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University of Southampton

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

English

**'What to Do with All this History?' A novel (*Victorious Dust*) and critical
commentary**

by

Konstantinos Kaltsas

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

July 2020

University of Southampton

Abstract

Faculty of Faculty of Arts and Humanities

English

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This thesis comprises a novel and critical commentary that explore history, narration and crisis in contemporary historical fiction. The novel, *Victorious Dust*, traces the lives of three generations of a Greek family from the end of the German occupation of Greece in 1944 until the eve of the 2015 bailout referendum. In doing so, it investigates and critiques various parallels drawn between the Greek Civil War (1943-1949) and the 2009 financial crisis. The novel meditates upon this particular historical analogy to ask wider questions about the role of the traumatic past in our (mis)understandings of the present, and whether, contrary to our belief in the ‘healing power’ of narration, it is the very narrative we make of history that perpetuates these traumas in the first place.

The critical commentary briefly explores the genesis of the novel in relation to the financial crisis and the historical context of the civil war. It situates the novel within a personal approach to creative writing that responds to established theoretical and close-reading practices in higher education, and argues for a fluid, non-rigorous engagement with both, as tools to assist, rather than direct, creativity. This position is demonstrated in the case study of the novel’s relationship to history and selected literary-theoretical arguments on historical representation.

Using the novel’s development to explore formal questions prompted by the meeting of history and fiction, the commentary situates the work in a wider context of haunting and the supernatural in contemporary anglophone fiction. The commentary offers a series of conclusions on core aspects of craft and method (research in historical fiction, plotting, and character development), notes the persistent effects of the traumatic/‘heroic’ past and historical analogy on the present, and offers the novel as a distinct contribution to contemporary historical fiction.

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Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: Konstantinos Kaltsas

Title of thesis: 'What to Do with All this History?' A novel (*Victorious Dust*) and critical commentary

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission:

Signature: Date: 16/07/2020

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Victorious Dust borrows and reworks phrases and/or passages from a number of writers and I would here acknowledge a number of them: Aris Alexandrou, Petros Abatzoglou, Nikos Bakolas, James Baldwin, Wilfred Byford-Jones, Joseph Conrad, Kathryn Davis, J. G. Farrell, Vassilis Gourogiannis, Henry James, M. John Harrison, Christopher Isherwood, Pavlos Matesis, Dimitris Petsetidis, Thomas Pynchon, Rupert Thomson, Yorgos Seferis, David Foster Wallace, Sarah Waters, Virginia Woolf, Alki Zei.

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1. Critical Commentary

During any prolonged activity one tends to forget original intentions.

J. L. Carr¹

Pearl Harbor is a two-hour movie squeezed into three hours, about how, on Dec. 7, 1941, the Japanese staged a surprise attack on an American love triangle.

Roger Ebert²

1.1 Introduction

Shall I begin with the obligatory attempt at a pithy pronouncement? Some trite L.P. Hartley allusion?³

Perhaps it is better to begin by saying: a few years ago I began work on a novel that, much to my surprise, was in part a historical one, a genre I had spent a long time proclaiming I was not interested in as a writer. Why write it then? Because I felt compelled to do so. Because, as per Flannery O'Connor's reputed declaration ('I write because I don't know what I think until I read what I say'),⁴ I had asked myself a series of questions for which I urgently needed answers.

The series of questions I asked myself at the time being somewhat resistant to articulation, I will here limit myself to listing three moments of instigation while

¹ 'Foreword', *A Month in the Country* [1980] (London: Penguin, 2000), p. xv.

² *Pearl Harbour*, review, 25 May 2001 <<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/pearl-harbor-2001>>

³ 'The past is a foreign country; we do things differently there'?

⁴ Cited in Murray, Donald, *Shoptalk: Learning to Write with Writers* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1990) p. 8.

sidestepping related personal experiences, crucial to me but not in themselves particularly interesting:

a. Watching as a large part of public discourse on the Greek financial crisis (2009-) hardened into depictions of Germany as ‘Nazi oppressor and coloniser’ and Greece as ‘colonised and oppressed... and moral sinner’.⁵

b. Watching as political discourse within Greece turned to labels such as ‘traitor’, ‘Quisling’, ‘Nazi lapdog’, ‘filthy communist’, etc.

c. Listening as the above was defended through invocation of the cliché about the lack of knowledge of history condemning us to its repetition, which led me to ask, ‘What if it’s the other way around?’

1.2 Research Questions

With time, this initial series of (more tangled than nested) questions developed into the more defined research questions that motivate this thesis. Here they are:

a. National and personal history as a function of narrative. Are we anything more than the stories we tell ourselves *about* ourselves? What happens when these stories are overwhelmingly traumatic? What effect does this have on our relationship to the present, and our attempts to engage in historical analogy? Can it be that, as historiographer Antonis Liakos has argued, indifference towards (or even denial of) history in some cases represents, not the *lack* but a *type* of historical consciousness, intimately related with the management of the ‘traumas, disappointments and expectations that arise out of people’s encounters with history’?⁶

b. Could I write a novel that both acknowledged and critiqued the urge to compare the financial crisis to the Greek civil war (1943-1949)? A novel that – neither pretending to objectivity, nor embracing either partisanship or some kind of ‘all sides

⁵ Nissen-Adler, Rebecca, ‘Are We “Lazy Greeks” or “Nazi Germans”?’ , in *Hierarchies in World Politics*, ed. by Zarakol, Ayşe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) pp. 198-218, p.200.

⁶ Apokalipsi, *Outopia kai Istoría: Oi Metamorfoseis tis Istorikis Sineidisis* (Athens: Polis Editions, 2011), pp. 16, 18.

were equally bad' relativism – dealt with the war in its very particularity instead of eschewing specifics in favour of some generalized, 'universal' depiction of civil conflict?⁷

1.3 Two caveats before proceeding

a. I have at this point spent nearly four years writing *Victorious Dust* (henceforth *VicD*), and another three or four thinking about it before that. During this time my thoughts on it developed, backtracked, then developed in different directions, all with such great regularity that, other than the initial conception discussed above, it is difficult for me to do anything but talk about various stages of the process through the prism of what I *now* think I was doing *then*.⁸

b. During these four years it often seemed to be the case that everything I thought, read, and even did, went into writing *VicD*; obviously, this commentary cannot even begin to cover all that. What it can do is gesture towards some of the aspects of the work itself, as well as the writing process, that I found most interesting and/or challenging, while recognizing that these will not necessarily be the ones that would strike readers as such.

⁷ For reasons mainly socio-political, this approach has characterized a significant number of Greek novels about the period, such as Thanassis Valtinos' *I Kathodos ton Ennia* (Athens: Kedros, 1978), Andreas Fragias' *Loimos* (Athens: Kedros, 1972), Aris Alexandrou's *To Kivotio* (Athens: Kedros, 1975) etc. These otherwise great novels are so oblique and voided of specifics (though not exactly allegories either) that readers unfamiliar with their context can struggle to grasp even basic information such as who is fighting whom and why. *To Kivotio* especially owes its tremendous power to a Kafkaesque lack of context and dream-like logic that however come at the expense of turning the war into an almost literal nightmare and its setting into an 'anyplace/anytime': An approach in no way invalid, but one that I wasn't interested in emulating, and not only because the present novel is addressed in the first instance to an audience even more unfamiliar with its context than a Greek-speaking one.

⁸ The irony of the novel in question being a historical one does not escape me.

1.4 A brief note on the historical context of the Greek Civil War

EAM ('National Liberation Front') was the main movement of the Greek resistance during the Axis occupation of Greece (1941-44), comprised of various, broadly left-of-centre groups, though the main force behind it was the Greek Communist Party (KKE). The military wing of EAM (ELAS – the 'Greek People's Liberation Army') accounted for four-fifths of guerrilla fighters in the country and was therefore supported by Britain despite its frequent clashes with other resistance forces, both republican and royalist. Its relationship with the British-backed Greek government-in-exile was contentious, especially regarding the prospect of the return of King George II to the throne once the war was over. This matter was ostensibly settled during the May 1944 Lebanon conference, where it was agreed that the fate of the monarchy would be decided via plebiscite after liberation.

Post-liberation (October 1944 for most of the country), the tension between the two sides did not abate, and the newly-formed government of national unity collapsed in early December 1944 over the issue of demobilisation.⁹ A December 3rd protest organized by EAM ended in tragedy when the Greek Police opened fire on the crowd, leading to a series of clashes between ELAS and government forces – soon assisted by the British Army – known as 'Dekemvriana' ('The December Events'), which ended in mid-January with the defeat and disbandment of ELAS.

There followed the 'White Terror', a period of persecution of Greek communists which continued until 1946 and the eruption anew of civil war, fought this time between the Greek government army (supported first by Britain, then the USA) and the KKE's 'Democratic Army of Greece'. This clash ended in the final defeat of the Left in 1949. Communist guerrillas were for the next several decades considered traitors to the nation and either imprisoned and internally exiled or forced to exile themselves to various Eastern Bloc countries, while former collaborators were celebrated as heroes and

⁹ Briefly: The British-backed government demanded that ELAS demobilise before a new national army was formed but refused to assent to the Left's demand that the – royalist and anti-communist – remnants of the Greek army be demobilised concurrently. This fuelled the belief that the government and the British were about to return George to the throne using force.

awarded state pensions. The communists' role in the Greek Resistance was not recognized by the state until the early 1980s.

1.5 *Victorious Dust* – two synopses

This being a commentary on process as well as result, I will present a synopsis of the novel during the proposal stage, then one of the novel as submitted herein, in order to highlight and discuss two areas of major changes that came about as a response both to my own developing thinking about the work and my supervisors' comments and suggestions.

The novel I set out to write would trace the lives of three generations of a Greek family from the end of the occupation to the eve of the infamous 2015 Greek bailout referendum.

The first part would be narrated by Michalis Xenidis, whose father, Andreas, joined the resistance, then fought with the communist side during the civil war of 1946-49. Michalis would narrate this story based on his own memories as well as those of his elder sister, Katerina. The bulk of the narration would cover the period from liberation until Andreas' imprisonment in the late 1940s.

The second part, set in the summer of 1995, would follow Michalis's son, also Andreas,¹⁰ a university student on a visit to meet his girlfriend's family. Unbeknownst to both their families, the two would be making plans to immigrate to the UK but those would come into question, while Andreas would also have to deal with his father falling seriously ill. The narration would cover the previous fifty years only very obliquely, with Andreas seeming to have very little knowledge of the events covered in the first part.

The third part, set on the day before the 2015 referendum, would again follow Andreas, whose work-related visit to Greece has been extended due to a family emergency. Exactly what has transpired would only become apparent near the novel's

¹⁰ It is Greek tradition to name grandchildren (especially the first-born) after their grandparents – usually, but not always, the father's parents. So this is a plausible name that lends itself to be exploited in the novel in relation to the grandson's crisis of identity and the weight of his family's traumatic past.

end, where it would be revealed that the entire novel was a metafiction written by a guilt-ridden Andreas in an attempt to come to terms with his family's (and his country's) traumatic history.

The novel submitted herein mainly differs in two ways: there are now multiple third-person focalizers within the first-person narration of part one; and the novel is no longer an overt metafiction, though it may still be a covert one.

The first part is still (ostensibly) narrated by Michalis but his narration includes multiple third-person focalizers, not just Katerina but also Wilfred Byford-Jones, a British army officer (a historical figure whose memoirs I made extensive use of); Ourania Petrou, a royalist Athenian who during the occupation billeted an SS officer in her home; her solicitor, Mr Voreas, a collaborator who has made a fortune taking over Jewish properties in Salonica; and twelve-year-old Stelios Abatzoglou, who is (or believes he is) haunted by the ghost of his sister, Maria, killed during a British bombing raid on Piraeus. The action is limited (with the exception of a number of proleptic sections) to the two months between liberation and the start of the Dekemvriana, when almost all the characters converge on Syntagma Square on the morning of December 3rd.

The second part remains exactly as above.

The third part remains broadly the same, but there is no final metafictional revelation. Rather there are hints pointing to competing explanations: that either the first part is indeed narrated by Michalis (as a series of recordings meant for his granddaughter, Nora) or that the novel might be a metafiction, with Andreas ventriloquizing his father's voice to complete the latter's project (the novel ends with the suggestion of Michalis's passing, though this is not confirmed).¹¹ There is also now a second haunting (or 'haunting'), with several characters throughout the novel encountering an unknown, disfigured man, similarly but not always identically described in a manner that mostly points to Michalis but could also point to Andreas. (For the intention behind which see section 1.11.3.)

¹¹ Whether Andreas might be the 'author' of only part of or the *entire* novel is not settled. Hints point variously to either possibility.

1.6 A (non-) theory of creative writing

Before proceeding with specifics, I wish to briefly sketch my (quasi-)theoretical position during the writing of *VicD* via reference to two key texts I lack the space to discuss more fully.

Neil McCaw objects to the dominance of ‘formalist concerns’ in the teaching of creative writing within universities, especially as a ‘learning the rules’ kind of exercise.¹² He does not, however, advocate for a radical break with the practice, but rather suggests that ‘numerous *knowledges* (social, cultural, political)’ ought to be introduced to it.¹³

Mike Harris argues that ‘writer-hostile, reader-and-text literary theories’ are not suitable tools in the *practice* of creative writing (since ‘nearly all literary theory is consumption theory’) and calls instead for ‘more appropriate, process-based theories’ to take their place.¹⁴ He also objects to what he calls the ‘“pick and mix” method of theorizing’ that sees in creative writing an opportunity to ‘cherry-pick’ from a range of theories, resulting in a ‘yoking-together of philosophical incompatibles’. However, he too finally arrives at a relatively modest proposal that calls for ‘theory’ approached as a series of ‘systematic generalisations’ that may include ‘the usual “named” theories and most of what writers have to say about their own work.’

With this in mind, my position while working on *VicD* fell between McCaw and Harris. *Pace* McCaw, I overwhelmingly made use of close reading while working on the novel (both in my reading of other texts and in others’ readings of mine). But, *with* McCaw, this was close reading with ‘numerous knowledges’ introduced to the practice. In addition to novels *of* the periods covered and *about* those periods, in both English (the language I was writing in) and Greek (the cultural context I was writing about), I read: novels that had nothing to do with these periods or my subject matter; history and

¹² ‘Close Reading, Writing and Culture’, *New Writing* 8(1) (2011), 25-34, p. 26, 27.

¹³ *Ibid* pp. 28-31, 31.

¹⁴ ‘Escaping the tractor beam of literary theory: Notes towards appropriate theories of creative writing – and some arguments against the inappropriate ones’, *Text* 13(2). Retrieved 20 October 2015, from <<http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct09/harris.htm>>

Unpaginated. Further citations with not be provided.

historiography textbooks; oral history records; academic papers on trauma studies and the memory of conflict; literary-theoretical texts on the historical novel; texts on the gothic mode; newspapers and magazines; even cookbooks (food and its lack being a significant issue during WWII and the civil war). I also watched a number of Greek films and documentaries about the civil war. I looked to all these texts for both information (obviously a main area of concern in a historical novel) *and* the various modes/discourses through which this information was presented. Also *pace* McCaw, while I read with rule-learning in mind, I didn't set out to simply find texts to emulate; I also read with an eye for texts that didn't work.¹⁵ A major influence I discuss herein, Laurent Binet's *HHhH*,¹⁶ I found instructive precisely because it's impossible to overstate how much I objected to its every single page.

More generally: *with* Harris, I agree that the individual writer is not 'completely autonomous'; that '[s]ocial, political, textual and unconscious psychological forces play a well-attested role in the writing process' and should be taken into account. But I don't think it's my place to dwell overmuch on these (the effect being in general paralytic), nor do I always trust my conclusions about them: in attempting to analyse your own unconscious impulses it might be difficult, if not impossible, to tell the difference between deeper understanding and *post hoc* justification.¹⁷

¹⁵ Not in some impossible 'objective' sense, but in the more cogent one of, as David Foster Wallace puts it, not ringing my cherries. See Miller, Laura, 'The Salon Interview: David Foster Wallace', in Burn, Stephen (ed.), *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p. 62.

¹⁶ [2010] trans. by Sam Taylor (London: Vintage, 2013).

