my head. How was this happening? How was it possible? The one who experienced terror, anger, and abuse as a child to force his own child to live the exact same nightmare?

Twenty-Three

On the day of grandpa's funeral, father got ready as usual to go to work.

'Aren't we going to the funeral?' mom asked while pouring coffee into his cup.

'Mind your own business,' father snapped and pushed his cup away.

Some coffee spilled on the table. He grabbed his briefcase and left, slamming the door behind him.

'It's understandable. He lost his father,' mom said, grabbing a towel to clean up the spilled coffee.

I wanted to tell her that father didn't need a special reason to behave the way he did, but I felt sorry for her. I knew that in her mind, there was always the hope that father would change and become the person she believed he could be.

In the afternoon, father returned with the same attitude as in the morning. Or perhaps even worse.

'Again, moussaka?' he grumbled as mom placed a hot piece in front of him, its aroma capable of piercing your nostrils.

'Because it's your favorite,' mom said in a low voice, filling our plates. 'We thought it would make you feel better.'

Father noisily dropped his utensils on the table.

'And who told you I don't feel well?' he shouted. 'Who told you I need your help to feel better?'

'We just thought that...' mom tried to say, but his voice drowned hers like thunder covering any other sound.

I closed my eyes tightly. How nice it would have been if we could eat mom's moussaka, talk and laugh; how nice it would have been if we weren't afraid. How nice if our lives could have been easy and simple. If they could have been nice.

I heard a crash and opened my eyes. Father had grabbed the baking tray and thrown it out of the open kitchen window.

'I work all day, come home exhausted, and I can't even find a decent meal. You are useless. All you do is sit around all day,' he shouted.

He wasn't just shouting. He was screaming. Louder than ever. As if mom were to blame for everything that had happened in his life, as if someone had to pay for it. The sound of the doorbell forced him to stop shouting and go answer.

'Are you okay?' It was Mr. Savvas and Nefeli. 'We heard voices and were afraid something happened.'

Father said that everything was fine, and there was no reason to worry. Mr. Savvas seemed not to believe him and stood at our doorstep, but father insisted that we were all perfectly fine and slammed the door in his face. I was afraid that Mr. Savvas's appearance would infuriate him even more, that, in addition to the baking tray with moussaka, he would throw mom against a wall. But all that followed was silence. He gulped down the rest of his beer and went to the living room.

Mom and I went outside the kitchen and collected the baking tray and the moussaka scattered all over the yard. The moussaka that mom had been so happy about in the morning when she thought of making it because father would like it and would lift his spirits.

All the enthusiasm she had in the morning ended up in a tossed baking tray of moussaka on the ground. All her love and dedication to this man always ended up in a heart tossed on the ground.

'You don't deserve this, mom,' I said and hugged her. 'None of us deserve this.'

Mom shook her head many times.

'I know,' she whispered and hugged me.

Twenty-Four

The next morning, I woke up to the smell of fried bacon. I wondered where mom found the courage to prepare breakfast after yesterday's incident with the moussaka. When I entered the kitchen, the sight left me astonished. Mom was sitting at the table, and father was serving breakfast.

"I hope you're hungry," he smiled and placed a loaded plate in front of me. "I won't let you get up from your seats until you try a bit of everything," he laughed and filled his own plate. He poured juice into our glasses and raised his own. "To new beginnings," he said. "We'll never let anyone break this family apart."

We raised our glasses and clinked them with his. I looked at mom and wondered if she felt as stupid as I did. If she also thought about how ridiculous it was to make a proposal with the same person who, just a few hours ago, threw the tray with the food you had served him out of the window.

"And when I say a new beginning, I mean it," he continued. "As soon as we finish eating, I want to take you to our new home. Everything will change once we move. You'll see. A lot of bad energy has accumulated in this neighborhood."

Certainly, for father, the source of bad energy was Mr. Savvas. The passion with which he spoke tempted me to wonder if Mr. Savvas was indeed the cause of our troubles, even unintentionally. If he was the one triggering explosions in father. And if moving away could change our lives.

As long as we were in the car heading towards the village, father chatted non-stop about how big the new house was, how quiet the neighborhood was, how clean the air would be where we'd live. I didn't know what to think. Was this what we needed after all? To start anew somewhere else?

Dark clouds had started to gather in the sky, and a summer storm broke out while we were still on the highway. The further we went towards the village, the stronger the storm became.

At some point, father stopped the car and said, 'We've arrived.' We opened our doors and ran towards the house. I shook the rain off on the covered terrace and tried to orient myself in the space until father found the key to the front door. I looked around. There was nothing. Nothing else around, as far as my eyes could see. A huge house in the middle of nowhere.

Father opened the door and signaled us to enter. 'Behold our new paradise,' he closed the door behind him and guided us through all the rooms.

The empty house, combined with the rain pouring down forcefully, gave me shivers. What would happen if the house change didn't mean a new beginning? What if father started again the same behavior' pattern? The house was in the middle of nowhere. What if we needed help? What if we had to run somewhere?

In our other home, we were surrounded by houses, neighbors, cars, and streets. Not that it had ever proven useful. Only we knew what was happening inside our home, and we always found a way to survive on our own. But a bad feeling had begun to surround me, like the black clouds piling up above the neighborhood.

On the road back, I felt more and more strongly that our new beginning would turn out to be a huge illusion. I really wanted to believe him this time, but I had already believed him so many times in the past, only to end up disappointed. What would change now? I decided, however, that I would make one more attempt and promised myself that it would be the last.

Twenty-Five

On the last day before the move, I went to say goodbye to Nefeli. She had been holding a grudge since the day I had announced the move.

"Come on, Nefeli, you know you're my best friend, and that won't change even if our houses are no longer next to each other."

Nefeli pursed her lips.

"Yes, that's what everyone always says, and then they end up only talking on Easter and Christmas."

I wanted to tell her that my home would always be open to her, and she could visit whenever she wanted, but I didn't want to lie. I knew that father would never risk Mr. Savvas returning to our lives in any way.

"I'll write you a letter every week," I finally said.

Nefeli burst into laughter and then started crying.

"Oh, Anna, only you live in the time when they used to send letters with pigeons. I'll miss you, silly."

She hugged me again, making my eyes well up too.

"I made something for you," she said and opened her desk drawer.

She handed me a large notebook wrapped in red paper, on which she had written, 'Nefeli-Anna: Friends Forever.' As I flipped through the pages, my eyes teared. Nefeli had filled the pages with pictures of us, starting from the year we began going to kindergarten together. Under each photo, she had written small stories, funny incidents that happened to us, things that only the two of us could understand.

"You're the best friend in the world," I said, hugging her.

When we managed to let go of each other, I said goodbye again and left. Nefeli closed the door behind me, and I headed home. Mr. Savvas suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

"I wanted to say goodbye to you too," he said. "And to tell you that you're an amazing girl. Don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise."

"Thank you," I said, feeling a bit awkward.

"Your lives are your own, and it's none of my business, but I want you to know that there are people who can help you. If you ever need help, I mean."

He pulled out a folded pamphlet from his pocket and handed it to me. I didn't even open it. I tucked it between the pages of the notebook Nefeli had given me and hastily went home.

"What is this?" father asked as soon as I entered.

"A gift. From Nefeli."

He took it and started flipping through it. My heart pounded so loudly that I wondered if he could hear it. What would I say if he found the pamphlet? It would be a disaster. Thankfully, he stopped a few pages before the point where I had hidden it and handed the notebook back to me.

"We're not moving to Mars," he finally said. "You'll see Nefeli again."

I shook my head, then went to stash the notebook in one of the boxes in my room.

At night, when father's snoring assured me that he had fallen asleep, I quietly opened the cardboard box, found the notebook, and unearthed Mr. Savvas's pamphlet. I unfolded it and read: *Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in the Family*. It was written in bold, large letters.

Maybe it sounds ridiculous, but at that very moment, as I read it, everything became clear in my mind. As if all doubts had been dispelled. Maybe sometimes you choose to keep your eyes closed and your ears plugged. You choose not to see what has been in front of your eyes from the beginning. It took a pamphlet with bold letters to make me realize.

Twenty-Six

Three days after settling into our new home, I was already certain that something about this new space didn't sit well with me. It made me feel strange. Anxious. Every night, when I closed my eyes, I would jolt awake in fear. And then it would take a long time for me to fall back asleep.

I thought I heard thuds and would wake up. I turned on the bedside lamp and checked the time. I half-opened my door and strained to listen. I waited, but nothing happened. I wondered if I had imagined it. I returned to my bed, attempting to sleep. I wondered how many more thuds would haunt my life?

Perhaps it was because most of my things were still packed in boxes, and I hadn't yet felt like this new room was truly mine. Maybe it was because father remained calm and smiling since the day we moved, which tied my stomach in knots. Is there a greater anxiety than waiting for the thing you fear the most to happen?

On the fourth night after our move, the heat became unbearable. We went out to the veranda and sat on the steps, side by side.

"Not a leaf stirs," said father.

"Shall I bring something cold for us to drink?" mom suggested, getting up.

"Leave it," father stopped her. "Let's take a stroll to the village square and have something there."

It was the first time we ventured outside since we moved. For three days, all we did was open boxes and tidy up. We went on foot. The route was so beautiful. It smelled like summer, the sky was full of stars, and tranquility prevailed everywhere. Tranquility and peace.

"We belong here," father smiled. "We should have been living here long ago." He put his arm around mom's shoulders and embraced her.

"It is indeed very peaceful," mom said, nestling into his hug.

I prayed within myself that all of this was true. That father meant it. That he just needed a change of environment, to distance himself from

what made him explode to be able to find peace. I felt this was our last hope. The last chance to leave behind all the darkness that had stolen the light from our lives so many times. Like we had climbed our last step before falling into the abyss.

In the village square, a few tables were arranged on the cobblestone pavement. People were eating, clinking their glasses, laughing. They seemed happy. Carefree. That was what had been missing the most from our lives. Carefreeness.

We sat at a table, and father ordered drinks and some appetizers for all three of us. We ate, talked, laughed, and enjoyed ourselves. I would bet that if someone saw us, without knowing who we were, they would think we were the happiest family in the world.

"Tomorrow, I think we should gradually start working on the garden. What do you say?" father suggested, taking a piece of bread from the plate.

We both nodded approvingly. As if there was ever a chance we would object. Even if he insisted that this was a new beginning, we couldn't discard what we had been accustomed to until then. At least not so easily.

I wondered if I could ever treat father the way Nefeli treated hers. If I could tell him anything that crossed my mind without fearing his reaction. If I could dance in front of him while he watched the news or talk while he read the newspaper. And if I could ever be myself without fearing his own.

When we returned home and I lay down on my bed, it was already half-past eleven, but I struggled to sleep. I lifted my pillow and pulled out the notebook Nefeli had given me. I opened it in the middle and took out the pamphlet Mr. Savvas had given me. I had read it many times since the day it fell into my hands. So many times, that I had memorized every word.

By now, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that my mom and I had been victims of domestic violence for many years. I knew that father was the perpetrator and that perpetrators usually don't change their behavior. At least not without seeking help from a professional. I also knew that there was no way father would ever seek help from a professional because he simply didn't believe he had a problem.

I now knew where to turn for help for myself and mom. And there were many out there who wanted and were able to help us. But they first needed to know that we needed help. Nevertheless, I had decided not to talk to anyone yet. Because deep inside, I pleaded and hoped that things would truly be different this time.

Twenty-Seven

Cheese was the last thing I wrote on the shopping list. I filled it in on the last line, tore the page from the notepad, and put it in my pocket.

"Ready?" father asked, and I heard him grab the car keys.

In the village, there was only a very small grocery store, so we had to drive to the neighboring village, about fifteen minutes away.

"You win something, you lose something," father said, and for a moment, I wondered whether we were winning or losing.

I felt sorry for my losses. However, I also thought about the peaceful days we were having. I wondered how long they would last. If they did, then yes, we had definitely won.

The air conditioning in the supermarket was high, giving me chills. I took the shopping list from my pocket and handed it to mom.

"Cheese," she said at some point. "We need cheese."

Father pushed the cart towards the dairy section. The variety of neatly arranged cheeses suddenly made me realize that my stomach was growling.

"Need any help?"

A young employee with a white apron appeared in front of us and started an endless analysis of each cheese separately. He explained them in such detail, as if we had just landed on Earth from space and had never eaten cheese before.

"Try this," he said, handing us small pieces to taste.

"Maybe this one?" mom pointed to one of the cheeses and turned to look at father.

"Your wife has good taste," the employee smiled. "I'd choose this one too."

Father asked him to weigh it, put it in the cart, and went straight to the checkout. He didn't say a word while we loaded the bags into the trunk. When I noticed that his face had taken a reddish hue, the growling in my stomach turned into a tightening.

Was it possible for him to be angry because the employee thought mom had good taste in cheese? Could he be upset because some random employee was eating the same cheese as mom? No. Impossible.

Several hours later, the conversation thankfully seemed to have been forgotten. The garden needed attention, which proved to be a good distraction. One of us was digging, the other planting, the third watering. What an excellent team we must have seemed to anyone passing by.

During the evening, father said, 'I'm hungry,' and mom rushed to satisfy his craving. I followed her to the kitchen.

"Shall I make omelets?" she asked.

She stood in front of the open refrigerator, checking the shelves.

"Yes," I agreed with her choice, and mom took out some eggs and handed them to me.

I arranged them on the table, one next to the other, along with the tomatoes, cheese, and milk.

In less than a quarter of an hour, the kitchen smelled delightful. Mom emptied the last omelet from the pan onto her plate and came to sit with us.

"The house looks different now that we've made the garden," father said and unfolded the towel next to his plate.

He took a large bite of his omelet, almost swallowing it whole.

"Amazing omelet, you nailed it," he said.

Mom smiled with that enormous radiant smile she always had when father approved of her choices.

"A few eggs, a bit of cheese, milk, tomatoes, and voila. The young man was right after all. This cheese is amazing. We should remember to get it again."

Before I could swallow my own piece, I heard the sound of a fork falling. I lifted my eyes from the plate and saw father's fork on the floor. At first, I thought he just dropped it and was about to get him another one.

Within seconds, his plate was catapulted against the opposite wall, shattering into dozens of small pieces—just as many as the pieces my heart broke into.

No. We couldn't go through the same thing again. After moving houses. After distancing ourselves from the source of our troubles. After father changing. It was a new beginning. He had said we would make a new start. What happened again?

"Wherever I take you, you will never change", he yelled. "Where do I have to take you to be sure about you? Where? Tell me!"

He grabbed mom by the shoulders and shook her. I stood behind her, trembling.

"Only if I bury you in the ground, I will find peace!"

He let her go and ran to the kitchen counter. He opened the drawer and pulled out a large knife. Mom grabbed my hand, and we ran out of the kitchen. We opened the gate and started running down the street. We were crying, running, and holding each other's hand. Our end had come, I thought, pulling mom to run faster.

He was running after us, shouting. When he caught up, I saw that he no longer held the knife. I almost felt relief, but he grabbed both of us by the arms and dragged us.

"Get in the car," he shouted. "Now."

He opened the door and pushed us into the back seat.

It felt like he was tearing my heart out. Like throwing it into the garden, onto the pile of weeds we had stacked before. My heart bled helpless on a heap of unfulfilled dreams, on a pile of false promises.

I realized I shouldn't have believed his words. I should have called the number on the pamphlet Mr. Savvas gave me. I should have asked for help while there was still time. Now it might be too late. I promised myself I wouldn't believe him again if I survived that night.

He started the engine and hit the gas.

"We'll live together or die together," he said, pressing the gas pedal.

We were like a bullet, the speedometer needle reaching the limit; mom and I were holding each other tightly, crying.

We'll die, it's time to die, I kept thinking.

"I love you, mommy," I whispered and kissed her wet cheek.

We'll die. I don't want to die. I want to live, I thought.

Mom held me tight. She kept her eyes closed and whispered something. I couldn't understand what. Probably some prayer. I closed my eyes too and prayed that these wouldn't be my last thoughts in life. That my life wouldn't just be this: an endless struggle to escape.

Some minutes later, we entered the highway. The car was moving so fast that I couldn't see the cars we were passing. I couldn't believe we hadn't been killed yet.

A chilling sound suddenly reached my ears. I turned my head back. It was a police car. A police car was following us. I pushed mom. She turned to see. We held each other's hands tightly. Father kept looking through the rearview mirror, desperately trying to escape.

When we entered the town, I feared that he might succeed. He kept turning into every narrow alley, trying to disappear from the police's view.

However, the police car continued to follow us. The chilling sound of the siren became the most comforting sound I had ever heard in my life. In every narrow street and every unknown neighborhood, the siren was behind us, protecting us—or at least that's how I felt in those moments.

Father kept trying to hide us, to make us disappear, to have us only for himself. So, we couldn't speak, think, or feel for ourselves. Another police car appeared out of nowhere and cut off our path. Trapped between two police cars, under the sounds of the most chilling and simultaneously relieving siren I had ever heard.

Father continued to tightly grip the steering wheel, and mom continued to hold me tightly. The three of us sat still, as if time had frozen at that very moment. As if there was nothing else, we could say, do, or live. The police officers descended. Two from one car and two from the other.

Father immediately changed his demeanor. He rolled down the window and said we were out for a drive, that he didn't realize he was speeding, and as soon as he heard the siren, he panicked and couldn't

stop. He claimed it was instinctive, not letting his logic work. He apologized, willing to pay any fine imposed on him. He smiled, emphasizing that he was a law-abiding citizen with a clean criminal record, and they could check it if they wanted.

My rage made my temples pound. The police officers seemed unsure of what to believe. No. He couldn't escape this time. Enough. Everything that happened all these years were more than enough.

Mom sat silently next to me. She wouldn't speak. I knew she wouldn't. Most likely, the police would issue us a fine, and we would be allowed to leave. And then? What would happen afterward? Would he kill us? Even if he calmed down that night, when would the next outburst come, with no one to stop him? It was my last chance. I had never been more certain in my life.

"He is lying! He'll kill us! Help us! He'll kill us!" I screamed, and I didn't even recognize my own voice.

It sounded like the cry of a trapped animal.

The rest happened so quickly that it felt like I didn't experience it for real. They pulled him out of the car, handcuffed him, and put him in the police car. Then they helped me and mom to go the other police car.

"Everything will be okay," one police officer said, smiling at me.

As I watched the police officers put father into the police car and close the door behind them, I felt as if someone had tied two wings on my back and shouted, 'Fly. Now you can.' And as I saw the police car with father inside move away, I thought that I was losing him for good, even though I had never truly had him. And then, it felt like someone tied two stones on my wings and pulled me back to the ground.

EPILOGUE

Mom and I start anew. Aw if we are being born today, as if this moment is our new dawn.

She holds my hand, and we walk. Everything around us seems dark.

But we hold each other tight, and we try to find the light.

We walk and we want to forget—the things that hurt us, the things that broke us, the things that almost shattered us into pieces.

And as we hold each other and walk, light enters through the crack.

And the crack keeps widening until light illuminates our faces.

Embraced, we find now the strength we need to smile.

THE END

A SEVENTY-YEAR-OLD AGED TEN
(Translated in English by the author)

A dragon who?

On Friday, April 8th, on 20 Fireworks Street, a peculiar figure lurked behind a cluster of blossoming trees. From time to time, the head of this figure – a head that had lost all the melanin that once colored its unknown color of mane – protruded through the foliage and discreetly observed the group of four children riding their bicycles in their neighborhood park.

The head was particularly cautious. It did not want its presence to be noticed under any circumstances. When it saw that one of the children was looking, whether intentionally or not, in its direction, it pretended to be absorbed in examining one of the leaves of the tree behind which it was hiding.

The day – one of the first truly spring days of the year – was perfect for a bike ride. The four friends were very happy that they could finally go out to play. And things would be even better if the mysterious figure didn't cast its shadow just a few meters away from them.

First of all, Stavros approached Daniel and started showing him his bike wheel, comment something. However, his finger then pointed in a different direction. Daniel' gaze followed the direction indicated by his friend's finger. The two boys exchanged a few words and then continued cycling carefree. But don't be fooled. The 'carefree' attitude was only for appearances. Daniel, in turn, side-swiped Margarita with his bike, pretending smiling, saying, 'Someone is watching us.' Margarita smiled back at him. She wasn't a fool to show that she was disturbed, even though her heart raced. She got off her bike and walked over to Irene. She winked at her friend and raised her right hand in a 'high five' gesture. Irene responded immediately, raising her hand in a 'high five' stance. As the palms of the two girls joined, Margarita said to Irene, 'We're being watched. Be careful.'

A few more minutes must have passed. The kids continued to ride their bikes, and the mysterious figure continued to glance at both the children and the leaves. The olive and lemon trees were laden with blossoms, turning their foliage into the perfect hiding spot.

At some point, Stavros quickly pedaled to his friends and then gave the signal. "Go". Immediately, all four sped up and reached the point the mysterious figure was standing. She seemed to falter as soon as she saw four angry faces looking straight into her eyes. She abandoned the leaves she held in her hands and started walking briskly in the opposite direction from where the four friends were gathered. However, they were faster. Within seconds, they surrounded her.

"Don't you know it's rude to spy on people?" Daniel frowned.

The mysterious figure – a woman around seventy, wearing a trench coat and pitch-black sunglasses – pretended to cough several times and then cleared her throat loudly again and again. It wasn't a cold or the first spring allergies. It was just a little trick to gain some time.

"We demand to know right now why you're spying on us," Margarita raised her voice. She knew that normally you don't raise your voice to adults. But this particular adult wasn't behaving quite right. So perhaps she deserved it.

"Tell us, please," Irene said with a soft voice. She was always shy and polite with everyone, regardless of their behavior.

The mysterious woman seemed as if she had swallowed her tongue. She wasn't making a sound. But the kids were determined. They weren't planning to budge an inch before they learned what they wanted to know.

The woman seemed to understand that she had no other choice; she had to confess everything. She cleared her throat many times and calmly said, "I wasn't spying on you. I was observing... the dakos."

The kids burst into laughter. "Did you take us for fools?" Daniel asked. "Do you seriously expect us to believe that there's a dragon lurking around here, and you came to monitor it?"

"Yes, it breathes fire," Margarita chuckled. "Should we call the fire department?"

Irene wanted to tell the mysterious woman that she and her friends were now ten years old and couldn't be easily fooled like little children. But she noticed that the woman had started to sweat, so she

kept silent. Perhaps her outfit was to blame too. Why would someone wrap themselves in a trench coat on such a sunny day?

The woman opened her mouth again. "Not the dragon. The dakos," she said as calmly as before. The kids exchanged glances. The woman added, "It's a dangerous insect that destroys the olive fruit."

A dangerous insect that destroys the olive fruit? What was she talking about? The phrase "dangerous insect" brought different images to each child's mind. Margarita imagined it with shark jaws, Daniel with vulture wings, and Irene with leopard claws.

Stavros was the only one who didn't form any mental image because he considered the woman's words pure lies. He took out his phone, connected to the internet, typed "dakos" into the search box, and waited.

What he waited for was the search to yield zero results so he could expose the woman who effortlessly sputtered a bunch of lies. However, things didn't go exactly as planned. A stream of results appeared on the screen, unequivocally confirming the words of the mysterious figure standing before them. "Dakos" was indeed a dangerous insect that could destroy the olive fruit.

The four kids started inspecting the olive leaves, but they found no blood-sucking insect anywhere. However, they didn't want to discuss it further.

"Good luck with your search," Stavros said, mounting his bike.

"I hope you save the poor olive tree," Margarita commented as she got on hers.

"Just be careful not to get bitten," added Daniel, while Irene simply said, "Goodbye."

When they had moved far enough, Stavros asked the others, "Did you believe her?" But no one could say for sure. They decided not to discuss it any further and continued biking towards their homes.

The woman in the trench coat still stood in the same spot, watching the four kids until they completely disappeared from her sight.

BLUE GLASSY EYES

On Saturday, April 9th, at 30 Firecrackers Street, a mysterious figure dressed in black clothes and excessively pointed shoes entered the pizzeria 'Drooling.' She ordered a medium pizza without ham.

Seven minutes later, a group of four kids, dressed in denim, matching T-shirts, and canvas shoes, entered the same pizzeria for their usual Saturday night gathering and ordered a large special pizza.

Now you might wonder how four kids can arrange a Saturday night meeting at a pizzeria on their own. Well, it can easily happen. You see, these were our familiar four kids, and one of the waiters at the pizzeria was Irene's father.

So, essentially, the kids were not alone every Saturday night at the pizzeria since Irene's father kept a vigilant eye on them from across the counter. However, they pretended not to see him and chose to feel like grown-ups going out to have fun with their friends. They eagerly awaited this encounter every week, Saturday to Saturday.

However, Saturday, April 9th, was destined to be different from all the other Saturdays they had experienced until then. They sat at the same table, ordered the same pizza, and the corner of their eyes caught Irene's father watching them at regular intervals. In other words, everything was under control. Everything as usual.

Yet, things were not exactly as always. If you were a bit observant, you'd notice that it wasn't just Irene's father with the pair of brown eyes watching the kids. There was another pair of eyes, so blue they seemed glassy.

It must have been during the second slice, when Daniel choked on a bite. Irene lifted the soft drink glass and offered it to him. "Watch out, buddy," Stavros laughed. "There's enough pizza on the table. Don't rush. We won't eat it all."

Daniel coughed a few more times and then brought the napkin to his mouth, ostensibly to wipe his mouth. In reality, the napkin served as a cover, preventing anyone outside the table from reading his lips.

"Someone is watching us," he whispered. "From across. I think it's the woman with the trench coat."

Margarita and Stavros had their backs turned and didn't want to turn suddenly and stare. So, they waited for Daniel and Irene to tell them more.

"Yes, that's her. But she's not wearing the trench coat now, nor sunglasses," Irene said, feeling her hair stand on end as she noticed the deep blue, glass-like eyes of the woman.

The pizza still smelled delicious, but for the first time, the kids' appetite had vanished. Inside the round wooden plate at the center of the table were about seven untouched pieces, and within each plate was a half-eaten slice.

Unacceptable! This was simply unacceptable. The Saturday pizza was their ritual. It was their moment, the most significant time of the week, and they wouldn't allow anyone or anything to ruin it.

This is what Daniel was thinking as he got up to go demand an explanation. Who was this unknown woman who appeared in their lives out of nowhere, and by what right was she following their every step?

Irene, realizing what Daniel was about to do, gently pulled him back to his seat. She didn't like quarrels, and if someone raised their voice to someone else, she would get upset.

Margarita, on the other hand, was a loudmouth. Loudmouth and impulsive. She got up from her seat and quickly walked towards the woman's table before anyone could stop her. She stood in front of her and stared. The other three followed suit.

The woman raised her eyes from the pizza and looked at the kids. She looked at them almost indifferently, as if she didn't remember ever meeting them before in her life. Well, that infuriated Margarita!

"You!" she raised the index finger of her right hand. "Again, in front of us! Again! Why? What do you want from us? What?"

The woman didn't seem particularly bothered. She took the napkin next to her plate, brought it to her lips, and wiped. However, a bit of red sauce escaped to her lower left lip.

"The pizza is delicious," she finally said. "I hope you enjoy yours as much as I enjoy mine."

Her words were a spark that ignited a fire in Margarita. Stavros gently touched her shoulder to calm her down. But can bulls be calmed, especially when they see quite a bit of red sauce in front of them?

Stavros decided to speak before Margarita could make another comment. He knew that when Margarita lost her composure, she said things she regretted later, and he didn't want to let his friend expose herself.

"Did you find any dakos in your pizza olives today?" he asked as softly as he could. Of course, Stavros wasn't a fool. He knew very well that there was no chance of finding a dakos or a dragon in a pizza's olives. The only reason he mentioned that word was to make the woman understand that, even if she pretended not to remember them, they remembered her very well. Extremely well.

The lady smiled slightly. "There's no dakos in my olives. Thank you for your interest. And now, if you don't mind, I'd like to continue my dinner. Good evening."

The four kids turned back to their table and did everything they could to forget the incident and have a good time. Just like they always did on Saturdays. They cracked their jokes, ate their pizza, and clinked their glasses.

But no matter what they did or said, they felt the blue, glass-like gaze of that woman piercing through them. And that gave them the chi

A TERRIFYING SECRET IS REVEALED

It was exactly after one week and one day the weather turned bad. Rain and a gray sky. The children were very disappointed because it was Sunday, and on Sundays, they always went for a picnic with their parents in the town's largest park.

"We should go and wait in the car until the rain stops," suggested Stavros, but his parents said in unison, "No. Absolutely not."

"We should take our umbrellas with us. It will be marvelous to eat and watch the rain," suggested Margarita, but her mom frowned and said, "Do you want to catch a cold again?"

Daniel followed his father, asking, "But it's spring. What's wrong with a little rain?" He asked so many times until his father raised his right hand like a cop stopping the traffic and said, "Enough."

Irene simply suggested, "If we wear many clothes, hats, and gloves?" But her dad had already started setting the kitchen table.

What can one say about the adults? A little rain and a few gray clouds are enough to make them lock themselves inside the house. As if they suffered from amnesia and couldn't remember that when they were children, they splashed in the small puddles formed by the rain and opened their mouths wide to drink water. Oh, time, that passes and destroys all the simple and beautiful things.

So, the children's plans were wrecked due to the gloomy weather. Of course, if you ask me, the weather was as it should be. Because Sunday, April 17, was destined to be the day when the children would face the revelation of a terrifying secret. And terrifying secrets are not suitable to be revealed under the bright rays of the sun.

Thus, the Sunday table was set – at Stavros' house had lemony chicken, at Margarita's had rabbit stew, at Daniel's had lamb with potatoes, and at Irene's had pork cooked in wine – I must admit, my mouth watered. While the children were having their meal, the rain stopped, leaving only the grayness of the melancholic sky.

With a thousand pleas, irrefutable arguments, and a few lowered faces, the children finally persuaded their parents to let them at least go out to play ball in the small park in their neighborhood. Of course,

they first made them wear jackets and coats, as if they were planning to send them on a daring mission to Alaska rather than a hundred meters away.

The children didn't say anything because they didn't want to endure the familiar nagging of their parents. So, they went to the park like chubby onions and tried to throw, kick, and catch the ball; but how can you throw, kick, and catch the ball when you're wearing half of your wardrobe?

They reluctantly left the ball and sat on a bench. Before they could discuss anything, they heard a sneeze, and one turned to see if the other had sneezed. If someone from the group sneezed because they caught a cold, everyone would hear the scolding from their parents.

However, none of the children had sneezed. They ignored it and continued to talk. But they couldn't ignore the second sneeze that reached their ears. They got up from their seats and started searching behind every bench, bush, and wastebin to find the source of the sneeze. Nothing.

They sat back on the bench and continued their conversation from where they had left off. The third sneeze was so loud that it made all four of them jump.

"Whoever you are, come out!" shouted Stavros.

"Right now!" demanded Margarita, who had serious suspicions about who was making the sneezing noise.

No response came from anywhere. The children stood still in the middle of the park and waited.

"I'll count to three," said Daniel, but the only response he got was three more consecutive sneezes.

"Maybe you'd like a tissue?" Irene took out her tissues from her pocket. The others gave her such fierce looks that she had to put them back.

However, her voice was so sweet, and her manner so kind that something very strange happened at that moment. They say that a good word lures the snake out of its hole, right? Well, something like that happened.

"A tissue would be amazing, thank you."

A lightning bolt illuminated the sky, and a deafening thunder followed a few seconds later. A few drops started to fall on the ground.

"You! It's you again!" Margarita screamed, and her voice was louder than the thunder.

Of course, I don't blame Margarita for her reaction. How would you react if you saw the same unknown woman in front of you for the third time? On that day, the woman wore a blue raincoat that matched the color of her eyes and red rubber boots that matched the color of her nose.

Irene took out her tissues again and offered one to the woman. She said, "Thank you," unfolded it, and blew her nose so loudly that it sounded like a ship horn approaching the harbor. Daniel chuckled a bit. The woman said, "I caught a cold. I better go home and make some chicken soup," and started to leave.

"Where do you think you are going?" Stavros intercepted her. "You're not going anywhere until you tell us who you are and why we keep finding you in front of us."

With a red nose, the woman said, "I would love to, but I have to take the chicken out of the freezer. We'll talk some other day," and continued to walk away briskly.

However, the children formed an impassable wall around her.

"Either you tell us who you are, or we call the police. And let's see what you'll tell them then," clarified Daniel.

"I really want to see that too," said Margarita. "How you'll explain to the police why you've been following four unknown kids for so many days."

The woman's nose turned even redder than before. Despite the chilly breeze, many tiny droplets of sweat had gathered on her forehead.

"Either you speak, or I make a call," Stavros took out his phone and started typing.

"Wait!" the woman shouted. "There is... there is an explanation. I'm not what I seem. I'm also ten years old, like you."

WHAT HAPPENS TO WISHES ON STORMY DAYS

The children burst into laughter. What an unbelievable excuse this woman came up with! Was she in her right mind? Out of all the excuses someone could think of to justify the unjustifiable, did she really believe that by saying, "I'm also ten years old like you," she would be credible?

The children stopped laughing and started getting angry. Not only was this strange woman constantly in front of them lately, she was also making fun of them in the worst possible way.

"We've had enough of this," said Margarita. "Stavros, call now."

"No, wait!" the woman shouted. "I'm telling the truth. I'm the same age as you."

"Lady, you should be ashamed," said Daniel. "Just because we are kids and you are an adult doesn't give you the right to treat us this way. I'm going to get my father, and we'll see if you'll tell him the same fairy tale."

The woman continued trying with all her might to prevent them from bringing an adult. "Give me just a few minutes, and I'll explain everything to you."

The four friends looked at each other for a moment. After so many years of friendship, they could communicate with their eyes. "Fine," said Margarita. "You have exactly five minutes. Not a second more."

The children went and sat on the bench where they were sitting before. The woman stood in front of them, hands tied behind her back, as if she was preparing to recite a poem. Or as if she was waiting for someone to come and handcuff her.

In the sky, the clouds were piling up, just like the anger in the hearts of the four friends.

"It was a cold and rainy day," said the woman.

"Like today?" asked Irene, who wanted to visualize the scene.

"No, not like today," replied the woman. "Much colder and much rainier. Thunder and lightning tore through the sky from end to end, and I woke up frightened. I was ten years old."

"Ten years old? Meaning?" asked Margarita, who didn't believe a word of what she had heard so far, but the woman had a unique way of telling a story, and she really wanted to hear the continuation.

"I mean that when I woke up, I was still ten years old. I was like you. And I couldn't imagine what the day would bring me next."

At this point, the woman made a brief pause. She brought her hand to her lips and covered them, as if she didn't want them to tell the rest of the story.

"What happened next?" asked Daniel.

A lightning bolt tore through the sky again, and a few snowflakes fell on the already wet ground.

"I wanted to go out and play, but my mom wouldn't let me. So, I had to find something to do. Some way to pass the time. I read, watched TV, played on the computer. By evening, I was already bored. I needed some action."

The four children had their eyes fixed on her, waiting to see how this peculiar story would unfold. The woman sneezed, and Irene handed her another tissue.

"I went up to the attic and searched through the boxes to find something interesting to do."

"And did you find anything?" asked Stavros.

"I found a wooden box with old photos. Most of them I had never seen before. They were photos of my grandmother. My grandmother died in her seventies, a few days before I was born. I never met her."

"That's a shame," said Irene.

The raindrops became heavier, and the children worried that their parents might call them to go inside at any moment.

"What happened next?" asked Margarita. They had to find out the rest of the story. They couldn't bear to stay in suspense.

"I took a picture of my grandmother and looked at it closely. I wished I had the opportunity to meet my grandmother, I whispered.

As soon as I finished my words, a deafening thunder struck, and immediately there was a power outage."

Irene got scared and squeezed Margarita's palm. Something inside her told her that she wouldn't like what she was about to hear at all. Most likely, it would give her nightmares. But at the same time, she desperately wanted to hear it. Not just Irene, but all four children.

"It took several moments for the power to be restored. I kept the photos in the box and prepared to go downstairs to eat. It was dinner time, and my stomach was growling. As I passed by the full-length wooden mirror that was abandoned in a corner of our attic, I almost died from horror."

"Why?" all four children asked simultaneously.

"The reflection in the mirror wasn't mine. I stood there with my heart pounding on my chest and stared. I rubbed my eyes and looked again and again. The figure standing across, piercing me with its gaze, was... was my grandmother's."

The children exchanged glances. What did this mysterious woman mean? How was it possible for someone to see another figure in the mirror instead of their own? The woman seemed to perceive the confusion in the children's eyes and said, "The wish I had made earlier to meet my grandmother came true. But in a very strange way. I became my grandmother. My entire previous life disappeared in seconds, and I suddenly found myself living her life."

The children had countless questions to ask, but the rain started pouring so heavily that their parents came out and shouted at their children to go inside immediately. The children stood there motionless, receiving torrents of rain on their heads and not reacting. Until their parents came and dragged them inside the house.

The woman put on the hood of her raincoat, put her hands in her pockets, and hastily took the way back.

TO BELIEVE OR NOT TO BELIEVE?

Each parent pulled their child from the park to their home. The children didn't react at all, which particularly puzzled their parents. Usually, they would make a scene in similar situations, shouting that it wasn't fair and that their parents always treated them like babies. However, that day, they followed silently, their gazes hypnotized.

Margarita's mother noticed that her daughter looked very pale and thought it was because she wasn't eating well. She decided to become her shadow and feed her continuously with strengthening foods. Daniel's father felt his son's hand trembling in his own and believed his son had chills. He decided to give him antipyretics and to check his temperature every few hours.

Irene's eyes were watery and glassy. Her father got very worried and asked her what was happening. She said, 'nothing' and refused to discuss anything else. Stavros's mom was puzzled because, as soon as they got home, her son said he had homework and locked himself in his room. But since when did this child go to study on his own, without needing to be chased first?

The four children didn't know what to think and what to believe. To believe or not to believe? Was it ever possible for this woman to tell the truth? Was it ever possible for such things to happen in real life? No. Definitely not.

Of course, they couldn't put their hand on the fire. There were so many mysteries in the universe. So many unexplained situations. Perhaps this was just one of them. An event that couldn't be explained with common human logic.

Stavros took his notebook and wrote:

Storm → girl's wish → power outage → the wish came true.

It helped him a lot to put his thoughts on paper. It cleared his mind, and he could find solutions more easily to anything that concerned him. He read the words again and again and tried to decide whether to believe what he heard a few minutes ago or just crumple the paper and throw it in the trash. However, the decision was not easy at all.

While Daniel was making similar thoughts, heavy hail fell outside on the street. The wind was howling furiously, carrying with it leaves and branches. Daniel opened his desk drawer and found a photograph. It was a picture of his favorite football player. He turned off the light in his room and stood by the window, holding the photo tightly. 'I wish I could meet Lionel Messi,' he said and closed his eyes. He waited for a few seconds before reopening them and then went and stood in front of the mirror. Unfortunately, the trick didn't work! He was still Daniel and not the famous Argentine footballer. Then how had it happened to this girl? Maybe because he turned off the light himself, instead of waiting for a power outage?

Margarita was drinking a glass of warm milk while typing various questions on her computer that could shed light on what they heard from this mysterious woman. The most helpful thing she could find was a movie titled 'The Curious Case of Benjamin Button,' about someone aging backward. She found the story very interesting and wondered if the woman's story was of similar logic.

Irene replayed the events many times in her mind until she felt she had to discuss it with someone, or else she would go crazy. She went to the living room and found her father covered with a blanket on the armchair, reading a book.

"Are there things we don't know in this life?" she asked.

Her father didn't understand the question. Irene tried to rephrase it. "Do things happen that cannot be logically explained?"

Her father placed the bookmark on page eighty-nine of his book and said, "Only things that cannot be logically explained happen in our world, my dear. Wars, poverty, injustice. It's an irrational world out there."

Irene wanted to ask more, but she didn't know how to do it without revealing details. She settled for saying 'thank you' and left, leaving her father to continue reading.

So, it was an irrational world out there. Her father had said so. Of course, he spoke about wars, poverty, and injustice. He didn't talk about little girls who, one day, magically turned into their dead grandmother. But still, 'it's an irrational world out there' could be explained in many different ways, couldn't it?

That night was one of the strangest nights the four children experienced. Stavros frequently tossed in his sleep, and Margarita dreamt of her grandmother in the village, whom she hadn't seen since Christmas. Daniel slept with the light on, and Irene was afraid to go to the bathroom alone.

The next morning, the four children woke up tired and with headaches. However, it was Monday, and they had to go to school. Outside, the sun was shining, giving a clarity and transparency to nature. But it also shed light on the thoughts of the four friends. It is true, after all, what they say, that everything looks different in the light of day. And the new day that had started shed ample light on the dark affair of the previous day.

'I don't believe her,' Stavros said when they met at school.

'Neither do I,' Margarita agreed. 'Such things only happen in movies.'

'I tried it too, but it failed. So, how did it happen to her?' Daniel commented. 'She fooled us. And honestly, I can't understand why.'

Irene knew that her friends were right. They were thinking very logically, and so should she. But still, a small voice of doubt in her head wouldn't let her rest.

'It's an irrational world out there,' she repeated what her father had told her the previous day. 'Perhaps we don't know everything.'

And with these few words, she planted doubt in the minds of her friends.

A RANDOM DISCOVERY

Several days had passed, and the woman was nowhere to be found. The children didn't know whether they felt relief or disappointment. On Friday, during their usual bike ride, they didn't spot her behind the bushes. On Saturday, at the pizzeria, they observed each customer carefully, but none had those blue glass-like eyes.

'Weird,' said Stavros. 'I expected to see her again somewhere.'

'Maybe she feels uncomfortable after revealing her secret?' Irene wondered.

'Perhaps there was another power outage, and she transformed back into a ten-year-old,' Daniel speculated.

'We might never find out,' said Margarita. 'At least, that's how things seem.'

However, things would soon show something very different. It all started on a Saturday afternoon when Stavros's father craved chocolate cake and decided to make one. He opened the cookbook, found the right recipe, and began to gather the ingredients on the table. However, there was a problem—they were out of cocoa.

'Stavros, I'm going to the supermarket,' he called. 'Are you coming?'

They walked because the supermarket was quite close to their house. Just before entering, Stavros saw her—the mysterious woman. She was holding a bouquet of flowers and entering the house right next to the supermarket.

"Dad, I'll say hi to a classmate of mine who lives in this house," Stavros said to his father, and guilt over telling lies gripped him. But the opportunity was unique, and he couldn't let it go to waste. His father didn't suspect anything and went into the store to find his cocoa.

Stavros went and stood outside the gate of the house, contemplating what to do. Should he go in? And if he did, what would he say to her? 'Why aren't you spying on us anymore?' That was illogical. They had made such a scene about her spying on them before. They even threatened to bring the police, and now that she left them in peace, they would complain?

'Hello, are you looking for something?'

Stavros jumped. A young woman with her dog stood next to him. 'Can I help you with something?' she smiled.

"Uh... no... I mean... yes. Do you know who lives in this house?" he said, pointing to the house across from them.

"I'm not sure," the girl said. "I've been abroad for some time. But before I left, I often saw a girl your age playing in the yard. Since I returned, I haven't seen her again. Are you looking for her?"

"Uh... yes," Stavros said, and he began to fear that Irene might be right. Perhaps the woman's secret wasn't some exaggerated fairy tale after all. "Erm... this girl you're talking about, do you remember how she looked?"

The young woman thought for a moment and then said, "I think she was your height, with long brown hair and striking blue eyes. Especially her eyes—I could never forget them. They resembled glass."

As the young woman waved goodbye and left, Stavros's heart raced faster than usual. The cake his father made a little later was nearly impossible to eat. Not because of the taste, but because Stavros was still in shock from what he had heard. He spent almost the entire night awake, pondering the young woman's words.

On Sunday, during the usual Sunday picnic of the four families in the park, Stavros pulled aside the others. He told his friends exactly what the young woman had said to him the previous day. Goosebumps ran through everyone. Their appetite disappeared. Was it true then? What would they do now?

The parents spread checkered tablecloths on the grass and laid out the food they had brought: freshly fried meatballs, chicken bites, thinly sliced potatoes, small triangular sandwiches, cheese pies, orange cake, and almond chocolates. I must admit, my mouth is watering.

Parents always brought a lot of food to the picnic because their kids played and got hungry, and afterward, their appetite opened up. However, on that day, they barely touched their food. The dishes they served remained almost untouched.

"Are you okay?" Stavros's father asked. "Are you sick? Did you catch another infection? Do you have a fever?"

The kids, especially on that day, couldn't stand their parents' nagging. "We're fine," they said and stood up. "We just want to play." They took the ball and pretended to play. In reality, though, they were trying to think about their next steps. As everything indicated, the woman had told them the truth that rainy day in the park. What would they do to help her?

"Maybe we should tell our parents?" Irene wondered. "Ask for their opinion?"

"They won't believe us," Margarita said. "They'll think we have an infection and hallucinations from the fever. Grown-ups don't believe such things."

"Do we believe her, though? Are we sure about it?" Daniel still had some doubts.

"Tomorrow, after school, on our way home, let's take a detour. Let's pass by her house and knock on the door," Stavros suggested.

"And then what?" Irene asked.

"Tell her that we believe her," Margarita said, "and that we want to help her."

"But can we?" Daniel wondered. "I mean, really help her. Can we?"

"If we don't try, we won't know," Stavros commented. "It must be terrifying to be ten years old and forced to live in your grandmother's body. I wonder why she hasn't lost her mind yet."

Each child at that moment imagined what their life would be like if they were forced to live inside their grandmother's or grandfather's body. Horrifying. So, they had to do whatever they could to help the poor girl

PLAN A

The expression on the woman's face when she opened the door of her house that Monday afternoon clearly showed that she wasn't expecting this specific visit. Or any visit, for that matter. She was wearing an old, worn-out tracksuit, slippers, and some of her hair stuck to her glistening forehead.

"You..." she said as soon as she saw them. "What... what are you doing here?"

The kids were disappointed with her reaction. How was it possible for her not to be happy to see them? After all, they knew her secret. She had confided in them. Maybe they could even help her. Why didn't she seem pleased?

The woman continued to hold the door half-open and didn't invite the kids inside. 'Erm... I am busy,' she said. The kids justified in their minds her behavior, thinking that she might feel uncomfortable after revealing her secret. Perhaps she was thinking they would consider her crazy or a liar. That's why she pretended to be busy now.

Margarita approached the woman. 'We believe you,' she said. 'We believe what you told us that day. About what happened to you.' The other three nodded many times to show they agreed with their friend's words.

The woman tried to smile, but her smile seemed fake. 'Thank you. You are very good kids. But I have work to do now,' she said, attempting to close the door. Daniel managed to slip inside.

'We want to help you,' he said. 'Let us.'

The woman was forced to let the other three in. The house was large and dark. Most shutters were closed. Irene ran to the big wooden furniture in the corner of the living room and picked up a photo. 'You, right?' she said. As you used to be.'

The photo showed a girl exactly as the one described by that young woman to Stavros. With long brown hair and striking blue eyes that looked almost fake. The woman's eyes began to water. The children felt sorry seeing her so sad.

'I have an idea,' Stavros said. 'Let's repeat, step by step, what you did that day to try to reverse what happened to you.'

The woman didn't seem enthusiastic. 'I've tried everything,' she said. 'Nothing works. It's better for you to go home. There's nothing you can help me with.'

However, the kids didn't easily accept no for an answer. 'Let's give it a try,' Daniel said. 'Even just for once.' And Margarita added, 'No one should spend their life in a body that isn't theirs.'

The woman took a tissue from the box on table and wiped her face. 'If we try, and you see that it doesn't work, do you promise that you'll forget it and never mention it again?'

The kids couldn't understand why the woman was so negative. Maybe it was expected though. How could she be positive when one day, during a storm, while exploring the attic of her house, the electricity went out, and underwent such a tremendous metamorphosis?

Was there a rational person who could accept it so easily and continue to face life with optimism and a smile? Certainly not. So, there was no reason to misunderstand her somewhat cold behavior. They would do the same in her place.

These five people, one behind the other, climbed the old spiral staircase leading to the attic of the house. Inside, there were dozens of closed or open boxes and various items scattered on the floor. Probably, the woman hadn't gone up to the attic again since the day of the storm. Logical.

'Show us,' Irene said. 'Exactly where were you standing at that specific moment?'

The woman moved to different points until she found the spot she was looking for. 'Here,' she said. 'I think I was standing somewhere around here.'

'The photo. We must find the photo of your grandmother,' Daniel said.

The children started opening boxes and searching until Stavros stopped them. 'No,' he said. 'This time, she should hold her own photo.'

The one showing her at the age of ten. Not her grandmother's photo. We want to reverse the situation.'

The others agreed. But of course. They wanted her to be ten again. She had to hold her own photo. The one that showed her at the age of ten. Not the photo of her grandmother.

'I'll go get it,' Margarita said and ran to the living room.

Everything was ready. The right spot, the appropriate photo, and the correct lighting. Closed shutters and Daniel ready by the switch to turn off the light.

"I will count to three. On three, Daniel will press the switch, and you will close your eyes and wish to have your own body back. Are you all ready?" Stavros asked.

The woman nodded, and Daniel raised his thumb. "One, two, three!"

At three, absolute darkness fell. The woman tightly shut her eyes and muttered something. The kids crossed their fingers and waited. They waited and waited, but nothing happened. Daniel turned the light back on. The woman opened her eyes. The kids uncrossed their fingers. Why didn't it work? They felt immense disappointment. Irene was on the verge of tears. The woman seemed to expect it.

"I told you," she whispered. "Nothing works."

Margarita couldn't accept their defeat. "Maybe it's because today is a sunny day. Perhaps we should try another day when there's a storm."

"We can come up with many ideas," said Daniel. "Let's go home, make another plan, and come back."

"You promised that if it didn't work, we wouldn't discuss it anymore," she told them, leading them out of the attic. "Thank you, but let's leave it at that."

As the woman closed the large wooden door behind them, the kids walked away, feeling utterly helpless and disappointed. They pitied the poor girl, who, as everything indicated, would have to spend the rest of her life in her grandmother's body. What else could they do though?

Plan B

No matter how hard they tried to think of another plan to save her, they couldn't come up with anything. They searched the internet, read books, sat down and wrote down possible solutions. Everything seemed almost silly when reconsidered.

"Maybe she's right," said Daniel. "Maybe we should leave things as they are."

Margarita reacted strongly. "But we can't! Since we know the truth, we can't just continue our lives and do nothing about it."

Irene was very thoughtful. "Perhaps we can do something," she said. "Maybe we can include her in our group as she is. Even if she doesn't look ten, she is ten. Maybe this way, she won't feel lonely."

For a few moments, the kids didn't speak. They pondered the idea proposed by their friend. It might be a good idea after all. A very good idea. They would include her in their group while continuing to search for ways to turn her back to how she was before.

On Friday afternoon, just before their usual bike ride in the neighborhood park, the kids rang the woman's doorbell.

"You have to come with us," they almost said simultaneously. "We have a surprise for you."

Danae – that was her name – didn't have time to react. They dragged her from her house to the park and showed her a large blue bicycle.

"It's my mom's," said Margarita. "I borrowed it."

"But I..." Danae started to say.

"Since kids' bikes don't suit you anymore, we found an appropriate one," said Stavros. "It's borrowed, of course, but it does the job."

They forced her to go on a bike ride. As time passed, the woman felt more and more comfortable. Shortly before saying goodbye after the ride, her cheeks had taken the rosy color that the kids' cheeks had.

On Saturday at the pizzeria, they invited her to join them. "She's a friend of ours," Irene said to her dad when he asked who the lady

accompanying them was. The father didn't ask more questions. They ordered a large special pizza and picked with their hands the olives, pretending to search for the dakos.

"Come on, stop it," the woman said and burst into laughter. They clinked their glasses, and they had so many subjects to discuss that the speed at which time passed seemed absurd to them.

The children were very happy. Their company seemed to do her good. Sometimes it even seemed like she forgot that she was trapped inside the body of a grown woman.

On a Tuesday afternoon, while Stavros's father was shopping at the market next to her house, the kids had lemonade on her terrace and ate cookies with chocolate chips.

"You are a blessing," Danae smiled at them. "You make me so happy."

"And you make us happy too," Irene said, and the others agreed.

They were not lying. They genuinely enjoyed her company. But why should that surprise them? After all, she was just like them. Inside, she was like them. It's just that temporarily her outside resembled someone else's. So, it didn't seem difficult for them at all to see beneath the surface.

IS IT POSSIBLE?

On a Sunday night, Irene was searching in her library for a book to read. However, she had read all the books stacked on the shelves over and over. Perhaps it was time to start borrowing books from her father's library.

She stood in front of the heavily loaded shelves in their living room library and pulled out some books. She read their blurbs and settled on one of two hundred and fifty pages, about a man trying to build a time machine to travel to another era. She hadn't read such a big book again, but she loved reading and wanted to give it a try.

She brushed her teeth, put on her pajamas, and lay down on her clean sheets. She was eager to start reading to see if the man in the story had indeed managed to build the time machine he had dreamt of. She passed her fingers over the cover and then opened the book to read the author's biography at the cover flap of the book.

As soon as she saw the small portrait photo of the smiling lady who wrote the book, she opened her mouth wide in surprise. She looked amazingly similar to Danae's grandmother. Not just similar, but identical.

She read the name. It was her. It was Danae's grandmother. Danae Eleftheriadis. So, her grandmother was an author? Danae had never mentioned it to them. Not only was she an author, but she had written a lot of books. Twenty-seven, according to her biography. Irene thought this was amazing. Danae must have been very proud of her grandmother.

As she started reading the first paragraph of the first page of the book, a thought struck in her mind and made her dizzy. She went back to the place where the biography was written and read it from the beginning. Yes, she remembered correctly. It said that Danae Eleftheriadis was born in 1946. But nowhere did it say that she no longer lived.

Irene got up and quickly made the calculation on a piece of paper. Someone born in 1946 would mean they were seventy years old in 2016. Irene remembered well that Danae had told them that her grandmother died at the age of seventy when she was born. So, if she

were alive today, she would be eighty. Therefore, the biography should state that she was born ten years earlier, in 1936.

What exactly had happened? Had those who wrote the biography made a mistake? And why was her date of death not mentioned anywhere? Irene, being a bookworm, had read many books and many author's biographies. She knew for sure that if an author was no longer alive, their biography would include the date of death. Here, there was no such info.

She turned the book back to its initial pages, where one could find information about when a book was published. 2012. That's what it said. Four years ago. How was this possible? Since her grandmother had been dead for a decade. How could this specific book have been published in 2012? Was it some old manuscript discovered after her death?

She couldn't understand what was going on and waited for the next day to discuss it with her friends. Had Danae been lying to them? Was her grandmother actually alive? And if so, how did this transformation happen, and she was now living inside her body?

VIVID IMAGINATION

As Danae opened the front door of her house and saw the four kids on her doorstep, her face lit up. These kids had the unique ability to fill her life with joy. At least, that's what they had been doing until that moment. However, things were about to change.

When they entered, all four stood in front of her and looked at her closely. Irene turned the book she had hidden behind her back until that moment and showed it to Danae.

'Do you know this book?' she asked.

Danae's smile froze. Irene opened the book to the page with the photograph. 'Is this your grandmother? Is she alive? It says here that she's alive. And that she's ten years younger than the age you told us.' Irene was unstoppable. Her questions poured like the bullets of a gun.

Danae felt exactly like that; as if someone had shot her repeatedly in the heart and left her to bleed on the ground.

'Just tell us!' Daniel shouted. 'We want to know. What really happened to your grandmother?'

Danae stood there silent and couldn't utter a word. But the kids were yelling and demanding to know. Danae took a deep breath and said, 'It's not my grandmother on the photo. It's me.'

The kids didn't understand what she meant. Margarita thought she had suffered from identity confusion all this time trapped inside a body that wasn't hers. Danae brought her hands to her eyes and started to cry. 'It was all lies,' she whispered. 'Everything was lies.'

She cried for a while, then took a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped her eyes. 'Six months ago, my only son and his wife, who were living in this house, decided to immigrate to Germany. They couldn't find a job in Greece anymore. I tried to change their mind because I didn't want to lose them, but they were adamant.'

The woman went and brought the photo of the girl decorating the buffet. 'They took with them my most beloved person in the world, my granddaughter. We have the same name and the exact same blue eyes.'

The kids were left with their mouths wide open in surprise. They couldn't find words to comment on what they were hearing. Danae continued. 'From the day my kids and my granddaughter left, I felt boundless loneliness and deep sorrow. One Friday, I took a walk in your neighborhood's park, and I saw you riding your bikes. You reminded me so much of my little Danae. You are the same age as her. That's why I stayed and watched you from behind the bushes. But then you came and asked for explanations, and I had to tell you those silly things I said.'

'How did you know we would be at the pizzeria the next day?' asked Stavros, who had begun to feel very strange about the woman's confession.

'I didn't know,' the woman replied. 'I honestly go there often. Our meeting was entirely accidental. However, I admit that that rainy Sunday, I deliberately came to the park because I wanted to see you again. Every time I saw you, it felt like seeing my granddaughter.'

Margarita wanted more explanations. "Why did you tell us that story about your grandmother?"

Danae fixed a few strands of hair behind her ear and wiped her eyes again. "I panicked. Because you were shouting that you would call the police and bring your parents. I don't know how, but at that moment, my mind created the story I told you, and the more I narrated it, the more details I found to add. When I went home, I felt extremely guilty for lying to you, and I decided never to show up in front of you again. But then you appeared, and no matter what I said, you insisted on wanting to save me.'

The children were furious with what they heard. "You lied to us!" shouted Stavros. "We tried to help you, and you kept feeding us one lie after another."

"I didn't do it on purpose. I wanted to tell you everything after a while, but I didn't know how. I was afraid... afraid that I would lose you. Your friendship means a lot to me."

"A great gift! What a horrible lie," Margarita screamed. "If you valued our friendship, you wouldn't let us believe that you were trapped in someone else's body. In the body of a seventy-year-old."

Danae's eyes were red. "I'm sorry. I am truly sorry. You are the best thing that happened to me in the last six months. Forgive me. I beg you to forgive me."

The children had no intention of listening to more excuses. "Don't ever bother us again," said Daniel as all four left her house.

In the days that followed, the children continued with their lives, trying to forget this strange story and how betrayed they felt. They agreed not to mention her name again or cross her path.

Whenever they went for a bike ride or a walk in the park, they looked around first to make sure she wasn't somewhere watching them. Even on Saturdays at the pizzeria, they checked even under the tables to be sure she wasn't there, pinning them down with her deep blue gaze.

But the woman was nowhere to be found. Four weeks passed, and the anger began to fade in the hearts of the children. When their anger completely subsided, her absence began to strengthen their desire to see her again.

A different kind of friendship

Margarita often thought about Danae's words, especially the part where she talked about how much she missed her granddaughter. She wondered if her own grandmother felt the same about her. Of course, her grandmother lived in a village, four hours away by bus. But still, she didn't have the chance to see Margarita often. Margarita made a decision: to spend a large part of her summer vacation in the village with her grandmother, even if it meant temporarily losing the company of her friends.

Stavros, every time he replayed the events of that day in his mind, felt unbearable guilt. He remembered how many times his grandparents asked him to spend a Saturday night at their house, and he always said no to avoid missing out on time with his friends. He decided that on some Saturdays, he wouldn't go out for pizza and would instead go to his grandparents' house to stay. Perhaps they could even make a homemade pizza with his grandmother. Surely that would bring her great joy.

Daniel worried a lot because his grandfather lived in Bulgaria, and he rarely saw his grandson. Would he follow other children in the streets of Sofia telling them that in reality was a ten-year-old boy trapped in his grandfather's body? He set a goal to call him every week, and in the summer, he would ask his parents to send him money to come to Greece and visit them.

Irene had neither a grandmother nor a grandfather. However, there was an elderly neighbor who always invited her to treat her some cake, but Irene would refuse because she felt embarrassed to talk to someone she didn't know well. Perhaps next time, she would set aside her shyness and accept.