¹⁷ For example: During my upgrade viva I was asked to comment on my then-recent decision to introduce a haunting into the novel and its conceptual underpinnings. I could only reply that it felt instinctively 'right' as a countertendency to a metafictional reading, though I could not yet explain exactly why. Sure enough, upon reflection I did explain it to my satisfaction – leading to the more deliberate decision to introduce the second haunting into the narrative – but even so, the suspicion persists that the explanation arose because one was needed, not because this was the actual genitive impulse behind my decision. So, while I think it is vitally important that you question your assumptions, tendencies, received ideas, etc. – the aim should be that your novel is

But, *pace* Harris, I take this non-autonomy as licence for a less rigorous, more liberated interaction with theory in the practice of writing. My point being that once he concedes the role of these forces in the writing process, Harris is halfway to conceding that, despite the difficulties he argues it creates, there is at least a degree of truth in the poststructuralist rejection of ‘the idea that writers control the meaning and significance of their writing’; and that the tangle of forces at work will inevitably give rise to the kinds of blind spots and contradictions literary critics so enjoy teasing out of literary texts.¹⁸

And this, finally, is where I found engagement with theory to be most useful. Firstly, as a kind of benchmark of ‘common’ reading practices, drawing my attention away from aspects of craft (mostly of interest to other writers) to issues related to the work’s reception by *readers*, and allowing me to attempt to theorize a ‘reader position’ and its perspective *while* writing. Secondly, as a reminder that I cannot finally absolutely control the text’s meaning which (eventually) liberated me from the (exhausting) compulsion to attempt to do so. So my reading of theory was done more creatively/practically than critically, allowing me to engage with a variety of texts to inspire ideas and approaches for the novel without exhaustively pursuing the theoretical conversations those texts have given rise to.¹⁹

1.7 A case study: History and the novel, theory and practice

From the very beginning, the most important influence on the novel’s preoccupation with history was arguably Linda Hutcheon’s work on historiographic

better than you are; smarter, more aware, more empathetic, less dogmatic – I also remain wary of anyone who would claim complete self-transparency in this regard.

¹⁸ Circumventing ‘obvious or self-evident meanings in order to draw out less visible and less flattering truths.’ Felski, Rita, ‘Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion’, *M/C Journal*, 15(1). <<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjjournal/article/view/431>>

¹⁹ I note here the obvious corollary: While I am aware that approaches influential to my thinking about *VicD* (for example, Fredric Jameson on postmodernism and Linda Hutcheon on historiographic metafiction – approaches in themselves broadly antithetical) have been subjects to extensive critique, I will not be touching on the latter in this commentary, whose purpose is not to mount a defence of these theories but to illustrate their role in my writing practice.

metafiction and the (Hayden-White-derived) distinction between historical facts and events:

[B]oth history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past ('exertions of the shaping, ordering imagination').²⁰ In other words, the meaning and shape are not in the events, but *in the systems* which make those past 'events' into present historical 'facts.' This is not a 'dishonest refuge from truth' but an acknowledgement of the meaning-making function of human constructs.²¹

Besides the blatant way in which the very form of the entire novel engages with this preoccupation, there are also numerous smaller moments that gesture towards it. For example:

Stelios, contemplating his father Philippos' rambling attempts to make sense of the political situation in 1944, assessing and reassessing them over several decades, unable to ever *conclude* (p. 167).

Or (grandson) Andreas' realization upon meeting his ex-girlfriend that '[h]e was hearing from an ex-girlfriend about the guy she'd been sleeping with behind his back and later dumped him for, while she was talking to an old acquaintance about her ex-husband. She couldn't have forgotten about the connection, but of course in her mind that had been the prelude, not the main movement. This was as it should be, he concluded: same events, different facts. Different stories.'²² (See p. 311.)

Or the way in which the novel's final part opens with a section entitled 'Andreas Xenidis: Four attempts at a history of the years 1995-2015' (p. 283) – an allusion to White's suggestion that

the annals and chronicle forms of historical representation [are] not the 'imperfect' histories they are conventionally conceived to be but rather...

²⁰ Quoting Gerald Graff.

²¹ *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (Abington: Routledge, 1988), p. 89.

²² Granted, not a very subtle treatment of theme here.

particular products of possible conceptions of historical reality... that are alternatives to... the fully realized historical discourse that the modern history form is supposed to embody.²³

There are two points to make here:

One, that despite the critique historians such as Richard Evans have levelled at White,²⁴ it seems to me what is mostly being attacked is the most radical version of the linguistic turn in history studies, which Amy J. Elias summarizes as 'attempt[ing] a subversion of the ethos of historical accounting', rather than what Elias characterizes as White's 'much more nuanced' (if still controversial) formulation 'that history was a story that was based on past events but was shaped according to the available tropes of narrative, as any narrative accounting, by definition, had to be.'²⁵

Two, that despite my general agreement with Hutcheon, in some ways I lean (a little hesitantly) more towards Elias's development of Hutcheon's ideas into the 'metahistorical romance' as 'fiction... agonized... as much as energized by' the postmodern rejection of Truth for truths in the plural.²⁶ Elias's argument is that there is a fundamentally 'different ethical and social valence' in the way in which the techniques of postmodernism are used by, for example, postcolonial novelists such as Salman Rushdie or Leslie Marmon Silko compared to a novelist such as Robert Coover, though she does

²³ 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality', *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980), pp. 5-27, p.10. Relatedly, the novels Stelios will grow up to write are described by the narrator of part one as refusing to 'present worlds that hang together, that are unities rather than assemblages of atomized facts.' (See p. 101.)

²⁴ See *In Defence of History*, 2nd edn [London: Granta, 2000], p. 68, 78, 100-1, 126.

²⁵ 'Historiographic Metafiction', in McHale, Brian & Platt, Len (eds) *The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 293-307, pp. 298-99. It remains part of the criticism directed at White that his ideas have been far more influential with literary critics than practicing historians. See Berlatsky, Eric, *The Real, the True, and the Told: Postmodern Historical Narrative and the Ethics of Representation* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011) p. 21.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 304.

conclude that both historiographic metafiction and the metahistorical romance ‘potentially paved the way for a twenty-first-century novel of recovery or “sincerity”, a “new historical realism” that is not ironic and also not antihumanistic...’²⁷

The reason for the hesitation being that I am not entirely convinced by any argument that sees historiographic metafiction – a genre that includes novels such as E. L. Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel*, Gabriel Garcia Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*,²⁸ and Susan Daitch’s *L.C.*²⁹ – as uncomplicatedly ‘energized’ by some ‘postmodern rejection of Truth’. When I come across comments such as Madhu Dubey’s³⁰ part of me applauds, but part of me wishes to ask exactly which is that ‘dominant’ strand of postmodernism that lacks a ‘moral foundation’? Because it seems to me it’s always someone *else’s* postmodernism that critics are objecting to.

Nevertheless, there was one major change which took place between planned novel and final draft against this very line of thought, and which stemmed from exactly such ethical considerations: the set piece involving the shooting in Syntagma Square, and the points of view from which the narrator describes it. (See the ‘Sunday, 3 December 1944 [2015]’ section, p. 173-204).

²⁷ Ibid. p. 305. I *can* say that something along these lines was my intention for *VicD*, though whether I achieved this is not for me to decide.

²⁸ [1971] London: Penguin 2006 and [1967] trans. by Gregory Rabassa (New Delhi: Penguin, 1996) respectively.

²⁹ London: Virago, 1986. An overtly political, feminist take on the genre that ‘makes us cognizant of the irreducible metaphoric dimension in all historical narratives and reminds us that they are a *fabling forth of actualities*.’ (emphasis added) (See Price, David W. ‘Experiencing the Past: Susan Daitch’s *L.C.*’ in *History Made, History Imagined: Contemporary Literature, Poiesis, and the Past* [Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1999], pp. 79-120), p.88.)

³⁰ ‘So, although it shares a stylistic repertoire with other varieties of postmodernism, the postmodern black novel... puts it to different – more serious and critical – uses... [Various] critics... remark on the moral foundation and social commitment that distinguish black from dominant strands of postmodern fiction...’ See ‘Contemporary African American Fiction and the Politics of Postmodernism’, *NOVEL*, 35(2/3), pp. 151-168, p. 154.

1.7.1 Anatomy of a scene (an interjection)

The December 3rd shooting in Syntagma Square is an event whose exact circumstances and significance were still being contested as recently as 2015,³¹ and my intention for part one was that the focalizers the narrator had shifted between up until that point would be variously witnesses to, or involved in it. (The meaning of this should be obvious. The narrator hasn't selected these characters who then *happened* to be present; he's selected them *because* they were present. The reader should recognize this backward-moving causation and consider what it suggests about the narrativization of history involving *choices* about sources and points of view.³²) The characters would witness more or less the same events – literally from a variety of different vantage points (see figure 1) – and then interpret them as somewhat different facts. And that is when the problems started.

³¹ See, for example: Vulliamy, Ed & Smith, Helena, 'Athens 1944: Britain's dirty secret', *Guardian*, 30 November 2014, and Pritchard, Stephen, 'The readers' editor on ... Athens, 1944', *Guardian*, 28 March 2015.

³² This is what the narrator is commenting on in the first paragraph of the 'Saturday, 2 December 1944 (2015)' section: 'So here we are. Here we are, still, with these strands laid out not-quite-parallel, about to be pulled into the braid for which they were always meant. Followed backward to a kind of start – followed that far, and no farther, for no good reason other than time, which is reason enough for everything – then traced forward once again, to get us here, to their conclusion and beginning' (p. 165).

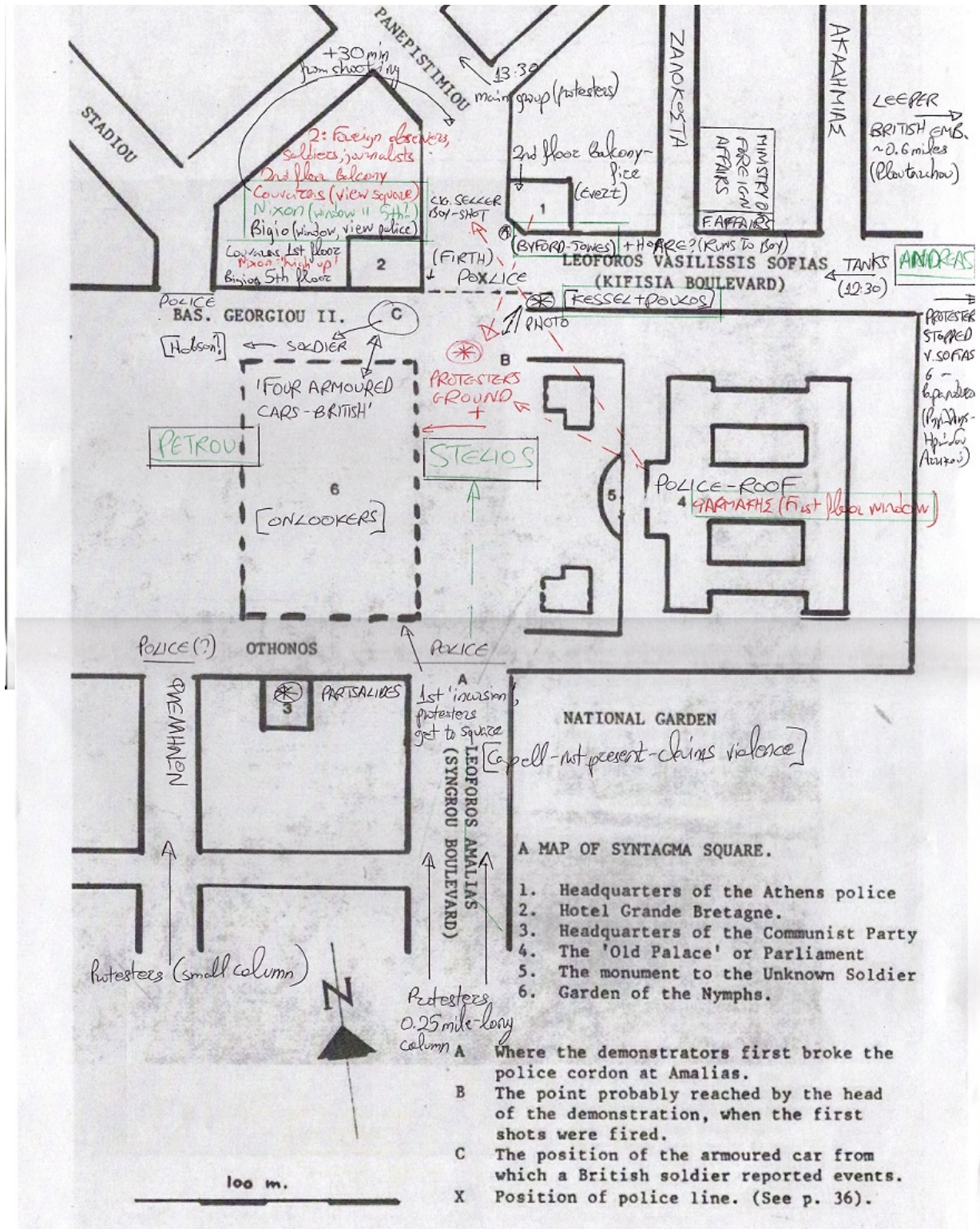


Figure 1. Map of Syntagma Square in December 1944.

Taken from Baerentzen, Lars, 'The Demonstration in Syntagma Square on Sunday the 3rd of December 1944', *Scandinavian Studies in Modern Greek* 2 (1978), 3-53, p. 7. Added are my own annotations, marking the position of my characters as well as eyewitnesses and participants whose testimonies I used in planning this scene.

Historians are in agreement that the Athens City Police opened fire on the unarmed crowd.³³ Several 'objective' eyewitnesses report as much in their respective memoirs.³⁴

Unsurprisingly, of course, the Greek Right and its supporters have for decades argued, variously, that the crowd was armed; that the women and children in it were used as shields for hidden communist snipers who fired first; that the police were only defending themselves; that the whole thing was a deliberate provocation, it was actually communist snipers who shot their own comrades etc.³⁵

Conveniently for my side of the argument, Kessel also provides a number of photographs of the moments leading up to (and including) the shooting in which there isn't the slightest indication anyone in the crowd is armed, let alone firing at anyone. Here are just three:

³³ Though whether this was a planned response to the demonstration or the result of police officers panicking when confronted by the crowd is still up for debate. In the novel I lean more, but not definitively, towards the former explanation, which seems to me more convincing based on the available evidence. An excellent (Greek-language) overview is provided in Charalambidis, Menelaos, *Dekembriana 1944: I Machi tis Athinas* (Athens: Alexandria Editions, 2014), pp. 65-79.

³⁴ Byford-Jones, Wilfred, *The Greek Trilogy: Resistance – Liberation – Revolution* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1945), pp. 136-142.

Kessel, Dmitri, *On Assignment: Dmitri Kessel, Life Photographer* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1985), pp.98-99.

³⁵ I could list sources here, but I won't dignify them with a mention.





Figure 2. Syntagma Square, 3rd December 1944.

Photographs by Dmitri Kessel.³⁶

I had planned to include some of (the less outlandish of) these right-wing claims in the novel as an example of diverging sets of events and facts, but found myself worrying that by writing these claims into the scene I ran the risk of the sequence being read as privileging all these points of view equally, and possibly creating doubts as to what actually happened. I feared that limiting myself to signposting the issue via some ‘later, X will claim he saw’ type of formulation was not a strong enough device to create enough separation in readers’ minds, while I also did not want to sacrifice the immediacy of the scene by ‘pausing’ to draw more attention to the issue. I also did not want to rely on either prior knowledge of events on the part of readers (since most of them wouldn’t have any) or their willingness to seek out more information after reading the novel (which, in my experience, most would not demonstrate). So in the end this was one

³⁶ *I Ellada tou 1944* (Athens: Ekdoseis Ammos, 1997).

'truths in the plural' bridge too far, and I opted to reserve moments of uncertainty for other parts of the novel.³⁷

1.8 A case study: History and the novel, theory and practice (cont.)

The question of readers' prior knowledge raises certain issues about the ethics of historical representation that occupied me throughout the writing of this novel, and not always in expected ways. To explain what these are, let me begin by quoting Vladimir Nabokov's response to a *Writer's Digest* offer of \$200 for 2,000 words: 'My answer to your question "Does the writer have a social responsibility" is: NO[.] You owe me ten cents, Sir.'³⁸

Let me now say: nice try, but no.

I am not about to argue for any kind of specific utilitarian function for art; but nor am I too ready to subscribe to some absolutely detached formalist *l'art pour l'art* school of thought. Having said that, despite what a million terrible poets would have us believe, art is not about 'self-expression';³⁹ it is, rather, fundamentally communicative in nature, and not taking into consideration the manner in which your communications might be received represents a major rhetorical failure.

³⁷ To those who would suggest this demonstrates the kind of problematic inconsistency associated with the 'yoking-together of philosophical incompatibles' that Harris decries, I must respond, much like Alessandro Manzoni responded to what he perceived as the two key criticisms of the historical novel form (fact not clearly distinguished from invention/fact *too* clearly distinguished from invention): 'How to answer these critics? To tell the truth, they are probably right.' (Quoted in de Groot, Jerome, *The Historical Novel* [Abington: Routledge, 2009], p.30. Subsequent references to de Groot are to this edition and will be given in the text.)

I should point out I can see a consumption-oriented approach to the novel that reads such a failure of nerve as intentional, ascribing it to the narrator rather than the author. (See section 1.8.1.) Speaking from inside the writing process, the failure of nerve was all mine.

³⁸ Quoted in Womack, Kenneth, *Postwar Academic Fiction: Satire, Ethics, Community* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 173.