On Friday, before their usual bike ride, the children knocked on Danae's door.

"Truce," said Margarita as the woman opened the door, shaking her white t-shirt. Danae smiled and let them in. The first moments were a bit awkward, but Danae brought lemonade and cookies with chocolate chips, making things much sweeter and easier.

"How did you spend all this time?" Stavros asked Danae.

"I was cleaning the attic," she said, and they all laughed. "Oh, and I started writing a new book. I'll call it A seventy-year-old age ten. Perhaps you can all imagine its plot."

"Wow, we'll become protagonists in a book!" exclaimed Daniel. "We'll go down in history as the four thick-headed kids who swallowed whatever fairy tale an author with vivid imagination served them."

The others laughed.

"You're not thick-headed at all," said Danae. "You're the best kids I've ever met."

And thus, the group of four children gained another friend. A friend who didn't have the same age as them and whose interests were mostly different from theirs. Still, she was a friend with whom they could easily chat, tell each other exciting stories, go for bike rides in the park, and burst into laughter while drinking lemonade and eating cookies with chocolate chips.

In short, a friend with whom they could have a good time, enjoy themselves, and truly feel happy together. Because while her body and face showed seventy, her soul seemed to be the same age as theirs. And when people's souls manage to synchronize, nothing else seems to matter anymore.

THE END

WHERE DID YOUR LAUGHTER GO, ORSALIA?

(Translated in English by the author)

Where did your laughter go, Orsalia?

Orsalia often comes to my dreams. She wears a white, flowery dress and takes me by the hand to dance. She smiles and her eyes smile along.

"I don't want to dance, Orsalia," I say. "Leave me alone."

She laughs out loud, lets go of my hand, and starts dancing on her own. She twirls, and her dress looks like a blooming flying garden.

"La la la, la la la, la la la. "

Her voice is so sweet. I love to listen her voice and watch her dance. I shouldn't have let go of her hand, and I don't want to stand by myself.

"I'm coming, Orsalia, " I yell. 'Wait up."

She takes my hand, and we dance. Her hand is warm and soft. We laugh. Orsalia's laughter always sweeps me away. The flowery skirt swirls. Floral fragrance emerges. A fragrance of spring, and joy.

But all of a sudden, her laughter weakens. As if it's coming from afar. Or as if it's going somewhere. Where is your laughter going, Orsalia? I need your laughter, my dear sister. I truly need it in my life.

I squeeze her hand as tightly as I can. I'm afraid I might break it. I don't want to lose you, Orsalia. I don't want you to leave. I'll stay here holding your hand so tight that nothing and no one can take you away from me.

Crack, crack, crack. The flowers fall one by one from the skirt and shatter with a loud noise on the floor. Why are your flowers breaking, Orsalia? The dress turns into a white fabric that covers it all.

It gets between us and prevents me from seeing you. I push and pull and kick until I manage to throw it off me. I look around, but you're nowhere to be seen.

"Orsalia? Orsalia? Orsaliaaaa? " I shout through my cupped hands. "Come baaaack. "

Someone nudges me. Someone says, "Solonas, wake up. " I open my eyes. The first thing I see are a few drops. It's my eyes that are wet. I wipe them with my pajama sleeve.

"Calm down. Everything will be okay. " Dad strokes my hair. "Drink some water." He takes the glass from the nightstand and gives it to me. I'm not thirsty, but I drink. "Do you want me to sit with you for a while?"

I want to say 'yes,' but Dad's eyes look more swollen than mine.

" No, I'll go back to sleep," I whisper.

He leaves, and I regret not telling him to stay. I shut my eyes and try to sleep. So that I can dream of you again, my beloved sister Orsalia.

The bunk bed that turned into a castle

The bunk bed above mine is now empty. Since the day Orsalia left us. Ten months and four days ago. A few days before our tenth birthday. Dad said we might move it someday. Mom didn't say anything. Her words are so sparse that there are days I can swear she hasn't spoken more than fifty words. Mom used to say fifty words per minute. 'I'm a talkative type,' she would laugh, when Dad teased her about driving us crazy with her babble.

"Do you want some orange juice?"

Several oranges are sitting next to the juicer.

"I want Mom to squeeze my juice," I say.

Dad takes an orange and cuts it in half.

"Solonas, please. I'll squeeze a juice for you to get some vitamins," he insists, and then I just see his mouth moving without hearing what he's saying because he pressed the juicer button and it makes noise.

"Come on, drink," he hands me the glass.

"No." I push the glass away. "I said I want Mom to squeeze it for me."

My voice comes out squeaky.

"Solonas, please, listen to me. I know you're going through a hard time. We all do. But we have to continue. We have to find the strength to go on. Arguing won't solve anything."

I let him talk. I refuse to hear him. He annoys me. I push the glass as far as needed to fall off the counter and shatter into pieces. Juice splatters everywhere, even on Dad's pants.

"Go to your room now," he shouts.

I don't even care. I prefer to go to my room. Why would I stay here? I climb onto Orsalia's bunk bed. Her bunk bed has become my castle. I come here, arrange the pillows around and hide. I hide and talk to her. I don't want Dad to find out because he might get angry.

"Orsalia, my beloved Orsalia, do you remember that time we had a competition to see who would drink the most juice? Behind the back of Mom and Dad, of course. I drank three glasses, and you drank four. And even though I drank less, I was the first one to vomit. Remember, my dear Orsalia? Shortly after, you did too. Mom and Dad were racking their brains to figure out what we ate, and we got sick. How they could know? Don't worry; I'll never tell them. I promise, my sweet sister. It will be our secret forever."

Is and was

Someone throws pebbles at my window. I stick my head out and look. It's Lydia. Riding her bike, she waves at me to go outside. I don't even think about it. With a jump, I land in the garden.

"Why don't you knock on the door anymore?" I ask her.

"I don't want to," says Lydia.

"Why not?"

"Because your mom looks at me in a weird way and says 'oh, my little girl,' and then she caresses my cheek and cries."

"Maybe your cheek looks like Orsalia's, that's why."

She thinks.

"I don't think so." She shakes her head. "Definitely not. My cheek is puffier. My whole body is puffier. Look." She lifts her t-shirt and shows me her belly. "Orsalia is skinny like you."

"Yeah," I say, and then I remember.

I remember how I used to confuse verb tenses in school. Until I experienced them for real and had to clarify. Present tense: It's happening now. Past tense: It happened in the past. I know that 'is' and 'was' have managed to break my heart in two.

"Orsalia was skinny," I say. "She's not anymore."

I've climbed on my bike too, and we ride side by side.

"But how do you know?" Lydia says. "That she's not anymore?"

"If she is, why isn't she riding her own bike next to us?"

"Maybe she is and we can't see her. Maybe she's invisible. And she has an invisible bike as well. Maybe we'll see her when we become invisible too."

"Maybe," I say.

We go on a few more rounds. Lydia's words go round and round in my head. Or maybe it's my head that is spinning from the numerous rounds we've done. I see Dad coming out of the front door heading towards us.

"Hello, Mr. Philip. How are you? When will you come to our house to watch the football match with my dad? He says you can come anytime. He'll order pizza. And ham doesn't need to be among the toppings since you don't like it. My dad doesn't mind eating pizza without ham once in a while. Will you come?"

"Thank you, Lydia. I'll come. I will come soon."

He won't go. I know he's just saying he will go. Dad doesn't go anywhere anymore because he doesn't want to have a good time. At least that's what I think. I think he's afraid. Afraid that Mom will get angry. Or that Orsalia will get angry. He comes close to me and pats my shirt.

"You're sweating," he says. "You're soaking wet. You'll get sick. Come quickly inside to change."

I try to free myself from his hands.

"Dad, it's summer," I say. "I don't get sick in the summer. Leave me alone. I want to go for a ride with Lydia."

He almost forces me off my bike and drags me inside the house.

"Leave me alone," I shout. "I want to stay with Lydia. I want to play with Lydia. Leave me alone!" I scream so loudly as if Dad were about to throw me off a cliff.

"You need to change, Solonas. You'll get sick. You mustn't get sick."

I sob. Dad is crying too. Silently. He manages to wipe some of his tears, some others run down to his mouth. He opens my closet and pulls out a t-shirt.

"You need to be careful, son," he says. "You are the only one we have. You need to be careful."

Baked chicken and potatoes

Dad used to complain when it was his turn to cook. "I'm not good at cooking," he would nag, but Mom wouldn't let him off the hook. Now Dad cooks every day. Mom can't cook. She can't clean or go to work either. She can only sleep or sit in the big green armchair, facing the large window.

I don't know why Mom can't cook anymore while Dad can. After all, both of them lost Orsalia. Maybe Mom loved her more? Honestly, I don't know. I keep thinking about it, but I can't figure it out. And then my head hurts.

Dad puts one pot after another on the stove and cooks. As if we're planning to feed the whole neighborhood. But, of course, we don't feed anyone. Because Mom can't handle visitors either.

The three of us sit down, Mom holds the fork, looking at the empty chair. She doesn't take a bite. I, on the other hand, am so hungry that even though I see the empty chair, I eat. I don't know if it's the right thing to do. I don't know if Orsalia will get angry. I haven't got a clue about anything anymore.

Today, Dad made baked chicken with potatoes. I don't like baked potatoes. At least chicken is my favorite kind of meat. Orsalia hated chicken and loved potatoes. That's why we used to exchange them. When Mom and Dad weren't looking, I pushed my potatoes onto her plate and grabbed her chicken.

Of course, I'm not so sure our parents didn't realize what we were doing, but they never scold us. One day while we were having baked chicken with potatoes, Dad said out of the blue, "Blessed are those who have people who complement them in their lives." I didn't understand what he meant. Orsalia winked at me, and later she explained that my potatoes complemented her chicken, and vice versa.

Now there's no one to complement me, and I have to eat my baked potatoes by myself.

Checked blanket during summer

Dad washes the dishes, and I dry them. Mom has curled up in the green armchair and looks out of the window. I go near her.

"Do you need anything, Mom?" I ask her.

"Bring me a blanket, Solonass," she says.

It's summertime, but Mom needs a blanket. In her room, I find on a chair the fluffy checked blanket that she usually wraps herself in. It's the same blanket the four of us used to cover ourselves during winters, watching movies on the couch.

Maybe Mom needs a different blanket for a change. A blanket that won't carry so many stories. I search the closet until I find a red one that doesn't remind me of anything.

"Here, Mom," I say, handing it to her.

She looks at it and hands it back to me.

"The other one, Solonass, the checked one."

Her eyes are on me, but they don't really look at me. Since that day, Mom's eyes don't truly look at anyone. They only want to see Orsalia in their imagination.

I go and bring the other one, the checked one. Mom wraps herself in it as if it's raining and freezing outside. I understand her though, there are so many times I feel a freezing cold inside me too.

"May I sit next to you?"

My heart beats faster than usual as I wait for her answer. Because I know she doesn't want to. I know she will refuse.

"I'm tired, Solonass," she says and bundles up in the blanket. Only her eyes are visible. The eyes that are searching in their imagination to find Orsalia.

"Solonass, come," Dad shouts. "Come and help me."

While drying the last dishes, I wonder if Mom is angry with me, and that's why she doesn't want to hug me. I wonder if she is upset that I am alive, instead of Orsalia. Maybe what they say about parents loving their children the same is not true. Maybe Mom loved Orsalia

more, and now she's left with me. That's why she no longer wants to embrace me.

Apple pie with ice cream

Ding dong. I open the door. It's Lydia.

"Aren't there any pebbles to throw at the window today?" I ask her.

"Well, can't you see?" she says and shows me her hands. "I'm holding these."

She comes inside. She puts the bowl she's holding on one hand on the kitchen table and hands me the plate she's holding in her other hand.

"What is it?"

"Ice cream. And apple pie. My mom made them for you."

"Mmm, my favorite."

Lydia's mom knows all my favorite food, all my favorite sweets, and she always loads Lydia's hands to bring them to my house. Dad enters the kitchen and greets Lydia. Lydia goes and stands across him.

"My dad says he needs help in the garden, and only you know how deep he should plant the seeds. Because the other day, he planted some seeds and dug such a hole, and Mom told him, 'At the depth you planted them, they'll sprout in thirty years.' And Dad lowered his head to the holes and told me to ask you to go help him, just like you always did. Will you help him?"

"I'll help him, Lydia. As soon as I find some time, I'll go help him."

I can't understand why Dad can't spare an hour to go help Lydia's dad. In the past, he spent all his free time there. How many pots of food does he have to cook before he finds a little time to help his best friend? I find some plates, and serve apple pie and ice cream for me and Lydia.

"Do you want to go to the park tomorrow to have a bike race? I'll definitely beat you because I've been practicing a lot lately."

The ice cream, the apple pie, and Lydia's idea bring a bit of summer back inside me.

"Yes! I'd love to! Great idea!"

Dad approaches us.

"What are you talking about?" he says with red face and eyes wide open. "You are not going anywhere. I forbid it. Am I clear?"

I get angry.

"You won't let me do anything anymore. You always say no."

My voice sounds high-pitched and broken. Lydia is bent over her plate, cutting her apple pie into tiny pieces.

"For your own good, son. For your own good. Life is unpredictable. It's my duty to protect you. Life is unpredictable."

Lydia eats a few of the tiny pieces she has cut and then says it's time to leave.

Blue Velvety Eyes

"The flowers in your vase have withered, Alexia," I say.

Alexia lifts her eyes from her notebook and looks at me.

"I'll get fresh ones tomorrow," she says, smiling.

Every Friday, from four till five in the afternoon, I'm at Alexia's office, and we talk. About what I want to say and what I don't want to say. She asks, and I answer, and she keeps taking notes.

I sit on the blue velvet couch opposite her armchair, leaning my back against it. It's the most comfortable couch I've ever sat on, even though I've had the most uncomfortable conversations while sitting on it.

"I want to tell you something. No one else knows. Not Mom, not Dad, not even Lydia, who knows everything."

Alexia's eyes match the color of the couch: blue and velvety. Velvety like a fabric that gently embraces you, so you won't feel cold and afraid. And she looks at me. She really looks at me. She sees me, and I know she wants to see me and understand me.

"You can tell me anything, anything at all," says Alexia.

"Everyone found it strange that Orsalia and I never argued. That we always enjoyed being together."

"That's not unusual," Alexia says. "Twin siblings usually develop strong bonds. They have their own unique way of communicating."

"Yes, but you don't understand," I say, and my voice starts to become a bit squeaky. "That day, I called her stupid. Because I wanted to convince our parents to send us to summer camp, and she didn't want to. She said that summer camp was full of bugs, and she didn't want to go. And so, I called her stupid."

Alexia takes some notes.

"I'm sure you didn't mean it. And she knew that. We all say things we don't mean when we're angry."

"Yes, but you don't understand. I told her that I don't want to sleep in the same room with her anymore. And that the next day, I would ask Dad to move my things to the empty room in the house."

Now my voice is completely squeaky, and my chin is trembling. Alexia comes to the velvet couch and looks at me with her velvety eyes.

"Solonas, all siblings fight. Even siblings like you who didn't fight often. It's perfectly normal. It doesn't change the deep love you both felt for each other."

"Yes, but I didn't get a chance to apologize, Alexia. I didn't get a chance to apologize."

Alexia's velvety eyes are slightly wet. She hugs me, and I want to stay in her arms and cry until that iceberg that grew in my heart finally melts.

"I'm sure she knew," she says, squeezing me tighter. "I'm sure she knew from the very first minute."

The deserted dessert

In the afternoon, after work, Dad feels like making dessert. I don't know if, apart from cooking, he will also start baking cakes, but one thing is for sure—I never say no to anything sweet.

"With this flour, it will rise higher," he says, showing me the flour, he plans to use. I could never have imagined that my dad would become an expert in flours.

I hear footsteps approaching. It's Mom. She opens the medicine cabinet and takes two painkillers. She swallows them with some water and sits at the table next to me.

"What are you making?"

It's the first time, Mom shows interest in what we're doing in the kitchen. It's the first time she shows interest in anything in general. I'm very happy, and I can see in Dad's look that he's happy too.

"I found a recipe in a magazine," he says. "For peach cake. I didn't know there was such a thing. I thought of giving it a try. What do you think?"

Mom takes the magazine clipping and reads.

"Do we have peaches?"

I rush to the fridge and find a few. I show them to her. She gets up, washes them, and cuts them into small pieces. Dad is so surprised by her behavior that he confuses his words. He confuses the ingredients too, and I have to help him sort them out.

"Maybe when it's baked, we can slice it outside in the garden and have a peace with our coffee," Dad suggests, and I'm absolutely sure that his heart is making a pounding sound while waiting for her response.

Mom shakes her head—a type of head movement that means "yes" and which makes my heart and probably Dad's heart flutter. And she smiles. Not that old, wide smile that revealed her white teeth. A different kind of smile, a tight one. But still, a smile. Dad's hands tremble.

When all the ingredients are mixed into the bowl, Dad pours the mixture into a pan with a hole in the middle.

"Can I lick the bowl?" I ask.

Dad hands it to me, and while I eat the leftovers, I think of Orsalia. I remember when we used to have a contest to see who could eat more. And we laughed so loudly that, we ended spiting dough on each other's face.

I hear a strange sound and turn to see. Mom is crying. She looks at me licking the bowl and cries. Mom remembers. She remembers everything I remember. She remembers Orsalia licking the bowl next to me. She remembers the contests and our laughter. She remembers laughing and telling us, 'Oh, you two will never grow up,'. Surely, she remembers it all.

She gets up, and with dragging steps, she leaves the kitchen. She leaves me and Dad to bake the dessert on our own and eat it on our own. But who has the appetite to eat cake anymore? Even if it's the most delicious peach cake in the world.

I am stupid. It's my fault. It's my mistake. I made Mom cry. I, with my silly ideas. I shouldn't have taken the bowl to lick the dough. Why did I take it? Why didn't I use my brain to think? To remember. That Orsalia used to do this too. We used to do this together, Orsalia and I. Of course, as soon as Mom saw me, she would remember and cry. I am stupid, stupid, stupid. I am such a fool. I made Mom cry. I ruined everything. I leave the bowl on the table and run to my fortress to hide behind the pillow castle.

Scratched knee

Alexia opens her desk drawer and takes out my favorite chocolate.

"To regain our strength," she says, smiling, and breaks it in half.

Of course, if I want to be honest, she doesn't break it exactly in half. My piece is much larger than hers.

We sit facing each other, eating our chocolate, and smiling. Alexia has a way of making everything sweeter, like the aftertaste chocolate leaves in your mouth as it melts. But our chocolate piece eventually comes to an end. And the sweetness comes to an end too.

"Alexia, I made Mom cry," I say. "I was completely stupid. I did something that reminded her of Orsalia."

I explain to her what happen, and she listens carefully.

"Solonass, your mom doesn't need someone or something to remind her of Orsalia. She will carry her inside her always, throughout her life. You didn't do anything to remind your mom your sister. Her reaction is entirely normal and has nothing to do with you. It's still too early. Memories are novel for all of you."

"What do you mean by novel?" I ask.

"Novel means new. Let me explain it differently. Have you ever fallen down and scratched your knee?"

"Multiple times," I say, although I have no idea what a scratched knee has to do with the topic we are discussing. "Look here." I show her my right knee. "Two years ago, I hurt it so bad that I still have a scar. I was wincing in pain all day."

"That's how you should think, Solonass, about your heart. Like your scratched knee. The wound is so deep now that it makes you wince in pain. However, days, weeks, and months will go by. Gradually your wound will heal. The pain will seem less intense. And in the end, there will remain a scar, like the one on your knee. It will always remind you of Orsalia, but it won't hurt as much anymore."

I want to believe her, but I don't know.

"Will the same happen to Mom's heart?" I ask.

"Both your mom's and dad's hearts. I want you to remember that, no matter how your parents react, you have no share of responsibility anywhere. They need their time to become the parents they once were. Promise me you will always remember that?"

As I give my word to Alexia, I wish my knees and hands were scratched instead of my heart. Because a scratched heart hurts a lot more than a scratched knee.

Lydia, come back

Dad and I hang out in the garden. I ride my bike while he is searching for recipes on his tablet.

"Do you crave for anything?" he asks. "Something we haven't eaten lately?"

Sometimes I feel like Dad thinks he can patch up the holes in my heart with food. He keeps cooking and feeding me, but the holes in my heart don't patch up that easily. I wish they did.

"When will Mom be able to cook again?" I ask.

He lifts his head from the tablet. "She will. Someday she will be able to cook again. Give her some time."

"But why are you able to cook? Aren't you sad?"

It takes him a while to answer. "Everyone has their way of dealing with what happens to them."

The bell of a bike rings. Lydia enters our garden. Lydia doesn't need invitation to come to our house. She knows she can come whenever she wants because we all love her. Even Mom, who no longer feels comfortable seeing or talking to her. Perhaps because she reminds her of Orsalia. Perhaps because Lydia makes her wonder again and again why Lydia is alive while Orsalia is dead.

I had that question too. Not because I wanted Lydia to die, of course. But I wonder why someone dies and someone else lives. Why someone reaches a hundred, and someone doesn't make it to ten. I don't think anyone will ever be able to answer that for me.

"Hello!" she waves her hand, greeting us. She goes and stops her bike a few inches from Dad's chair. "Mr. Philip, help. My dad desperately needs help. You are a handy man, right? Because according to my mom, my dad can only handle destruction. That's what she told him at least, and he said, 'No one understands me in this house.' Because you won't believe what happened. On Saturday, we went to buy a new couch. But it wasn't a regular couch, I mean a whole one. It was in pieces in boxes. And Mom told him to pay for assembly, but Dad said, 'No way we're paying for someone to assemble it. It's a piece of cake to assemble furniture by yourself.' Yesterday, he spent

the whole day assembling it. And today, the couch is all crooked, and there are eleven leftover screws. Mr. Philip, would you come and help him?"

"I'll come, Lydia. I'll come soon," Dad says.

"In your Scout's honor? Because you always say that and never do it."

"In my Scout's honor," Dad says.

"But Dad is not a Scout," I intervene. "He doesn't have Scout's honor."

Dad plays innocent and continues searching for recipes.

"I said I would come," he repeats, and we let him be.

We start taking rides on our bicycles. Lydia is all joy and laughter, and her laughter makes me laugh too. Lydia's laughter is the kind of laughter you can hear from afar. When, let's say, I lose her during recess at school, I can locate her by the sound of her laughter.

Orsalia's laughter, on the other hand, was very different. It filled the room, but in a different way. It resembled gentle melody of a piano. I hear Orsalia's laughter sometimes. I hear it inside my head. Sometimes I feel sad, sometimes I smile. I feel sad because I won't be able to hear it for real again, and I smile because I can at least hear it, even if only in my mind.

"Solonas, look! There!" says Lydia, pointing to the branches of a tree in our yard. "Look at the kitten. It must be trapped."

We leave our bikes aside and approach the tree. A kitten has climbed on one of the highest branches, and its meows sound like crying.

"I'll climb up to save it," Lydia says and starts climbing. But she can't do it. She keeps slipping and trying to climb again, several times.

"Let me try," I say, and Lydia steps aside. I am a few inches away from touching it. "Come here, little one," I say when the branch I step on breaks, and I crash on the ground.

"Solonasaa, what happened?" I hear Dad yelling. When he comes close, I've already managed to get up. He checks my legs and arms and my head to see if I've broken anything.

"I'm fine," I say. "Look." I take a turn around myself. "Lydia saw the kitten, and we tried to save it."

Dad seems angry. "Do you need to do everything Lydia says? Just because Lydia wants to put herself in danger, do you have to do the same?" He shouts. "Do you know that you could injure yourself? Did Lydia think about that before suggesting you play heroes? I think it's better for both of you if this friendship stops right here before something worse happens."

My ears are buzzing. Did I hear right? Dad forbids me to be friends with Lydia?

"Lydia is my best friend, and she will always be. You can't tell me who I can be friends with and who I cannot!"

My voice is too high-pitched, and my eyes are teary. Lydia says nothing. She gets on her bike and leaves.

An unexpected visitor

Since yesterday afternoon, I have locked myself in my room and refuse to come out. I sneak out, that is, after making sure the coast is clear, and run to the bathroom or the kitchen to grab something to eat. Dad has come outside my door many times and asked me to open the door, but my answer is always the same.

"Go away, I don't want to talk to you."

Why would I want to talk to him anyway? What he did was unacceptable. He kicked Lydia out, and now I have no friends. Now, I have no one at all. Because Orsalia died, Lydia left, and Mom is in her own world, so who's left for me? Dad. But I don't want to talk to Dad. Because he's unfair and illogical and selfish.

Knock knock knock. A light knock on the door. I don't respond.

Knock knock knock. A loud knock on the door. I don't respond.

"Solonas, you have a visitor."

A visitor, I have a visitor! Lydia, it must be Lydia! Dad regretted his behavior and called her to apologize. I manage to get down from my castle without getting tangled in the pillows that surround me.

"Lydia!" I shout and open the door.

But it's not Lydia. It's just Dad. I'm about to yell at him for tricking me when I notice he's holding something in his hands. Well, not something. Someone. He's holding the kitten. The kitten Lydia and I tried to save yesterday.

"It kept meowing constantly. I couldn't leave it up the tree," Dad says and enters the room.

We sit on my bed. It's a tiny fur ball. I pet its head. It's soft and fluffy.

"I tried to find its mom and siblings, but I couldn't," Dad says.

"Doesn't it have anyone? How will it survive on its own?"

"Maybe we can help it survive."

"What do you mean?" I say, and I hear my heart go pound, pound, pound.

"If you promise to help me, take care of it, we could keep it."

I'm ready to scream with joy when I remember that we need to discuss something else before everything is okay between us.

"Of course, I'll help you take care of it," I say. "But that doesn't mean I don't want Lydia in my life. Dad, she is my friend. She's my best friend. You can't just drive her away like that. You can't choose who I hang out with and who I don't."

The kitten bites his finger. He leaves it on my bed and adjusts his glasses on his nose.

"It's because I am afraid, son," he says. "I'm afraid you'll get hurt. I want to take care of you as best as I can. I have a duty to take care of you as best as I can."

"But you do that," I say. "You always did."

"I didn't do it with Orsalia," he whispers. He hides his eyes in his hands and cries. He makes me cry too.

"It wasn't your fault, Dad," I say. "It wasn't your fault."

I hug him, and we stay there for a while crying until our eyes dry. We take the kitten and go out in the garden. It's twilight, and everything outside seems a little calmer. Just like calmer I feel inside my heart.

Numerous apologies.

"But we can't go uninvited," Dad says.

"But we always go uninvited," I say.

"Yes, but now it's different. I mean, now it's not like it used to be."

"You said you wouldn't stand in the way of my friendship with Lydia. Don't take it back now."

"No, that's not what I am saying. I'm just thinking that we might not find the door wide open as we used to. Because of what I said to Lydia the other day."

"What if we baked them a cake?"

Dad seems thrilled.

"Great idea," he says and finds his baking book.

Later, outside Lydia's house, with a chocolate cake in hand, Dad still worries that he hasn't been a good friend and that they have the right to kick him out. But something inside me tells me that things won't turn out like this.

And thankfully, I am right. Lydia's mom rushes and hugs him, and Lydia's dad gives him a firm handshake, patting him on the back several times. Dad seems to gain courage. Lydia is silent.

"Sorry, Lydia. I sincerely apologize. I am lucky that my son has a friend like you. I hope you can forgive a grumpy middle-aged man like me."

Lydia smiles.

"At last, you came, Mr. Philip. Thank God," she says. "Because the couch in our living room is still crooked."

She takes him by the hand and leads him towards a gray couch that doesn't seem to be at its best.

"Oh, and take these too," she says, placing a handful of screws in his palm. "You'll surely know where they should go."

Dad laughs and gets to work.

And that's how the corner gray couch in Lydia's living room is saved. And that's how my friendship with her is saved too.

Dear diary

"See you tomorrow!"

I greet Lydia and her mom, who accompanies us home from school every day. October is almost over, and the sidewalks are covered with the yellowed leaves of the trees. I like stepping on them and hearing the crack they make as they break.

I don't really like the hours after school because I spend them alone until Dad returns from work. I'm not entirely alone; Mom is at home too. But usually, it feels like she's not really here. Even the times I pretend to struggle with my homework so she would come and help me, I feel like she's not truly there.

I unlock the door and call for her.

"Mom. Mom, are you inside?"

The house seems empty. I start to worry. Where did she go? "Mom?" I find her in my room. She's standing, her hair is messy, and she's reading from a notebook. Am I seeing right? Is she reading my diary?

"That's my diary!" I shout, trying to grab it back. She resists. "Let it go! I forbid you to read it; it's mine!"

She's stronger than me.

"Why were you meddling with my things?" I yell. "You never come in here anyway."

Mom hugs me and tries to keep my hands and legs still. She embraces me. I can't remember the last time she embraced me. I soften. We both sit on the rug exhausted. Her eyes are teary.

"Solonass, please tell me you don't really believe all the things you've written in here."

I shrug. Her eyes look scared, and it's the first time since that day that I feel like she's genuinely looking at me. She finds a page in my diary and reads aloud:

September 18

Dear diary,

today, I suggested to Mom that we go sit in the garden because the weather is still warm. She told me she had a lot to do and couldn't make it. But I know it was a lie. Mom just doesn't want to spend time with me anymore. I need to accept that and stop bothering her. Mom would prefer spending time with Orsalia instead of me. Of course, she'll never admit that. I don't care. I won't suggest doing anything together again. I'll ask Dad to teach me how to cook and bake.

Her voice breaks, and her hands tremble.

"Solonass, do you really believe these things?"

I don't answer.

"Solonass, turn and look at me, please."

She holds my head in her hands, forcing me to look her in the eyes.

"I'm sorry, darling," she says. "The only thing in the world that comforts me and brings me joy is you. I love you so much that I feel my heart might break. It's just... it's just that I feel so sad sometimes, that the only thing I can handle is to be alone in my room."

"But, Mom, you don't need to be alone. You have me and Dad," I say, hugging her. "You have us."

"I know," she says, hugging me back.

Black crows in my mind

For the first time today, Mom got up, dressed, and made breakfast for me. Honestly, I have never eaten a sweeter toast with jam in my entire life. It's because Mom's hands sweeten everything.

"I'll wait for you in the afternoon to go for a walk," she says, and my heart pounds. Now I realize how much I missed my mom. Now that I have her back in my life.

At school, the teacher asks for volunteers to read the answers to the homework assignment he gave us: "Something I did to alleviate the pain of those around me." Lydia asks to read first. She goes and stands in the middle of the class.

"One day, during summer, Solonass, my best friend, and I saw a little kitten meowing alone on the branches of a tree. It was trapped. We felt we must alleviate its pain. I immediately, without hesitation, started climbing the tree. But because I eat a lot of bread and sweets, and because I don't exercise much, I couldn't climb as high as I wanted in order to alleviate its pain. My best friend, Solonass, who is skinny but strong, pushed me aside and started climbing the tree. I was sure he would soon alleviate the poor cat's pain. Unfortunately, he slipped and fell. Later, Solonass's dad took the cat down from the tree, alleviating its pain. We both lived well, and the kitten even better. The end."

She bows, and the class applauds.

"Well done, Lydia," says the teacher. "Anyone else?"

Vasilis comes forward.

"Something I did to alleviate the pain of those around me. Last year, a classmate of mine, whom I won't mention by name because he might not want it, so I'll keep him anonymous, had something serious happen to him. Well not him, his sister. So, the anonymous classmate of mine became an orphan. That's why I always asked my mom to put two chocolates in my bag, and I gave him one to alleviate his pain. The end."

He finishes, but no one applauds.

"You're a moron," Gregoria yells. "We all understood whom you are referring to."

"Yes," says Dimitris. "And he's not an orphan. He'll be an orphan only if his mom or dad dies."

Chaos. In the class and in my mind.

"Quiet. Be quiet," says the teacher. "Vasilis, sit down, and next time, be more careful with your assignments."

Before Vasilis takes his sit, he turns and looks at me.

"Hey, buddy, I have only one chocolate today, but if you want, we can share it."

And just like that, out of nowhere, the words I just heard start flying into my mind like black crows. What happens if my mom and dad die? What happens if I truly become an orphan?

A Pact

"I'm very proud of you," Alexia tells me on Friday while I'm in her office. She hands me a small wrapped package. "You've made great progress all these months. Well done, Solonass. I got you a little gift."

I give it back to her.

"No, Alexia," I say. "You say that because you don't know. Because I haven't told you yet what's going on in my mind."

"You can tell me anything, and rest assured I won't change my opinion."

"I'm just afraid that something else might happen to my family. I'm afraid that mom or dad might die. What will I do if mom or dad, or both, die, Alexia?"

"To be afraid is the most natural thing in the world. There's no human being who isn't afraid. Even those who appear tough and strong from the outside may be soft inside like a lettuce."

"I am a lettuce, both inside and outside."

"You're much stronger than you think," Alexia smiles at me. "You've proven it with your actions all these months."

"Yes, but, Alexia, you didn't answer my question. What if mom or dad dies?"

"That's unlikely to happen. And besides, there are so many people who love you and would never leave you alone. Your grandparents, aunts, uncles, Lydia and her family. Do you realize how beloved you are, sir?"

I try to smile.

"Let's make a pact," Alexia continues. "Whenever a negative thought torments your mind, you'll immediately push it away and think a happy thought. I'm sure there are many things in your life that make you happy. Aren't there? "

What makes me happy

Alexia's gift is a red notebook with a multicolor hot air balloon on the cover. Perhaps because I told her that I dream of flying in a hot air balloon one day. She asked me to use it, to open the first page, and fill it with everything that makes me happy. Next time, I should read it to her. I thought I wouldn't know what to write, but instead, my hand moves easily over the lines.

What makes me happy:

- 1. Mom, who now wants us to do things together and not just sleep all day. When she curls up in the green armchair with the plaid blanket, she lets me curl up next to her and tells me she loves me to infinity.*
- 2. Dad, who teaches me to cook and bake cakes. He also teaches me carpentry because, as he says, we can't cook all day; I need to learn other things as well.*
- 3. Lydia, who is the best friend in the world and always has the most exciting ideas. Also, our jokes that make us laughing out loud until we feel as our breath will stop. Lydia confessed to me that one day while laughing, she peed herself a little. That's why she pretended she had to go help her mom with household chores, which sounded very strange to me because Lydia never helps her mom with household chores. Whenever I remember this incident, I laugh. Even now, as I write it, I laugh.*
- 4. School. Not always, of course. Especially during recesses and when we make jokes in class. Also, when we write essays and I have the best ideas, and my teacher says, 'Well done.'*
- 5. Alexia, who helps me clear my thoughts and talk to her about things I don't want to confess even to myself.*
- 6. My cat, who always gets into trouble and is very funny. The other day, we lost her, and I was ready to burst into tears, but we found her inside the breadbox. Instead of crying, I burst into laughter, and mom grabbed the breadbox to sanitize it. I'm also sure she loves me as much as I love her because she follows me everywhere. Yesterday she entered the shower with me without me noticing, and she got wet. I dried her*

with mom's hairdryer, and her fur looked like she stuck her paws into the socket. I need to remember to give her a name because I can't keep calling her 'Kitty.'

7. *My dreams. That is, what I want to do when I grow up. Like, for example, flying in a hot air balloon, diving into an ocean, and going on a safari in Africa with Lydia. Lydia says she will drive our jeep because if I see a lion and get scared, I might crash somewhere, while she is calmer.*

8. *My dreams. That is, what I see at night when I sleep. Because in my dreams, often comes Orsalia. In my dreams, it's as if Orsalia never left. She comes, and we talk. I tell her my news. I hug her, and we laugh. Orsalia's laughter is the most beautiful sound in the world. When I wake up, I feel a bit sad that she's not really here. But still, I'm glad I could see her, even like this.*

Occasional clouds

We finally named her Life. The kitty. Alexia suggested it to me. She said that this small word with four letters hides the greatest meanings of the world. I didn't quite understand what she meant, but one thing is for sure, I like that name. I think kitty likes it too. Whenever I call her like that, she runs straight to me.

It's already spring. Lydia and I, with our families, are getting ready to go for a Saturday picnic in our town's large park. Yesterday, I overheard Mom telling Dad that she doesn't feel like coming. I know that most of the time she doesn't feel like doing all the things we do together, but she does it for my sake. Dad told her that he feels the same way but they have to keep trying because there is no other way. I wanted to tell them that I feel that way often too, as if a heavy gray cloud is always chasing my sunshine. But I didn't say anything.

We spread our things on the grass. Dad takes out each dish from the basket and presents them to us. "Let's see: spicy chicken meatballs, fried potatoes with rosemary, skewers on a stick, yogurt dough cheese pies, and for dessert, muffins filled with jam. "

"Did you make all these by yourself?" Lydia's mom asks. "Well done, Philip! Honestly, that's amazing! "

"Mr. Philip is a chef, " Lydia says. "Whenever I'm at their house, he cooks the most delicious food. "

"Well, " Dad says. "I am not a chef. But I can cook a couple of dishes."

"You can definitely cook, Mr. Philip," Lydia says. "While my dad cannot. The other day, Mom had to work longer, and my stomach was growling. I told Dad, and he said to wait for Mom. But I couldn't wait for Mom because I was so hungry that I felt like fainting on the ground. And Dad said to choose something to order. And it's not that I didn't want to choose something to order, but I remembered that Mr. Philip always cooks, and I told Dad. And he said, 'No big deal. Cooking is not a big deal. I can cook for you if you want.' And I told him that of course, I wanted him to cook for me. And he found two eggs in the fridge and emptied them into a pan with half a pound of oil. And I told him, 'Dad, eggs don't need so much oil to fry.' And he told me to mind my own

business and that he is pretty aware of how much oil eggs need to fry. He wasn't born yesterday. And in the end, we ordered pizza. "

Everyone laughs. "Stop babbling, Lydia," her dad says. "You're driving everyone crazy. "

"Enough talking about food; it's time to taste it, " Dad says, and we fill our plates. The adults talk about their stuff, and Lydia and I about ours, when I see someone approaching us.

"Philip?" he says, looking towards Dad. "I've been watching you from across, and I was wondering if it was you. What are you doing, man?"

Dad stands up, shakes hands, and hugs the tall stranger. "Thanasis, how glad I am to see you again. How are you? We lost touch, haven't we?"

"I tied the knot, my friend, since the last time we met, " he says, laughing, "and soon I'll be a dad too. No more freedom. Oh, past glories. Are these your son and daughter? " He points at me and Lydia.

Dad takes a while to answer. "This is my son, Solonass, yes, and this is his friend Lydia. "

Lydia raises her hand and greets him. "Don't you have a daughter too?" he asks again.

I instinctively turn to look at Mom. She looks elsewhere. And she doesn't smile anymore. Actually, none of us is smiling anymore.

"She has a strange name," he insists. "Amalia, Versalia, something like that. Don't I recall right? "

Dad seems not to know what to say or do. Some flies are ready to sit on our food, and I shoo them away with my hand.

"Orsalia is not here, " Dad says, and I wish this guy finally shuts up and goes away. No luck. He stands in the same spot and continues the interrogation, as if someone taped him to the grass.

"Don't tell me she's already starting to going out with boys and stuff. I need to be prepared; we are expecting a girl too. Tell me what the future holds." He laughs, and honestly, I want to get up and punch him in the face.

"Orsalia is dead," Dad says, and for a few seconds, there's such silence that I can hear the wings of the flies hovering over our food.

The guy seems very awkward now. He whispers some incoherencies, greets us, and disappears. He is in such a hurry that one of his shoe steps into Lydia's plate sitting on the grass. Lydia is furious.

"What a moron, " she says and throws the plate into the trash.

We are all in a bad mood now. We have lost our appetite. We continue to eat and talk, trying to forget what happened, but it's obvious in everyone's look that we're just pretending.

That gray cloud that often follows me comes once again and settles above my sun.

Forever in my heart

I don't even know how it's summer again. We are with mom and dad in a camping area, setting up our things. Our tent, sleeping bags, a few plastic chairs. I am so happy that I feel like I might start flipping in the air.

We spend the whole day at the beach. We swim for so long that I can't feel my arms anymore. In the late afternoon, we sit down to eat watermelon. Dad cuts big slices and serves us.

"I wish Lydia were here too," I say. "She would have loved the place."

"Maybe next year they can come with us," dad says.

"Only Orsalia didn't like camping. She was always clear about that," I say and immediately regret it. Because we're having such a good time, and I don't want to ruin it. "Sorry, it slipped. "

Mom comes next to me and hugs me.

"You can talk about Orsalia, darling, " she says. "You can talk about her whenever you want. I want you to feel comfortable mentioning her whenever she comes to your mind. "

She's not crying, but her eyes are wet.

"I'm afraid I'll make you cry, " I say.

"Even if I cry, I never want Orsalia to stop being part of our conversations. "

Dad abandons the watermelon and approaches us. We embrace, all three of us.

"Orsalia will always be in our hearts," he says. "I think about her every day. I remember how she always used to say, 'Dad, no. You can't be serious. I can't deal with more multiplication tables. I'd rather go fix the roof right now and glue back the tiles that came off than endure this torture.'"

We laugh. Orsalia indeed had a way of making everything seem more dramatic than it really was.

"And do you remember that time Orsalia had the idea to make you a special breakfast for your anniversary? We fried eggs with apples because she said all great chefs use unconventional ingredients in their cooking. It was so terrible that you couldn't even pretend you liked it. You spat it all out into the dish. And Orsalia said, 'There is zero appreciation in this family.' "

We laugh and we cry, and we embrace. We sit next to each other, and I feel their love protecting me like a shield.

"And do you remember, darling, " mom says, "when I made you help with household chores, and Orsalia held the duster and dusted the same spot over and over again until you finished the rest of the room?"

We remember more stories. One story leads to another, and this is how our first night camping unfolds. Sharing stories from our life with Orsalia. We remember and laugh, we remember and cry, but one thing is for sure – Orsalia lives and will live forever in our hearts.

And perhaps as the summers come and go, maybe the joy of having lived with her even for ten years will overcome our sorrow for the rest of the years we lost.

I will never forget your laughter, my sweet Orsalia. You were the best sister anyone could ever have. I will love you forever.

THE END

PHOTOS ON A BLACK BACKGROUND

(Translated in English by the author)

“What is death?” Orpheus asked me.

We were playing hide and seek in the garden, and it was the moment he reached out his hand to grab me. I stopped to catch my breath. Quick, sharp, rhythmic breath. His sweaty fingers touched my dry skin.

I expected to hear, “I got you,” but instead, he asked, “What is death?”

He’s young, not even six yet, and he knows how to persist. He knows how to persist until he gets what he wants, until he gets an answer to what he wants to know.

Death, I thought, is what I always wanted. Or, actually, not always. Death is what I’ve wanted for the last eight years.

His mom came out in the garden, kissed him, and told me, “Same time tomorrow.” I left with quick, sharp, rhythmic steps, without needing to give an answer to what death is.

*

On the way back, my steps brought me to the very last place I wanted to be. In the neighborhood where we lived during X.’s era. As soon as I realized I was getting closer, I sped up to tune my steps to the sound of my heartbeat.

I turned and looked at his house – even though I had said I wasn’t going to look, because I couldn’t bear to look. But I looked. It was like having a wound inside your mouth and running your tongue over it again and again.

I saw the wooden shutters, still painted red, in front of the window that used to be mine. Those particular shutters that, when closed by his hand, turned everything around me black.

Even today, eight years later, seeing those red wooden shutters, made everything around me turned black.

*

I returned home to find my mother as I always find her. With a cigarette in her hand and an ashtray on her chest. Lying on the couch, dazed, unable to have a normal conversation.

Was my mother sleepless again? Her eyes small dark sockets, filled with fear and rage and hatred. Eight years later – I was eight, I turned sixteen–, my mother is unable to forget. Eight years later, my mother repeats the exact same thing over and over again. She says: "I am your mother. What kind of a shitty mother have I been? What kind of a shitty mother have I been not realizing what was happening to you? "

However, no matter what my mother says, the past cannot be forgotten. No matter what my mother says, doesn't have the power to make either of us forget. Forget his hand on my small, white, pure body.

*

My mother sent me to my father to take him our dinner's left overs. Same as when you give your dog the bones you were planning to throw anyway. He opened the door stumbling and kissed me on the forehead. His breath whipped mine.

My father is not the kind of person who spends his evenings staring at moldy ceilings. My father's evenings are full of alcohol and women and parties. My father doesn't say: "I am your father. What kind of a shitty father have I been?" My father says: "It was your mother's fault, who wanted a boyfriend, who took home the first random asshole".

My father is not the kind of man who sinks in waves of remorse. My father can swim in a sea full of whiskey.

*

Before I was eight years old, I often dreamed of being this almost transparent girl standing on the edge of the earth having a pair of white wings on my back. Before I was eight years old, I didn't fall off cliffs.

*

In the last few months, I spend some hours of the day with Orpheus. In a huge house in the most expensive district of the city. Orpheus is afraid of ghosts. Even when the sun shines.

"Do you know where ghosts come from?" he asks me.

"From where;"

"From my closet. They hide inside my clothes until someone opens the door."

*

I spend all my earnings on polaroid paper. Orpheus' mom gave me the camera during the first time I celebrated my birthday with them. Since then, this rectangular box nestles some of my hopes.

*

Every time we open the closet and find no sign of ghosts, Orpheus puts his sweaty palm into mine.

"They are afraid of you," he whispers. "That's why they disappear when you come".

I want to tell him that I am, too, afraid of ghosts—my own ghosts—more than anything else in the world. But I don't.

Instead, I say:

"Shall we roll on the grass?"

And we run.

*

With my polaroid camera I capture moments that I wish were mine. Yesterday it was a girl with long wavy hair, wearing a white dress leaning with half-closed eyes on the trunk of a tree. It seemed to me as if the soul of the tree had jumped out of his trunk. As if the soul of the tree was this young girl with wavy hair. I kept my distance and then I clicked on my camera. I always keep my distance before pressing click. Besides, what would I say if she asked for an explanation? It's not that I am weird, it's just that my own life is kind

of shitty and I find it comforting to steal something from the lives of others?

*

Before I was eight, I often imagined that I looked like a fairy with long wavy hair. It was an image I had seen in a picture book and made great impression on me. I was wearing white clothes, having my hair in slight waves similar to the waves of a calm smooth sea. In my back were growing big wings. I have an intense memory of them, as if it were yesterday they first came to my mind, but in fact they go back almost a decade. Oh, those wings. Growing all white in my small body, a body white and pure. I was walking forward reaching the edge of a cliff without being afraid to look down. Because I was aware I was carrying two big wings on my back. I breathed in getting ready to fly.

*

If I could transform into that fairy girl with the big wings, I would fly to meet my mother the day we arrived with our luggage outside X.'s house. The day my mother hugged me and said: "From this day on a different life starts for us my dear Amalia. From this day on starts an amazing life."

I would grab her by the shoulders and shake her until she would come to her senses.

*

My mother sinks deeper and deeper in her own world the last eight years. A dark world full of cobwebs. I can hardly put them aside to find her. There was a time when she was sliding on rainbows. Starting with that time after her divorce with my father. What a vagabond my father was. What kind of woman would ever agree to marry him and have a child with him? Well, my mother. My mother, who was desperately looking for a way to escape from the misery of her own family.

"Everything will be all right, my sweet girl. Everything will be all right."

Repeating it over and over again like murmuring a lullaby. And young Amalia back then believed her mother's soothing words. Because of her young age couldn't come at the safe conclusion that lives that are brought up by gray sunken souls will lead with mathematical precision their own existences to absolute misery too.

When my father exited our lives, my mother felt like she was riding a rainbow rising over the shithole with the moldy walls we then begun calling home. The only roof over our heads she could afford to rent.

And I, a young Amalia with silly hair bows, flowery dresses and white lacy socks, was jumping all around not letting the stench of the moldy walls enter my nostrils.

That one year – when my father exited our lives and until X. enter it–I could only see vivid colors in front of me. I could see bright rainbows. Both my mother and I. But even from the brightest rainbows can hang cobwebs, mother. I think we both learned this well by now.

*

There are so many times I wished I could become a fetus again and return to my mother's womb.

*

I didn't find the job with Orpheus on my own. The job kind of found me, one day when it was raining non-stop and I was walking along the street with the multiple shops without holding an umbrella over my head. I do not have an umbrella. I never had one. Or, rather, I haven't got an umbrella for the last so many years. Water – rain, sea, shower– has an almost purifying effect on me. It penetrates every pore of my body and for a while– even for a little bit – manages to clear the stench I feel being hidden under my skin. What would I need an umbrella for?

I was walking along the street with the multiple shops and I couldn't find a single one that I wanted to enter. Christmas was approaching and all that festive decorations made me want to stop in

front of the most decorated shop window in town and puke. Vomit on the sidewalk my disgust for the glittery lies of this holiday.

So, should I put on a sequined dress and climb on the highest heels? That's how I'll ensure my happiness? That's how I'll exorcise the memories of the skull faces and frozen fingers that have been chasing me for the past eight years? Only if sequins turned into stones, only if I could throw them to my past until it bleeds to death. Can the devil bleed to death though?

"You should all eat shit!"

Out there in front of the most decorated window, with the rain pouring on my head and my voice tearing my insides like a knife.

"You should all eat shit!"

Five or six people passing by stopped and looked at me. A woman grabbed her husband's arm, as if she was in danger of me. As if I would violently grab her by the hair and force shit into her mouth. The sales assistant waved to me to leave. I left. You should all eat shit. Puke.

*

I have the sketch of a womb above my bed. I didn't draw it myself. I cannot draw. Better this way. If I could draw, there would have been pictures of Apocalypse all over my walls. The hell lives inside me. The womb is drawn by the hand of my mother, after my persistence.

"Why;" she asked.

"Because it's the only place I would like to exist."

*

Orpheus asked me to lean over him.

"Last night my dad was here", he whispered in my ear. "I closed my eyes and there he was. He stroked my hair and kissed me on the forehead."

Orpheus has it all. All the toys. All the money. All the opportunities in the world. If he didn't have a paternal grave to visit frequently as well, I suppose he could be considered happy.

*

My father returned into our lives after my mother made sure beyond any doubt what was going on in my room every time X.'s hand closed the red shutters of my window. We sought refuge with my father when we packed up everything we owned and left X.'s house. My father wasn't drunk when my mother told him. A rare moment in his life. I don't know how much whiskey he swallowed afterwards, nor how he managed to locate X. and beat the crap out of him. Did this change anything? Even if I would get to see his dead corpse lying in decay in front of me, not a single thing would be changed. His hand will coil around my body like a poisonous snake till the end of the times.

*

Every time I press the click on my camera, every time I manage to capture a moment, I feel like time stops for me. That it gives me the chance to catch my breath, to exit the spinning rotation my thoughts have taken the last few years. At first, I collected the photographs I took and stored them in a shoe box. On a Saturday morning, I dreamt of black crows sitting on my shoulder. Without harassing me, without me being afraid of them. I woke up, got dressed and ran into a store that sells paints. I painted the largest wall in my room black, and from that day on my photos stopped existing inside a rectangular shoebox.

*

I will always be haunted by this memory: my father drunk, after beating X., barging into the house, grabbing me in his arms and saying to me with his breath stinking of alcohol:

"I 've beaten the shit out of him. Smell it. Smell his blood on my shirt."

I puked on him at once.

*

The sale assistant of the photo studio I had entered that rainy day rolled her eyes to such an extent that her eyeliner looked even more ridiculous on her. I was dripping, I knew it. But photo studios had always fascinated me in a way I could hardly explain. I went inside, even though I knew I was the last kind of customer they would like to see. I was wet, broke and sick.

Once I felt the warmth of the room on my body, I started coughing so hard, I was afraid I would vomit on the row of cameras in front of me. If I had a camera, I wouldn't mind coughing to death.

"You have to leave". The sale assistant grabbed me by the arm and tried to shoosh me away.

Her eyeliner was so thick, that I couldn't help but saying:

"Hail, Queen Cleopatra. What are you doing inside a photo studio? Your place is in Egypt."

She looked at me like I was crazy.

"Boss, we've got a problem", she cried towards a guy talking to a tall, slender, chic woman.

The guy came on our way, exchanged looks with Cleopatra and were both ready to throw me out.

I was about to tell them to eat shit and spit on them when I saw the tall, slender woman approaching me with a smile on her face and something calmed down the storm raging inside my soul.

*

The smell of mold had hit my nostrils hard as soon as my mother turned the key and unlocked the small apartment she had rented after her divorce with my father. She then had to open the doors and the windows for fresh air, to combat the smell of fungus rotting the walls and the wood all around us. It was a freezing February, and with the windows wide open we were shivering like hatchlings that had fallen from their nest. When it got dark and the cold became unbearable, my mother closed the doors and the windows and lit a scented candle that I have no idea how she found. The scent of orange mixed with the smell

of mold, stayed forever as a memory in my mind. A memory of peace, a memory of the first night my mother and I slept peacefully, without someone cursing, puking and breaking things.

The smell of mold didn't particularly bother me at first. It was only when X. begun coming in our house that I started noticing it.

*

The wall behind the fireplace with the burning logs made a huge impression on me. Inside the coffee shop the tall elegant woman and I went, after we left the photo studio. It was a stone wall from the ceiling down to the floor. I don't know why, but as soon as I laid my eyes on it, the memory of the moldy walls of our then apartment evoked. At first glance there was absolutely no resemblance between our walls and the wall I was facing. But I couldn't help wondering, more obsessively as time went by, if the wall across me, was as clean and neat under the stones as it seemed on its top surface. Or if something foul and repulsive rotted beneath them, in such a degree that if every stone was removed, the customers sipping their tea or coffee would have been dumbfounded by the hideous sight. A sight that they never expected to see.

"Drink" the woman told me. "It will warm you up. You're shaking."

I picked up one of the two cups the waiter had placed on our table and sipped. From the moment the hot chocolate touched the tip of my tongue till the time it went down my scratched throat I was thinking of X. How similar to the wall he had been. Underneath his glamorous appearance was hidden the greatest decay of all. That was the reason I was shivering and not the wet clothes drying on me. I didn't tell her though. Not that day, not ever.

*

I often imagine that I am dying. From a different reason each time. Last night I couldn't sleep again. Lying on my bed, I came up with a new death scenario. Death scenario number sixty-four. The story

goes like this: it's Sunday morning. I wake up to find my mother as I always do. Lost in her own dark world. I tell her:

"Mother, it's been years. You 've got to move on. We 've got to move on."

I grab a handful of coins from my wallet. I hold them tight in my palm, so tight that my palm starts to sweat.

"I'll go get some croissants for us to eat."

I go out into the street and feel the first rays of the sun caress my hair. I feel grateful. I don't even remember the last time someone caressed my hair. I walk straight ahead and the closer I get to where I want to go the tighter I squeeze the coins into my sweaty palm.

The moment I am about to cross the road, I bring my fist close to my nostrils and sniff it. Metal. I keep looking straight ahead. Neither right nor left. Just straight. I cross the road. While I'm on the ground bleeding to death, the driver of the car that hit me is standing over my head and crying. The blood springs like a fountain from my body and its scent hits my nostrils like a wave. My blood smells like metal. My palm is now open and the coins have rolled on the asphalt. I tell the driver to stop weeping and stroke my hair. He does. My soul exits my body while I am feeling the greatest gratitude of all.

*

Since the day I told Orpheus the story of Orpheus who ventured himself into the land of the dead to attempt to bring his beloved Eurydice back to life, he asked me to only narrate him this particular story from now on. Every time I invent a different version of the myth.

*

I was so looking forward to hanging my first photo on the freshly painted black wall, that I couldn't wait for the paint to dry. I took all the photos out of the shoe box and laid them side by side on my bed blanket. It was hard to choose which one would be the first. Then my eye fell on a particular photo and I immediately knew it had to be the one. A click on a sea of colorful umbrellas. I had shot it from the first floor of a fast-food restaurant I had gone in search of a toilet. I stood

and looked at the rain and the people rushing by, each one holding an umbrella in their hand. There was a beige one, a pink, a yellow, two blues, some multi colored and three blacks. I was sure I couldn't choose another photo to be the first. I want to look at that photo and think that maybe one day I 'll be able to hold an umbrella over my head too, that one day perhaps I won't need water's purifying effect on my body.

If you unhang it from my wall and turn it upside down, you will see that its back surface is black instead of white. From the black paint on the wall that hadn't dried. From my impatience to stick the photo on the wall.

*

Orpheus was three when his dad died. It was pouring rain; the car went into the wrong side of the road and his death was instant. Orpheus hates the rain as much as I hate red shutters. His mom says that by the age of three, he loved wearing his wellies splashing in ponds. But then the rain was considered his enemy, because it reminded him of what he wanted to forget the most.

If I knew what the red shutters would remind me after a while, I'd teared my tongue out than tell my mother the first time we went to clean X.'s house: "The red shutters are the most beautiful shutters I have seen in my whole life".

*

When I step under the running water of the shower, I feel normal. Well, not exactly normal. When I step under the running water of the shower, I feel slightly more normal than usual. As the water touches my skin, I feel that my filthiest memories vanish along the sweat, roll down the drain and disappear forever in the dark sewers. Where they belong, where they should be in the first place. Among filthiness, stench and total darkness. The moment I turn off the faucet and wrap myself in a towel, I wish my memories could stay there forever, hidden in the dark. So, I can feel a little bit normal, a little bit cleaner.

*

My obsession with showers lasts for as long as my memories are overflowed with filthiness, stench and total darkness.

*

We don't have a bathtub in the house where my mom and I live at the moment. The bathroom barely fits a shower. My mother often complains that we can't even take a bath like normal people. I always ignore her comment, because I am not in the mood to remind her that us two never really lived as normal people. Not inside this particular house nor in any of the other houses that we have moved in the past.

*

The ghost in Orpheus' closet changes form regularly. The other day it was the spitting image of his classroom bully, who Orpheus is afraid of but doesn't want to admit it.

"Do you want me to come to your school and talk to him?" I ask him.

"I want you to open my closet and take a good look," he replies.

The ghost that frightens Orpheus often changes form and always hides in the same closet. The ghost that scares me hides everywhere and it always looks the same.

*

The house I lived in while my parents were married had no moldy walls. However, the decay inside it was more than obvious. I have no particular memories until the age of five. One of the first scenes I can recall is me sitting on a round carpet, with various toys spread around me and my mother and my father shouting at each other. Me bursting in tears by the yelling and my mother rushing to pick me up from the floor and run to the kitchen shutting the door behind her. I didn't have my own bedroom in that house. My bed was placed in a corner in the living room. When my mother wanted to have some privacy, we went to the kitchen.

The smell of oil in frying pans often evokes this memory. My mother and I weeping inside the kitchen. I suppose my mother was in tears, because she realized that her expectations to escape from the misery of her life by marrying my father was a total failure. And me, because I was being forced to leave my toys behind and stay locked inside a kitchen that stunk of frying oil.

The biggest part of my life stunk of something. Frying oil, alcohol, mold and the intense scent of X.'s cologne.

*

Inside the coffee shop the tall elegant woman and I were drinking hot chocolate there was a Christmas scent. In a discreet kind of way, that doesn't overwhelm you or overflow your nostrils in a such an extent that you feel the need to vomit.

Why had I followed a strange woman inside a coffee shop? Why had I sat across her to have hot chocolate? I didn't like people and didn't want to socialize with them. But still, I wasn't getting up to leave.

"How old are you;" she asked me.

"Almost sixteen."

"Do you go to school?"

I nodded yes.

"If you need a job, just a few hours during afternoons, I am looking for a girl to keep an eye on my son. He's almost six. You could take up photography with your earnings. I mean, if you are interested in such a thing."

And since I could remember myself, it was the first thing I ever heard that really interested me.

*

Not all my photo shoots have a successful outcome. Especially at the beginning, I spent quite some money on polaroid paper that ended up in the garbage. It was early spring, not even two weeks had passed since Orpheus' mom had given me the camera. I saw them walking holding each other's hand. A girl and a boy. They weren't the only

people around me holding hands. But, this particular girl, seemed from behind to me in such an extent that if you put us side by side with our backs turned, you wouldn't know the difference. It was as if I suddenly acquired the ability to see myself from the back. Next to a boy whose hand held mine tightly; his hand that had absolutely no resemblance to X.'s hand.