³⁹ Let me be clear: hell, no.

I am not suggesting that having a specific audience in mind is a sacrosanct requirement for the writing of every last sentence. But surely every writer – as I earlier mentioned I did – theorizes, at least periodically, some reader-position from which to think about the work *while* composing it and before soliciting the opinion of actual readers, amongst whom are variously to be found – even while a novel is still being written and edited – beta readers, agents, editors, or, ahem, academic supervisors; i.e. readers expected to *respond* to the still-not-final text so that the author may improve it.⁴⁰

This kind of attempt to perform a detached (readerly) evaluation of the text *while* composing it has a very familiar name: that of self-consciousness. Of course, in the case of the historical novel especially, this is nothing new. As Elias argues, a certain self-awareness to do with the ‘elusiveness of the historical past’ and its recuperation has been crucial in the development of historical fiction since Walter Scott.⁴¹ De Groot also suggests that the self-consciousness of historical novelists is heightened by their awareness of the ‘way in which their practice...intersects with “reality” and with “history” ’ and that their ‘attempt to articulate this to [their readers]... highlights the artificiality of the novel, introduces a fundamental metafictional element to the form, and demonstrates that as a genre the historical novel provokes a certain anxiety and disquiet on the part of the writer’ (p. 9).

Indeed, and despite my firm belief as a reader that one *shouldn't* seek to learn history from novels, this proved to be a major source of frustration for me as a writer. I found myself unexpectedly paralyzed with self-doubt when it came to my responsibility towards the historical record and my resulting desire to, as much as possible, avoid anachronisms and distortions in the depiction of all three periods the novel is set in.⁴²

⁴⁰ A fact that underlines the enterprise’s inherently communicative status, in contrast to what Tim Groenland calls the ‘paradigm of singular authorship [that] has long been the norm in the commercial presentation of fiction.’ See *The Art of Editing: Raymond Carver & David Foster Wallace* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p.7.

⁴¹ *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 10-16.

⁴² Of course, Hutcheon’s historiographic metafiction revels in anachronism and wilful distortions etc. Here too was another concrete manifestation of my move towards something like Elias’ ‘new

This went beyond matters of *décor*, the issue being the still-relevant Lukács claim that the historical novel as we have come to understand it began with Scott, for the ‘so-called historical novels of the seventeenth century... are historical only as regards their purely external choice of theme and costume.’⁴³ It was in this context that my sense of responsibility almost overwhelmed me. Thankfully, and not a moment too soon, Laurent Binet and his *HHhH* came to my rescue.

1.8.1 **Self-consciousness, or self-consciousness? (an interjection)**

On one level, *HHhH* is the fictionalized retelling of the 1942 assassination in Prague of SS officer Reinhard Heydrich by Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš, soldiers of the Czechoslovak army-in-exile. This narrative however is constantly interrupted by various asides in which the ‘author’/narrator (more on this below) explains the genesis of the novel, elaborates on his thinking about the relationship between history and literature, and explores his struggle to provide the most faithful account of events possible.

To begin with, here is the novel’s first paragraph:

Gabčík—that’s his name—really did exist. Lying alone on a little iron bed, did he hear, from outside, beyond the shutters of a darkened apartment, the unmistakable creaking of the Prague tramways? I want to believe so. I know Prague well, so I can imagine the tram’s number (but perhaps it’s changed?), its route, and the place where Gabčík waits, thinking and listening. We are at the corner of Vyšehradská and Trojická. The number 18 tram (or the number 22) has stopped in front of the Botanical Gardens.

historical realism’. My reasoning being that if one of my goals was to meditate on the nature of a specific historical analogy, aiming for anything but strict fidelity to the events and circumstances being compared was akin to ‘cheating’. Keeping in mind Walter Benjamin’s ‘To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it “the way it really was.”... It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.’ (*Illuminations* [1955] [New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019], p. 198): No, absolute fidelity is not possible, but the intention matters, or at least it did so to me in this instance.

⁴³ *The Historical Novel* [1937] trans. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: The Merlin Press, 1989), p. 19.

We are, most important, in 1942. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Milan Kundera implies that he feels a bit ashamed at having to name his characters. And although this shame is hardly perceptible in his novels, which are full of Tomášes, Tominas, and Terezas, we can intuit the obvious meaning: what could be more vulgar than to arbitrarily give—from a childish desire for verisimilitude or, at best, mere convenience—an invented name to an invented character? In my opinion, Kundera should have gone further: what could be more vulgar than an invented character?⁴⁴

This opening is exemplary of the novel's method: the assertion of verifiable factual information (the character's name, the place and time), the hesitant wondering over unverifiable particulars (the character's auditory experience), the worry over the accuracy of factual information (the tram number) that opens into overt theorizing about verisimilitude and invention, and the 'author'/narrator's opinion regarding the vulgarity of the latter, in a tone described by James Lasdun as 'amusingly anguished authorial self-reflexiveness'.⁴⁵

In my reading, it was the narrator's opinions where the problems started. He later claims that, 'This is what I think: inventing a character in order to understand historical facts is like fabricating evidence' (192.1). And this is just wrong. Eventually, the entire novel seemed to become a thesis supporting this kind of monolithic, unsophisticated purism. Much like James Wood,⁴⁶ I read on, convinced the (actual) author was engaged in some kind of 'long con', and was in fact counting on me to spot the glaring contradictions and inconsistencies in the narrator's treatment of such ideas. At the very least, I told myself, one would think the (actual) author would be able to see that inventing a character in this sense is not 'fabricating evidence', but rather fabricating a point of view

⁴⁴ The pages of the UK edition of *HHhH* are unnumbered. The novel itself is divided into 257 numbered sections and thus references to the novel will be cited – in the main text – by section followed by paragraph number; in this instance 1.1.

⁴⁵ 'HHhH by Laurent Binet – review', *Guardian*, 16 May 2012.

⁴⁶ 'Broken Record: A historical novel at war with itself', *New Yorker*, 14 May 2012.

from which existing evidence can be marshalled. Not to mention that on a fairly basic level this argument could be reasonably extended to a rejection of *all* fiction, or at least its ability to ever refer to the world rather than just itself; for it is not clear – to me at least – that there exists some kind of fundamental difference between present fact and historical fact that makes one type amenable to fictional representation and the other not.⁴⁷ That is, actually, precisely what the narrator ends up doing when he admits to boring his girlfriend with his ‘theories about the puerile, ridiculous nature of [all] novelistic invention’ (107.2).

This is worth examining closely. The narrator’s girlfriend is objecting to a description of Himmler reacting to being brought important news: ‘The blood rises to his cheeks and he feels his brain swell inside his skull’ (106.1). The narrator admits this is what he elsewhere calls one of those ‘cheap literary effects’ he ‘can’t resist’ (218.1) and explains (at great length) why he still finds it preferable to other (terrible) alternatives. His fear, as he explains in the novel’s first section, is that he will reduce his story’s heroes to ‘vulgar characters’ and their actions to ‘literature’; his hope, that ‘however bright and blinding the veneer of fiction that covers this fabulous story, you will still be able to see through it to the historical reality that lies behind’ (1.2).

The goal is laudable, the concern understandable, but what Binet is engaged in here seems to me a category error. The objection to the description of Himmler is surely *not* that it is invention or artifice, but that it is *bad*, clichéd artifice. The other options Binet provides are worse, but he seems to think that no better ones exist only because *he* can’t come up with one. The problem, finally, is a shift from a ‘proper scepticism about the truthfulness of fiction’ to a ‘despair about [its] possibility’⁴⁸ – a state immediately recognizable to any writer who finds their successive drafts riddled with inaccuracies, clichés and false quantities and despairs of ever writing anything worthwhile,⁴⁹ but also not any kind of fatal criticism of the whole enterprise.

⁴⁷ ‘Fact’ here in the sense employed by Binet, not Hutcheon.

⁴⁸ Wood (2012).

⁴⁹ Don’t even ask.

All this was why Binet's objections and self-doubt finally began to seem to me like so much posturing.⁵⁰ There was the obvious observation that employment of clichés *while* attention is drawn to them seems more like defensiveness than genuine concern over language when the clichés are nevertheless so liberally persisted with; also the fact that this kind of intense self-consciousness to a large extent fades into the background in the second half of the novel, yet the kind of awful writing that should trigger it appears with the same regularity;⁵¹ there was, finally, the matter of the selective nature of Binet's doubts, and the ethical concerns it raises.

⁵⁰ To finally address the obvious issue of the literary-theoretical non-identity of Laurent Binet, the actual author of *HHH*, and 'Laurent Binet', its 'author' and narrator. Were one to take this as given, an argument could be constructed about the knowingness of the entire novel – for example the employment of one of *the* clichés of postmodern fiction: the notion that the reader is reading through the book *as* it is being written, observing the author think his way through it, which leads to a theoretically interesting situation of the artifice of the novel being acknowledged and debated through unacknowledged and undebated further artifice (the 'long con' I mentioned previously). But I reject this reading, because having read the novel carefully, twice, I see no evidence of it other than the hermeneutics of suspicion itself; i.e. my conviction it must be there, since the alternative is that the (actual) author is exactly as wrongheaded about fiction as he appears to be. There is also the evidence of the opinion expressed by none other than Binet himself who, when asked about his narrator, told the *Guardian*: 'He is absolutely identical [to me]. When I was a student I was always annoyed by the teachers telling me you have to make the distinction between the author and the narrator.' (Fox, Killian, 'Interview – Laurent Binet: "Most French writers are lazy" ', *Guardian*, 27 April 2012.) I realize Binet's statement would be inadmissible in certain literary-theoretical circles, but speaking from a practitioner's point of view, I am inclined to take him at his word.

⁵¹ 'These four men turned into stone statues, all eyes trained on the Sten, everyone's brains working at incredible speed, a speed no ordinary man can even comprehend' (218.5).

'As soon as the SS have two entry points... the parachutists realize it's all over. They're screwed and they know it... It's total chaos. It's the Alamo' (250.30). (Considering the analogy it appears to suggest, I find the pseudohistorical comparison especially egregious.)

The kind of thing that drives Binet to fits of self-consciousness is often ludicrously trivial.⁵² (While writing *VicD* I initially also did at times puzzle over black-and-white photographs from the '30s and '40s, wondering about colours etc., but surely this cannot be what's at stake when it comes to historical accuracy.) But this kind of obsessive questioning of various types of details is usually nowhere to be found in the far more serious case of the representation of various types of historical facts – most crucially, for me, the case of events leading to the German occupation of Czechoslovakia.

On March 15, 1939, the president of Czechoslovakia, Emil Hácha, was summoned to Berlin, where in a night-time meeting with Hitler he was informed his country would be invaded at dawn. He was given the choice to surrender (and maintain some degree of autonomy) or be overwhelmed anyway (Binet has Hitler threaten to 'utterly destroy' the country [79.8]). Hácha was leaned on for several hours, fainted when threatened with the immediate massive bombing of Prague (he might have had a heart attack), and had to be revived by a doctor before signing the country's surrender.

This (horrifying) story is the kind of event a historical novelist would be expected to make much use of, presenting readers with the kind of difficult, often unanswerable, human question that history habitually poses: 'What would *you* have done?'

What does Binet do with so compelling, so ethically fraught a moment? This: 'It is nearly four a.m. Hácha signs. "I have sacrificed the state in order to save the nation," he believes. The imbecile. It's as if Chamberlain's stupidity was contagious...' (80.4, ellipsis *sic*)

This isn't just bad writing, it's bad writing that abdicates the responsibility to history the author spends most of the novel advertising. History not as 'backdrop'⁵³ but as our 'ability to imagine [our]selves in a particular moral actor's historico-ideological matrix.'⁵⁴ The problem is *not* that Binet judges Hácha; it's how little interest he has in

⁵² Was Heydrich's Mercedes black or dark green? (6.1, 146.3, 155.1, 212.1)

⁵³ See: The epigraph from Roger Ebert's review of *Pearl Harbor*. Don't see: *Pearl Harbor*.

⁵⁴ Santin, Bryan M., 'Kurt Gerstein and the Tragic Parable of "Clean Hands"', in Coffman, Christopher K. and Lukes, Daniel (eds.), *William T. Vollmann: A Critical Companion* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2015), pp. 141-165, p.143.

imagining the man's experience before judging him (and also in his unthinking projection of hindsight onto the uncertainties of past, the way he relies on the clichéd reference to Chamberlain to contextualize Hácha's decision, as though their circumstances were identical). The problem is *not* that Binet obsesses over the details of material culture; it is that material culture doesn't serve as the physical aspect of a social reality and is instead fetishized as just so much *stuff*. The problem, finally, is that in *HHhH* the doubt and vacillation and uncertainty are mostly limited to inconsequential events, the certainty reserved for human facts.

1.9 A case study: History and the novel, theory and practice (cont.)

Reading Binet, then, led me to rethink my self-consciousness over the 'elusiveness of the historical past' as primarily a matter of Vollmann's Lukács-like injunction to 'imagine ourselves into the circumstances described'.⁵⁵ Of course, this didn't mean the issue of self-consciousness was immediately resolved. It did, however, manifest differently in the writing of the two 'historical' parts of the novel.⁵⁶ Most troublesome by far was the 1944 section, where my concern began with a focus on accuracy in relation to events and their perception at the time but quickly proved to have to do more with the depiction of material culture. The reason was obvious: when it came to the events of one of the most contentious periods of recent Greek history, I had at my disposal a great number of sources – textbooks, memoirs, testimonies – to consult. Meanwhile, I was encountering a problem that in retrospect I should have foreseen: Greek culture has for the longest time been predominantly an oral one. Especially for memoir/autobiography/fiction (so, most of the types of writing a novelist makes extensive use of in research on the particularity, the *how* of people's everyday lives) this has led all too often to writing that is *not* particularly descriptive. Objects and clothes might be mentioned or listed but not *described*, materials are not always specified, details are referred to in the vaguest of

⁵⁵ *Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means*, 7 vols (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2003), vol. 1, p. 52.

⁵⁶ While granting that 1995 doesn't satisfy the 'sixty years hence' school of thought on historical writing, I approached it as a socio-politico-cultural context distinct from both what precedes it *and* what follows it – i.e. a distinct historical period.

terms, locations are named but not 'seen'.⁵⁷ A few examples here from the English edition of Pavlos Matesis's (great) novel, *I Mitera tou Skilou*: '..my own little apartment, two rooms plus hallway' (the sole description of the apartment in the entire novel), 'the railway station...the railway carriage' (no description provided), 'Madame Rita...She was rich, and she was tall', '...I walk into The Crystal Fountain. The place is full of Germans eating...'⁵⁸

The kind of hyper-specific recreation of the material conditions of wartime life that one finds, for example, in Sarah Waters' *The Night Watch*⁵⁹ presents therefore with significant challenges in the Greek context, and this was an issue I came up against again and again while attempting to imagine the physical reality of my characters' lives.

At first, the 1995 section of the novel didn't seem to present as many difficulties. It mostly steered clear of politics and history, and the material culture of the time was both already familiar to me through my own experience and much easier to research. But that familiarity soon proved to be itself a concern. Most trivially, in the case of major anachronisms creeping into the first draft – for example, a reference to a Greek rock record released only that year being referred to as though it was an established classic, or

⁵⁷ This problem is exacerbated by the fact that material culture has only very recently begun being seen in Greece as a worthy field of study for periods other than antiquity. There are at least a number of small folklore museums that provide some help where print culture does not. Relatedly, while I cannot point to any kind of quantified analysis of this, it seems to me overwhelmingly the case that part of the reason for this lack of extensive description is that the Greek novel is more likely than for example the British to feature a first-person intradiegetic narrator (as per Gérard Genette's typology of narrative, 'a narrator present as a character in the story he tells' – see *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin [Oxford: Blackwell, 1980], p. 245) who narrates the entire novel either to the reader (though this is usually signalled, not through addresses in the 'Dear reader' mode, but through the use of *conversational* fillers such as 'As I was telling you...' – i.e. addresses to a *listener*) or some unspecified but *intradiegetic* narratee, essentially imitating a Homeric bard reciting the epics.

⁵⁸ Transl. by Fred A. Reed (London: Arcadia Books, 2010), pp. 1-7.

⁵⁹ London: Virago, 2006.

several mentions of coin-operated payphones though by that point they'd been completely phased out.⁶⁰

More significantly, I found myself forcing certain details into the narrative as (cheap) foreshadowing. For example, my first draft included a shortish, somewhat alarmed conversation regarding the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn 'political party' that immediately struck me as utterly false: their support amounted at the time to about 0.1% of the popular vote (actual membership numbered in the low hundreds) and with the exception of a couple of Athenian neighbourhoods they lacked almost any visibility and were mostly treated as a bad joke.