I let them move further away and then I shoot the picture. I waited for it to be printed. I intended to put it under my pillow when I would return home. The photo came out a bit blurry and I didn't have time to take another. The boy and my alternative self, had already moved away. I would need to start running in order to catch up with them. If they would suddenly turn and see me, how pathetic would I feel?

At night before going to sleep I felt sorry for throwing the photo in the bin under my desk. I took it in my hands again and caressed it with such tenderness. As if it was a small child who needed all the love in the world. As if it was a girl who needed all the love in the world, who needed a hand to offer her all the love in the world.

The boy didn't come into my sleep that night, neither did the girl. Only X.'s arm, coiled around my body. I grabbed the photo from under my pillow, tore it into four pieces, and threw it outside the window. The wind lifted the pieces up.

I felt relieved. If the pieces disappeared, if they flew as far away as possible, I would never have to see them in my eyes again. I wouldn't have to see what I would never become. A normal girl walking carefree next to a boy holding her hand in his. A hand that wouldn't remind her anyone else's hand.

*

In one of the versions of Orpheus and Eurydice myth that I invented, Orpheus couldn't keep the deal he had made with Hades again and full of anticipation turned to face his beloved one. However, this time she didn't disappear, a spirit that flew away. The loving gaze of Orpheus manage to bring her close to him. The deathly paleness of her face was replaced by the rosy color of their love.

Orpheus was lying on my legs the whole time the story lasted, and when I turned to look at him, the first thing I noticed was the rosy color of his cheeks.

*

My mother is the eighth child in her family. Her parents had seven children before her. One would expect that they would stop at eight, but no. They had two more. My mother remembers her own mother mixing up her children's names and often calling one by the name of the other. My poor mother believed that, by being with my father, would acquire the value that no one ever gave her as a child. She believed that from then on, she wouldn't just be one out of ten that their names got mixed up in other people's thoughts and words, but the one and only.

Poor mother. My father, whether drunk or sober, often called her by one of the names of the women he flirted with. My mother may have stopped being one out of ten, but she became one out of dozens. A fact that confirmed her the insignificance of her existence.

*

But my mother was never insignificant for me. Especially the moment I stopped in the middle of the road and confessed to her everything regarding X. At that particular moment, my mother was the most significant person in the world. And her reaction showed me that I wasn't as valued to her. Her reaction showed me that the most significant person for her was X.

*

The first time I was on my way to meet Orpheus, I vomited the lunch I had forced myself to swallow some time before. I started feeling nauseous, from the moment I got on the bus. Orpheus' neighborhood is as far away from mine, as our worlds are. You can't go on foot.

I found a mint gum in my backpack and put it in my mouth. I chewed nonstop, until the lady sitting next to me, turned and gave me

an annoyed look. The noise my jaws made on the mint gum was a minor disturbance; the kind of disturbance people using public transportation often need to endure. The disturbance would have been highly greater for the woman sitting next to me, if I had puked my lunch on her.

When I realized that there wasn't any chance to hold any undigested food inside me, I pressed the bus stop button repeatedly and stumbled to a nearby tree. As I emptied my stomach on the ground, I wondered if any of the passengers on the bus had noticed what I was doing. Especially, if the lady who a few seconds before was sitting next to me, had noticed what I was doing feeling relief that I had vomited near the trunk of the tree instead of her clothes.

I washed myself using a water bottle I always carry in my bag and checked my surroundings. I had gotten off a few stops further than the stop I was supposed to get off.

*

I wish life was like a bus. If it got to a point where you felt like you were going to puke, you could repeatedly hit the stop button and get off.

*

I was supposed to be outside Orpheus' door at five p.m. I was in a neighborhood full of huge houses with freshly cut lawns. There were some passers-by, most of them were walking their dogs, and I could ask them for directions. I hate talking to strangers though. I hate talking to non-strangers too.

My instinct told me to take a specific direction and so I followed it. I realized once again that instinct exists indeed and people who choose to follow it gain an important ally in their lives.

It was seventeen past five as I walked towards Sparta Street and managed to find my way outside the large wooden door of Orpheus' house. When my gaze would fall on my watch again, it would be twenty-five past seven. This time my back would be turned towards

the large wooden door of Sparta's Street and I would walk towards the bus station. Two hours would have passed without me realizing it.

*

My instinct has always been flawless. Even when I was younger and had no idea what instinct was. However, I knew that there was a reason for feeling my stomach upset the moment my mother introduced me to X. I was too young to give it further thinking though.

When at some point I asked Orpheus' mom why she approached me that day at the photo studio, bought me a cup of hot chocolate and, mostly, gave me that part time job at her house, she replied:

"Instinct. I followed my instinct. I felt that you needed something to hold on to, as I had needed myself during adolescence."

She smiled at me, and her smile was contagious.

*

The almost whole year we spent with my mother just the two of us, after her divorce with my father, was the best year of my life. My mother used to clean houses to make ends meet. After school, she would take me along to the second house she would have to clean for the day.

It was during that time that my mother and I started playing "Houses". Usually, the game started outside the front door of each house. All the houses were huge, my mother was exhausting herself trying to clean them. Her face was glowing though. She was happy that year, we were both happy that year. When we stood outside the front door, she would get the key out of her pocket and she would say: "There's no place like home". We laughed and went inside.

That year was the happiest year of my life and the game "Houses" my childhood's favorite game.

*

I play "Houses" by myself till now. It takes me back to that particular year of my life. When I wander around a neighborhood and

see a house I like, I approach it and stand in front of the iron gate trying to imagine how my life would have turned if I was born and raised inside it. Mostly I am trying to decide if inside that specific house I could fall asleep at night without being haunted by nightmares.

One afternoon I was observing the colorful curtains hanging in front of a window. At some point a hand pulled them aside. My heart started pounding the moment I noticed the hand. When I looked closer, I realized it was the hand of a child. The girl in the window waved at me. She grinned and I noticed that a couple of her front teeth were missing. She seemed around eight.

I made an effort to smile back. As I walked away, I wished that she would keep grinning even when the curtains on her window were closed. Most of all, I wished that it was her own hand that was closing those colorful curtains of her window.

*

My own childhood ended at eight. At eight I buried the child inside me and for the last eight years I've been mourning its death.

*

The polaroid camera is always inside my bag. I don't leave the house unless I make sure that I carry it on me. My mother cannot understand why this is so important for me. I think, in fact, that is something that annoys her a lot. When once she told me: "I don't get what you are photographing all day", I replied: "That doesn't impress me at all".

When I closed the door behind me, I first checked if my camera was inside my backpack and then I regretted for talking back at her.

*

I kept feeling nauseous the first time I went to meet Orpheus. My throat was dry from vomiting and my voice was hoarse.

"I work from home during afternoons and I would like somebody to keep an eye on Orpheus," his mom told me.

I looked around waiting to finally meet the renowned Orpheus. I was thinking that a child growing up in such a huge house, who can apparently have anything he desires, would end up being a spoiled brat. I prepared some excuses to use for escaping in case my predictions proved to be right.

When at last a petite boy with round cheeks and sad eyes showed up and said: "There are ghosts in my closet. What about yours?" I immediately felt a sisterly love towards him and my eyes filled with tears.

*

I will always be amazed by the womb. This little nest with the ability to protect and nurture the most precious thing in the universe. Human life. I will also be amazed by the contrast of the womb to the outside world. How the outside world can hurt, injure and destroy the most precious thing in the universe. Human life. Especially life that the woman in whose womb this particular life was created failed to protect it.

*

My mother says that the day I was born my father planted a small tree for me at the garden of the apartment building where we used to live. He was bragging about it, about how this tree would become the pride of the neighborhood and that the tree and I would grow simultaneously. In three months' time the tree dried up. My mother insisted that it was because my father watered the plant with whiskey. Personally, I have a problem believing it. My father, even drunk, would never waste his precious drink to water a stupid little tree. Even if it was the tree that symbolized the birth of his one and only daughter.

*

Yesterday I hung another picture on the black wall of my room. A highly successful one, I think. Two children, boys, identical twins, indulging in their ice cream cones, laughing at the sight of each other's face.

I decided, before sticking each photo in the wall, to write on its back a title. In this particular one I wrote: "Mirrors."

*

The first time I saw X. looking at me in a peculiar way—in a way that no one ever looked at me before— it was through a mirror. It was a few days before my eighth birthday. The three of us went shopping for my gift. He had asked me in advance what I wanted and I had answered: "The most floral dress in the world."

The children's clothing store we had walked in smelled like flowers. Maybe because of some air freshener. I felt so happy that someone would buy me new clothes. Most of my clothes and toys until then were second-hand. I have been a charity case for neighbors and acquaintances who gathered in large garbage bags whatever they didn't need any more for me to use.

Since my mother started dating X., I began to slowly acquire new things, things that belonged to me from the first place. Clothes that hadn't been worn by other bodies and toys that hadn't been played by other hands. Books with no bookmarked pages.

My mother held the flowery dresses I had chosen to try on. I was so happy, that I felt as something blossomed inside me, opening wide fragrant petals.

My mother and I walked towards the fitting rooms. At least that's what I thought. That it was just my mother standing behind the curtain of the fitting room I went to change. By the time I took off my jeans and t-shirt and I was about to put on the first floral dress I had chosen, I noticed X.'s eyes staring at me through the small opening of the curtain.

That day I didn't try on any of the flowery dresses. I put on my jeans and t-shirt as fast as I could and told my mom that my stomach hurt and I wanted to go home.

I didn't give her any further explanations, because I didn't know exactly what to say. All I knew was that those petals I had felt were blooming inside me dried up at once and the fragrance turned into a stink that made me want to puke.

*

Often, while wandering the streets, I look at people passing by. I can't help wondering whether there are others like me. People who keep their filthy skin a sealed secret under their neat clothes. People who force themselves to get up every day and go on with their lives ignoring their dirty skin. How many layers of clothing does one need to keep such a kind of skin hidden?

*

Most of my clothes seem borrowed. They are a few sizes bigger than my normal size. (After all, the word "normal" is not a word included in my life's vocabulary.) I can't deal with glances from the opposite sex. Glances of desire, lust or just curiosity. I can't deal with male gazes touching my skin. Under my baggy blouses and ugly jeans there is a body that wishes to remain hidden, invisible. Protected under the bagginess of a woolen blouse.

*

I don't want people to recognize me either. That's why I avoid going to a certain place more than five times. Kiosks, supermarkets or any kind of shops. Five times is the maximum number of times I allow myself to visit them. More than that, the sales assistant and even some customers will begin to recognize you. It's this irritating habit of Greeks to ask questions, to want information about you and the skeletons inside your closet. My closet's skeletons are none of the business of any curious sale assistant.

This habit of mine– to cross a place out of my options' list after visiting it for five times–often forces me to walk long distances in order to find a safe place to shop. I don't mind. I love walking. What I hate are prying eyes.

*

During one of the times my mother and I were playing "Houses", I overturned the Chinese vase decorating the coffee table next to the sofa and broke it. We were in the living room and my mother

commented on how privileged we were to have such a large and bright place to relax during afternoons. We pretended not to see the mops and the dusters stacked in a corner. We had trained our eyes to see only what we wanted to see, what mattered the most. (A flaw that unfortunately my mother retained even when we had stopped playing "Houses".)

I fluttered inside that living room with the tall windows like a butterfly enjoying the transparent light of spring until, in one of my flutters, I knocked the vase down. I looked at my mother in horror, and she looked back at me, equally horrified. I burst into tears, but she told me not to worry. Perhaps we could glue the pieces back together, or even if we couldn't do that, she would tell them to deduct an amount from her salary. However, I couldn't console myself, because I knew how hard my mother had worked, and I didn't want to be the reason for her getting scolded. I cried harder and harder, until she came and hugged me, telling me that in life, it's not worth crying over some broken pieces of glass.

Next year, when X. entered our lives, my mother's flaw of seeing only what she wanted to see became the reason for me to break like the Chinese vase in that airy and sunny living room. And if there's anything worth crying for in life, it's for the broken pieces of your soul.

*

Every time I cut another piece of tape to stick a photo on the wall, I think about how easy my life would have been, how easy the lives of everyone would have been, if the broken pieces of our souls could stick back together with a simple piece of tape.

*

My second-grade teacher couldn't discern the pieces of my childhood soul. She was wearing round glasses that she often misplaced having difficulty seeing clearly. But even wearing them her eyesight was flawed. She had trouble recognizing the broken Amalia, despite her leaving pieces scattered here and there, hoping that her teacher, or anyone else, could understand what the eight-year-old

Amalia struggled to comprehend. How could an eight-year-old body and an eight-year-old mind understand?

The teacher with the round glasses couldn't discern the broken pieces of Amalia. I don't blame her. Perhaps she had experienced a sugary childhood surrounded by protective hands, hands that enclosed her eight-year-old body and eight-year-old mind to prevent them from shattering into countless small pieces.

The teacher with the sugary childhood, the sunny walks in blooming meadows, the fluffy kittens meowing next to her feather pillow, was unable to recognize the mold, the foul odor, and the darkness of a childhood soul. Even if eight-year-old Amalia stood in the middle of the room, letting her pieces fall onto the teacher's desk one by one, I doubt she would be able to see them.

*

Every night my mother brings home newspapers from the nursing home where she works. One day, I read in an article the phrase: "Our childhood is our homeland". I felt such disgust, like an itch all over my body. I rushed to the shower and scrubbed my skin with such ferocity that in some areas, it dripped blood. Before going to bed, I threw the newspaper into the kitchen bin. I couldn't fall asleep. The itchiness kept coming back. I got up, took the trash out for the garbage truck to pick it up.

*

During the time I am at Orpheus's house, I feel like I leave many of my life's baggage at the doorstep and enter the house a bit lighter. When we play with Orpheus, I find myself forming into a child. I was stunned when I first realized that somewhere inside me, there was a person who still resembled a child.

As I say 'goodnight' and leave, I load the baggage back on my shoulders and head home.

*

I wish I could step out of my body during the hours I become a child again. I wish my teenage self could embrace my child self, hug it tightly, weave a safety net around it, build a nest so that this child can live inside, grow up, become a normal teenager, and then an adult who is not afraid to exist outside of nests and safety nets.

*

The house in which I lived until my parents' divorce was the same house my mother and I returned to after what happened with X. During that time, my father was with a woman named Lilian. Lilian had scarlet red hair that I couldn't stand looking, because it reminded me of the red shutters in X.'s house. It was a peculiar cohabitation us four living in the same house. My father and Lilian slept in the one and only bedroom, while my mother and I slept in the living room. I on the sofa, and my mother on the floor. Lilian had no issue with our reappearance in my father's life, nor was she bothered that we occupied so much space in the living room.

She was jobless like my father; I remember her smoking constantly with an empty gaze, speaking with a drawn-out voice. Occasionally, when my mother went out to look for a job and my father wasn't home to take care of me, I stayed with Lilian.

I always bring her back to my mind amid clouds of smoke—nicotine and the smell of food burning in the stove—sitting cross-legged in front of me on one of the three chairs in the kitchen, wearing silk robes and holding a cigarette between her slender fingers.

"I was made for big things, little girl. I was made for a different life. For a grand life. Do you understand? "

No, I didn't. Back then, I couldn't understand what a big or a small life consisted of. But I understood that red was Lilian's favorite color. Apart from choosing it for her hair, she painted with that her nails too.

Red Lilian behind the gray clouds of smoke, the misty Scarlet-Lilian who constantly dreamt of a grand life, made me realize whenever I brought her back to mind how small our life was, how tiny my life was.

*

In another life, I will be light. Light as a cloud drifting in sealike skies and skylike seas, a lacelike wave on a shore during sunrise. In another life I would like to be an orange-red sunrise. So that the whole day will be ahead of me. So that the entire life will be ahead of me.

*

One afternoon during sunset, I took my camera out of my backpack to capture the view. The sun was setting behind a row of apartment buildings, behind a series of elongated rectangular boxes in which, I wondered, how many dreamt of a different life. On the exterior wall of a building, someone had written: "Lilian, I love you. Do you understand?"

I took a few steps back to fit everything into the frame: the colors of the sky, the rectangular boxes, the message to Lilian. Was it Lilian from my childhood or a different one? A Lilian who, if she could see the photo holding in my hand a little later, would no doubt feel the tranquility of the sky, the anticipation of a lover, the hope for another kind of life. If I knew who this Lilian was, Lilian whose name made a boring wall stand out from all the others, I would give her this specific photo. To look at it closely until her inside was painted with the orange tints of the sky, until the answer to "Do you understand?" was written inside her heart.

I don't know who Lilian of the wall is, so when I returned home that night, I wrote behind the photograph: "Love. Do you understand?" and stuck it on the black surface across me.

*

I know I am not likeable at school. In my junior high years, I often became the target of mockery due to my baggy clothes, antisocial behavior, and other flaws. This year, in high school, they got bored of me and left me alone. Fortunately, high school students have better things to do than deal with me. It's obvious they don't like me, but I feel neutral about it. Making friends or forming any other kind of relationships is not a priority in my life.

*

In some other life, I 'll have a best friend. Maybe even more than one.
In some other life, I will have best friends.

*

Orpheus wanted to know if I could take our photo since I' m a photographer. I told him that I am not a photographer, but of course, I could take our photo. I told him that if I could choose only a person to take my photo with, it would definitely be him.

He smiled. I leaned my head next to his and smiled too. I turned the Polaroid camera towards our faces. On three, I clicked. After the click, Orpheus said, "I love you, Amalia." After the words "I love you" by Orpheus, I realized that my smile was no longer just a posed smile.

At home, I wrote on the back of the photo: "If I had a brother" and stuck it on my black wall.

*

During the time we lived at my father's house, Lilian went with my mother to introduce her to an acquaintance of hers who was looking for workers for his factory. I was left with my father, and when I turned to look at him, I saw pity in his eyes. Was it for everything that life had reserved for me? Or for X. that life had reserved for me? There was no way that he pitied me for the father that life had reserved for me. (Of course, my father's eyes were and still are red and watery, a sign of excessive alcohol consumption rather than excessive sensitivity.)

When my mother and Lilian left, my father awkwardly caressed my hair and told me that everything would be ok. He even offered to take me for ice cream. I cannot recall how I reacted, whether I was pleased with this offer, if I still had even the slightest ability to feel any kind of joy. However, I remember that when we reached the kiosk, I chose a strawberry ice cream cone from the large freezer, and my father, after caressing my hair again, desperately searched his pockets for money to pay for it.

I held the ice cream in my hands, wondering if I should backtrack to the freezer, open it, and put the ice cream inside. I wondered what my father was quietly muttering to the owner and why the owner looked at me as if he pitied me from the depths of his soul.

I never found out what my father whispered into the owner's ear. I didn't need to return the ice cream after all. My father may not have succeeded in finding any change in his pockets, but he succeeded in convincing the owner to give it to me for free.

It was an ice cream that I could hardly enjoy. While eating it, I felt the owner's gaze of pity on my body, and the taste of strawberry on my tongue being distorted.

*

The first few months X. entered our lives, before he laid his hands on me, he often put them in his pocket to get money to buy me an ice cream. Sometimes even twice a day. Without needing to convince any kiosk owner about the misery of my existence. I always chose chocolate ice cream on a stick, even if I had the opportunity to eat two ice creams in the same day. However, if someone forced me now to eat chocolate ice cream on a stick, I would vomit instantly.

*

Death scenario number sixty-five: It is winter, icy cold and it's snowing. I am naked and I am freezing. I open my closet and search for something warm to wear. Inside the closet, there are only eight empty hangers. In the depths of the closet, I spot a discarded blue fabric. I hold it and look at it. It's the nightgown I used to wear when we lived in X.'s house. I don't want to wear the nightgown I used to wear when we lived in X.' house. However, it is the only available garment in the entire house, and I am naked and cold.

I put it on with closed eyes, then open them and look at myself in the mirror. The nightgown is from my childhood, my body is that of adolescence. The contact of the nightgown on my body is excruciatingly painful. I must take it off, I am desperately pulling,

wanting desperately to remove from my body anything that reminds me of that nightgown, of that childhood.

However, the nightgown won't come off. I don't know what to do. It is stuck to my body, suctioned onto my skin, transformed into a poisonous shirt of Nessus. I am despaired. The only thing I can do is to pull as hard as tearing my flesh to get rid of it.

I open the door and go outside. It is icy cold and snows heavily. I am not cold; how could I be cold? My nightgown, my flesh, my memories are all on flames. I struggle to take them off, to throw them all away. I struggle to rid myself of them. I fall into the snow. I roll. I stay there and freeze. The next morning, they find me dead. The nightgown, the flesh, and the memories are mutilated. I rest.

*

The three chairs in my father's kitchen had been three from the time we lived together as a family. Three of us, three chairs – it seemed to make some sense. (Sense. A comically tragic word when used in connection with my family.) I don't remember the three of us ever sitting as a family to have a meal together on those three chairs, before my mother and I packed our bags and left my father behind. My father was rarely home to sit and eat with us, and on the few occasions he was home, he was busy vomiting in the bathroom than dining with us in the kitchen.

When my mother and I returned to that same house, carrying exactly the same suitcases we had left with, but burdened with a different kind of load this time, it never occurred to my father to go buy a fourth chair.

The times when all four of us gathered in the kitchen – Lilian was the reason my father was home more often during that period – one of us had to eat standing or squeezed onto another's chair. Lilian's burnt dishes often ended up in the trash, but my mother's lukewarm ones frequently found their way into our stomachs.

It was a sight that, if I had a Polaroid camera back then, I would avoid capturing. In the kitchen with three chairs and four people, there was an obvious misery, a plain depression that often makes me wonder why some people end up living their lives like this: eating

lukewarm food while standing or being squeezed with someone else on a chair.

If I had the photo of the three chairs and the four people now, I would stash it in my drawer, as not to darken my black wall any further, as not to darken my soul any further.

*

"Full chairs, empty lives". If this particular photo were in my drawer and you turned it to read the caption.

*

In Orpheus' kitchen, there are plenty of empty chairs every time we eat together. However, his gaze is always focused on a specific one. I do my best to catch his attention, to make his gaze move from the empty chair to the chair that I am sitting on. I don't always succeed. Whether occupied or empty, some chairs have the ability to haunt our lives.

*

In another life, I will hover and won't need a chair to sit. There won't be chairs in my life to remind me that there was a time I was squeezing onto a chair with my mother, there was a time both she and I reached the point of not having our own chair to sit.

*

I don't remember the last time my mother and I sat together at our kitchen table to eat. Her dishes are no longer lukewarm. Her cooking has significantly improved in recent years. Equally significantly, our relationship has slipped in recent years.

Usually, each of us eats alone at the table during different times of the day. Occasionally, for some inexplicable reason, when we experience a more elevated mood, we decide to eat together. In the living room, in front of the television. Side by side. Even on those rare occasions of high spirits, when our elbows touch while moving the

utensils in the plate up and down, I still feel like each of us is eating alone, as if each of us is eating alone at a different moment in her mind.

*

"If I had a time machine, I would go back to a day when my dad was alive," Orpheus told me one afternoon. "How about you?"

"If I had a time machine, I would go back to the first day I visited your house," I said, and gently stroked his hair.

*

After narrating the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice to Orpheus in different variations, he asked me to start telling him more Greek myths, because he prefers them over the picture books on his library shelves. The myth of Demeter and Persephone came to my mind first. I explained to him that Demeter's soul darkened every time Persephone returned to the Underworld.

"And when she went back on earth?" Orpheus asked. "How did Demeter feel? "

"Her heart blossomed, and along with her heart, the whole nature blossomed too. When Persephone ascended to the earth, spring would come again.'

"My dad can't return on earth. My dad can't bring spring back. "

I wondered if I shouldn't had told him this particular myth. However, now that I had, the story was out there and I couldn't take it back. I placed my hand on his heart.

"Your dad will live here. Forever. When you can find your dad here, spring will return again."

*

There is a spring that can never return, and it is mine. My own spring is perpetually captive in the Underworld of X. The Underworld of X. is enclosed with red shutters, and in the atmosphere lingers the scent of men's cologne. I suffocate. If, at times, I manage to lift my head,

straighten my shoulders, and take a few steps forward, at the exit's threshold, I find X.'s hand blocking the passage to the light. If I could bypass X.'s hand and step outside, I would find everything I desire. Outside is everything I desire, outside is spring and hope.

Yet, I am still inside. Underneath. My head bows, my body hunches, leans so low that it almost touches the ground. I am forced to crawl, to slither like a worm in the soil, to return precisely to the point from which I started. Eternal Underworld. Eternal X. Eternal hand of X. Eternal darkness. Condemned to the eternal darkness. Condemned to the eternal hand of X.

I pondered whether I should include the sufferings of Tantalus in the list of myths I intended to narrate to Orpheus. I decided against it. This boy needed as much hope as one could give him, as much hope as I could give him.

I decided that this girl needed as much spring as one could give her, as much spring as I could give her.

*

A fairy with wavy hair, I dreamt of being a few days ago. Wearing a white dress, I walked barefoot, and when I turned my head left or right, I could discern wings sprouting from my back. The wings did not weigh me down; I felt them light, like the folds of my skirt. My chestnut-blond hair swayed in sync with the gentle rustling of leaves on the trees.

Such a strange sensation to retain the sense of smell in some dreams – I could distinguish the scent of pine, a fragrance harmonizing with everything around me, making me feel happy. I walked forward. With my head held high, my gaze fixed on the endless horizon.

And then, what a misfortune. Everything changed. The breeze turned into a whirlwind. I heard shutters forcefully opening and closing, my body filled with bleeding wounds, my blood painted my dress red, nothing white remained on my body. Snakes twisted around my head, the stench of men's cologne filled my nostrils, the smell of male odor burdened my body; I couldn't lift it from the ground, my body was down writhing.

I turned to see my wings, hoping they could save me, hoping they could put me back on my feet. I panicked. I screamed. I emitted a cry that tore me in half, a scream that echoed back resembling X.'s laughter. On my back, I saw a terrifying sight. Horrifying. On my back were no longer my proud white wings. Those lay broken below. Two hands sprouted now on my back, two male hands, the hands of X.

I went insane. The hands, the snakes, the echo had driven me mad. I had no other choice. I stood up, speed up, and leaped into the void. Before breaking into pieces at the bottom of the cliff, I managed to wake up.

*

"Tell me more Greek myths. You promised to find more Greek myths to tell me", said Orpheus.

"I will tell you about Medusa. She was very ugly and had twirled hair..."

"Like yours? If she had twirled hair like yours, she must have been pretty."

"No, she didn't have hair like mine. She had hair like twirling snakes."

Orpheus found Medusa's hair so funny that he laughed until tears streamed down his face. Orpheus' laughter managed to exorcise the nightmare from the previous night.

*

I imagine life after death as a return to the womb. I used to think of it as a return to a non-existence state, but I changed my mind. The return to non-existence seemed somewhat unfair to me, like depriving those who have been wronged in their first life of the second chance they deserve.

For the return to the womb to have meaning though, the following condition seems necessary: the sperm and egg that will give birth to you in your second life must come from individuals

diametrically opposed to those who joined their genetic material the first time.

For example, if the sperm that led to your first unsuccessful life belonged to an alcoholic, in your second life, half of your genetic information should derive from someone who detests alcohol to the extent that the sight of even a glass of wine induces nausea. If the egg through which you came into the world the first time belonged to someone who only saw and heard half of what was important, for your second mother, the most alert woman would be chosen.

Only in this way the second life will have value; only in this way it will be preferable to absolute non-existence.

*

One afternoon, I saw two girls and a boy sitting on the grass in a park, basking in the sun. They were dressed in plaid shirts and torn jeans. One girl had long hair down to her waist and wore thick eye glasses. The boy and the other girl wore sunglasses. They were eating sandwiches and talking. Occasionally, they laughed. They drank juice. They seemed to be in their second life, to have returned to a womb and been reborn. They seemed to be living the ideal version of themselves. I hid behind a tree and clicked. I titled the photo: 'A Second Chance.'

I looked at the collection of photos gathered on my black wall. As I looked at them, I felt like I was momentarily transforming into the self of the second life I dreamt of, as if the moments from the wall's photos matched the version of my second self that I dreamt of living.

Leaving my room, I found my mother cooking in the kitchen. The radio was playing; Eleftheria Arvanitaki was singing that 'There is no second life.'

*

The acquaintance of Lilian's owning a factory gave my mother a job at that period when we returned to my father's house. My mother worked such long hours during that time that often the only words we exchanged were 'good morning' in the morning and 'good night' at night. On some days, we couldn't even manage that. In the early

morning, I would hear her dragging her steps outside the living room and dragging them back in deep darkness. Between sleep and wakefulness, I mumbled words I wanted to tell her.

There were entire days when I didn't see either my mother or my father. On those days, Lilian awkwardly played the role of guardian, taking me to school and semi-burning food for us to eat. I'm not sure if the role of guardian was a role that bothered her, if the care she was forced to provide made her small life seem even smaller in her eyes, if my existence minimized hers.

Six months later, my mother gathered the necessary amount so we could empty my father's living room and move to the apartment where we still live today. Our house is in the same neighborhood where my father's house was and still is. The first time we left after the divorce, my mother took me as far away as possible. I don't know why the second time she chose such proximity with her ex-husband. I imagine that the events with X. made her think that even the alcoholic figure of my father could serve as some kind of paternal model, some kind of protector. And I don't think there is a greater proof of the degradation of our lives than this.

*

A paternal figure would be a father who would wait for me outside the school gate every noon. He would ask on the way home to hear my news because he would genuinely be interested in hearing my news. He would know my teacher's full name and the names of my best friends.

Whenever we went for a walk in the park, he would push my swing to the sky. I would reach the sky if I had a father behind the park's swing pushing me, waiting for me outside the school gate, loving me in every moment of my life. Such love would lift me higher and higher every day that passed.

*

X. was lifting my mother higher and higher every day that passed. In my mother's eyes, X. was the exact opposite of my father.

Good job, nice manners, often arriving home with a bouquet of flowers in hand. From a certain point on, my mother stopped touching the ground. Especially the day X. called her a 'soulmate,' my mother started to float. How could she walk on the ground after that, to notice me lying on the floor? When your entire life had felt nonexistent, how can your feet touch the earth when you become someone else's soulmate? Sometimes I don't blame her at all, but other times I blame her completely.

*

A few days after my mother and I moved from my father's house, he came ringing our doorbell. He told us that Lilian had left him, that she had secretly emptied her closet and disappeared. Without giving him any explanation, without even saying goodbye.

Hours later, my mother turned to me and said, "He never cried when I left. "

"You can't know that, "I replied.

But deep down, both of us knew that my father never cried when she left, he never cried when we left.

*

The first time we played 'Houses' at X.'s house, we didn't know to whom that specific house belonged to. My mother worked for a cleaning company, and it was the manager of the company who arranged the details. I sat in a corner in the dining room, doing my homework. After cleaning the upper floor, my mother came downstairs, approached me, and smiled.

My mother was always a beautiful woman, even when her hair stuck to her forehead, and her worn-out joggers did injustice to her tightly bound body. She was almost always sweaty and unkempt, but she never lost her spirit. Her break from work was a signal for us to play our favorite game.

My mother considered it necessary to play this game in every house we cleaned, perhaps because she knew that we would always return to our own tiny and moldy house. She knew that the two of us

would never manage to live in such a huge house happily. (What my mother didn't know was that, a little later, we would move to that exact house, the house in which we first lived in our imagination, and that happiness would not come even when our imagination became reality.)

The first time we played 'Houses' at X.'s house, my mother took a white napkin from the holder, folded it into an accordion shape, and, laughing, said to me, "How do you like my hand fan? " The first time we played 'Houses' at X.'s house was the last time I was happy in that particular house.

*

"Daphne was a nymph. The god Apollo fell madly in love with her. He chased her constantly until Daphne had no more strength to run. "

Orpheus loves Greek mythology. No matter how many myths I narrate him, they are never enough.

"And what did she do? What did Daphne do to escape? "

"She begged her mother Gaia to help her, and Gaia transformed her into a tree. "

"And did she manage to escape? "

" Yes, she managed to escape. "

*

Death scenario number sixty-six: X. is chasing me. I run to escape. I turn back to look, and I see him transforming into a dark demon with yellow eyes. His arms are disproportionately long compared to the rest of his body. I run as fast as my legs can carry me, but his arms are so long that he'll touch me soon. I run until I have no more strength to run.

Exhausted, I reach my mother. I beg her to save me. I implore her to rescue me from the arms of the dark demon with yellow eyes. I fall to her feet and cry. My mother remains unmoved. It's as if she

doesn't see me or hear me. She holds a white hand fan and waves it. I beg her to take me, to put me back in her womb to be saved.

The demon suddenly appears out of nowhere, transformed into the god Apollo. My mother's eyes are wide open now, looking at him. His slimy words find open paths towards her ears. My mother hears his admonitions, puts her hand on her belly, and uproots her womb. She gives it to Apollo, who ties threads around it and transforms it into a lyre. The beauty of Apollo and the melodic tune of the lyre hypnotize my mother, putting her into a deep sleep.

Apollo turns into a dark demon again, and the lyre takes the form of a womb in his hands. I tremble in fear, wanting to become microscopic, hoping I can crawl to the womb to be saved. However, the demon holds it tightly, laughing, then throws it so far away that it shatters into hundreds of thousands of pieces.

The demon's hands are now empty. My mother is sleeping deeply, and there is absolutely no one to save me. His hands approach to touch me, they are a thread away from touching me. Instantly, I shatter into hundreds of thousands of pieces. I am saved.

*

The first time Orpheus's mom introduced me to the man she's been dating the last few months, I couldn't help but wonder if he was indeed a pure Apollo or if he concealed a dark demon within him. When, a little later, I went up to Orpheus's room to play with him, I opened a huge embrace and enclosed him inside it, turned my hug into a womb and enclosed him inside. The womb that should protect every child from pure Apollos and dark demons.

*

In another life, I will be born as an oleander. Green leaves, pink blossoms, a plant like all the others. That's what you'll think at first glance. A plant like all the others, a plant you want to approach. You want to touch it. You want to cut its leaves, its blossoms, its branches. You may think you have the right to touch its leaves and branches, its blossoms, to cut the blossoms and branches of an oleander. You will

approach and do it – as you did back then – but this time, I won't fear you.

In another life, I won't fear anything or anyone. I won't need anything or anyone. I will be able to protect myself. Mother Nature will arm me with poison. Poisonous leaves and blossoms. Deadly toxicity in everything you desire. Every hand that touches an oleander, every touch that violates an oleander, ends to immediate death. Mother Nature decides the fairest punishment. The only acceptable punishment for anyone who disrespects an oleander.

Instant death. Death. Your death. Yours, not mine. The only acceptable punishment is your death.

*

Orpheus seemed sleepless.

"The ghost in my closet mutters at night and won't let me sleep."

"Really? Do you hear what it says?"

"It says that if Ares marries my mom, my dad will be lost from my heart forever."

*

On Monday mornings, my mother slams the kitchen cabinets more forcefully than usual. As if they were to blame for something and needed to be punished. On Monday mornings, the kitchen cabinets become the scapegoat in my mother's hands. They are the ones who must pay because it's another Monday morning, because it's pouring rain outside, because the bus is usually late, and the bus stop is flooded, because in the nursing home where she works, death often lurks.

Most of the kitchen cabinets' doors are worn out from the constant banging. The upper right cabinet, where the coffees and spices are kept, has had no door for a while. The door was banged harder than the doors of the other cabinets. Maybe it was a Monday when my mother was looking for some scapegoat to pay for something more serious than another rainy morning, or another delayed bus, or

another elderly death. Maybe it was a Monday when my mother wanted the cabinet, the cabinet door, something, someone, to pay for what she felt had to pay herself.

*

On a rainy Monday, I slipped getting off the school bus. Some students laughed. Someone in front of me gave me his hand. I touched it hesitantly. I got up. The laughter stopped. The rain intensified. I walked with a fast pace towards my classroom.

*

My mother confessed to me that every time an elderly person dies in the nursing home where she works, her colleagues withdraw to the kitchen until an ambulance arrives to transfer the body to the mortuary. My mother, on the contrary, goes to the deceased, looks at them, and places her hand on their cold, motionless flesh. She lets her gaze and her hand rest on them for a long time.

She told me that her hand is always warm before touching the deceased; by the time she moves it, it's cold, it has acquired the temperature of the dead. She told me it's something she won't stop doing, something she will continue to do all the years she works in that particular nursing home. She told me that's the reason she doesn't look for another job, even though it's a shitty job. I told her I understand, that we all have our obsessions, that I have many obsessions of my own. She reacted. "No, you don't understand. It's not an obsession. It's a punishment. It's a self-punishment."

I froze; my flesh, cold and motionless for a second, numbed whatever felt alive inside me. I left the room in a deadly silence.

*

Zeus enclosed his punishment for humans inside Pandora's box. Can you imagine what he placed in the box?"

"Ghosts."

"Ghosts?"

"Yes, the punishment inside the box was ghosts."

"Perhaps we could say it that way. Perhaps the best punishment for each person is what haunts them."

*

I don't know why my mother and father didn't report him to the police. Fear? Ignorance? Shame? Were they ashamed? For me? Were they ashamed to admit that they had a daughter who had been abused? Ashamed that they were parents who brought their daughter to the point of being abused?

A few days after the events, X. disappeared abroad for ever.

*

Orpheus's mom asked me to go with her and Orpheus to the amusement park that opened recently in our city. I accepted. I had never been to an amusement park in my life. As soon as Orpheus's mom bought us cotton candy, I started to shrink. As the bites of the sugary cotton melted on my tongue, I shrank even more. I reached the point of being the same height as Orpheus, and my cheeks rounded and smoothed out all my sharp angles. My soul turned pink, and for a moment, it had a sweetness similar to the taste of my palate.

I told Orpheus to stick out our tongues and handed his mom the Polaroid. I was sure that the intense pink color of our tongues would contrast with the black color on my wall. When I went home, I wrote behind the photo: 'Pink tongues vs the dark.' Every time I look at it, my soul turns pink, and all my sharp angles acquire the roundness of Orpheus's cheeks.

*

X.'s death scenario, number one: The door of my room creaks, the floor squeaks, the wind opens and closes the red shutters. There are so many noises inside my room, so many noises inside my mind. The noise of the door, the noise of X.'s footsteps towards the window, the noise of his hands closing the shutters.

My hands know what his hands want to do. My hands search under my bed, find and pull out a box; it's Amalia's box. I named it that way. Amalia's box. I sit on my bed and place the box on my knees. Tap, tap, tap, X.'s footsteps approaching. He comes and sits on the bed next to me. I don't turn to look at him, but I know he's definitely looking at me. I grab his hands so he won't manage to grab me. I put the box on his knees. I turn back and look straight ahead. I can't stand to look at his hands.

I guess X. is not looking at me now, he's looking at the box, the box I have put in his hands, the box that I have named Amalia's box. I suppose he is wondering what to do with the box, whether to open it or not. I know he won't be able to resist. He can't resist in anything mine. I know his hands desire more than anything to touch me, but for now, they touch my box. I am safe as long as his hands touch my box. Amalia's box will be the cause that I will be forever safe.

Gling, the bell inside the box notifies me that X. has opened it. The box has opened irreversibly. The jingle of the bell informs me of the irrevocability of the matter. I turn to look. Now I can look, I know I'm safe to look. The first thing I see is the terror on X.'s face, identical to the terror my face had when his hands weren't touching Amalia's box, but my body.

Inside Amalia's box, I have enclosed X.'s punishment. Huge axes. They have sprung out of the box, X. looks at them, indescribable terror in his face, his entire face is terror. Perhaps he wonders how such huge axes fit inside such a small box belonging to Amalia, how so much immense hatred fits inside such a small soul belonging to Amalia.

The axes, two in number, go and stand facing each other. X. still holds my box in his hands; his hands are glued to my box and therefore he cannot detach them. The axes gain momentum upwards and, cut X.'s hands from the root. His blood spurts onto the red shutters. The red shutters get undyed, now the shutters are white, opening without a sound, letting pure light wash the dark room.

My dark soul stands opposite X.'s mutilated body and bathes in the pure light of catharsis. My soul, cleansed by the white light of catharsis, looks at X. dying with terror on his face. The absolute terror of the irreversible, the magnificent terror of the irrevocable.

*

"Is there always hope? Is that why Zeus placed hope at the bottom of Pandora's box?"

"Yes, there is always hope."

"Even if your dad dies, and your mom wants to marry an Ares? Even if a ghost mutters in your closet every night?"

"Yes, hope always exists, no matter how many 'even ifs' there are in our lives. Hope always exists, for everyone."

While waiting for the bus to go home that same evening, I wondered if I truly believed what I had told Orpheus. That there is always hope, that there is hope for everyone. I wondered if I believed that there is hope for me. The bus arrived before I could make up my mind.

*

I saw the boy who had helped me the day I slipped off the bus, three days later. It was an unpleasant surprise for me to realize that he had discovered my hiding spot at school and was sitting hidden behind the bushes that I now consider mine. Behind the bushes that have hosted me during all the recesses since I came to high school, because I don't want to socialize with anyone at school, and because no one at school wants to associate with me.

I realized that he was new at the school; I realized that I had to explain the rules to him, to explain to him that whoever finds some bushes first, they automatically become theirs. And I was the first to find those bushes; those bushes had become mine a while ago.

"It's my space here," I said.

He lifted his gaze from his book and looked at me as when you look at an annoying fly buzzing in front of your eyes.

"If you don't like it, leave," he said. "I'm not going anywhere."

He turned his gaze back to his book. I wonder where I found the courage, and went and sat a few meters away from where he was sitting. Maybe because his eyes clearly showed that he preferred to look at his book rather than me. Maybe because this is something that

always comforts me in others, to see that their eyes prefer to look at something other than me, to see that in their eyes I look like an annoying fly that just buzzes.

*

The first time after my parents' divorce, my father made no effort to communicate with us. At least that's what my mother told me. A few months later, my mother said that my father would come to pick me up from school the next day. From what I understood from her words, she was initially negative to that perspective, but he was persisting, and so my mother had to compromise.

Many nights as I fell asleep, I realized how much I missed my father. Those nights that I missed my father, I cried, and with tearful eyes, fell asleep. It's not that I missed our nighttime rituals; we didn't have nighttime rituals with my father to miss. It wasn't the father who would tuck you in, read you a bedtime story, then gently kiss you on the forehead and leave a light on so that you wouldn't be afraid of the monsters hiding under the bed. Even without nighttime rituals though, many nights as I went to sleep, I missed my father.

One of those nights, my mother entered the room and demanded to know why I was crying. I told her that I missed my father. My mother got angry, lost her temper, started pacing in the room, and then, opened her mouth and with a voice like thunder told me, "Fathers like him are not to be missed." I remember her words precisely, as if we had had this conversation yesterday.

So, the next night and every night after that, as I lay my head on the pillow and the absence of my father brought tears in my eyes, I whispered to myself, like a spell, my mother's phrase: "Fathers like him are not to be missed." The constant repetition often caused the words to lose their meaning, to transform into a meaningless sequence of letters on my tongue. Nevertheless, I devoutly whispered it again and again until falling asleep, and always in that sleep, my father came to visit me.

As the days turned into weeks and the weeks into months, I began to feel my father's absence less painful. And even though I kept forgetting to whisper my mother's spell, its influence on me never

ceased. My eyes closed for sleep drier, and in my dreams, my friends, my teacher, and my mother visited me. The father who was not to be missed had almost ceased to be missed indeed.

Until that afternoon when my mother talked about the compromise that I had to make the next day. The night before that compromise, I repeated my spell many times before falling asleep, and when I woke up, I looked out the window and saw the light of dawn. Tomorrow had arrived.

Tomorrow had arrived, but my father hadn't. In vain, I waited for him outside the school after class. After all the other children were picked up by their parents, I stayed alone outside the school, whispering my spell. When I got tired of standing and talking to myself, I took the way home.

My mother was still at work, and when she returned, she found me crying on the stairs of the building. As soon as she realized what had happened, she started to curse him, in such ugly words that I had to cover my ears with my hands as not to hear the words she thought appropriate to describe him with. I covered my ears because I thought that if I would hear them, they would be imprinted in my mind, and every time my father came to mind, my mother's words would flash like neon signs over his head.

That night, I forced myself to repeat the spell twenty times: 'Fathers like him are not to be missed,' and on the twentieth time, I realized that my father was missed more than ever.

*

Eating lunch a few meters away from V. for a month, it would seem strange to me now if during a recess, I didn't find him in his usual spot. Habit is a bad thing after all.

*

There are so many days that I feel my body dirty. So many days I feel my body emitting an odor. Intolerable filth following me everywhere, sending me to the shower to scrub my flesh with a sponge. I would prefer my body to be covered with pimples, my face

full of acne. I would love it that way; I wouldn't be ashamed of it, I wouldn't have a problem with others looking at it. There are many days of my life that I hate my body, slime everywhere, so many days I hate to touch the slime of my body, hate to touch my body.

Slime on my hands, slime on everything I touch. I have destroyed everything I touched with these slime-drenched hands. My relationships with others, my relationship with my mother, everything ended up having green, disgusting slime on them, everything I touched became a green, disgusting slime.

So many days my body emits a heavy masculine cologne. I feel nauseous to the point where I run to the bathroom and vomit. Whenever I smell a heavy masculine cologne, I feel an urgent need to vomit. To vomit my disgust for the masculine cologne I smelled, my disgust for X.'s cologne, my disgust for X. To vomit X.

*

V. doesn't wear cologne. I've noticed this sitting in some distance away from where he sits.

*

I asked Orpheus's mom to find as many pictures of Orpheus's dad as possible, because I needed them for a project. Many were in digital format. She gave me money, I went to the photo studio we met, and had them printed.

*

"Artemis was a goddess who didn't want to get married. One day, she caught Actaeon staring at her while she was bathing in the river, and she got angry. She transformed him into a deer. His dogs didn't recognize him and tore him apart. "

"But my mom wants to get married. She wants to marry Ares. My mom doesn't want to transform Ares into a deer. "

*

When we first moved to X.'s house, my mother told me to go take a shower because we would go out when X. returned from work. When the bathroom door opened, I was standing inside the transparent glass shower, facing away from the door. I didn't panic when I heard the door open; I thought it was my mother, she always helped me to wash my hair. I turned to look and saw X. looking at me, staring at me persistently, without averting his gaze, without awkwardly apologizing, and immediately closing the door.

I felt so fragile at that moment, transparent. It was as if my body was made of glass, as if the transparency of my body allowed X. to enter my soul, to see it embarrassed and ashamed. My heart pounded, ready to break my glass surface, to free me from that torment. As soon as X. left closing the door behind it, I grabbed my towel and wrapped it tightly around my body. Without rinsing off the soap. I swaddled myself with the towel feeling like a defenseless baby.

I couldn't say anything to my mother afterward, because when the three of us went out, X. made her laugh louder than I had ever heard her laughing. However, I was crying silently.

*

X.'s death scenario number two: it's summer, I'm on vacation with my mother and X. My mother is sleeping on a sunbed, she always sleeps, her straw hat covering her face.

I go into the sea to cool off; the salty water stings my wounds; everything X. has done to me is vivid in my memory. I can't stand X. looking at me again; his gaze disgusts me, his gaze sprinkles salt on my wounds. I see him getting in the sea, approaching me. I see lust in his eyes, desire in his hands; my whole body becomes an open wound that bleeds. The closer he gets, the more intense my pain becomes. He looks at me. A gaze of lust. He wants to touch me. Hands of lust. My wound opens, uncontrollable bleeding. X. is undeterred. He tries to place his gaze onto my wound, his hands onto my bleeding soul.

I scream. Deep enormous waves rise, waves of unstoppable bleeding hit his body and throw him down. Blood and salt fill his body, fill his gaze; every inch of his eyes is filled with salt and blood. He is blinded. He won't be able to look at me again. His eyes now only see

black, his eyes are now full of darkness. Waves of blood drown his body; his drowned and blinded corpse washes ashore in front of my mother. I swim across and escape from both of them.

*

I asked Orpheus what his favorite color is. At first, he said blue, then yellow. I told him to decide because we couldn't keep repainting the wall. He mentioned orange and then purple. I asked him to think of a color that came to mind when thinking of his dad. He said, "The green of the trees, because I used to play in the garden with my dad." In the afternoon, I went to the paint store and bought paint in the color 'green of the trees.'

*

The first time my mother met X., I wasn't with her. It was the day I futilely waited for my father outside the school gate. The next day, when my mother's nerves had somewhat calmed down, she looked at me and said, "We 've been unlucky in our lives. We got the worst man ever. Yesterday, I met the owner of the house you like, the house with the red shutters. A real gentleman. The complete opposite of your father. "Later, she made soup, and while we were eating, she said, "I'm sorry for choosing such a father for you. "

For many years now, I've been waiting for a much more significant apology from her. For many years, I've been waiting for her to ask for forgiveness for much more significant sins. Forgiveness she hasn't been able to utter yet.

*

V. saw me during a recess tsking my Polaroid camera out of my bag. He asked if I liked photography, and I nodded yes. He put a bookmark in the book he was reading and told me about an ideal place for photography. A place he often visits for peace. He said I could join him sometime if I wanted to take some photos. I nodded no.

*

While I was painting the wall in Orpheus's room in the color of trees, Orpheus sat on the floor and looked at me.

"I like green," he said. "Green means garden and dad."

I told him that the next day, when the wall would be dry, I had a big surprise for him. He shouted 'hurrah' and started jumping up and down.

*

In another life, I will have my own ideal place. It doesn't have to be something extraordinary, like an exotic beach, or a green mountain. It could simply be the area behind the bushes at school, where I spend my recesses. However, in this ideal place, I won't feel the need to maintain a safety distance from V.

*

"Eros was the winged god of love. He held a quiver full of arrows and fluttered here and there. When he aimed his arrows at two people, they had no choice. They immediately fell in love with each other. "

"Did this god ever target you with his arrow, Amalia? "

*

One night, I dreamt of the cliff. The cliff I often dream about. I was sitting on the edge, my legs dangling down, eating my school lunch. I wore wide and thick clothes, layers upon layers. I looked straight ahead and saw my classmates like figures on a cinema screen. They formed groups, ate together, talked, and laughed. No one was condemned to wear layers of clothes on their bodies, nor to have their lunch in isolation. No one was condemned to live their life on the edge of the cliff.

I swayed my legs rhythmically, one, two, one, two, forward, backward, forward, backward. With each swing, I felt more alone, with each swing, the void below deepened. One, two, one, two, forward, backward, forward, backward. The laughter of my peers was

deafening; the sound of their kisses shattered my eardrums. I couldn't stand hearing them anymore, I couldn't stand watching them anymore. So many groups of friends everywhere, so much loneliness on the edge of the cliff. I couldn't bear it anymore. That's why I jumped. I jumped into the abyss. As I was falling, I saw sorrowful faces around me: my mother, my father, Orpheus's mother. As soon as I saw Orpheus mourn, I regretted my act so much that my clothes instantly inflated, turned into sails, defying gravity and lifting me back up.

At the edge of the cliff, V. was sitting, reading a book. I said 'hello' and sat next to him to have my lunch.

*

For years and years, you know, you are absolutely certain, that your heart has hardened from pain, anger, and hatred. For many years, you know that your heart can feel nothing but pain, anger, and hatred. One day, however, a little boy with round cheeks and sad eyes finds a way to pierce your heart with the arrow of his love. And this love, is a round and warm kind of love, a love that has the ability to soften your rough edges, to illuminate your dark pieces.

And some other day, another arrow targets your heart, but in a completely different kind of way. You wonder what this strange feeling is, what this unfamiliar feeling is that you're experiencing. This feeling that doesn't resemble the round and warm love you feel for the little boy with sad eyes. You don't know how to answer; you only know that your heart flutters at times in your chest.

And this is something that surprises you because you didn't know, you had absolutely no idea that the heart was an organ that could sprout wings.

*

Two white doves sat across from one another. Looking at each other. The beak of one touched the beak of the other. I approached quietly. They didn't hear me nor did they see me. They heard and saw nothing but their love for each other. I clicked on the camera as their

heads and bodies met forming a heart. I wrote behind the photograph: 'Eros' and stuck it on the wall.

*

The tiny apartment with its moldy walls that we rented was filled with cardboard boxes a few days before we moved to X's house. We had almost emptied our closets and the kitchen cupboards, filling the boxes with their contents. We stacked them on top of each other, and my mother wrote on those with glass inside 'FRAGILE'. I didn't know what that word meant, and when I asked my mother, she said, "Something that breaks easily."

On the eve of the move, I lay in an empty room feeling more fragile than ever. I felt empty and alone. I didn't want tomorrow to come; I didn't want to leave my room, even though it was tiny and moldy.

X. used to visit our house months before we moved to his place. He would sit on our worn-out couch and eat in our cheap plates. He brought me gifts and sweets, speaking to me kindly. No raised voices, no fuss, no glass full of alcohol in hand. However, I didn't like him. Even if he gave me gifts and told me sweet words. Even if I didn't have to listen to him vomiting another bottle of whiskey into the toilet.

I didn't like him. I didn't want him sitting next to me on the couch. I didn't want him putting his hand in my hair and caressing it persistently. He made me feel uncomfortable, he caused me shame, he evoked a feeling that I didn't know how to describe at the time. But I knew it was a feeling I detest. It sent me running to the kitchen to pretend drinking another glass of water.

On the day X. gave my mother a key and said, "You don't deserve to live here. My house is always open for you", and my mother embraced him in tears, I understood that I could never escape.

The night before the move, I lay in a bare room and tried to convince myself that I could feel the joy my mother felt. I tried to convince myself that I didn't despise X. That indeed, we didn't deserve to live in a tiny, moldy apartment, and everything would be fine. I don't remember if I managed to sleep that nig

*

"Today, I will tell you the myth of Aegeus."

"Whose?"

"Aegeus. He was the king of Athens. He stood at the harbor and waited for his son to return from a difficult mission. He had asked him, if he managed to return alive, to raise white sails on the ship."

" And if he didn't return alive? "

" They would raise black sails. "

" And then? What happened then? "

*

X.'s death scenario number three: I am in my bedroom at X.'s house. In the bedroom with the red shutters. The bedroom is on the upper floor of the house. The red shutters are open, I stand and look outside. I am not eight years old; I am sixteen. I wear a long white dress.

He parks outside the house, and I notice that black fabrics hang in front of all the truck's windows. The doors of the truck open, and three people get out: my mother, X, and little Amalia

From a distance, I see a vehicle approaching. As it gets closer, I realize it is a moving truck. It parks outside the house, and I notice that black fabrics hang in front of all the truck's windows. The doors opens, and three people get out: my mother, X, and little. My mother wears pitch-black sunglasses, she can't see clearly. My mother is blind, she can't see anything. X. holds her by the arm and guides her every step. In the garden, the bushes form a labyrinth. X. leaves my mother's arm and transforms into the Minotaur.

I run. I run to escape the monster that is coming after me. I run through the labyrinthine corridors formed by the bushes; I get trapped; I don't know where to exit to save myself. I want to yell for my mother, but my mother is blind, she can't see to come and save me. The Minotaur, panting, chases me. I am trapped, he will catch me for sure.

Amalia, standing at the window, watches Amalia running in the labyrinth. Amalia standing at the window aches for Amalia running in the labyrinth, her heart breaks for the little girl that her mother sent into the hands of the Minotaur.

Amalia standing at the window takes a deep breath, so deep that her white dress swells, becomes a white sail; she lifts her high and then lands her to the ground. As soon as her feet touch the ground, a loud explosion is heard, the labyrinth shatters into pieces, the Minotaur shatters into pieces, and young and older Amalia, tightly embraced, transform into ships with white sails.

*

"Since black is the color of sadness, why did you paint the wall of your room black? Are you sad, Amalia?"

"The wall of my room is not just black. It's filled with colorful photos. It's both black and colorful."

"So, are you both sad and happy?"

*

A few days after the incident in the shower, I opened my mother's handbag and searched for the small notebook with phone numbers. I found it at the bottom of the bag, looked up my father's phone number, and wrote it down on a piece of paper. On a day X. was not home, and my mother was taking a bath, I dialed my father's number from X.'s landline, praying that he would answer. I hadn't thought about what exactly I would say; it was enough for him to pick up, and I would figure out what to say.

On the other end of the line, a woman's voice told me that my father wasn't home, and if I wanted, I could call again. She didn't ask who I was, and I didn't explain. I didn't call again. I kept the piece of paper with the phone number in the pocket of my jacket and never used it. Perhaps it was my mistake, perhaps if I had called again and again until he answered, maybe I could have found the words I was searching for, perhaps I could have cried for help. Maybe he wouldn't be drunk at that moment; maybe he would come to rescue me.

So many maybes, all spoken in vain. My father is not the type who can help others. My father is not the type who can help his own daughter.

*

Once, during high school years, I met Lilian again. It was in a supermarket far from the neighborhood where I live. She was standing in front of the shelf with baby food, her back turned to me, but I immediately recognized her. When I called her name, she turned around, surprised, and looked at me. "It's me," I told her. "Amalia." She was moved, her eyes welled up with tears, she hugged me tightly. She told me she got married, that a few months ago she gave birth to a boy, she showed me the baby formula she was buying. I observed her face while she was talking to me. Her face looked rounder, fuller; her skin smoother. She appeared younger, despite the passing years. She seemed to be living a fuller, smoother life.

She asked about me, wanted to know my news, asked about my mother, if things were easier for us now. My father was not part of any of her words. Before we said goodbye, she hugged me again and kissed me. "Stay as far away as possible from toxic people," she said. Perhaps that's where my father was, behind the toxic people.

*

The day after I painted Orpheus' wall green, I woke up to go to school and found my mother crying. I asked her what was wrong, but she wouldn't tell me. I noticed that she was holding something tightly in her fist; with difficulty, I opened her fingers to see. In her hand was a folded photograph. When I realized what the photo was, I stopped breathing for a moment. "Where did you find it?" I whispered. She showed me an old dusty book. Holding the photo in my hands, I ran and locked myself in my room.

*

The worst day of my life was captured in the upside-down photo on my desk. The blackest photo of my life, my darkest moment of all. I sat on my bed and took deep breaths. I didn't want to look at it because

I couldn't bear to look at it. But I felt that I had to look at it, that maybe, if I managed to look at this black, dark thing that had confined me inside a black, dark coffin for so many years of my life, maybe something would change.

I got up and went to stand in front of my black wall. It was almost filled with the photos I took. I looked at each one, trying to remember where I was when I took them, what I was thinking, how I felt. I saw them all one by one, and when I finished, I went to my desk and turned the photo from its top side. The photo was taken a few hours after the first time X. laid his hands on me.

*

X. had convinced my mother to enroll in the evening school program in our neighborhood. My mother hadn't finished school, and X. insisted that she shouldn't let her abilities go to waste, that she could go to college afterwards if she wanted, that he would cover all the expenses. He repeated over and over that he would do whatever it took to change her life. Our lives.

As soon as I learned that my mother would leave me alone with X. in the evenings to go to school, I begged her to take me with her, promised that I would sit in a corner without bothering her, that I would wait for her without making a sound. When she told me that this wasn't possible, and that X. would take better care of me than a father, I burst into tears. She grabbed me by the shoulders, shook me hard, and said, "For the first time in my life, I am happy. Don't you dare ruin it for me."

My mother went to school, and X. kept his promise. He did everything in his power to change my mother's life and mine. Forever. After X., our lives could never be the same again.

*

I look at the photo. X. stands between us, with one arm tightly around my shoulder and the other tightly around my mother's waist. We belong to him, that's what he wants to prove. My mother stands next to him, wide open with happiness, radiant. I am pale and

withdrawn, my body stiff. I wonder how my mother didn't notice back then when she held the photo, her child screaming for help. Her child, colorless, huddled, tiny. Her child, fetus desperately searching for a womb to nestle into.