My initial reasoning was that even though I was *myself* barely aware of them at the time it would have been possible for my characters to be more perceptive. But immediately I both questioned the likelihood of this for *these* characters and decided I was engaging in exactly the kind of glib *ex post facto* prophesying/'narrative irony' that I cannot abide as a reader. Replacing the conversation with a more frivolous one in which neo-Nazis were treated simply as idiots did not seem to me much better a solution (and would have introduced certain complications regarding the later revelation of a character's far-right leanings), so in the end I simply cut that section without waiting for feedback from readers. Accordingly, the major difficulty in writing this part of the novel was remaining wary of this particular type of elusiveness when it comes to the very recent past shading too much into the present.

A final note on this matter: it occurs to me that when it came to research and the deployment of historical detail, in some ways at least, certainties became artefacts of distance, albeit divergently. The further back in time I moved, uncertainty as to the psychologically 'different country' I was entering was unexpectedly balanced out by my increased confidence that various types of details (in terms of minor events, locations, objects etc.) that extensive research had failed to unearth could, if needed, be invented

⁶⁰ The use of collectible prepaid phonecards gifted me with a wonderfully appropriate detail to use (p. 262) though only once I allowed myself a small anachronism: the 'Parthenon' collectible was a 1993 issue no longer in circulation by the summer of 1995.

with relative impunity. Most readers would be unlikely to know what I had failed to discover.

Predictably, this situation was reversed when it came to the recent past (especially the 2015 section). My increased confidence in my understanding of my characters' circumstances was balanced out by my worry about details more readers could immediately recognize as false, even if this was somewhat futile an exercise: when it comes to readers' prior knowledge of history, it seems to me one is always assuming either too little or too much. To the suggestion, for example, offered to me on several occasions, that in fiction one *can* interfere with at least *major* historical events (having, e.g., Hitler assassinated in a French film theatre sometime in 1944)⁶¹ safe in the knowledge that the mythical beast, the average reader, knows 'that's not how it really happened', I offer the observation that in January 1998, upon exiting the cinema an acquaintance had dragged me to for a viewing of the abomination that is *Titanic*,⁶² I found myself in the position of having to explain to said acquaintance that, no, for reasons obvious to everyone but him, no, the ship hitting that iceberg was not a 'shocking twist'.

1.10 The Content of the Form

I turn now to the matter of the form each of the three parts of the novel takes. While it was one of the most interesting developments of the writing process I will not herein discuss in detail the initial conception of all three parts versus their final form and the thinking behind these evolving choices, but a summary is useful in demonstrating the combination of supervisory feedback and personal reading that guides the creative writing PhD.

1.10.1 Initial form and concerns

In order to meditate on at least some of the many different literary forms of historical representation, I initially aimed to write the novel in three *distinct* modes:

⁶¹ *Inglourious Basterds*, dir. by Quentin Tarantino (Universal Pictures, 2009).

⁶² dir. by James Cameron (20th Century Fox, 1997).

The first part would stand for the kind of popular 'lyrical' historical novel most commonly associated with WWII (and often associated with postcolonial literature) – one where history is ultimately knowable, and the 'traumatic events of the past' can be articulated and therefore 'might cease to be trauma.'⁶³ I had in mind novels such as Victoria Hislop's *The Island* and Louis de Bernières's *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (both set in Greece), Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, etc.⁶⁴

The second part would stand for the kind of contemporary *bildungsroman* that in my view fetishizes cultural nostalgia while being largely ahistorical. I had in mind novels such as David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green*⁶⁵ (in contradistinction to, for example, a very similar novel, Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor*,⁶⁶ which never loses sight of culture as being historically derived), Soti Triantafyllou's immensely popular and influential (in Greece) *Savvato Vradi stin Akri tis Polis*⁶⁷ and (in an absurdist, ironic mode) Christos Chomenidis's *To Sofo Paidi*.⁶⁸ (Commentary on the *bildungsroman* is yet another area I don't have the space to address herein, but let me summarize its relevance here by

⁶³ Edwards, Justin D., *Postcolonial Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 136. There obviously exists a lot of trauma theory that deals with the (un)representability of extreme experience but I will not be touching on it in this commentary. I will only summarize the nature of my objection to this kind of novel's approach, which risks overstating 'the healing power of narration.' (Michael Roper, quoted in Thomson, Alistair, *Anzac Stories: Living with the Legend* [1994] 2nd edn [Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2013]) As Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson suggest in the case of 'life narratives' (represented in *VicD* by Michalis's narration in part one): 'The creation of a reassuring narrative... will never fully extinguish the suffering. Closure may be a keen aspiration but it is also a false hope.' (*The Oral History Reader* [1998] 3rd edn [Abingdon: Routledge, 2016] p. 299.)

⁶⁴ For full citations see the bibliography.

⁶⁵ [2006] London: Sceptre, 2007.

⁶⁶ London: Harvill Secker, 2009.

⁶⁷ Athens: Polis, 1996.

⁶⁸ Athens: Estia, 1993.

noting that that this type of novel seems to me often very far removed from the genre's 'historicist roots'.⁶⁹)

The third part would be a historiographic metafiction somewhat in the Thomas Pynchon mode, increasingly fragmented and intentionally confusing (at least until the revelation of its metafictional status); I had in mind the 'disintegration' that characterizes the final parts of *The Crying of Lot 49*⁷⁰ and *Gravity's Rainbow*⁷¹ but also something similar to the metafictional breakdown at the conclusion of Yannis Panou's *...Apo to Stoma tis Palias Remington*.⁷²

This plan was abandoned for two reasons:

a. As my supervisors suggested, the novel would be moving from two ostensibly 'realist' parts to a more 'experimental' and intentionally confusing final third in a manner unlikely to satisfy the majority of readers: those who would approach it as a more conventional historical novel could feel betrayed by its (very) late development into a metafictional puzzle, while readers who enjoy metafictional puzzles could be put off by the initial (and lengthy) 'realist' approach. In addition, the late metafictional turn could simply end up seeming nothing more than a 'cheap' way of resolving the narrative impasse.

b. Around the same time I read a number of novels (Garth Risk Hallberg's *City on Fire*, Paul Murray's *The Mark and the Void*, Jonathan Coe's *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*⁷³) that either did not gain anything from being overtly metafictional (the former two) or arguably even lost something. (The latter, whose final few pages of metafictional shenanigans – in this instance, no other word will do – immediately led to a Dorothy-

⁶⁹ Tobias Boes, *Formative Fictions: Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012) p. 178.

⁷⁰ [1966] London: Vintage, 1996.

⁷¹ [1973] London: Picador, 1975. 'No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive *knotting into...*' p. 3.

⁷² [1981] Athens: Kastaniotis, 1998.

⁷³ For full citations see the bibliography.

Parker-type revision of my appraisal from ‘toss aside lightly’ to ‘throw with great force’.) Thinking about these works, I had to ask myself what my novel would gain from an unequivocal revelation of its metafictional status, and the answer was: nothing. On the contrary, it stood to lose a great deal, and not just because of the obvious risk of signalling to the reader that the history the narrator has been struggling with has been *mastered* (that ‘healing power of narration’); I was also thinking of my own reaction to Pynchon’s *V*.⁷⁴ (compared to *Lot 49*), or David Foster Wallace’s *The Broom of the System* (compared to *Infinite Jest*):⁷⁵ That the creation of an elaborate formal construct which allows for a single solution tends to drain the work of interest once it is read.⁷⁶

Interestingly enough, this seemed to me to mirror the approach to traumatic history taken by the type of lyrical historical novel I mentioned above in which, once an event is understood and lessons are drawn from it, it can be allowed to recede back into the past and one can get on with the business of living. Historical facts, in this kind of work, are usually not context-dependent, but merely either known or unknown. Once known, they prove readily comprehensible, if temporarily traumatic – and incorporable into a pre-existing framework of historical relationships that their revelation re-aligns in straightforward reversals:⁷⁷ The suggestion being that the only problem with history lies

⁷⁴ [1963] London: Vintage, 1995.

⁷⁵ New York: Viking, 1987 and New York: Little, Brown, 1996, respectively.

⁷⁶ ‘*V*. is like a riddle that, once correctly answered, never taxes the mind again; *The Crying of Lot 49* is founded in an emotion of mystery... which remains... even when the outward mystery is solved. *V*. is a complex novel that gets simpler with each rereading, *The Crying of Lot 49* a simple novel that, reread, grows more complex.’ See Sklar, Robert, ‘An Anarchist Miracle: The Novels of Thomas Pynchon’, in *Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1978), pp. 87-96 (p. 89-90).

⁷⁷ In Elena Chouzouris’ *Dyo Fores Athoa* (Athens: Kedros, 2012), the narrator discovers that the father she believed was being cruel in order to protect her was in fact a ‘villain’ who’d driven away the mother she thought had abandoned her.

In Sofia Nikolaidou’s *Apopse Den Exoume Filous* (Athens: Metaixmio, 2010) the black marketeer, Skirpas, who’s been passing himself off as a member of the Greek resistance, also has to be revealed to be a sexual predator, just in case the reader was not entirely sure what to make of

in reworkings of the past, or its erasure, that there is a 'proper' position from which to view historical events, which are not so much open to interpretation as open to acknowledgment; in a reductive, pseudo-Freudian manner, this confrontation with the past is *per se* cathartic regardless of specifics.⁷⁸ It is rare for this type of novel to embrace something like W. G. Sebald's pessimism when it comes to the difficulties of historical retrieval.⁷⁹

1.10.2 Final form, and William Maxwell

All the above concerns, then, I addressed through the use of multiple third-person focalizers within the first-person narration of part one, as well as the more ambiguous climax of part three. The new form of part one would immediately draw the reader's attention to the 'constructedness' of the narrative, revealing the 'realism' of the novel's beginning to be a more complicated issue than it might otherwise appear, and allowing me to eschew overt metafiction in the third part in favour of something (hopefully) subtler and more complex: a wavering between explanations that would itself suggest questions about our relationship and responsibility to the past.

Two texts were instrumental in the development of these devices. The bulk of Michalis's narration being based on his sister's memories rather than his own was inspired by a brief passage in Michael Ondaatje's (fictionalized) memoir, *Running in the Family*:

him. If one were to believe most Greek novels about the occupation, not only were black marketeers few and far between, they were also uniformly 'evil'.

⁷⁸ As Ellen O'Gorman notes the '[model of] detective fiction as history presupposes the existence of one prior, correct version of the past, at which it is possible to arrive by a careful process of recovery, and to which it is imperative to owe allegiance.' ('Detective Fiction and Historical Narrative,' *Greece & Rome*, 46[1] 1999, 19–26, p. 20.)

⁷⁹ In Hayden White's formulation, one of the major effects of *Austerlitz* is 'the melancholy which arises from the suggestion that a merely "historical" knowledge of "history" will raise more problems than it solves when it is a matter of seeking a meaning for an individual life or existence.' See: 'The Practical Past', *Historiein* 17 (2010), 10-19, p. 12.

About six months before I was born my mother observed a pair of kabaragoyas “in copula” at Pelmadulla. A reference is made to this sighting in *A Coloured Atlas of Some Vertebrates from Ceylon, Vol. 2*, a National Museum Publication. It is my first memory.⁸⁰

A playful demonstration – down to the deliberate syntactical ambiguity regarding the referent in the last sentence: is ‘it’ the sighting, the reference to the sighting, or the volume that includes the reference? – of the process of familial myth-making, the way in which we continually write ourselves into an ongoing family history.

The device of additional third-person focalizers I stole from William Maxwell’s *So Long, See You Tomorrow*,⁸¹ not a historical novel, but one whose narrator, motivated by the guilt he feels over his behaviour towards a childhood friend who suffered a terrible trauma, is driven – fifty years later – to reconstruct the story of that trauma. Faced with the inadequacy of the known facts, the narrator abandons fact for fiction and, based on the evidence still available (newspaper stories, court testimonies etc.), imaginatively recreates what *might* have happened.

Crucial, for me, is the motivation behind the invention, the narrator’s struggle to make sense of the *known* past, his insistence (cf. Binet) that the events themselves are not sufficient explanation for anything, that it is the human facts that truly matter. And also the sense that these can be *imagined* – but, importantly (again, cf. Binet) not from some moral high ground but in an honest attempt at understanding that doesn’t preclude judgment, but precedes it.

In *VicD*, then, the mixture of first- and third-person perspectives for the first part is now followed by the deliberate ambiguity of the novel’s ending. The files Andreas reads through on his father’s laptop (p. 344 onwards) appear to confirm Michalis as the narrator of the first part and provide an explanation as to the circumstances of his narration while concluding (to various degrees) the stories of most, but not all, of the focalizers of part one.

⁸⁰ [1982] London: Picador, 1984, p. 75.

⁸¹ [1980] London: The Harvill Press, 1997.

(Byford-Jones is the only one who is given neither a pre-1944 past nor a future beyond the end of his involvement in the Dekemvriana. I would hope readers see this as intentional commentary: this *isn't* Byford-Jones's story. In a manner of speaking, this is my response to a certain kind of British novel's employment of colonial histories as the background against which British moral parables play out, the focal point being the moral parable rather than the history.⁸²

I would cite here J. G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur*,⁸³ to which I nod in *VicD* in General Scobie's advice to Byford-Jones to learn 'not to listen to the damned nonsense the natives are always talking,' advice offered to him in turn by a 'Mr Ford' (p. 179) – the sentiment and character both derived from Farrell.⁸⁴ My sole issue with this otherwise great novel is that while it has deep and hilarious things to say about Empire and Englishmen abroad, it also has not a thing to say about the 1857 Indian Rebellion itself: by sticking so closely to the blinkered viewpoint of its characters it itself re-enacts their blindness, which is both its greatest strength and its greatest weakness.)

But there is now also the suggestion ('You need to... finish this thing, right? Because I can't do it for you' – p. 382) that this might be Andreas' version of his father's project. Eagle-eyed readers will hopefully spot how, for example, the narrator's direct address to Nora in part one (p. 91) is strikingly similar to Andreas waking up in his parents' flat at the beginning of part three (p. 285), or how a proleptic section involving Michalis and Katerina in part one (p. 157) could just as easily fit Andreas and Katerina waiting for visiting hours in the clinic cafeteria in part three (p. 330 onwards). There are numerous such instances of various 'repetitions' throughout all three parts of the novel which can be read either as hints of 'reality' showing through the (meta)fictional weave of the story, or as instances of actual repetition of experience – the hope being this also reinforces a

⁸² As Hari Kunzru has it: '...the British novel, which is so wrapped up with ideas of a British male self coming to full presence or knowledge in the mystical mirror of the East' (quoted in de Groot, p. 116). It is in this same context that Greek words are not italicized throughout the novel: they are neither foreign nor exotic; they are not 'Other'.

⁸³ [1973] London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2009.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* p. 63.

claustrophobic sense of the inescapability of history and time. (The references to Steve Reich's music in part three are also meant to 'comment' on this, while Andreas' impressionistic description of *Eight Lines* (p. 295) is, of course, 'repeated' itself in part one (p. 159) and near the novel's end (p. 377).⁸⁵

1.10.3 A final note on form

In light of all the above, I wish to offer a few further comments on a number of deliberate choices regarding form and the manipulation of perspective/space/time in all three parts of the novel.

The first part is comprised of long, unbroken scenes written in a detailed, 'historical' style (somewhat in the manner of *The Night Watch* but not as exhaustive) and with particular emphasis on specificity of space and the 'realistic' passing of time (with the scenes themselves tracing synchronic courses for the characters until their eventual gathering in Syntagma Square). The intention behind this is to mimic and interrogate the process of historical synthesis and recreation, and (in the narrator's addresses to the narratee, his proleptic comments and interludes) foreground the narrative's reason for being: the attempt to recover the past as part of an *ongoing* history, linking it to the novel's 'present' – what Fredric Jameson refers to in his analysis of E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* as the 'present of enunciation'.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ The issue of whether the narrator of part one is Michalis or, in some way, Michalis mediated *through* Andreas is a good example of the questions raised by the wavering between explanations I mentioned previously. The characters of part one are always already mediated through the narrator – is this any different? If so, why? Is any possible difference to do with third vs first person? What are the ethics of, as Ismail Muhammad puts it, 'ventriloquizing our ancestors' (even in order to preserve their stories) vs 'speak[ing] in our own voices'? (See: 'The Misunderstood Ghost of James Baldwin,' *Slate* 15 February 2017.) Readers are welcome to judge this for themselves; my own answer to the question is, I guess, the novel itself (my inability to tell you what it means being the point of dancing it).