*

It was the first day that young Amalia's mother would go to school. Young Amalia's mother lived in her own imaginary world, a world as far away from the real world as the pretended self of X. was from his true self. Young Amalia's mother moved in and out of rooms, with small cries of enthusiasm, laughter, and joy. The certainty that this was one of the most beautiful days of her life, the day when her life essentially began. She opened the door of her room and went out.

Young Amalia cried inside her, silent screams of fear, deep sorrow in her soul. The certainty that this would be the worst day of her life, the day when her life essentially ended. She closed the door of her room and stayed.

Young Amalia and her mother lived parallel lives that day. It wasn't possible to meet each other.

*

In some other life, whenever I'm afraid, I will open a door and find myself in a warm, baby room. Inside the room, there will be a mother sitting on a wooden rocking chair. Immediately, I will become a baby and get in her arms to sleep. "Sleep come take this baby, I gave it young to you, bring it back to me an older one. Old like a tall mountain, straight like a cypress, its branches reaching east and west." Back and forth, the rocking chair, mother will sweetly lull me, her gentle voice in my ears until I close my eyes, until I find myself in dreamy worlds. In worlds where I will fear nothing anymore. In some other life, I will fear nothing because I will have a mother ready to lull me into dreamy worlds.

*

While X. entered young Amalia's room and sat next to her, she was murmuring a lullaby. X. kept getting closer, "Sleep come take this baby..." he was coming even closer, "...I gave it young to you...", the distance between them minimized, "...bring it back to me an older one...", his body was so close to hers, "...old like a tall mountain...", his body touched hers, "...straight like a cypress...", X. told young Amalia that what happened between them should remain a secret, young Amalia continued to be a baby and lull herself, "...its branches reaching east and west." X. told young Amalia that her mother would be jealous, that if she loved her mother, she should protect her. X. got up and left the room. Young Amalia lay on the bed like a fetus, praying for a mother to accept her tiny existence inside her womb.

*

My mother had entered my room banging the door. After her first afternoon at school, after X.'s first afternoon in my room. My mother opened the door, I didn't move, I stayed lying in a fetal position on the bed. "Are you already sleepy?" she asked me. I didn't answer. "Get up, X. will take us for pizza to celebrate."

I don't know what X. wanted to celebrate that night. My mother's first afternoon at school or his first afternoon in my room. Nor do I know if he kept a separate copy of the photo he asked the waiter to take just before the pizza arrived at our table. I knew I needed silence and quietness during that time. I heard them chattering incessantly, amused with everything, laughing with everything. The noise was piercing my mind. I wanted my mind to be able to think, to understand what had happened in my room a few hours ago. But I couldn't think, I couldn't understand. My head filled with my mother's voice, with X.'s laughter.

The waiter placed the pizza on the table. Its smell mingled with X.'s cologne. I felt nausea, in my stomach and my mind. I vomited on my mother's feet. They picked me up, and we left in a hurry. My mother put me to bed. I fell into a lethargy. I don't remember any of my dreams. Only darkness. When I woke up, my mother told me she had been worried, that I had slept for almost two days. But even if I woke up, my biggest nightmare was still real.

*

In some other life, there will be no darkness in my dreams, only white, pure, untarnished light.

*

The red shutters dripped blood. Every time my mother left the house, X. would enter my room and close the shutters. The shutters opened deep wounds. A river of blood flowed from them, flooding the room and reaching the ceiling. I closed my eyes and suffocated.

Claustrophobic darkness. Fear. My legs in the red thick surface. I tried to move them, to swim, to move my limbs with quick, frantic movements, desperate movements. I was in the exact same spot, the red liquid was thick, it was impossible to move forward. I was sinking. It was impossible to breathe, impossible to live. In this thick, bloody river of my life, all I could do was drown.

*

I don't remember how many months it lasted. What I remember is that one afternoon, while my mother came to pick me up from school, I stopped in the middle of the road and refused to continue walking. My mother got angry, saying it was hot, that she didn't intend to sit under the hot sun tolerating my whims. She pulled me by the hand. I resisted. She lifted me up. I screamed and cried. And I told her. I told her about X. and the red shutters. She couldn't hold me anymore. She let me fall. She looked at me without saying anything. In silence, we went back to X.'s house.

*

The afternoon we returned home after my confession to my mother, X. wasn't at home. As soon as I realized that my mother was ready to go to her evening lessons, a flood of emotions overwhelmed me. How could she leave me in his hands? Now that she knew? Now that I had told her? That evening, my mother hid around X.'s house and returned secretly, catching X. in my room.

Chaos ensued. Crying, screaming, cursing, apologies, pleas. Closets were opening and closing, our things were packed into suitcases, almost running, we left and went to my father. My soul always shudders when I think that my mother needed to see with her own eyes to believe. Inside me, a storm erupts when I think that my mother almost let me go through it again in order to believe.

*

I enter a room. Empty, rectangular. Music reaches my ears. I walk. As I walk, the music intensifies. As the music intensifies, the room narrows. Cheerful, powerful music. Across from a piano, my mother sits and plays. Ecstasy over the keys. Her head bowed. She doesn't turn to see me. "Mother?" I whisper. She doesn't hear me. She is devoted to her music. The walls tighten even more. "Mother?" I say louder this time. She doesn't hear me. Her music covers any other sound. Any other noise. Noise. I feel like a noise. The walls have narrowed in an extent that I can touch them with my hands. "Mother, can you hear me?" I scream. The music becomes deafening, the walls collide and crush me. Change in tempo. Sad, slow music. The walls move away, their white surface filled with my blood. My mother holds a bucket full of our tears and tries to clean the walls with the inscription Mom, can you hear me? written in blood.

*

I cry. I sob. I scream. I cry for young Amalia; I cry for older Amalia. I cry for what I suffered, for what I lost, for what I went through, for what I didn't have the chance to experience. I grab the photo and tear it, tear the pieces again and again, light a match, and burn them. I gather the ashes in a box. I put the box in my backpack. I open the door of my room to leave and find my mother leaning over the door. She cries. She whispers 'sorry,' she cries and whispers 'sorry.' I get on the bus and sit in an empty seat. My hand is on the backpack; my hand is on the box inside the backpack, my gaze on the window outside.

*

I look out of the bus window, but I don't see what's outside; I see what's inside, what's inside me. Mountains and cypresses, the mountains and cypresses of young Amalia's lullaby. I see myself wearing my white dress and walking barefoot ahead. I am in a large rectangular space. Perimeter planted with tall cypresses; I walk barefoot until I reach a dug grave. I stumble. Almost falling inside, but I don't fall. The grave is not mine; this is not my grave. I look up at the mountain. The view calms me down. I look back at the grave; I see a coffin. It's open. Inside is X. He is dead. I close the coffin and lower it into the grave. I take the shovel and pour soil into the grave, pour more soil, fill the grave with soil. I run and climb to the top of the mountain. "I want to be free," I shout. I feel a jolt. The bus stops outside the school.

*

During recess, holding the box in my fist, I gather all the courage I have and say: "Let's go today. After school. To your ideal place. Let's go today if you can."

He says he can, I exhale, and wait.

*

I couldn't scatter X.'s ashes anywhere else. The ashes of the past. Only in an ideal place. Vasilis stands next to me and explains why he loves this place so much, why it is an ideal place for him. He tells me he has connected it to a difficult period of his life, that it helped him in a challenging time. He says that maybe one day he will be able to explain more. I think that maybe one day I will be able to explain more too. I open the box and let the wind sweep away the ashes of the photograph, the ashes of the past. I check the time. I have to run to Orpheus. He'll be impatient by now.

*

Orpheus is so eager for our meeting that as soon as I enter their house, he runs and jumps on me.

"Now? Will my surprise be now?"

"Yes", I laugh. "Your surprise will be now."

I take him by the hand, and we go upstairs to his room. I take out all the printed photos from my backpack. I scatter them on the floor. Orpheus looks at them, looks at me, doesn't know what to ask, wonders what to say to me.

The door opens; Orpheus's mom enters the room. She smiles and her eyes are filled with tears. I give the photos to Orpheus. For each photo, Orpheus's mom tells her son the story behind it. I help him stick them on the wall.

Orpheus's green wall is now filled with photos of his dad. Photos of when his dad was a child, photos of when he was young, photos of when he became a dad. His entire life is displayed on the green wall of his son.

"You don't need to fear that you'll forget your dad. You'll always remember your dad. You'll look at his photos, and you'll always remember him."

I have never seen Orpheus happier. I make him stand in front of his green wall; he grins, and I click. When I return home, I will write behind the photo, 'Light,' and will stick it in the center of my wall.

*

As I return home, my mother sleeps on the couch with the TV on. I turn off the TV and cover her with a blanket. I look at her sleeping. My mother hides inside her a child who no one ever put to bed singing a lullaby. My eyes are filled with tears. I bend down and kiss her on the forehead.

*

I enter my room. I open the window. The scent of the day enters. The scent of the back yard, the scent of the lemon trees. The scent of spring. I want to be like spring in its brightest days. Like a blooming lemon branch, like a butterfly with colorful wings, and a swallow

returning to the bluest skies. I want to be like a blossoming spring season from now on.

*

I stick the photo entitled 'Light' in the most central point of my wall. His smile in the most central point of my wall. His smile expands, spreads, scatters. It infiltrates between the black pieces, penetrates the black space surrounding each colorful square, and fills it with light.

The sun enters through the open window. A gentle breeze brings the scent of lemon blossoms inside. I breathe. Orpheus's smile, the sun, spring, friendship. Could I just look at these, feel, and live only for these? Is it possible?

I know it's not possible. I don't want to have illusions. I don't want to make a new beginning based on illusions. The black pieces of my wall are there, the black pieces inside me are there. They will be there; even if colorful photos cover the dark surface of my wall, even if smiles, laughter, and hugs cover the dark surface in my soul.

I place my palm on the photos. I run my hand over each one, caressing them. Life could be like this. Carefree, joyful, beautiful. Could my life be like this? Can it be carefree, joyful, beautiful? It can't. I know it can't. It can't be just like this. But maybe, just maybe, it can be like this as well.

Perhaps one day, day by day, the photos on the black wall of my room will be replaced by others; photos of my own life instead of photos of other peoples' lives. One day, day by day, the black wall of my room might be filled with colorful photos of my own life.

*

Young Amalia is bleeding. There's a wound in her heart that's bleeding. Blood flows through her body, through her body flows blood. Young Amalia wears her white dress and walks. The wound in her heart hurts. Young white Amalia shouldn't have a bleeding heart that aches at such a young age. But she does. The pain is unbearable, young Amalia sobs.

Oh, my young Amalia. Oh, my little girl.

Young Amalia walks in the darkness. She drags her steps with difficulty. Her feet stick to the darkness, her body sticks to the darkness, her mind sticks to everything sticky. How can such a small body move through such deep, pitch-black tar?

Oh, my young Amalia. Oh, my little girl.

Pure light. White light. Clear light comes to chase away the pain of young Amalia. Older Amalia, bathed in pure white light, comes and grabs little Amalia by the hand. She can't stand seeing her stuck in the deep, thick darkness surrounding her. She grabs her by the hand and helps her unstick from the tar. She puts her hand next to her, kneels beside her, and hugs her. She takes a handkerchief from her pocket and wipes the wound of her heart, wipes the wound of both their hearts, wiping away their tears. She tells her that they cried enough, she tells her that all those tears have now shrunk the hole in their hearts, she tells her that the hole in their hearts will always be there, but it doesn't need to be enormous and swallow them.

Young Amalia nods, wanting to show older Amalia that she understands, wanting to tell her that she agrees. Older Amalia opens her hand and closes little Amalia's hand inside hers. With joined hands, they walk forward, bathed in pure, white, clear light. They walk forward until they reach the edge of the cliff, until they see beneath their feet the void of the abyss. They are no longer afraid of the abyss. They can look at it without fear. One Amalia turns to look at the other. One Amalia turns to look at the wings of the other. They smile, open their wings, and fly.

Now Amalias can fly high. Now they can be reborn. Now they can live.

THE END

ON THE WAY HOME
(Translated in English by the author).

Temporarily

"First, they lay down on the ground. On the earth. Under whichever tree they could found. A little shade in the extreme heat of summer seemed enough for them to catch their breath, to rest their bodies that seemed to age within a few days, to calm their disturbed minds. "

"Temporarily?"

"Temporarily. But they couldn't continue sleeping outdoors any longer. The heat was unbearable, and soon the first rain would fall. How long could they consider leaves and tree branches as their home? That's when tents were set up. Now they could rest in triangular shelters made of thick canvas.

"Temporarily?"

"Temporarily. But winter was setting in for good, the wind was biting, and the sky was pouring rain. The canvas shelters began to pile up, one after the other. That's why they replaced them with shacks. Zinc became their shelter; more resistant to the harsh whims of weather."

"Temporarily?"

"Temporarily. But inside the shacks, people were freezing in the winter and sweating in the summer. Even the zinc shelters were not a good choice. That's why they started building refugee settlements. This time, their homes were made of concrete. Solid, sturdy concrete. So that nature's fury couldn't defeat it. So that "temporarily" couldn't defeat it."

Dust to dust

We made small breads with soil and water in our grandmother's yard in the refugee settlement. What joy when our hands immersed in the mud! When the clay transformed into round loaves.

And then God took water and soil and created the first human.

We put them in the sun to dry. We went back and forth every few minutes to see if they had finally taken a solid form.

And then God cut a piece from Adam's side and created Eve.

Such a thrill when we could finally hold our little breads in our hands. A row of our own creations.

And then God took water and soil and created Cyprus. Thick forests surrounded by turquoise waters.

When the yard was filled with little breads, the adults complained about the mess. We had to break them, turn them back into earth. Another day, we would start again from the beginning.

Dust to dust. Earth to earth.

1974.

The bread to dust. The people to dust. Our lives to dust. Our houses to dust. Our orchards and herds to dust. The celebrations for the patron saint's day in every village to dust. The three-day festivities of the weddings of our relatives and neighbors to dust. The spoon sweets we made to treat our Turkish-Cypriot friends, the trays of syrupy delights that Turkish-Cypriots offered us to dust. The caravans of pilgrims to the Monastery of Saint Andrew every August 15th, even though the Saint's Day was on November 30th to dust. The Sunday strolls in ancient Salamis, the spring Orange Festival in Famagusta, the sports competitions at the Gymnastic Stadium of Evagoras, the school trips to Bellapais Abbey, the hikes in the mountain with the five fingers to dust.

Our lives to dust.

1974.

Dust to dust. Earth to earth.

And our lives have to start all over again.

Up or down?

In which of the two settlements do you live? The one up or down?" they often asked me, and since I usually confused which one was up and which one was down, I would answer: "In B' Settlement. I live in Agioi Anargyroi B."

My mom, when I asked her for the umpteenth time if we lived in the up or down settlement, told me: "How many times do I have to explain it to you? We live in the down one. Your grandmother lives in the up settlement. Remember the stairs we climb to go to your grandmother and the stairs we descend to come to our home."

This phrase, "our home," I understood early in my life that it wasn't a simple phrase for my family. It wasn't, let's say, like the phrase "our fridge." Because the words "our home," in my family, were often followed by gazes staring into the void and deep sighs and sniffles. While if someone asked, for example, if there was milk in our fridge, then a simple "yes" or "no" followed, and if needed, we would find the grocery list and write down the milk.

For me, home was that small apartment in the settlement, that small apartment in Agioi Anargyroi B'. If the Turkish invasion of 1974 hadn't happened, my home would probably be somewhere else. If the Turkish invasion of 1974 hadn't happened, there might not even be Agioi Anargyroi B' for me to call home.

Of course, if we think about it, then probably we could say that if the Turkish invasion of 1974 hadn't happened, I might not even exist, because my parents would be unlikely to meet, marry, and had me. So perhaps from every bad thing, something good comes out? I always liked to pose dilemmas to others. I started by saying: "What would you prefer? This or that?" There were times I almost asked my grandmother: "Grandma, what would you prefer? Not losing your home and not having your granddaughter - meaning me - born, or losing your home and having your granddaughter born?"

Fortunately, I kept this particular question on the tip of my tongue and didn't need to pose it as a dilemma to my grandmother. Because some questions don't have clear answers, like the question "In which of the two settlements do you live?"

Cypriot parrots and Australian parrot

We had two small parrots in the cage. Riri and Ririka. One was blue, the other was green. I didn't like having them because I didn't like keeping something alive in a cage. But my mom and sister wanted them. I pitied them. What's the point of having wings if you cannot fly?

Every time I returned from school, before even putting down my backpack, before even asking what we would have for lunch, I would ask if there was a letter from Australia.

Receiving letters from my cousins who lived there was a great joy. Those envelopes, with diagonal blue and red lines framing them and "by air mail" written on top, managed to shrink the distance between Darwin and Agioi Anargyroi B'. They managed to shrink the distance between where my aunt and uncle lived after 1974 and where we lived.

Every time such an envelope arrived by air mail in our mailbox, it was as if a piece of Darwin, a piece of Australia, a piece of my two older cousins entered our home. My two older cousins that I wished they lived in Cyprus so that we could hang out, and not just correspond 'by air mail'.

How many thousands of kilometers did such an envelope travel each time? "When will we go to Darwin? When will I see my cousins in person?" I asked.

"Where do you think Australia is? It's on the other side of the Earth," my mom replied, and I got annoyed. "Letters manage to go back and forth; why is it so difficult for us?" I commented, and then my mom said, "You have plenty of cousins here; aren't they enough?"

However, my cousins from Australia had a different charm. They were exotic. Like the Australian parrot they had sent me once on a large shiny poster. Along with posters of kangaroos and koalas, dense forests, and vast deserts of that distant continent. So exotic, so different from anything I had ever seen in Cyprus. "Australia is unique. When will you visit it?" my cousins closed the letter, and I, knowing that we would never visit, turned the poster with the big colorful

parrot toward my mom and sister and said, "Yes, but he doesn't live in a cage like Riri and Ririka."

I stuck the photo of the exotic parrot on my bedroom wall, and when I looked at it, I thought about my exotic cousins living in that distant place. One day I got the idea to take it off the wall and bring it to my grandmother. To give her the joy of seeing it. But neither its bright colors nor its long-feathered tail impressed her.

"Oh, so far away, Australia is," she said, and since I didn't understand where she was going with it, I said, "Well, yes, on the other side of the Earth."

Grandma took out a handkerchief folded inside the sleeve of her dress and blew her nose. As if she were allergic to printed Australian parrots.

"We lost our homes, we lost our villages, we lost our children," she said. At first, I didn't understand what she meant. When I thought about it again, I realized that for grandma, having a child and one day packing her bags to go live on the other side of the planet was like not having it at all. And even though my grandmother had three other daughters, she wanted her exotic daughter, just as I wanted my exotic cousins.

I stuck the parrot's poster back on my bedroom wall. I might have it in this large shiny photograph, but I didn't really have it. Just like my grandmother didn't have her firstborn daughter and her older granddaughters, even though they often sent her pictures.

When my aunt, uncle and cousins repatriated a few years later, the desire to visit Australia never faded within me. And unanswered, I still hold the question of whether they returned to their home when coming back to Cyprus or if, by leaving Australia, they left it behind.

The Olympian Gods and Leonidas with the 300

I had some mythology books bound in hardcover. Which was convenient. Because if they had soft covers, they would have surely been destroyed by constant use.

I was reading over and over again about the adventures of the gods of Olympus, the Argonaut Expedition to Colchis, and the Trojan War for the sake of beautiful Helen. I wanted to be the goddess Artemis and run barefoot in the forests with my sacred deer. Or the goddess Athena, the wisest of all, with my helmet, shield, and spear. And, instead of Agioi Anargyroi B', I wanted to dwell on Mount Olympus.

I often brought Olympus to my school during recesses. With my classmates, we played mythology at the back of the school, in the small grove that reminded me of the forests where Artemis roamed. One day, however, Leonidas disagreed and said he didn't want to play mythology anymore. That mythology was nonsense.

"And why is mythology nonsense?" I asked angrily.

"Playing the gods of Olympus is a nice game. Let's play," Margarita supported me.

Leonidas stood in the middle of the group and said, "We always play gods of Olympus. The gods of Olympus are stupid and fake. I want us to play Leonidas."

We remained astonished, looking at him. In the third grade, in History, we were learning Greek mythology. We hadn't met anyone named Leonidas yet.

"He is someone great who had my name," Leonidas asserted.

"Yeah, right!" Andreas scoffed. "Surely there was someone great with your name!"

Leonidas' palms clenched into fists. "Yes, there was," he yelled. "He had three hundred soldiers, and together they fought the Turks. They were three hundred against millions of Turks."

Instead of playing gods of Olympus, that day we played Leonidas and the three hundred against the Turks. When the next year we

learned ancient Greek history, the Persians hardly replaced the Turks in our minds.

Everyone Became Turks

Gregoris Afxentiou shouted "Come and get me" at the Turks and was burned alive by the gasoline thrown by the Turkish helicopter above his hideout. Evagoras Pallikaridis bid farewell to his classmates, leaving them a letter on his desk, and then joined the rebels in the mountains to fight the Turks. Kyriakos Matsis told the Turkish governor, who offered him half a million pounds to betray the secrets of the battle, "We are not fighting for money, but for the freedom of our country."

"No, children! Cypriots fought the British from 1955 to 1959. Not the Turks."

"Oh, yes. The British."*

And as the anniversary of the 1940 war approached, again we sent the Turks to the mountains of Pindus. Their feet sank into the snow, they were chased, and triumphantly driven away by the Greeks, making them a laughingstock.

"No, children. Greeks fought the Italians in 1940 in the mountains of Albania. Not the Turks."

"Oh, yes. The Italians."

And every March, Kolokotronis and Karaiskakis came to our minds, fighting body to body against the Turkish enemies.

"Correct, children. In the Revolution of 1821, the Greeks fought against the Turks to liberate their homeland."

Luckily, we managed to get right at least one out of three! Luckily, our teachers didn't need to bang their heads on the classroom wall for the third time.

Emine was not a dragon breathing fire

I had to meet Emine to understand that Turkish Cypriots were not dragons breathing fire. I met Emine at the English tutorial. She was a year older than me, but we attended the same class at the tutorial. We kept each other company while waiting for the kids who had lesson before us to come out of the classroom so that we could go in.

Emine, with her round rosy cheeks and smiling eyes, the girl who laughed loudly at my jokes and told me that when she grew up, she dreamt of becoming a psychologist, and that I should become one too because I could understand people, was the first person who made me realize that Turkish Cypriots were ordinary people like us. People with round cheeks, smiling eyes, and big dreams for the future.

Mrs. Yiota asked us to practice dialogues in pairs.

"What's your name?"

"My name is Andri."

"Where are you from?"

"I am from Cyprus."

"What's your name?"

"My name is Emine."

"Where are you from?"

"I am from Cyprus too."

Too. Both of us. From Cyprus. The origin of both of us had the word "Cypriot" as the second compound: Greek Cypriot, Turkish Cypriot.

Sometimes your history, the history of your homeland, becomes a fairy tale in the mouths of the adults who narrate it to you. "Once upon a time, a dragon breathing fire and lava grabbed with its claws the bird with the one leg and the pointed beak. The poor bird tried to escape, but the dragon bit its back, cut a piece, and swallowed it. The bird cried and mourned, fearing and trembling before the dragon."

But besides dragons, in fairy tales and in life, there are also girls with round cheeks and smiling eyes. People who learn foreign

languages and dream of becoming psychologists when they grow up, in order to help others.

Emine may not have convinced me to study psychology, but she made me understand that Turkish Cypriots were not dragons breathing fire.

Blue notebook from the grocery store

Right next to my grandparents' house, there was a grocery store. How magical it is to have a grocery store next to your grandparents' house. I would enter with coins in hand and come out with treats.

One day, I bought chips with vinegar and a chocolate. When I went to pay, I saw behind the counter some blue notebooks. I hadn't seen them before.

"How much is this notebook, Mrs. Eleni?" I asked the grocer.

She turned, picked it up, and said, "Ten cents. Do you want it?"

I only had twenty cents, and I couldn't buy both the chips, the chocolate, and the notebook. But I wanted it, I wanted this notebook very much. As I looked at it, I felt my heart flutter. "Yes," I said and put back the chips.

I left the grocery store with a chocolate and a blue notebook with a white label in the center. It was simple, but I liked it because it didn't remind me of the school notebooks with pictures of Saint Andrew Monastery, the port of Kyrenia, and the ancient theater of Soli. Those notebooks caused me stress since I had to fill them with schoolwork.

While eating my chocolate, I opened the blue notebook to the first page. How nice it is to have a notebook with many blank pages, with many empty lines. As long as I could remember, I felt the need to fill the pages of notebooks with words and stories.

In this notebook, I had written many of the first fairy tales born from my childhood imagination. I took it everywhere with me and told everyone that one day I would become a writer. I was absolutely certain that I wanted to play this magical game with words for the rest of my life. And as I grew older, my desire grew too. When my childhood dream became a reality in my adult life, one of the stories that lingered in my mind and wouldn't let me be until I started writing it was the story of the life I had as a child and a grandchild of refugees of the Turkish invasion of 1974.

I don't forget, and if I remember, everything turns orange

Once, I forgot to color the pictures in the worksheet, as our teacher had told us the day before. I remembered three minutes before the bell rang for first period. I grabbed an orange pencil from my pencil case and colored whatever needed to be colored with that specific color. As I colored with swift strokes, it was as if little flames were igniting on the paper.

The teacher collected our worksheets to correct them. She collected mine with the orange girl, the orange house, the orange dog. She called me a little later to go to her desk. I swallowed my saliva as I approached, and with a dry throat, I stood close to her. Mrs. Maria held the worksheet with my orange drawings.

"If you don't have time to color your worksheet, I prefer you tell me rather than doing it like this," she said, pointing with her finger to my sloppy drawings. The red polish on her nail resembled a fire truck detecting the little flames I had lit here and there.

I really wanted to tell her that I had time; I just forgot to do it. However, the sign behind her head in big black letters read "Remember Cyprus" and on the covers of all our notebooks, it was written, "Remember Cyprus." How could I tell the teacher that I didn't remember, that I always forgot?

The orange color of the crayon with which I had painted my worksheet that day became forever linked in my mind with the prompt to remember, even though my memory often betrays me.

Green or red line? Surely dead.

What could I create with a green line? Let me think... If I made it wide and placed it in a yard, it would become grass where children would play ball. If I made it twisted, it would transform into a crawling snake in the spring. If I made it thin and curved, it would turn into a slide for two friends to slide down.

And with a red one? What could I create with a red line? Let me think... A long carpet for some cinema stars to step on. Red lava from a volcano rushing forcefully and reaching the foothills of a village. A braided ribbon adorning the long, wavy hair of a girl.

I had a vivid imagination as a child. Yet, I shouldn't think of the green line as grass, a snake, and a slide, nor the red line as a carpet, lava, and a ribbon.

In my mind, one color often replaced the other, one line replacing another. Green line: the boundary between free and occupied areas of the Republic of Cyprus. Red line: the line drawn by our teachers on the map of Cyprus to show us which part is occupied and which part is free.

Was this line green or red, after all? And if it was green, why was that? Was it planted with grass? If it was red, how many ribbons should they intertwine to create it?

When the term "dead zone" was later added to my school knowledge, the green lawn withered abruptly to match the blood of the dead people.

Women remembered

While I might not have had a good memory, the women of Cyprus remembered.

"Why are these women shown on TV so often?" I wondered, and my father said, "Because they cannot forget what happened. And when we see them, we remember too."

I wasn't exactly sure what I should remember every time I saw these women on television. They were always many together, dressed in black clothes, and some hid their hair under dark-colored scarves. They held pictures of men in their hands.

One day, Mrs. Maria brought a large poster to our class with these women – the women with the photographs.

"The women on the barricades hold pictures of their missing husbands, missing fathers, missing sons," our teacher said. "They cannot and should not forget their missing ones, just as we should not forget them either."

And the thread of unknown words in my head was becoming more and more entangled. It took more years in school desks and more years in front of the television, watching the protests of Cypriot women with pictures in their hands, to understand that having your son, husband, or father killed in a war is difficult. But not knowing if they were dead or alive, not having their dead body to bury, was often worse.

And that's why at the barricades, at the points where free passage to occupied Cyprus stopped, these women chose to spend so many hours of their lives expressing their despair for not knowing if their loved ones were alive. Their despair that they didn't have their dead bodies to bury; that they didn't have their graves to visit, leaving some fresh flowers on them.

Wild animals in a stamp

We were like trapped wild animals in cages, living in our small houses in the settlements. Refugee apartment buildings, long boxes, one next to the other. Where were the large courtyards and endless fields that starred in the narrations of our parents and grandparents?

Like wild animals, we played with our neighborhood kids at the entrances of the apartment buildings. The wild animals of refugee settlements ran, yelled, and threw stones at each other. The wild refugee children who had lost the opportunity to run, yell, and throw stones at each other in large courtyards and endless fields.

We were the wild children of the refugee settlements. The refugee stamp of the two cents reminds me of us. A girl is sitting somewhere – on a suitcase, perhaps – looking puzzled ahead. What could she be thinking? What could she be wondering? Perhaps she wonders who forced her to sit on this suitcase when all she wants is to get up and run, run far away, in large courtyards and endless fields.

But how can the girl manage to stand up? How can the little refugee get up to run in the courtyards of her grandparents, in the fields of her parents? The wire fence behind her turns into a wire cage, and the child of the refugee settlements is trapped at the entrance of poorly constructed refugee apartment buildings.

How many times did you get burned on Easter?

On the night of Easter, we would stand in the yard of Agia Thekla – in the beginning, it was a small pre-built church in a grayish color. Small was the church, small was its yard, but many were we. We, the refugees, forced to celebrate Easter there because there was nowhere else for us anymore.

Many of us stood so close to each other that once, after the "Come receive the light," the child standing behind me, instead of lighting his next person's candle, set my hair on fire. I don't remember who first noticed that I was burning, but luckily, I got away with just a few burnt hairs.

Then followed the "Christ is Risen" and "Truly, He is Risen." However, in the refugee settlements with their grayish pre-built churches, the Easter wishes don't stop here. Sometimes, the "Christ is Risen" and "Truly, He is Risen" in refugee yards are overshadowed by the fervent wishes like "Next year in our homes" and "Next year in our villages" exchanged among neighbors in each settlement.

Neighbors and friends who, under different circumstances, wouldn't be neighbors and friends, wouldn't even know each other, and certainly wouldn't exchange wishes or set each other's hair on fire in the yard of a small pre-built church.

How many times, I wonder, did hair burn during "Christ is Risen"? How many more years will Easter wishes burn in the yards of refugee churches? In any case, since then, every Easter night, no matter which church I am in, I make sure to hide my hair inside my blouse.

Trapped in the bird's beak

The neighbors of my grandparents had enclaved relatives. The vocabulary of my childhood was filled with unknown words.

I no longer had Mrs. Maria as my teacher; I had Mr. Kypros – country and teacher with the same name! And to explain the unknown words that had become an integral part of our lives, he hung the map of our island on the board. He hung it on the nail, between the two green boards of the classroom, and pointed.

"At the tip of Cyprus. Up here, high, can you see? It's the Karpasia Peninsula. Here is Rizokarpaso. And here is the monastery of Saint Andrew."

This part of our country always reminded me of a bird's beak.

"Some refused to leave their villages occupied by Turkish troops in 1974. They became enclaved over there, staying under Turkish administration. "

Every answer to a question created ten more for me. Why were only they enclaved there? Why weren't all the refugees enclaved? Did the enclaved ones love their villages more? Were they braver than the others who left and became refugees?

The Lernaean Hydra of questions in my mind gained extra heads every time the enclaved relatives of my grandparents' neighbors came for a few days to see their family. Did they stop being enclaved on those days? What was the opposite word of "enclaved"? Did it exist? How did they feel leaving Karpasia to come to Agioi Anargyroi A', and how did they feel when a few days later, they left Agioi Anargyroi A' and returned to Karpasia? Where were they enclaved? In Karpasia or in Agioi Anargyroi A'? And was the word "enclaveder" a real word, or if I wrote it in an essay Mr. Kypros would underline it with a red pen?

My island, the bird with the large pointed beak and the only one leg, where had its wings hidden? Why couldn't it open them and fly away, somewhere where its beak didn't need to be enclaved anymore?

Why do some island-birds have beak and only one leg to stand still in the Mediterranean Sea? Why don't island-birds have real wings

to spread wide and fly to peaceful seas, to seas that don't puke enemy ships on a July Saturday at half-past five in the morning?

Why don't island-birds have wings to escape from the beast trampling on their back?

Red soil and golden fields

My other grandmother, whose I have the name, lived in the refugee settlement of Kokkines. She became a widow a few years after the invasion; I vaguely remember my grandfather dying early, struck by leukemia. Having raised her seven children, she wanted to find something to do to stay active. She started working in potato harvesting in Kokkinohoria to pass the time and supplement her small pension.

Kokkinohoria, the villages of the free area of Famagusta, with their fertile red soil, became my grandmother's workplace for years. Kokkinohoria, located close to the golden plain of Mesaoria where she grew up and lived most of her life.

As she pulled and uprooted the potatoes planted beneath the red soil that nurtured them, the invasion similarly uprooted her from the bright plain that raised her.

From the Mesaoria plain to the settlement of Kokkines, and from Kokkines settlement to the potato fields of Kokkinohoria, a few kilometers away from the place of her heart, grandmother Andriana suffered a stroke one May morning. She was sixty-nine, and I was thirteen.

I was studying for the final exams in History when I heard the news. I was reading the History of ancient Egypt, and as soon as I heard it, I didn't want to continue studying. What did I care about the history of the Pharaohs, the history of any place, when my grandmother's story had a critical development in Larnaca's Hospital?

A few days later, she took her last breath in that hospital, in that city, far from her plain, without managing to see her village and her town again.

Ghosts don't appear only at night

The ghost town of Famagusta is filled with the souls of grandmothers and grandfathers. Souls dressed in white sheets. The sheets of these souls don't only have two holes for eyes, like all sheets that dress ghosts and wandering souls.

The largest hole in these sheets is located on the upper left side of the chest, similar to the holes created by the nails in the body of the Crucified. The crucified ghosts pass through the walls of the ruined hotels, walk on the azure-green waters of the Varosha sea, bury themselves in the golden sand of the beach.

Buried the crucified white ghosts in the sandy beach of Famagusta, they close the holes of their eyes and the hole of their crucified heart, so as not to see the decline of their beloved ghost town. To look at it only with the eyes of their memory, only with the gaze of their love.

Larnaca, I left my soul inside, open up!

Years have passed. Grandfather Andreas and grandmother Andriana died, as did grandmother Maria and grandfather Antonis. Grandmothers and grandfathers die and continue to die. In Larnaca, Limassol, Nicosia, Paphos, instead of dying in Kyrenia, Famagusta, and Morphou. What about our parents? Will the same happen with them? With us? With our children?

I don't want to lie. I am a child and grandchild of refugees, but I cannot know exactly how those people felt the day they hastily packed a few things in a suitcase and embarked on the path of refuge. However, I know that if someone forcibly expelled me from Larnaca, if for some reason I had to leave it behind, if I couldn't return to it, then my soul would shatter into thousands of small pieces. Pieces that nothing and no one could find the material to glue back together because nothing and no one can become the adhesive material of such a fragmented soul, except the possibility of return.

If a wire were woven around my town, I would take a piece of white paper and write in capital letters: 'I LEFT MY SOUL INSIDE, OPEN UP!'. I would attach it high on the wire, like the message someone attached to the enclosed town of Famagusta: 'FAMAGUSTA – I LEFT MY SOUL INSIDE, OPEN UP!', 'LARNACA – I LEFT MY SOUL INSIDE, OPEN UP!', 'MY HOMELAND – I LEFT MY SOUL INSIDE, OPEN UP!'

On the land where we were born and raised, our soul probably remains. Mine is in this small town on the southeast coast of Cyprus, in Larnaca, where I was born and raised. Every time I return from a trip abroad, as wonderful as it may have been, a warmth floods me, a huge relief, as soon as I leave behind the airport and approach to the Salt Lake. Because this lake with pink flamingos in winter and this coastal road with palm trees and bathers in summer is my home. And if I were forced to uproot, my soul would stay in this salty lake, on these sky-high palm trees.

Roots

We are trees. We call ourselves humans; like trees though we behave. We develop roots little by little, connecting us to our land. Some bear fruit, others are deciduous, others evergreen, but all of us are trees. As we grow, our roots grow with us. Small, delicate threads at first. Then, over time, they thicken and lengthen, occupying space underground proportionate to the space we occupy above; sometimes even a disproportionately larger space below.

Invisible. You don't notice them at first. The thought that they are there and breathe beneath the ground does not even cross our minds. Gradually, we grow, and we begin to realize their existence. Magnets that keep us in the place where we sprouted. They spread through the soil, grasp onto rocks and pebbles. They support us but also hinder any escape, intentional or forced. How easily can a young person emigrate compared to an elderly one?

Our roots are an entire world branching out beneath our land. It takes us, let's say, to the yards with fragrant flower beds where we played as children. To the desks where we were educated. To the churches where we got married. To the hospitals where we gave birth to our children.

But what if leaving is not a choice? If it is a compulsion? If leaving is a matter of life or death? If in your land, outside your home, your school, your church, there is a monster roaring? Breathing flames that burn the fragrant flower beds and the wooden desks and the sculpted pews?

What if the beast approaches? What do you do? Leave? You must leave. You try to lift one of your legs off the ground, and some of your roots are cut. You try to lift the other, and are cut even more. You scream. You produce a sound so powerful that it covers the roar of the monster lurking at the threshold. The earth shakes. Your earth. The earth that is amputated with every step. Every step you take away from it.

Two amputated bodies. The earth's and yours. Two bodies condemned to live separately. Forced to lick daily the blood dripping from their wounds.

The grey wolves yelp over the dead lambs

"Why are wolves always portrayed as villains in fairy tales? In Little Red Riding Hood, in The Three Little Pigs, in The Seven Little Lambs?"

"In most fairy tales, the wolf symbolizes evil."

"In school, we learned that there are no good or bad animals. That animals follow their nature. They don't have logic."

"You're right. Wolves are not evil. They simply follow their instincts. Wolves would be evil only if they had human intelligence."

"Are there such wolves? With human intelligence?"

"There are. Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time, not many years ago, in our times, some lambs entered a meadow. It wasn't just any meadow; it used to belong to them. It used to be theirs. And because it used to belong to them, they longed to see it again and walk on it."

"At the beginning they stood a few meters away and glared at the wolves who had taken their meadow. They bleated that this meadow was theirs, and they wanted to take it back. The wolves went wild as soon as they saw them. 'Aououououou,' they all howled together."

"The lambs didn't back down, even though the wolves howled. They proceeded and entered their green meadow. The wolves showed their sharp teeth, extended their deadly claws from their paws."

"How audacious were the foolish lambs! A flock of foolish lambs, walking one behind the other, trying to stand against the fearsome and terrible wolves! The conquerors of the meadow!"

"The lambs entered the meadow, and the wolves started howling. 'Aouououou.' Their yelling echoed into the distance. The lambs cried, 'Baaa, we're entering our meadow,' 'Baaa, we're entering our home,' 'Baaa we're entering!'"

"The lambs entered, and the jaws and claws of the wolves came out. Some wolves attacked a lamb and bit it. The lamb next to it tried to help, trying to fend off the beasts."

"But how could a lamb stand against a huge wolf? How could a lamb confront a pack of wolves? They thrust their claws into it. They bit it in the neck. They drooled their rage on its body. Until the lamb

couldn't endure the blows anymore and died. And they triumphantly howled. And you know, those wolves were not animals. Those grey wolves were people. And those lambs were people too."

It was extremely hot that day. August 11, 1996. I was in my room. I heard voices in the living room and ran. People on TV were shouting. Someone was on the ground, and those standing around were beating him. They kicked and hit him with sticks and stones. I couldn't understand anything. Who was hitting whom? And why?

A month later, we started the second year of high school. We kept asking our teachers, trying to understand. Our minds couldn't grasp what had happened. Tasos Isaak was one of the thousands of motorcyclists who participated in the large anti-war march in August 1996, starting from Berlin—the last divided city in Europe, excluding Nicosia—and ending at the port of Kyrenia. However, the Cypriot government, after threats from the Turks, asked the demonstrators to finish their march at the Makario Stadium in Nicosia to avoid any clashes with the occupation forces.

Thousands of motorcyclists, refusing to accept this decision, headed towards the barricade of Deryneia and entered the dead zone. There, armed soldiers and a group of fanatic Turks, the Grey Wolves, awaited them. One of the demonstrators, Tasos Isaak, was beaten to death while trying to help another protester who had fallen into the hands of the Grey Wolves. Their frenzy was so intense that the UN peacekeeping forces couldn't save him.

The Grey Wolves. The phrase echoed from mouth to mouth, and I imagined people dressed in grey fur suits with open jaws dripping with saliva.

A few days later, at Tasos Isaak's funeral, another young man, Tasos's cousin, Solomos Solomou, entered the dead zone and climbed the pole of the flag to take down the red flag with the half-moon. A shot from the opposite Turkish post, and Solomos's eyes closed forever. He fell from the pole, but the flag remained on.

"Would you do it?" we asked each other at school. Opinions were divided into two. "They were courageous; they are heroes," said one half. "They lost their lives for nothing," said the others.

I don't know if Solomou died for nothing, if Anastasia, the little swallow of Haris Alexiou's song, Isaak's daughter, missed her father's presence in her life for nothing, born a month after her father's murder. Impulsive youth or brave patriots? Impulsive youth and brave patriots. They certainly lost years of their lives, years in which they could have given and received much.

But on the other hand, freedom is not an easy job. It requires bravery. And struggles. And dead bodies crumpled under the conqueror's flag.

April Fools' Day?

The first thing I thought on the day I heard it was that it was an April Fools' Day lie. But the diary showed April 23, 2003. We didn't have April Fools' Day. Was it true, then?

Yes, it was true. For the first time since 1974, the barricades had opened, giving us the right to access the occupied areas. And people started getting in their cars to go and see with their own eyes what they had been dreaming of for almost thirty years. Endless queues. Many slept in their cars to manage to get in line to go across. They went, they saw, and they came back. Different people. Changed. With yet another open wound inside them.

They spoke and cried. Cried and said, "I saw my closet. My wooden closet. It was still in our house. They completely changed our house. They only left my closet. In the same place it always was. I asked if I could open its door. I wanted to make sure. They let me. I looked at the date I had engraved when I bought it. 3/6/1964. I only enjoyed it for ten years."

"They cut down the acacia tree we had in the yard. I didn't realize it at first. But after two or three minutes, I said to myself: Something is missing. Something is missing from our yard. Our acacia tree was missing. They paved the yard. Our acacia tree was gone, forever."

"They invited us for coffee. Good people, I must say. They take care of our house. They love it. Good people, yes, but the house is not theirs. What else do you want me to say?"

"They didn't let us in. We knocked, but they didn't open the door. They were inside. I saw them. But they didn't open the door. We stood outside and looked at it until it darkened, and our feet hurt."

"I got sick. I lost ten years of my life with what I saw. Our village was deserted. They turned our church into a stable. They broke the crosses in the cemetery. I shouldn't have gone. I can't sleep at night with all these things I saw. I got sick."

And me? I didn't go. I want very much to see every piece of land about which I've been hearing stories for so many years. So many

years of hearing stories about these places have now taken on mythical dimensions in my mind. But I didn't go.

I don't want to go like this. With inspections, as if I were visiting a foreign land. I want to go when I can move with the same ease that I move in Larnaca, Limassol, Nicosia, and Paphos. I didn't go, even though I know that I might never be able to go...

The melody of bones

I met several Helens in my life. This specific one loved poetry. If she could write, she would recite him a similar poem every day.

If someone gave me a box,

I would like to find inside

a flute.

I would stretch out my hands

and gently pick it up

to avoid scratching it.

I would place it against my lips

and blow.

The breath coming

from my heart

would enter into it

and play to the tempo

of love.

If someone gave me a box,

I would like to find inside

your bones.

I would stretch out my hands

and gently pick them up

to avoid scratching them.

I would place them against my lips

and blow.

The breath coming

from my heart

*would enter into them
and play to the tempo
of love.*

At night, after the burial, sleep eluded her. She got up, turned on the light, and wrote him a letter.

My beloved brother,

I remember you with your flute. Summer middays, each in our room; me with a book, you with the flute. I read, and you played. Words and notes intertwined; my love for stories, your love for melodies. Literature and music.

Then the Turkish invasion. "Have you seen Dimitris? When did you last see him? Have you brought any news about Dimitris?"

No news. No news about Dimitris, for years. We were all waiting for you. Years and years. I had accepted early on that the Turks had killed you, but our parents wanted to see to believe.

When the exhumations of the remains began, one summer afternoon, I was lying in my bedroom - different house, different town, I live alone now. I was reading a book, dozed off, and dreamt of you, my brother.

In my room, the present one. You sat on the green velvet armchair and played the flute, holding one of your bones. I cried in my sleep. I woke up. The armchair was empty, and my cheeks were wet.

A few months later, your bones were identified. It was official. They had our family's DNA on them. Today, at your funeral, I heard a flute accompanying the hymns.

Our parents weren't here to see and believe. It didn't bother me. I know that you are somewhere, all three of you together; you are playing music, and they are smiling.

Helen

She left the letter on her bedside table and turned off the light. She wished that when she closed her eyes, he would come and sit on the armchair again.

Ahead

We did not escape, neither I nor my classmates, from the battle of the sexes.

'Boys are strong, girls are wrong,' they teased us.

'Girls are genius, boys are oblivious,' we teased them.

The eternal rivalry of boys and girls.

'I think we were classmates in elementary school,' the father of one of my students told me.

He brought me the photo of the first grade to see and remember. A light brown-haired boy standing at the back row with the other boys of the class. I, seated at the front, with the rest of the girls. My expression irritated, hands crossed over my chest. Who had anger me that day?

'I recognized you as soon as I saw you,' he said. 'You haven't changed much since then.'

I smiled broadly, just in case I still looked angry, like in the photo of the first grade. I smiled, because I was happy to have a student who was the daughter of an old classmate.

On the basketball court, girls played with boys, various ball games. Mocking each other. 'Girls are genius, boys are oblivious!' 'Boys are strong, girls are wrong!'

But when another elementary school came to play against our football team, then we, the girls, stopped calling the boys oblivious, and the boys stopped calling us wrong. We stopped being oblivious against wrong and became strong genius united. United against our mutual enemy, which was now the rival elementary school.

'Go, Agioi Anargyroi!'

I wrote the exercise instructions on the board and turned to my students to make sure they understood how to work. I walked by their

desks to see what they were writing. I stood next to the daughter of my old classmate. Many years ago, we played the gods of Olympus with her father, and now I was teaching her about them.

We didn't do badly, I thought. We, the children and grandchildren of refugees who grew up in the settlements. Without economic comfort. With parents who did not have the opportunity to be educated as a few years later we would have. With grandparents almost illiterate. In uprooted families.

Perhaps the difficulties we faced gave us strength. Courage. Showed us the way. And that way had only one direction. Ahead. Perhaps the new generations - I sincerely hope that the new generations - will walk only ahead, no matter what their past was like.

Eleven

"Once upon a time, eleven children were born in different parts of the world. Some in Somalia, some in Syria, some in Congo. Some in other homelands: Pakistan, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria."

'What beautiful names these places have.'

'Yes, they have beautiful names. But unfortunately, in these places, there is great poverty and wars often occur. In the homelands of these children, their lives were in danger. They had to leave.'

'And did they leave?'

'Yes, they did. They got on boats, traveled on rotten ships, squeezed with people who were leaving to save themselves. Some were seasick and cried. Others, the older ones, imagined they were on pirate ships, that a black flag with a white skull was raised on the ship's mast, that the deck was full of treasures. The smallest ones were lulled in embraces; the rocking of the waters - similar to the rocking of their cradle a short time ago - lulled them sweetly and sent them to colorful worlds of dreams. Just as their cradle sent them to colorful worlds of dreams. Until the day their home was bombed, their cradle shattered into pieces, and the colorful dreams turned into dark nightmares.'

'And then? What happened to these eleven children?'

'They reached the shores of Cyprus unaccompanied. Unaccompanied means they did not have an adult with them to take care of them, a parent or a guardian.'

'There are children who don't have anyone with them?'

'Unfortunately, the many wars in the world killed countless parents and left countless children without company. Others lost their parents on the journey to the new land.'

'And where did these eleven children go? Who took care of them?'

'As I told you, they reached the shores of Cyprus. They found shelter at the Temporary Accommodation Center "Pournara" in Kokkinotrimithia. This is a place where refugees who come from homelands where they could no longer stay, homelands where, if they returned, they might be killed, find temporary shelter. They are people

seeking protection. *Seeking asylum. In this place, these eleven children lived. There they ate, played, and slept.'*

'Did they blow out the candles on their birthday cake there, too?'

'Their birthday cake? Oh, I'm not sure if they had a birthday cake. I don't think they had a birthday cake.'

'They didn't have a birthday cake? How can they not have a birthday cake? Did they not even have candles? Balloons? Gifts?'

'I don't know. I don't think so. Although they should have. All the children in the world, no matter what homeland they were born in, no matter what country they sought refuge in, should have birthday cakes and candles and balloons and gifts.'

'I feel very sad now. What happened next?'

'Then they disappeared. They vanished. Eleven children from Pournara disappeared within three years, and no one knows where they went, and no one can find them.'

'I know where they went.'

'You know? How can you know where they went?'

'They went to find another homeland that would make them a delicious cake for their birthday every year, light as many colorful candles as the years they turn, inflate colorful balloons for them, and give them the most wonderful gifts.'"

What does Ivan dream of?

What does Ivan dream of? What images form behind his closed eyes? Is it perhaps a dream that lasts as long as the months he sleeps?

Ivan, a young athlete, used to run on his school's field and come first. The teacher would place a gold medal on his chest. Now, his father has his hands under his armpits, supporting him, while his bent-down mother moves his legs forward, one after the other.

Pasta with minced meat was his favorite food—he often asked for a second serving. Now, he is fed through a tube inserted into his nose.

He used to fill the bathtub with warm water and play with his rubber ducks until his parents shouted, "Enough, Ivan, grab the towel and dry yourself." Now, while asleep, they put him under the running water of the shower and soap him. As they dry his hair with a hairdryer, his head is tilted back.

He used to play hide and seek, puzzles, and board games with his siblings as soon as they finished their homework. Now, his siblings draw cards with him sliding down rainbows, and underneath, they write in big letters, "Get well soon."

Ivan and other refugee children seeking asylum in Sweden gradually fall into a constant, inexplicable sleep. First, they stop talking, then eat less and less until they give up on everything. Medical examinations reveal no organic damage that could have caused this condition.

What does Ivan dream of during all these months with his eyes closed? What does he see? Black? Darkness? No, certainly not. He saw that while keeping his eyes open. He saw his parents worrying that the Swedish government might deport them. Ivan couldn't bear to look at the black anymore. That's why he closed his eyes. For a little while—or maybe longer. Until he is calmed down and rested.

Now he can dream of the light of the Swedish summer sky. The alphabet that Mrs. Annika taught him in his Swedish school. Now he dreams of his mother crying with joy and hugging him, saying, "They won't deport us! We can stay here! We don't have to go back!"

How strange. Children who exhibit resignation syndrome wake up from their coma a few months after asylum is granted to their parents. But what am I saying? Strange? Not at all strange. How normal! Children wake up when they finally feel safe.

Olena's journey

Olena felt trapped in her new school. In her new home. In her new place. New? Can a school you are forced to go to be considered new? A home where you are forced to stay? A place where you are forced to live? Olena couldn't see colors anywhere in all these new places. Her eyes carried the gray of bombed Ukraine.

"Everything is gray here. I hate it. I want to go back home."

Her mom and dad, even though they also had only gray in their souls, bit their lips until they bled and painted their words red. Her teachers in Cyprus, even though their hearts had turned gray from the images of war they saw on TV, images that had awakened the trauma of their own displacement, dug their nails into their palms and painted red the welcome they gave her at the school she went to register.

The gray of bombed Ukraine had formed a thick impenetrable frame around her slender silhouette, around her chestnut-blond hair. Gray that painted her lips, blinded her gaze, soaked her skin's pores. The once colorful Olena transformed into a grayish Olena.

Just before the Easter holidays of 2022, I entered the E1 class of the school where I worked to talk to the kids about literature. The previous year, I was their teacher. Smiles all around, they were happy to see me, and I was happy to see them too.

Everyone except the girl in the back-left desk. She didn't know me, and I didn't know her. I didn't know what to say to her and in what language to say it. Until I projected on the interactive whiteboard the book I had come to discuss with the kids. 'The Journey' by Aaron Becker. The pages started unfolding one after the other. A story told only with pictures. A book without words.

The kids gave voice to the story, each in their own way. The wordless story gained a voice in our class through the mouths of twenty different children. It came alive in the eyes of the girl in the back-left desk as well.

A red pencil found its way into her imagination. The magical red pencil of the protagonist. With it, she drew a magical wooden door on the classroom wall. She bent down and grabbed its handle. The door

creaked, and Olena slid through its opening. She closed her eyes until she got used to the strong light coming from the other side. She stood up from the ground and put her hand to shield her eyes from the sun. But where was she? Where had she come out? Certainly not in a magical forest like the protagonist of the book we were discussing.

When her eyes adjusted to the sun, she let out a small cry. She was in her neighborhood. Not as it appeared the day she left. She was in her neighborhood park as she had always known it. With the lush green grass and tall trees.

She heard laughter. She turned. Her classmates! Her friends! Riding their bikes and scooters, holding balls and wreaths.

"Olena! Come play!" they shouted.

Olena smiled. Her lips took on the color of summer cherries. She ran towards them. They played ball and twirled wreaths countless times around their waists. Exhausted, Olena lay down on the green grass and closed her eyes to the azure sky.

Suddenly, a crack was heard. The gray outline of the girl cracked in many places all around. Her friends took a piece each and tossed it as far as their hands could reach.

They danced and sang. "I have an idea," said Olena. She shared it with them, and everyone got excited. They lay down on the grass, each assuming a different position. They managed to create a giant peace sign only with their bodies.

A lady selling balloons was so moved by the sight that she let the balloons fly freely. The blue sky filled with red, yellow, green, orange, pink balloons. The green grass filled with children craving to live their lives with balls, wreaths, parks, friends, and peace.

Did Olena imagine these things that day while I was in her class? I can only make assumptions. But I hope that at least something from what passed through my mind also passed through hers. I hope that Olena, every time she feels trapped in a gray and sad frame, paints a magical door with her imagination and escapes.

My truth

"Grandma Maria, I often bring you to my mind, especially since the day you passed away. And sometimes I see you in my dreams. Do you know what I am thinking?"

"What, my child?"

"The fairy tales you used to tell me. They were the sweetest tales I've ever heard. I feel so sad that you were born in a difficult era and couldn't go to school. If you had been educated, you could have written great books."

"It doesn't matter, my child. You are writing books for both of us."

"Grandma Andriana, I often bring you to my mind, especially since the day you passed away. And sometimes I see you in my dreams. Do you know what I am thinking?"

"What, my child?"

"How many difficulties you went through to raise your seven children. You also lost your husband after the war. But you didn't give up. You didn't give up until the day you passed away in the field. I am not as strong as you. I'm weak."

"You are stronger than you think, my child."

"I'm not sure, grandmothers, why I'm writing this book. I think I want to say that the experiences of one generation influence the next. That what you and our parents lived through affected us, as well. And what affected us will affect our children and grandchildren. And also, being a refugee is an experience engraved in all people in the same way, no matter which country they are born in."

"You speak the way you feel and the way you live, my child?"

"I do."

"You spoke your truth, my child, and that's what matters. You needed to speak your truth, and you did."

On the way home

It's the same dream with variations. I find myself in my grandmother's house in the up settlement. It's evening, and I am a child. I set out to go to my home in the low settlement.

I try to decide which way to go to reach my destination faster; to go right, left, or straight ahead? I don't always follow the same route. Sometimes I go through the school road. Other times through the church road. And sometimes I walk straight through the heart of the two settlements.

On the way home, my steps stick to the thick darkness of the night. But I continue. I fear that I won't manage to orient myself, that, as I walk, this road lengthens, that obstacles become more and more. But I continue.

I don't know how long the dream really lasts, but I feel it lasting for hours. Hours of agony walking a distance that in reality takes ten minutes, but in my sleep, it feels like an eternity. I feel like a little mouse constantly walking on a wheel, never reaching a place.

My anxiety about the darkness, my anguish about the distance, my difficulty in finding the points of the horizon, all fade away only with the thought of the final destination.

Again and again in my sleep, I walk the road home. And there is nothing I crave more in my dream, nothing I crave more even when I am awake, than to always be led by my steps to what I call 'home.'

Another day

It's another day. A different day. The sky is cloudless, the sea calm as oil, the earth planted with blooming flowers. No one—absolutely no one—looks at the sky with a fearful gaze, afraid it might drop bombs. At most, a refreshing drizzle might fall to water the earth. Then, proudly, the colorful rainbow will decorate the sky like a garland.

No one—absolutely no one—trembles at the thought that enemy ships might emerge from the turquoise waters of their homeland. The turquoise waters of your homeland are for swimming, for standing with friends on the sandy beach and throwing pebbles, competing to see which pebble can go the farthest.

No one—absolutely no one—carries a hastily packed suitcase through the city's ruins, running to find shelter somewhere else. Suitcases are for packing calmly, and cities and cultures are to be explored on vacations with your loved ones.

The soil doesn't cover the dead. The soil gives flowers and fruitful trees. The flowers fill the vases, and the fruits overflow in the fruit bowls.

Schools are painted in lively colors, classrooms filled with books and computers, yards adorned with wreaths and balls. All children—without exception—are educated as they have the right to be, playing as they have the right to play. No child—absolutely none—lives in the terror of war, the desperation of displacement, the loneliness of orphanhood.

Sometimes, in my waking moments, I walk through Agioi Anargyroi. I start from the low settlement neighborhood, which is my paternal home, and reach the up settlement, which was my grandparents' home. I reach my beloved elementary school. The small grove where we played mythology is now a beautiful botanical garden. New classrooms have been built, walls are painted, life progresses. It is the Holy Week of 2022. For a while now, I've been writing this book. I walk through the settlement and wonder what I want to tell the children who will read it. What made me remember all this and write it down?

Reality is suffocating. It's a suffocating reality out there. It gives me asphyxiation. If only there were another reality. If only there were a different reality...

Andri is nine years old. She runs carefree in the golden fields of Mesaoria with her classmates. Osman excitedly boards a boat in Syria to go fishing with his grandfather in open waters. Olena boards a plane with her family heading to Cyprus. They will spend their summer vacation swimming in the island's clear waters, sunbathing.

The girl walking through the neighborhood is no longer a girl. She is a woman. The girl who was going to school with a blue notebook full of fairy tales in her backpack is now an author. She has written more than ten books, became a teacher, and taught hundreds of children. She has visited many countries in Europe, met people in the literary and artistic fields.

Yet inside her, is the girl of the settlement, the child and grandchild of refugees. It's a part of her identity, written indelibly on her soul. Every war on the planet, every refugee crisis, awakens the drama of her own homeland. Every time an Osman gets on a boat, every time an Olena boards a plane, seeking refuge on another land, inevitably in her mind, tents from 1974 awaken, the refugee settlements on her island awaken.

Divided homelands. Refugees. Foreign countries. And then what?

I think we, humans, have within us the instinct for survival; a strong, almost unbeatable instinct. We are born to live, to run freely in golden fields, to board boats and go fishing in open waters, to travel for leisure.

If only wars would cease. If only weapons and bullets disappeared. If only this horrible word were erased from dictionaries.

But—however it may be, even with wars, bullets, and painful words—we, humans, we refugees will continue. We will dream and pursue those dreams until they become our daily reality. We will start from scratch and reach ultimate. We will travel, meet people from all over the world, create. We will extend our hands and lift up those fellow humans whom unjust wars and irrational hatred have cast down.

We, humans—we refugees—we will chase after color, light, and love. We will fight for peace and freedom. We, humans, will always choose LIFE.

THE END