⁸⁶ *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* [1991] (London: Verso, 1992), p. 24. Jameson points out that the published text of *Ragtime* lacks the novel's first version's explicit positioning in the present, thus 'freeing the novel to float in some new world of past historical time whose relationship to us is problematical indeed' (pp. 21-2). It was a happy coincidence to

In contradistinction, the second part, in addition to being a third-person, single-focalizer narrative, is also comprised of mostly shorter scenes or fragments, written in a somewhat more 'jagged' style, while the passage of time is not always 'seamless'. There are gaps of variable length between scenes (from a few seconds to several hours), and the clear suggestion, eventually, that the narrative might be skipping over moments of some importance.⁸⁷ All this operates in conjunction with a lack of historical perspective on the part of both Andreas and the narrative itself: Andreas' dismissal of history ('the exposed strata of striated rock, telling a story he didn't know how to read' – p. 209) is (hopefully) evident throughout, and especially in his uncertainty about ('December '44 or '45?' – p. 246) and lack of interest in ('this was more or less all he knew' – p. 246) events involving his own immediate family.⁸⁸

As for the narrative, part two lacks both the flashbacks and proleptic sections of part one, mostly confining itself to a somewhat 'flattened' present, one where the past is not engaged with – at least not until Andreas reveals his grandfather was a communist (p. 246). I am, however, hoping readers will notice that the persistence of the past is regularly suggested even prior to this conversation (see, for example the description of the village square (p. 216), or Andreas insisting to Zoe that 'their respective pasts were

read this having already decided to make my own novel's narrative link to the 'present of enunciation' explicit for precisely this reason.

⁸⁷ For example, during Andreas's and Zoe's argument:

'And your brother: "Women shouldn't read so much. It gives them ideas".'

'Oh for god's sake that was a joke. He was just riling you up,' (p. 260/260)

which refers to a moment otherwise absent from the narrative.

The intention here is to indicate an experience of the (yet unintegrated into a narrative/history) present as it unfolds, and the narration through a single focalizer is meant both to foreground Andreas's sense of disconnection from his surroundings and to be contrasted with the synthesis of viewpoints in part one: 'No one had ever lived the historical past because historians were in possession of a wider range and a kind of evidence (or knowledge) that no agent of the real past could ever have possessed.' See White, 'The Practical Past', p. 16.

⁸⁸ As opposed to his very aware historicist approach to matters of form, both musical (p. 210) and literary (p. 214).

their own business' – p. 230) in ways that open up a small but (in both senses of the word) *critical* distance between character and narrative.⁸⁹

Finally, the third part seems to be at first similar to the second one but soon diverges from it, firstly through the inclusion in the narrative of different kinds of *texts* (Andreas' email exchanges with a colleague, his feedback email to a student etc. [p. 287]) that set up the later introduction of the various texts returning to the 1944 characters and completing their stories (p. 344 onwards).

Secondly, through the reappearance of historical depth for both the character and narrative: For the character, via Andreas' thinking about Byford-Jones (p. 292) and the Dekemvriana (p. 296), which presages his later attempt to historicize the present (p. 300), setting up what the reader will learn about his struggle with history in the novel's climax. For the narrative, first via the reemployment of flashbacks that slowly both fill in Andreas' story over the previous twenty years and reveal what has happened to Michalis; following this, by the reappearance of Katerina who narrates herself the story of the trauma of her father joining the resistance; and finally, by an ambiguous series of short sections in the novel's final scene – beginning with 'There was the matter of being here' (p. 378) and culminating with 'There was, finally, the matter of time' (p. 381) – that can either be read as staying with Andreas as focalizer or possibly shifting from Andreas to Michalis: the narrative voice here is very similar to that of the narrator of part one, while the penultimate section ('the matter of being lost' – p. 380) reverses the perspective of an earlier image (p. 120) in a manner that could be read as describing Michalis's current state (and possibly providing a sort of alternative explanation for one of the novel's two 'hauntings').⁹⁰

⁸⁹ During his initial conversation with Zoe's brother, Andreas notices Manthos 'shifting his weight from one foot to the other, then throwing a little backward kick, like a bull pawing at the ground. (The psychology being thus expressed was not particularly complicated)' (p. 230). The hope here is that readers register the ambiguity about which of the two characters the parenthetical comment might be referring to.

⁹⁰ Namely, that part one may be taking place in Michalis's mind. It also occurs to me, entirely in retrospect, that in this case the moment of Andreas's pleading with his unresponsive father to

1.11 Three excursions to other places of interest

Before arriving at my conclusions, I offer some comments on three more areas of particular interest or concern during the writing process: character (and intertextuality), intertextuality itself, and the ‘supernatural’ element of the novel as counteracting its metafictional reading.

1.11.1 Character and intertextuality (Or: Another road leading back to history)

Let me begin again by registering my misgivings about a line of thought. In his analysis of *Ragtime*, Jameson notes that ‘the objects of representation, ostensibly narrative characters, are incommensurable and, as it were, of incomparable substances, like oil and water – Houdini being a historical figure, Tateh a fictional one, and Coalhouse an intertextual one.’⁹¹

Jameson is not alone in this. Elsewhere, Hutcheon herself devotes a chapter of her *A Poetics of Postmodernism* to ‘the problem of reference’, where she similarly suggests, for example, that the meeting of Ezra Pound and Hugh Selwyn Mauberley in Timothy Findley’s *Famous Last Words* challenges readers because the two ‘have different representational resonances, for their initial contexts (historical and literary) differ.’⁹² More recently, Stacie Friend has categorically summarized this as: ‘Indisputably real individuals who appear in fiction, such as Napoleon... are not fictional characters in the relevant sense.’⁹³

My first objection I raise by way of Friend’s ‘indisputably real individuals’. As opposed to? It is telling that Friend mentions Napoleon, Jameson Houdini, and Hutcheon Pound: i.e. all three focus on *major*, inescapably famous historical figures.

But suppose a reader such as my *Titanically*-ignorant acquaintance; or suppose the employment in fiction of a historical figure most readers will likely be ignorant of (for

‘wake up’ (p. 383) resolves itself as almost literally the Joycean history as nightmare to awaken from. See *Ulysses* [1922], Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 34.

⁹¹ *Postmodernism*, pp. 22-3.

⁹² pp. 141-157, p. 148.

⁹³ ‘Fictional Characters,’ *Philosophy Compass* 2(2) (2007), 141–156, p. 142.

example Byford-Jones, whose name readers well-versed in the history of the Greek civil war will recognize immediately, though no one else will). If the argument is that a qualitative difference exists in the referents of 'real' and 'fictional' characters appearing in a text otherwise designated as a 'fiction' such that they become 'incommensurable substances', the obvious point to make is that the difference hinges, not on intratextual qualities, but readers' (widely varying) ability to make this distinction based on extratextual knowledge.⁹⁴ Hutcheon has previously made a similar point: 'In the literary text there are no such thing as real referents for the reader: all are fictive... The reader accepts this once he accepts the fact that what he is reading is an imaginative construct. That the author may or may not have had real referents in mind can never be determined with certainty.'⁹⁵

Now, what I seem to be arguing is that the real-fictional divide is one that may not be apparent, or even of concern, to the reader, potentially resulting in one kind or another of reading experience; but what about the writing process, and the historical novelist's fundamental 'self-consciousness' of the relationship of one's fictions to history? I am about to argue, paradoxically, that the self-consciousness is itself my second objection and part of my answer.

Returning to Jameson's three categories of characters (historical, intertextual, fictional) I want to point out a significant complication too often ignored, one that thinking of Doctorow's (b. 1931) Houdini (d. 1926), or Tolstoy's (b. 1828) Napoleon (d. 1821) should make immediately apparent: the Houdini of *Ragtime* and the Napoleon of *War and Peace* are, in fact, always already *intertextual* characters in the very relevant sense that their representation was shaped via construction through a mosaic of 'quotations'; that the texts which instantiate them were produced not via reference to

⁹⁴ As Jameson points out himself, without going on to specifically consider how readers' *lack* of historical knowledge may influence this dialectic (p. 23).

⁹⁵ *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 94.

their authors' direct observation or experience but via the 'absorption and transformation' of other *texts*.⁹⁶

This is obviously not quite what Kristeva has in mind; yet, I posit, the Jamesonian unbridgeable distinction between historical (real) and (inter)textual character is thus transformed into the vastly smaller gulf of varying engagement with two kinds of textual discourses that to return to Hayden White's point do not, despite the different ways in which we evaluate and test their claims, stand in some kind of *absolute* real-vs-imagined opposition: yet another example of the porousness of certain borders.

It is in this context that, when Jameson remarks that the 'aesthetic situation' that gives rise to *Ragtime* has resulted in a kind of historical novel that 'can no longer gaze directly on some putative real world, at some reconstruction of a past history which was once itself a present; rather, as in Plato's cave, it must trace our mental images of that past upon its confining walls,' and goes on to lament the 'new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way...of our own... simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach,'⁹⁷ I feel tempted to respond, 'New situation?'

Because isn't it the case that this agonized search for a past historical reality untainted by our present is yet another permutation of the self-consciousness that de Groot traces back to Scott, or Manzoni's admission that his critics 'are probably right'? When exactly was it that we had anything *but* our mental images of the past to work with? (Plato's allegory itself anyway pointing at precisely our inability to get past phenomenal states to some direct apprehension of the Real.) Because even Jameson's lost ideal, note, involves a '*reconstruction*' of the past, not the impossible thing itself.

I am not suggesting the past is fundamentally inaccessible; rather that is only ever accessible indirectly – through *points of view*, which are themselves, in the case of historical novels, quite literally texts that absorb and transform a variety of other texts. Nor am I suggesting that these texts cannot be evaluated in relation to historical truth,

⁹⁶ Kristeva, Julia, 'Word, dialogue and novel,' in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1986), pp. 34-61, p. 37.

⁹⁷ Postmodernism, p. 25.

with all the ethical concerns this raises about representational/reconstructional choices; only that said truth is *itself* also apprehended indirectly, via (interpreted) material evidence as well as the historical discourse itself.⁹⁸

So how does all this translate in this case? *VicD* contains entirely fictional characters (say, Mrs Petrou), and historical characters (Byford-Jones), as well as fictional characters based to various extents on existing people (say, Katerina, or Grandma Zoe); but really, as far as I was concerned during the writing process these were all, finally, *fictional* characters.

I do not mean to suggest there were no constraints on writing any of them, nor that any existing constraints were uniform. In the case of Mrs Petrou, or Katerina, for example, the constraints had to do mostly with what I found plausible for their circumstances and character once I had settled on what that character was; the fact that Mrs Petrou was entirely fictional while Katerina wasn't did not alter my approach. As for Byford-Jones, the initial constraint was similar, the sole difference being that his character I settled on after reading his memoir, as well as two earlier collections of his various pre-war newspaper pieces.⁹⁹ So that while I took liberties with his thinking about the political situation in Greece, I did so by amplifying and extending his already recorded worries, doubts and vacillations. The additional constraint was not to diverge significantly from his external circumstances as he related them, not because I ignored the 'fictionality' of his record, but because the point was the fundamental incompleteness of the record itself even if every word of it were true and accurate: essentially I wrote him in the interstices of his memoir. I did, in the one instance it suited me, place him in an entirely invented scene (his conversation with General Scobie – appendix, p. 397) while making sure this didn't contradict either his memoir or (my understanding of) the relevant history.

But my point here is that these constraints were in all instances *self-imposed*, and

⁹⁸ This is what Buell Wisner recognizes (in relation to Vollmann's work) as 'the inherent dangers and the continued validity of the textual model in relation to the socio-historical real.' See: 'Vollmann's *Argall*-Text: Neo-Elizabethan Form and the Literalist Past in *Seven Dreams*,' in Coffman, Christopher K. and Lukes, Daniel (eds.), *William T. Vollmann: A Critical Companion* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2015), pp. 199-116, p.104.

⁹⁹ For which see bibliography.

only settled on with the purpose of the entire novel in mind. Had I been writing a different novel, I would have settled on different constraints.¹⁰⁰ And, furthermore, that once I had settled on these constraints, my treatment of all the characters was, finally, identical: they were all pieces of fabric that went into the making of a pattern, and what mattered was whether the latter took on the shape I needed it to.

1.11.2 Books all the way down (Or: 'Do the infinite-regress dance')

VicD, then, is in constant conversation (in terms of content) with the great number of non-fiction texts from which I gleaned the facts and events required to reconstruct the historical periods it depicts. At the same time, it also cannot help but be in conversation (in terms of form) with a number of the literary texts that constructed its *author* and the manner in which this sometimes manifests most obviously (intentionally) in the text is itself meaningful:

On one level this conversation proceeds via direct reference (for example to Nikos Bakolas' *O Kipos Ton Prigipon*, p. 344).¹⁰¹ On another level, it takes place via allusion: Andreas' direct, self-satisfied reference to *Moby-Dick*¹⁰² in part two ('A damp, drizzly November in their souls indeed,' p. 210) has been preceded by a more covert allusion ('hills, roofed by a low sky,' p. 209) to Giorgos Seferis' 'Mythistorema' and its famous lines 'Our country is closed in, all mountains/ that day and night have the low sky as their roof.'¹⁰³ On yet another level, in the most overt instance of the novel's construction via 'quotation', the conversation proceeds through the re-writing of entire *passages* from other texts: I would expect most readers to recognize in Mrs Petrou's introduction to the

¹⁰⁰ It increasingly seems to me that novel-writing consists solely of attempting to solve problems you wouldn't have if you weren't writing novels.

¹⁰¹ [1966] Thessaloniki: Paratiritis, 1987.

¹⁰² Melville, Herman [1851] (London: Penguin, 2003) p. 3.

¹⁰³ See *Collected Poems*, trans. by Edmund Keeley (Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 14. Again, this is meant to open up some distance between English-Lit-obsessed (young) Andreas's constant reference to 'foreign' texts (itself meant to be considered next to Byford-Jones' obsession with ancient Greece) and the narrative's acknowledgment of the tradition he is wilfully ignoring at the time.

narrative ('Mrs Petrou had told her husband she would get the potatoes herself,' p. 68) the first sentence of *Mrs Dalloway*;¹⁰⁴ but eagle-eyed readers might also spot how, for example, the aforementioned section where the narrator of part one directly addresses Nora (p. 91) rewrites Woolf's 'A Haunted House'¹⁰⁵ or how a description of a gust of wind which shifts the narrator's point of view from Stelios' parents to Stelios (p. 108)¹⁰⁶ rewrites a similar description in the opening pages of the 'Time Passes' section of *To the Lighthouse*.¹⁰⁷

It is by intention that most of these extensive rewritings occur in the novel's first part, not only to again draw attention to this process of quotation in relation to the historical novel but also to very subtly suggest the likelihood of Andreas being its ventriloquist-narrator. (Note also that these allusions to the same writer occur in sections with different focalizers, as a kind of 'admission' of the manner in which all these disparate narratives are always mediated through the narrator's 'voice'.)

1.11.3 Ghosts

As already noted, as if it weren't bad enough that I embraced the seemingly-long-exhausted form of metafiction for *VicD*, I also decided to turn the latter in part into a sort of ghost story, an inordinately freighted mode which David Punter was already in 1996 characterizing as 'immensely popular *despite* lack of originality, and a constant repetition of themes and images which we have come across before.'¹⁰⁸ The overfamiliarity of the

¹⁰⁴ (1925) London: Penguin, 1996.

¹⁰⁵ [1921] in *A Haunted House: The Complete Shorter Fiction* ed. by Susan Dick (London: Vintage, 2003), pp. 116-17.

¹⁰⁶ Which description itself is meant to suggest the movements of a disembodied observer.

¹⁰⁷ [1927] London: Penguin, 2000, pp. 137-38. Immediately preceding the 'appearance' of Maria's ghost a few pages later the text references (p. 110), what else, the *ne plus ultra* of 'are the ghosts real or not' stories: 'The Turn of the Screw' ([1898] *The Ghost Stories of Henry James* [London: Wordsworth, 2001] pp. 175-266, p. 182).

¹⁰⁸ *The Literature of Horror Vol 2: The Modern Gothic [1996]* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 67-8. Emphasis added in acknowledgment of a pervading and subject-appropriate but unhelpful sense of doom.

device makes it impossible for me to even begin to discuss in any kind of systematic or comprehensive manner, so once more I will limit myself to commenting on certain readings while offering a brief explanation for my own choices.

I begin with de Groot's comment that the gothic novel sees

'history not as a source of information or something to understand but as a place of horror and savagery. The historical place, in Gothic, be it the castle, grave or forest, is not a repository of pastness but a site where history might attack the visitor, a charnelhouse of remains that still have the power to harm' (p. 16).

It was in this context that I approached the idea of hauntings as countering the notion of 'the healing power of narration'. With the metafictional element pointing towards the attempt to recover and understand the past, articulate its trauma, and incorporate it into a sense of ongoing history, the ghosts in my narrative would point in the opposite direction:

a. Their mysteriousness would suggest the impossibility of full recovery or articulation, not only because of their refusal to subscribe to an otherwise 'realistic' depiction of spacetime¹⁰⁹ but also in the narrative's very unwillingness/inability to settle the question of their existence; not quite the Lacanian Real as that which resists symbolization/representation, obviously, but a trace of that relationship itself. Having completed the novel, I came across this: 'Psychoanalysis is based on the idea that the real is shown in certain effects persisting in discourse – although it lacks representation *per se*';¹¹⁰ which seems to me analogous to the manner in which Maria's 'voice' manifests in the novel as 'effects' forming a 'discourse' Stelios *seems* to understand though the reader cannot. (Not directly, in any case. I should note here that it was an intentional decision that Maria, who doesn't literally speak, is understood by Stelios, while the disfigured man

¹⁰⁹ Made even more complicated by the fact that the two ghosts appear to be moving in temporally opposite directions, with Maria haunting the future that *followed* her death, and the disfigured man, whether read as Michalis or Andreas, haunting characters in the *past* as well as the novel's present. See (c) below.

¹¹⁰ Stavrakakis, Yannis, *Lacan and the Political* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999), p. 84.

isn't understood *despite* speaking; at least not by the other characters – by novel's end the careful reader should be able to figure out what it is he might be saying, as well as the 'reason' for his disfigurement.)¹¹¹

b. In addition, the ghosts' persistence would point to the false hope of closure even if articulation of the trauma were possible, a sense of fixedness rather than resolution. Maria's ghost, for example, persists despite the lack of mystery regarding (and Stelios' seeming acceptance of) the circumstances of her death. There is no 'buried' trauma to unearth – her dead body having been literally unearthed from the rubble – only the always exposed fact of permanent, irremediable loss. And while Stelios seems to have integrated his sister's death into some kind of private belief system that is to some extent comforting, this too will be brought into question at the very end of part one – the loss relived as the potential loss of what had (only?) seemed to have been recovered. As for the disfigured man, the fact of his haunting the *known* past itself suggests that knowledge of history 'will raise more problems than it solves'.

¹¹¹ This idea developed when it occurred to me that Maria's conversations with Stelios could be read as metonymic of history itself: a one-sided conversation with the dead, with the evidence of their 'presence' interpreted as though it were the answer to our questions. Similarly, then, the disfigured man's not being understood despite speaking could also be read as a literalization of the fact that, even when history *does* speak to us, there is no guarantee we will listen, let alone understand. It only occurs to me now – not having revisited *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in over twenty-five years before completing *VicD* – that this isn't entirely dissimilar to how the army officer searching the Buendía household after the banana plantation workers' massacre (whose occurrence the authorities deny) literally cannot see its sole 'survivor', José Arcadio Segundo, who is nevertheless perfectly visible and materially present for his family – so obvious an instant of *political* contestation of the erasures of official history that I find it strange when de Groot argues that the ghosts in the novel 'are mournful presences with no polemic or educational virtue...[that] simply infect the present' (p. 130). Stephen M. Hart argues convincingly that ghosts in magic-realist fiction are 'politicised' and 'operate as traces of subaltern trauma'. See 'Magical Realism in the Americas: Politicised Ghosts in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *The House of the Spirits*, and *Beloved*,' *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies* 9(2) (2010), 115-123, p. 118.

A useful comparison here is one between a landmark text of the contemporary historical gothic, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*,¹¹² and a more recent novel in direct conversation with it, Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.¹¹³ Of the two, *Beloved* is the more ambiguous text, pointing towards the need for the recovery of the past while questioning whether exorcising its traumas 'once and for all' is even possible.¹¹⁴ In this context, it presents its initial ghost as a malevolent force that appears to be seeking revenge, while *Beloved* herself, as the probable reincarnation of this ghost, remains throughout a deeply ambiguous figure.¹¹⁵ In Ward's novel, meanwhile, there is no ambiguity about both the existence of ghosts and their intentions. They are undoubtedly real and, in the case of Richie at least, looking to understand and come to terms with their own deaths; and however malevolent Richie's final manifestation is to the living characters, it is itself no more than an expression of pure bewildered hurt and need (pp.262-69).

Sheri-Marie Harrison has suggested that, unlike Morrison's, Ward's ghosts are not 'about recovery nor representation... [of] the lost stories of the voiceless... there is no buried trauma... Instead, racial violence has never gone away... Ward's ghosts speak to an ever-present and visible lineage of violence that accumulates rather than dissipates with the passage of time.'¹¹⁶

¹¹² [1987] London: Vintage, 1997.

¹¹³ [2017] London: Bloomsbury, 2018. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be given in the text.

¹¹⁴ See Chang, Shu-li, 'Daughterly Haunting and Historical Traumas: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*,' *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 30(2) (2004): 105-27, p. 126.

¹¹⁵ 'Probable' because, while most critics have little doubt *Beloved* is a ghost, contrary readings are possible: see House, Elizabeth B., 'Toni Morrison's Ghost: The *Beloved* is Not *Beloved*,' *Studies in American Fiction* 18(1) (1990), 17-26, p. 17.

¹¹⁶ 'New Black Gothic,' *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 23 June 2018.
<<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/new-black-gothic>>

This is mostly correct, though it doesn't address the narrative awkwardness of Richie being unable to remember anything about how he died, and seeking answers from a (still living) witness, answers given gradually, in long flashbacks that interrupt the main narrative and cover a much longer timespan than the circumstances of his violent death – which seems to me a device much closer to a recovery of the 'lost stories of the voiceless' than Harrison argues. In addition, the revelation at novel's end that the various ghosts are 'stuck', 'unable to cross the waters' (p. 282, 281), and looking for a 'keyhole' (p. 281) to enter the lives of the living, sits uneasily next to the novel's climax, during which Leonie performs the rite that allows her dead brother and dying mother to cross over to somewhere 'final' (p. 273). This seems to me an inadvertent refutation of Morrison's point: a final exorcism turns out to be possible after all – which is something I made a consistent effort to avoid suggesting in *VicD*.

c. Finally, neither ghost can be incorporated into a sense of ongoing temporally-ordered history. Maria appears to stand at some vantage point outside time, while the disfigured man is not only, as already discussed, haunting the past and present; in his case, especially, the narrative introduces a number of contradictions that by design cannot be settled (at the close of the narrative Michalis and Andreas are both alive, which would suggest that the disfigured man as a 'ghost' either originates from a future beyond the novel's end or represents a 'haunting' by someone living).¹¹⁷ In combination with

¹¹⁷ I did not read Sarah Waters' *The Little Stranger* (London: Virago, 2009) until deep into the writing of *VicD*, but found therein a similar device: the implication that the titular manifestation is not quite a ghost but instead 'spawned from the troubled unconscious' of its narrator (p. 498). I've also come across similar (heavily psychoanalytical) ghosts in the short stories of Robert Aickman – see, for example, *The Unsettled Dust* [1990] (London: Faber and Faber, 2009). Obviously, these are narratives whose lineage can be traced back to 'The Turn of the Screw', though they are much more *overt* about their hauntings being the result of repressed obsession and, unlike James, present their supernatural manifestations as unequivocally occurring in physical reality. (Incidentally, in their literalization of their central metaphor they seem to me closer to more openly generic texts such as Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* [1959] [London: Penguin, 2009].) I try to have it both ways: Maria's 'ghost' is heavily dependent on Stelios's interpretation of experience, while the disfigured man is seen, and often heard speak, by multiple characters (including, possibly, if he is read as Michalis, his own toddler self).

Maria's more traditional manifestation, the aim was the suggestion that 'time itself has become wounded and traumatized so that it no longer flows smoothly and seamlessly.'¹¹⁸ Barker's subject matter is, according to Whitehead, 'the overwhelming nature of the past... which... always and necessarily spills over into the present and future,' and her novel thus 'questions the processes of "regeneration" and recovery in the face of... overwhelming... traumas'.¹¹⁹ My point was precisely the uncontainable nature of the 'spillage' itself. Hauntings are both about what *was*, and is now being brought *forward* to the haunted (as the remnant that persists), as well as the haunted being pulled *back* (via the remnant that persists) to what no longer is.

On that note, finally, the disfigured man's presence was also meant as a critique of the use of the backward-looking gaze aimed at the past as explanation for the present. In this schema, the ghost is the present as explanation for the past, being the often-self-effacing (ghostly) point of view from which the past is seen, a literal manifestation of historical recovery/reconstruction inevitably dragging something of its circumstance along for the ride.¹²⁰

1.12 Conclusions

1.12.1 Writing as process (Conclusions on craft and method)

History and research

How much research the novel required wasn't surprising; what *was* surprising was exactly how much research was needed for me to feel confident enough to even begin writing it, or the extent of my initial miscalculation as to its *kind*. As discussed previously, the real challenge revealed itself to be, not tracing the minutiae of historico-political

¹¹⁸ 'The Past as Revenant: Trauma and Haunting in Pat Barker's *Another World*,' *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 45(2) (2004), 129-146, pp. 129-30.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 129.

¹²⁰ The hoary cliché about the quantum-mechanic 'observer effect', though here too there is an intentional ambiguity as to whether this 'observation' does in fact alter past events in any substantial way: it is not clear what, if anything, changes for the various characters as a result of the various manifestations of the disfigured man. On the other hand, it remains possible (but is never confirmed) that Stelios survives the shooting thanks to Maria's intervention.

events, but searching for the material details of a way of life. In short, it took a while for me to recognize what was most required and engage in a more systematic, focused ‘sensory’ reading of various sources. Were I to write a similar kind of novel again, initial research would be conducted very differently (and possibly take half the time).

Pace and description of action

The long section of the Syntagma shooting and its immediate aftermath (pp. 173-204) was unlike anything else I’ve attempted, both in the constant shifting between so many points of view and especially in its overwhelming focus on the description of action rather than interiority. The one immediate effect this had on process was that, unlike my usual approach of having only a rough idea of the content of a scene and letting the writing develop more organically than structurally,¹²¹ I had to choreograph the scene in its entirety in great detail *before* writing a single word (see Figure 1, p. 14).

All this made the scene both harder and easier to write. Harder because I had to edit and re-edit constantly until I settled into writing primarily with pace and movement in mind;¹²² easier because having this kind of detailed structure already in place was helpful in avoiding what are (at least in my case) the occupational hazards of gardening: following ‘interesting’ tangents into frequent longueurs and/or dead ends, or (all too often) not quite knowing where to take the story next. On which note:

Plotting

As a reader, I can care about plot very much; as a writer I am far less interested in it than in capturing experience and thought in the moment.¹²³ So I don’t tend to think very rigorously in terms of plot (‘The ordering of events, the conflicts, motives, themes and

¹²¹ In the George R. R. Martin differentiation of writers into ‘architects’ and ‘gardeners’ I fall firmly in the ‘gardeners’ camp. (See Flood, Alison, ‘Getting more from George RR Martin,’ *Guardian*, 14 April 2011.)

¹²² How successful I was in this is of course for the reader to decide.

¹²³ Or maybe I’m just not that good at plotting, and my lack of interest merely a defence mechanism.

resolutions')¹²⁴ rather than (somewhat vaguely) story, and I more or less 'feel' my way through the work until I reach a kind of critical mass in the first draft that allows me to give it a more definite shape.

In terms of the plot of *VicD* then: part one was already given its overall shape by real events, while the regular shifts between characters were (I thought) enough to generate some 'movement' until the Syntagma shooting. I was also aiming for a sense of an uncertain pause between liberation and the Dekemvriana (a more-or-less accurate depiction of what this period seems to have been experienced as, based on my research) so that the intervening lack of any major developments for the characters was in any case programmatic. Parts two and three, meanwhile, with their very limiting constraints on action in terms of space and time, were always going to be much simpler in terms of narrative structure; while, finally, the overall shape of the novel relies so heavily on 'repetitions' and the various correspondences and echoes between all three parts rather than intricate sequences of events that (the hope is) it reads as a complex narrative even if the events it relates are themselves not particularly complicated.

One more quick note on character

To the commentary provided earlier I would add only this observation: I found myself being a lot more even-handed with some of my characters than I had planned to be. My initial intention with regards to, for example, Mrs Petrou and especially Mr Voreas (as well as, for example, forty-year-old Zoe) was, not that they would be depicted as 'evil' or 'bad people' but that the narrative would somehow openly pass judgment on them. But I soon decided this approach was crude. Rather than attempt to push the reader towards a particular response, it would be more worthwhile to make an effort to write all these characters from the inside out, so to speak, and to give them the same benignly interested attention I gave every other character.¹²⁵ It seems to me I was fairly successful in this (again, it is really up to the reader to decide) though I would note that this benign

¹²⁴ Stokes, Ashley, 'Plotting a Novel,' in *The Creative Writing Coursebook* ed. by Julia Bell and Paul Magrs (London: Macmillan, 2001), pp. 207-213, p. 207.

¹²⁵ The aim was not that they seem entirely sympathetic, of course; only that they come across as complex human beings who don't see themselves as villains, as hardly anyone ever does.

attention did not extend to treating the characters any more ‘gently’ in terms of their fates: Mrs Petrou and Mr Voreas were always going to die, for example, and I wrote their deaths with the kind of relish you experience when you’re thinking to yourself, ‘Well, this scene might be rather good.’

1.12.2 Writing as the finished work (A confession)

The finished work is a failure.¹²⁶ The finished work is not quite what I imagined; nor what I planned; nor even what I attempted. It is only what I achieved, which now seems very little. Considering it next to what I had meant is almost like putting the vaguely human-shaped piece of marble I’ve spent a few years hitting with a mallet next to, say, Michelangelo’s *David*.¹²⁷

The finished work is also a success. Primarily for existing in the first place, despite everything. Also because it has taught me a thing or two; for example, how I *should* have written it. The paradox being that this knowledge is not all that useful. I can either follow it back to the beginning, to rewrite the work yet again and fail differently, or move on to the next work, which I’ll have to figure out how to write from scratch, the case being that writing *this* work has taught me how to write *this* work alone.

The work is a series of decisions that taken all together (and if the work has taught me anything at all) I now reject. Also, a series of decisions that, taken individually, mostly strike me as the best ones that were available to me at the time. I’m not sure anyone else would agree, but how dare they if they don’t.¹²⁸

1.12.3 Writing as the finished work (The novel as thesis submission)

Beyond the (unsurprising, not all that interesting, but necessary to register) writerly insecurities just exhibited, does the novel succeed in relation to my research

¹²⁶ Obligatory reference to ‘failing better’ skipped for all our sakes.

¹²⁷ ‘Well, at least I’m not Jeff Koons,’ I tell myself.

¹²⁸ ‘Like all writers, Richard wanted to live in some hut on some crag somewhere, every couple of years folding a page into a bottle and dropping it limply into the spume. Like all writers, Richard wanted, and expected, the reverence due, say, to the Warrior Christ an hour before Armageddon.’ Amis, Martin, *The Information* (1995) (London: Flamingo, 1996), p. 300.

questions? It seems to me that on balance it does. In its more narrow focus (my second question, p. 2), the novel engages with the civil war in all its particularity, from a point of view that is unashamedly political but not blinded by partisanship;¹²⁹ a point of view not all that uncommon to Greek literature, but so far not represented in anglophone writing. In relation to Greek literature on the civil war and the crisis, meanwhile, what I believe *VicD* introduces is much more about the *how* of the thing rather than the *what*; though even here it seems to me to strike a more productively ambiguous balance between protestation and self-recrimination than most fictional treatments of the crisis I've read thus far and is, I believe, the first novel to focus so closely on the Dekemvriana.

In relation to my second research question, then, I think the novel will get at least something across, even to readers for whom this history is entirely unfamiliar, about the history of the war as a trauma that cannot but *both* illuminate *and* distort the Greek response, not just to the financial crisis in itself, but to the socio-political climate it gave rise to, especially in relation to that ill-advised referendum.¹³⁰

Which brings me to my wider research question. What does the novel say to me as its reader about our relationship to history, trauma, and historical analogy? It seems to me *VicD* succeeds in depicting exactly the difficulties writing it created for its author. I set off to demonstrate the manner in which historical trauma persists in the present as long as that present is thought of as 'the future of a heroic national past',¹³¹ and in the process found myself becoming more haunted by the past the longer I contemplated it, to the

¹²⁹ It should be clear which side my sympathies lean towards, but also that I haven't shied away from the crimes this side committed, nor the ironies of looking back to the failed past that was, at that time, this side's imagined glorious future.

¹³⁰ Aren't they all.

¹³¹ The 'traditional historical novel of Lukacs', according to Jameson, whose view of science fiction as on the contrary 'achieving a distinctive historical consciousness by way of the future rather than the past; and becoming conscious of our present as the past of some unexpected future,' was crucial for my conception of the novel. See Anders Stephanson and Fredric Jameson, 'Regarding postmodernism – A conversation with Fredric Jameson', *Social Text* 21 (1989): 3-30, p. 18. My association of trauma and a 'heroic' past here is indicative of what I see as the inextricable link between the two.

extent that my own (personal, rather than authorial) reactions to the crisis became in retrospect more partisan than they had been to begin with. Which obviously leads to renewed vacillation on the subject of historical knowledge and the good it does. So what *do* we do with all this history? I don't know. We keep trying to live with it, I guess, if only because we have no other choice. Even forgetting it is not really forgetting.

1.12.4 Writing as that which is read (Conclusions on intent)

I began thinking about *VicD* during the heyday of the Greek financial crisis (2010-12); began writing it as public interest was shifting to the refugee crisis (2015); completed it under the shadow of Brexit (2019); and finished editing it while on coronavirus lockdown (2020). And while the financial and refugee crises, as well as Brexit, were certainly on my mind while I was writing the novel, and will have left their various willed (and unwilled) marks all over the text, the coronavirus was obviously not. Yet, as more than one reader has already pointed out, it is currently impossible *not* to think about the long ICU scene that concludes part three in relation to the pandemic. But even after that too is *history*, the novel's perceived moment of composition/completion¹³² will possibly keep the two linked in a manner I could not have anticipated. I mention this for it both illustrates the dangers of concerning yourself too much with topicality or timeliness and gives an idea of the importance of (and the impossibility of predicting anything about) the circumstances of reading.

Despite all this, I will venture here some comments on the novel's intent, beyond, that is, giving readers something to read. Progressively narrowing my focus then:

As a novel, first of all, the intent is that *VicD* provide at least some aesthetic pleasure, provoke some thoughts or an emotional response or, hopefully, both. For the vast majority of novels, this seems to me the only reasonable (and sufficient) intent.

As is the case with most *historical* novels similarly conceived, it is also the intent that readers learn something about historical events that I believe are worth knowing something about; and that this knowledge, though itself inadequate, might eventually

¹³² Based on the submission date of my thesis, at least; any other ideas regarding publication seem quite far-fetched right now.

send readers out of the novel and into the world and, perhaps, from the fiction to the actual history (that all too rare an occurrence).

As a historical novel specifically about Greece, the civil war and the financial crisis, it is also the intent (see the previous section) that *VicD* might give readers a better understanding of these two periods, not as distinct entities but in *relationship*, elucidating something of the reasons for, and the dangers in, the tendency to reach for analogies between them.¹³³

Which, widening the focus again, should hopefully lead readers to consider the nature of historical contingency and analogy in relation to the persistence of historical trauma (and conversely, the myth of the glorious past) and what this may suggest about the – both inevitable and dangerous – instrumental uses of history in articulating the present.¹³⁴

The novel's political intent in the present is a vexed issue. On the one hand, it's not meant as a polemic; on the other, it has a specific political outlook which is however to register, not a possible way forward,¹³⁵ but something about my own confusion and ambivalence about my own historical moment; and yet, to allow readers, through the articulation of the present as the unexpected future of the past/gone-present, to answer for themselves the question of what to do with what cannot be undone, and from there to consider both present and future as *moments*, themselves contingent; undecidable, never inevitable.

¹³³ And, incidentally for my main purposes but not insignificantly, to draw attention to yet another British 'intervention' about which not nearly enough has been written.

¹³⁴ It is in this context that readers might hopefully consider the closer-than-commonly-thought similarity of the processes of developing a sense of national belonging via either embracing or being cynical about exceptionalism and other forms of national pride; a resemblance evidenced by one of my non-fiction sources, Kostas Papaioannou's *I Ellada Pote Den Pethainei (Greece Can Never Die)* (Athens: Kastaniotis, 2008), whose title, derived from a post-WWII 'patriotic march', is meant in both the original sense of celebration as well as (the almost equally longstanding) one of exasperation at the country's perceived inability to ever change.

¹³⁵ I wish.

It is, then, in conjunction with these notions – the done and the un-done, the plausible and the implausible, the contingent and the inevitable – that I will conclude this commentary with a short discussion of readers’ comments regarding a particular passage that I found especially useful in demonstrating the status of ‘realism’ as an *aesthetic*.

1.12.5 The real and the plausible (One of these things is not like the other)

I won’t here rehash theoretical arguments about ‘realism’ but will begin with Jameson’s observation on the concept’s instability ‘owing to its simultaneous, yet incompatible, aesthetic and epistemological claims, as the two terms of the slogan, “representation of reality,” suggest,’¹³⁶ and add to it Dubey’s comment that ‘[w]hat most critics seem to have in mind when they speak of “realism” is any set of narrative codes and conventions that has achieved representational stability over time and therefore has come to appear transparently given.’¹³⁷

The passage I want to discuss in relation to this is a proleptic section in part one during which the narrator ‘jumps’ ahead to 1988 and the publication of one of Stelios’ science-fictional short stories (p. 131). The passage makes reference to H.P. Lovecraft, an (existing) Greek literary magazine devoted to speculative fiction, Nikos Kazantzakis, and Harold Bloom on the anxiety of influence; i.e. no single element of it is invented or can be said to not belong to the future of the novel’s past of 1944. (The novel’s world is clearly *this one*, in which the existence of all these elements is an indisputable *historical* fact.)

And yet no single passage of the novel has given me more (intentionally provoked) trouble with its readers. It was repeatedly put to me that it somehow came close to shattering their suspension of disbelief when it came to the historical reality of 1944 (re)presented to that point. To which my reply was, ‘As opposed to the previous few pages, where Stelios is sent on a mysterious errand by his sister’s ghost, who “speaks” to him only in various non-human sounds?’

Less glibly, my point is that readers who objected to this passage (including those who opted for a supernatural reading of the novel) never once took issue with the

¹³⁶ *Signatures of the Visible* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 158. Incidentally, cf. with his comments on the ‘reconstruction of a past history’, p. 40.

¹³⁷ ‘Contemporary African American Fiction’, p. 157.

inclusion of ghosts as somehow damaging to the novel's reality-effect. Nor did they read *VicD* quite as a magic-realist text in the Márquez vein (which it was never meant as); they appeared instead to read it, at least for most of its length and despite the blatantly self-aware framing of the 2015 narrator, as a realistic narrative that just happened to include a possible ghost or two.

My (not terribly original) conclusion is that 'realism', in this instance, was a matter not of plausibility, nor manner of representation,¹³⁸ but of tone – or, more precisely, consistency of tone within certain limits. Previous proleptic sections whose style departed somewhat from that of the main sections (for example, the rewriting of 'A Haunted House' mentioned earlier) did not cause similar concerns because their more 'poetic', solemn mode still read as conventionally consistent with the main narrative. The offending passage, meanwhile, was (intentionally written to be) a kind of push of the illusion of reality to its limits: self-consciously concerned with other fictional (non-'realistic') texts and literary criticism itself, drawing attention to the process whereby personal experience is often supposed to be transmuted into fictional narratives, and assuming a somewhat humorous¹³⁹ tone rarely encountered in the novel up to that point, the passage seemed a good demonstration of Jameson's suggestion that, 'If...the artistic devices... whereby it captures that truth of the world [it claims to represent] are explored and stressed and foregrounded, "realism" will stand unmasked as a mere reality-or-realism *effect*, the reality it purported to deconceal falling at once into the sheerest representation and illusion.'¹⁴⁰

It is in light of receiving these kinds of comments that I am eagerly anticipating¹⁴¹ more readers' opinions now that it is possible for them to read the (edited) novel in its entirety and decide what, if any, message it seems to them to get across. Bottle dropped into the spume, I return to my crag.

¹³⁸ This not being appreciably different to anything that had preceded the particular passage.

¹³⁹ One hopes.

¹⁴⁰ *Signatures of the Visible*, p. 158.

¹⁴¹ And/or dreading.

2. *Victorious Dust*: A novel

We poor dwellers in history. To what can our situation be compared? Only to earlier history.

Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*

In any event you will see that invariably what it is we need to discover is exactly what we already know.

E.L. Doctorow, *The Waterworks*

Directly upstage centre of the pit, on a slight rise, is a dead horse laid out on its side... The dead horse should be as realistic as possible with no attempt to stylize or cartoon him in any way. In fact, it should actually be a dead horse.

Sam Shepard, *Kicking a Dead Horse*¹⁴²

¹⁴² Please note that the novel is submitted herein with three brief summaries where sections were cut to meet the required word count. The cut sections themselves are included in the appendix.

Part One

2015

Where to begin, where to begin...

I wished to speak to you of my childhood. Of that two-room house in Kaisariani. The low ceiling, the dirt floors. Those dim, airless rooms where we slept through summer early afternoons with the blinds closed and fastened. The dirt road outside with the long ditch running down its middle. The dry earth, brought up into the air by the pounding of feet in great sheets of dust. Those rooms, dimmer and cold in winter – how Katerina and I shivered, standing naked in the washtub dragged to the middle of the kitchen floor for our weekly bath, while our mother poured water, heated on the stove, over our heads and down our backs.

I wanted to tell you about Katerina. About how she was drawn to all those buildings collapsed like wet cardboard boxes – how soft those crumbled walls looked from a distance, hanging in tatters off the sides of the buildings – empty doorframes surrounded by nothing, staircases leading nowhere. My sister drawn to them, and once in a while climbing a little up one of those staircases, looking at the sky through an empty doorframe, then climbing back down before she could be seen and our mother alerted.

Or about the rest of our family: about Aunt Aliko, who lived alone in a small one-bedroom flat and kept her few clothes in two suitcases under her bed, having nailed her wardrobe's doors shut, and who once, while visiting, had walked into the bedroom I shared with my sister to find our wardrobe's doors wide open and had screamed, and we'd found her on the floor broken with grief, clutching at the empty sleeve of my one good jacket.

About Aunt Stella, who was a kind and gentle woman, my mother would insist, as we watched her force a thick brown gruel down her son Spiros's throat, pinching his nose with her stubby fingers, yelling at him to 'Eat! Eat!' Spiros, so very fat already at five, but not, it seemed, fat enough for Stella, who was herself so very, very thin.

About our mother – your great-grandmother – who came and went so quietly you could never tell if your mischief stood a chance of going undetected; whose gentleness

was often mistaken for meekness, and equanimity for forbearance, though never by us. About the way she'd dry her hands on the edge of her apron; her hands permanently red, the cuticles frayed. Palms toughened to leather so that she almost couldn't caress you without hurting you.

About our father, who came home long after the war a silent ghost of a man I'd never known; his forever getting startled by the phone, his memory lapses and constant worry of having forgotten some infinitely important something; his stopping in the street outside our front door and looking around him as though lost, and being found, hours later, roaming the neighbourhood as if he couldn't recognize anything or anyone, or couldn't see it right or, worse, did see it right at long last, and rejected what he saw.

I wanted to tell you about myself, the things I can recall. It occurs to me that in some way there is no difference between the two: it's not myself at that age that I remember, only the things I saw. Judas trees. Oleanders. Mud bricks. Clotheslines. Pots. Clouds. Quarrels of sparrows. The underside of a table. I don't always have a story for them. They're just there, and there I am too, seeing them.

There are so many ways to begin, I guess, yet I fear that, were I to start with me, you'd no more understand my childhood than I did. But if one must first set the scene, so to speak, how far back must one reach? Will 1944 do?

'Why not 1821, Dad?' your father would suggest if he were here. 'The Greek Revolution. The source of all our troubles. It's as good a place as any.'

'If not for the revolution, there'd be no Greece for you to insult,' I'd respond tersely, just like in every other iteration of this conversation down the years.

'My point exactly,' your father would say.

October 1944 (2015)

Imagine, then, Lieutenant-Colonel Wilfred Byford-Jones standing on the bridge of the *Adrias* as the Piraeus and nearby Athens hove into view. Enormous grey clouds hung motionless in the midday sky over the sea that lapped gently against the distant shore. Everywhere there was light, neon lights and long chains of coloured fairy lights suspended from the low buildings, and the serpentine flames of welcome fires lit along the shore, casting vast orange reflections on the undersides of the clouds. Huge crowds were gathered at the quayside and the shore, waving American flags and Union Jacks next to Greek flags and red communist banners.

The armada approached cautiously behind the minesweepers still clearing the way. Through his binoculars, Byford-Jones was able to make out the initials formed by the fairy lights: EAM, ELAS, KKE. Someone behind him said something in Greek. Next to him, Captain Toumbas translated: 'He said the power station appears to be intact. We thought the Germans would've blown it up before evacuating.'

Something large dropped out of the sky to his left, doomed, its rigid wings folding back at the moment of watery impact. Byford-Jones started at the sight, preparing for the sound of the crash that never came. When a second similar object plunged into the sea an instant later he realized it had been nothing more than a pair of gannets.

He would only ever half-admit to it, but landing in Piraeus, while without question both a peculiar affair and a joyous occasion, was also about to prove somewhat of a disappointment. Two months earlier, when the prospect had first been presented to him in a conference in Cairo, what he'd pictured with mounting exhilaration had been an assault at dawn: wading through freezing surf, charging up some beach or other, ducking under machine-gun fire; the enemy pillbox overwhelmed; the gun falling silent.

Allowing thoughts such as these to unfold also meant he got a good look at them, so he wasn't unaware that they belied not only his thirty-seven years but his very experience of the war. Nevertheless he had persisted, within due limits, in giving his flights of fantasy free rein, though it wasn't long before the reality of the situation made swift work of them, fighting to a finish where his own conscience had only fought to a

standstill. Invited to yet another briefing during which he expected little of true interest would be heard, he had been instead presented with the following pieces of information: With the expected major advance into Northern Italy that AFHQ had been counting on not having yet materialized, the Americans had declined to contribute troops to the Greek expedition. It was also now rumoured the Germans might already be preparing to abandon Greece of their own accord. If this were the case, no plans to engage them or attempt to cut off their retreat were going to be considered. The upshot was that AFHQ was assigning the liberation of Greece to a token force of just about four or five thousand men. All this had come as a surprise to a number of the British officers involved, not least to Byford-Jones, who couldn't help but wonder about the need to dispatch any troops to Greece in the likely absence of Germans to be fought.

The questions thus created had begun to be answered later that day by the one authority on all things Greek with whom Byford-Jones was already acquainted. In between a myriad other stories, which Lieutenant-Commander Gladwin had begun telling over lunch at the Turf Club, and continued telling as they'd crossed Shari' al-Maghreby to enter Groppi's by the garden entrance – at which jasmine-scented garden, full of little round tables and chairs set out on a sandy floor, a brisk middle-aged Egyptian waiter in a long white galabieh and a red tarboosh had served them their freshly-roasted coffee while around them pashas sipped from cups of hot sweet tea and ordered more cream cakes and ices for their Levantine mistresses, who draped their fur stoles over their chairs and examined with simulated boredom the flowering creepers trained up the walls, pretending not to notice being politely stared at by officers on leave, out looking for female companionship – in between a myriad digressions and asides, anecdotes both long and short, stories both believable and outlandish, Gladwin had found the time to summarize the Greek situation as follows:

'The Germans neither can nor want to hold on to Greece, Wilfred – the troops this requires would be of much more use to them in Italy. The Greeks know this, which complicates things no end. We've been providing their various guerrilla groups with funds and arms, and too often they've been using them to murder each other rather than the Germans. Already looking ahead to what comes next, you could say. And of course, this Lebanon agreement: no one really trusts that anyone else will honour it. EAM/ELAS are convinced we–' at which point he'd paused, having registered Byford-Jones's incomprehension.

‘That’s the communists,’ he’d gone on. ‘EAM is the main resistance movement. It’s meant to be a kind of grand coalition but really, it’s just a front for the Greek Communist Party, the KKE. ELAS is its military arm. What *they’re* frightened of, despite every assurance to the contrary, is that we’re about to attempt to force King George back down their throats. What the royalists, and George himself is my understanding, fear is that we’re plotting to prevent his return to the throne in order to appease the communists. The republicans, meanwhile, don’t want George back on the one hand but are more fearful of the communists than the royalists on the other. *Everyone* is accusing *everyone* else of collaborating with the Germans, Papandreou’s government-in-exile is so intent on appeasing everyone it pleases no one, and there’s still Rallis’s Quisling government to contend with, and its Security Battalions, which comprise *both* republicans *and* royalists who evidently hate the communists more than they hate each other, or even the Germans.’

‘It all sounds like quite the mess,’ Byford-Jones had said.

‘That’s one way of putting it,’ Gladwin had concluded. ‘They’re interesting people, the Greeks. But Greece is not a serious country. Very best of luck to you, Wilfred.’

On any other Saturday, Stelios would have made half a billion drachmas already, which might have been enough for half an oka of bread. Around this hour he’d be stopping by Manos’s stall to buy a fig while eyeing, much like the beggars of Piraeus lying on the pavement on their filthy rags, too frail even to beg, the dark brown pieces of carob cake lined up next to boxes of matches and single cigarettes and whatever else might be for sale that day, peeling back the fruit’s bruise-purple skin to get at the flesh inside, fibrous and sweet and the deep red of ground meat, eating it slowly, crunching fastidiously on the yellow seeds slipping off his teeth like gristle. As a child he’d been convinced that swallowing the seeds whole would make a fig tree grow in his stomach and though he was, at twelve, no longer a child, the habit had stayed with him, adhered to with little conscious thought, like his occasionally reaching into his right trouser pocket and feeling for the marbles in the drawstring pouch he’d made from what had been left of his father’s haversack.

On any other Saturday there'd be more work, but Stelios would have the competition to worry about too: Yannis, the porter who used to be a clerk, Marios, the porter who used to be a cashier, Antonis, the porter who used to be a chauffeur, Thodoris, the porter who used to be a factory worker. On any other Saturday he'd be competing with them for what little work there was, dragging his small wooden cart behind the shoppers with their half-empty rucksacks and net bags, offering to carry their shopping to their homes or, in the afternoon, to the train station from which would depart the day's one train to Chalandri; or, back before the bombing, to Loudovikos Square, where they would catch the tram to Perama, the greys and browns and dark greens of the camouflage-painted tramcar uselessly invisible beneath the passengers hanging off its sides or sitting on its roof, crouched away from the pantograph sparking over their heads, wrinkling their noses at the acrid scorch in the air.

This was all before the bombing. There'd been no trains for a month after that. There were still no trams. Two hundred and seventy-seven days.

On any other Saturday shoppers would be shopping and porters would be porting and vendors would be vending and beggars would be begging, but today shoppers and porters and vendors and beggars were instead watching, standing on the quayside and farther down the shore since early morning, the crowds already huge when Stelios had made his way to the port just before seven. Thousands and thousands of people looking out to sea, the quayside festooned with lights, flames lit along the shore, their smoke mixing with the smoke rising from the ruins of the piers, the port authority and custom house, which the Germans had blown up Thursday afternoon before leaving in the evening, petulant children smashing the things they'd taken rather than be made to return them. The smoke drifting out over the sea where gulls dropped below it in smooth downward curves of flight, wings beating lazily then with great effort as the birds, abruptly heavy, alighted on the water's still surface, the water of the bay with its mines and its floating pieces of building or boat. And far off in the distance the reason for all the waiting, the ships coming into view, the crowds waving their flags and banners, cheering with voices already hoarse, cheering for the Allied ships that for three years had been always coming to save them but had never come, unlike the Allied planes coming to bomb them, which had.

Stelios reached into his pocket and felt the clay marbles through the pouch. The baker had charged him one thousand drachmas before letting him place the ten carefully

rounded lumps in the oven. He hadn't told his mother. He'd carved Maria's initials on them with a cutter he'd constructed by placing a long rusty nail on the tram tracks near the square and letting the tram flatten it before wrapping a length of twine around the part meant to be the haft. He'd used a piece of cork as a sheath so as to carry the blade around in his pocket without getting cut, had done all this shortly after he became a porter, having been robbed twice already by a pair of slightly older kids. He'd gone away and made his cutter and the third time they'd jumped him had given one of them a nasty gash across his cheek and they'd never come at him again, had in fact never again been seen anywhere near the port, which he suspected should have troubled him more, what with the nail being rusty and all. The marbles had turned out beautifully tan and round. Three days later had come the bombing and they'd stayed in the pouch in his pocket ever since. He never played with them. Where the bakery had stood all that remained was a modest mound of picked-over rubble.

Everyone was cheering and shouting and waving and dancing and hugging and crying but Stelios didn't join in, he'd come to the port to work, same as every other morning, even if there would be no work to be had today, and to satisfy his curiosity as to whether these fabled ships would indeed come now they were no longer needed. He backed away as the throng pushed forward to the very edge of the quay, and climbed on top of his little cart to see over their heads, his gaze shifting to the ships, still too far to be seen meaningfully, then being drawn back to the crowd, to these people come here to welcome the men who had killed his sister.

Just ahead of the *Adrias*, the first minesweepers were entering the bay of Piraeus. Byford-Jones could see the smoke from the fires rising in sheets, the air behind them distorted as if seen through smudged glass. He believed he could now detect a faint smell of burning wood underneath the ever-present hot smell of engine oil, the cool smells of the (he couldn't help it, already he wasn't quite seeing it for himself) wine-dark sea, of wet winds and salt and fish and the seaweed washing ashore in tangled mats.

'Well, Captain?' Byford-Jones said, turning to Toumbas, not exactly sure what he was asking, accompanying his question with a wave of the hand broad enough to take in both the port with its waiting multitudes and half the horizon.

Toumbas continued scanning the shore through his binoculars. 'The communists are not to be trusted,' he said finally. He lowered the binoculars and turned to give Byford-Jones a severe look, as if daring him to disagree.

'They've respected the Lebanon and Caserta agreements,' Byford-Jones pointed out. 'At least so far.'

'So far,' Toumbas said. 'And only because it suited them.'

An hour later Byford-Jones came ashore on a caïque belonging to the Anglo-Hellenic Schooner Flotilla and was immediately mobbed by a frenzied crowd. As he tried to make his way through the push and jostle to get to one of the jeeps awaiting to transfer officers to central Athens, he became convinced the city's whole population had turned out to greet them. He managed to join two more officers on a jeep that proceeded to move at a crawl down the swarming street, the driver leaning on the horn to create a passage just wide enough for the vehicle to squeeze through. Brightly coloured banners with messages of welcome in English and Greek hung overhead, most of them calling them 'brothers', some calling them 'comrades'. The multitudes threw flowers at them, chrysanthemums and cyclamens and roses, draped Greek flags over their shoulders, tried to lift them out of the seats and carry them away. There was a strange odour emanating from the flags, unpleasantly caustic but crisp.

The crowd to their left parted and Byford-Jones caught a glimpse of a small boy standing on a little wooden cart, staring straight at him. The boy wore a black wool sweater and dark green trousers, both too big for him. His face was haggard, his cheeks sunken and pale, and his forearms were covered with red splotches up to his elbows where the sweater's sleeves sat bunched, making his already stick-thin forearms look like the forelegs of some moulting insect. He could have been anywhere from nine to twelve years old, though if he were nearer that upper limit he would have been too small for his age. The boy looked on, expressionless, then the crowd came together and he was gone, replaced by a tall man in a black coat and grey trousers. There was a mark on his face that

could have been made by a fishhook, a red line extending from the corner of his lips to the lobe of his ear. The man was looking straight at Byford-Jones, as expressionless as the boy had been. After a moment he too vanished.

Stelios had seen the jeep slowly making its way towards the spot where he stood on his cart, cutting through the crowds that sutured themselves behind it, had seen the three soldiers smile at the flowers thrown at them, wave at the cheering throng, adjust the flags over their uniforms as if they were capes, the blue of the cloth turning their ruddy faces purple. Now the jeep went past him, the crowd parted, the Englishman turned to look Stelios's way, was seen clearly, the slicked-back hair and wide forehead and thin moustache, the eyes wide with joy and bemusement, falsely kind, false, all of him, the crowd drew back together, the jeep went past, Stelios on his toes trying to catch one last glimpse of the man, seeing him rise from his seat and turn to look back, not at Stelios but somewhere off to his left. Stelios felt in his pocket for the cutter and pictured trailing it across the Englishman's face but it was no good, as much as he wanted to want it he didn't, what would it solve, nothing. He observed himself arrive at this idea with something like mistrust, unsure of its origin or truth, as he jumped off his cart, turned his back to the crowds and started on his way home.

By then Byford-Jones had already had the boy and the scarred man chased out of his mind by colours and noise. He looked up to see people on the balconies of the low brick buildings throwing yet more flowers down at them, leaning out of windows to shout 'Zito Anglia!', to which the jeep's passengers would reply 'Zito Hellas!'. Every single street was decorated with Union Jacks, Greek and American and Russian flags.

The unprepossessing brick houses of Piraeus eventually gave way to the four- and five-storey blocks of modern flats of Athens, and then to Syntagma Square, where the greatest, most frenzied crowd yet was gathered, facing, not east, towards the Old Royal Palace – which for a decade now had housed the Greek Parliament – but towards the square's northeast corner and the off-white stately rectangle of the Hotel Grande Bretagne. Projecting bays framed the double portico of its façade, and a wide balcony extended across the third storey, from which balcony's railing a tall flagpole bearing a large Greek flag jutted at an angle, and on which balcony stood the objects of the crowd's adulation: five or six men, a couple of them in British Army uniforms, the rest in dark suits, waving downward in a vain attempt at silence in preparation for the delivery of a

speech. Somewhere – Byford-Jones couldn't see where – a band was mangling a patriotic air, audible only in fragments, when the noise of the crowd subsided briefly before once again gathering force and having its way with the handful of out-of-tune instruments.

He made his way across the square in the direction of the Grande Bretagne, accepting handshakes, embraces, pats on the back, occasionally submitting to having his cheeks kissed by both women and men. Twice he resigned himself to being hoisted on someone's shoulders and paraded around while waving a flag he'd been handed. It was a long while before he made it to the top of the broad marble steps at the hotel's entrance, where he paused for a moment to look upon the square before turning around and entering the hotel's lobby.

Mrs Petrou had told her husband she would get the potatoes herself. Mr Petrou had that morning offered – what a lark – to take care of the shopping (as well he should have; it was at his insistence that she would be making Viennese nockerls in the first place) and, having had his offer accepted, had at the last minute revealed he would first be 'nipping down' to Piraeus to witness the arrival of the fleet and take in the festivities. Mrs Petrou, surprised only at her own surprise, had pointed out that the round trip from Kolonaki to Piraeus most certainly did not qualify as 'nipping down', nor was, in her estimation, a reasonable course of action if what he intended was both for them to lunch at a reasonable hour and for that lunch to consist of Viennese nockerls. 'Piffle,' Mr Petrou had murmured, closing the door behind him.

The man was insufferable; no other word would do. Though Mrs Petrou did not doubt that, when all was said and done, to be insufferable was the sole business of husbands. In return, the business of wives was to come to a precise understanding of the ways in which their husbands would disappoint, and to correct their own expectations accordingly. This feat they could only hope to achieve by keeping their husbands at arm's length, for they required a little distance to be seen clearly; brought too close to the eye they became a blur. Marriage was perforce a lonely undertaking, which the Good Lord in his wisdom must have borne in mind when He had placed child-rearing at its core. She should have expected nothing more from Mr Petrou than that he would go on being as insufferable as always; hence her consternation at her own surprise. In the forty-sixth

year of her life, and the twenty-first year of her marriage, she really should have known better.

Such thoughts occupied her while she dressed in a brown calf-length skirt, a low-cut white silk blouse and her tan spring coat, opted against a hat, let her long auburn hair fall down past her shoulders, emptied her handbag of all but her keys and a handkerchief in which she wrapped the silver rose brooch that had belonged to her mother-in-law, and left the second-storey flat in Skoufa Street, turning right once she had reached Kolonaki Square, and following Kanari Street for two blocks before turning left onto Merlin Street where her solicitor's office was to be found at number 12. The sky above her head was the languid grey of boiled pork, with the exception of a thin band to the east that shone with a dull glimmer which put her in mind of the bellies of fresh mullets. She heard in the distance vast waves of noise rising and falling: the tumult of the great crowd gathered in its astounding idiocy in Syntagma Square, just over half a kilometre away. There was no hope for this country, she told herself for the thousandth time, savouring the repetition, for it served as proof of the steadfastness of her opinions, the discipline of her intellect, as long as such idiocy remained the rule rather than the exception.

Setting aside her irritation, she noted the acceptable number of people encountered along her route. This was as it should be. Life had not come to a standstill during the occupation; there was no reason for it to do so now. One day would have been enough. Three bordered on the obscene. Especially since she could not see much cause for rejoicing. The real danger lay ahead of them.

Being reminded of the existence of the communists brought her up short. She proceeded at a slower pace, examining passers-by a little more closely, the men especially, searching out the eyes, half-hidden under the low-set brims of their fedoras. She could not say what it was she was looking for, but she was relieved not to find it. No one seemed to be paying undue attention either to her or anyone else. There were familiar faces too, walking past her, some averting their gaze, as they had ever since it had become known that the Petrous had not been forced to put up *Hauptsturmführer* Lautenbach; rather, they had volunteered. Unlike Mr Petrou, she had never hid her contempt for these people, nor had she minded in the slightest when her family had ceased to be welcome in their homes. Hypocrites, all of them. As if everyone had not done whatever they could to survive. Mrs Petrou could already see them, a few years

down the line, from the safety of historical distance, coming forward to claim that they, unlike the Petrous and their ilk, had *resisted*. The Petrous owed them no explanation, and certainly no apology, she had always maintained, yet now she wavered. Had they turned themselves into targets by refusing to offer one? How afraid should they be? Was there some communist death squad out there carrying their names on a piece of paper?

While Hauptsturmführer Lautenbach still lived with them, they had felt safe. (Even Yorgos, she felt, though he never had admitted as much; it was only after Friedrich had returned to Germany that her son had begun to act in ways that aroused suspicion.) Safe, even when that poor cadet, Rogakos, not even twenty years old, innocent as a lamb, had been murdered late at night outside his house in Marasli Street, a mere six blocks from the Petrous' home. His mother had been at the window, waiting for him. The last thing he said to her was 'Close the window, mother,' before two men walked up to him and shot him in the back. Safe, even when Undersecretary Kalyvas had been killed in broad daylight outside his home in Solonos Street, one block away from their home. He'd been getting in his car when a man shot him in the back. He tried to crawl out through the passenger door. Two men who had been standing on the opposite pavement approached and shot him in the head. It was just past seven in the morning; the shots woke Mrs Petrou up. She cracked open a balcony door and peered outside. The bitter air pierced through her and she shivered with the cold. There was a light snow on the ground, already melting, turning the dirt into yellow mud. Even then, more often than not they had felt protected; untouchable. It seemed odd, in retrospect.

It was perhaps this preoccupation with what had been lost that led her to being assaulted, as she approached the front door of number 12, by a vision of the early days of the occupation – it must have been the summer of '41 – that awful season when a number of buildings up and down the block had briefly housed Italian soldiers who would alleviate their boredom by engaging in interminable, chaotic games of football in the street, driving the dirt up in loose spirals that settled on the just-washed sheets hanging from the balconies overhead, leaving behind them when they withdrew the burst remnants of those unspeakable objects they inflated and used in lieu of a ball.

Once the Gestapo had taken over the building at number 6 the street had assumed a more civilized image and Mrs Petrou had found her mood to be much improved when on her way to see Mr Voreas. Walking past the three-storey edifice at number 6 she would often hear music played on a gramophone somewhere on the

ground floor – symphonies, operas, works she could recognize, if not name, from listening along with Hauptsturmführer Lautenbach when, after dinner, he would bid the Petrous join him in their sitting room, select a record from the collection that had, rather incredibly, accompanied him all the way from Hildesheim to Athens in two leather carry cases, and place it on the gramophone he had installed on a small, round wooden table in the corner (the gramophone too was his, and a good thing it was that he had brought it along, since their own had had to be sold the previous year) before letting himself sink with a contented sigh into Mr Petrou's armchair and invite the pair of them to take their places on the couch; Mrs Petrou had not known whether to admire Lautenbach for his dedication to culture or quietly take offence at his certainty that he would find none in Athens – and though it was not uncommon for stranger, more violent sounds to erupt from the basement of 6 Merlin Street, just loud enough to reach the ears of passers-by above the more pleasing strains issuing forth from the ground floor, where metal grilles were fixed cage-like over the windows, this did no lasting harm to the overall impression of refinement; the Gestapo were, after all, police, and the building now a police station.

It was only a couple of years into the new regime that it had occurred to Mrs Petrou to ask Mr Voreas whether his business had been affected by the changes to the neighbourhood. Mr Voreas had appeared to take her meaning but had brushed off the question, suggesting that the vanishingly small number of clients who had sought representation elsewhere had been more than made up by the new opportunities presented to him once the wheels of the Greek and German economies had become so tightly interlocked. To say nothing of the property boom, which if memory served him right he had predicted and because of which, if he was not mistaken, the Petrous, upon taking his advice, had done rather well. (It was true. They would have done even better, and not gone hungry before the arrival of Hauptsturmführer Lautenbach, if Mr Petrou had not proved to be incompetent at simple arithmetic.)

The lobby of 12 Merlin Street – quiet compared to the street, once she had closed the door behind her – was dark, the air inside the building was close and smelled of freshly dug earth, the steps of the cramped, dimly lit marble staircase leading to the first floor landing were worn, their edges rounded, their middle sections dipping in shallow parabolas the grey of old bone.

She knocked on the polished oak door and waited. As it swung open Mr Voreas was already greeting her with a wide smile, as though she were there by appointment. (He had been without a secretary for a while now. He had shown little willingness to elaborate as to why, and Mrs Petrou had not pressed.)

‘Good morning, Mrs Petrou! What a wonderful surprise. Do come in.’

‘Good morning, Mr Voreas. I am not interrupting, I hope?’

‘Not at all! Please,’ he said, stepping aside and motioning her to enter with a broad, graceful gesture that she thought, not for the first time, had something of the theatrical to it, an element of exaggeration, as if he were on stage, projecting for the benefit of those seated at the back of the auditorium.

As she walked past him he closed the door and briefly placed his right palm on the small of her back, guiding her gently forward. Mr Voreas would never take this kind of liberty in the presence of Mr Petrou; this was one of the reasons, though not the primary one, why Mrs Petrou preferred to see the solicitor on her own. A woman of a certain age could be forgiven for wanting this, she believed: that a man should look pleased as she came in, and that he should demonstrate his pleasure in the subtlety of light, unnecessary, respectfully suggestive touch – respectful because it called for neither acknowledgment nor response, suggestive because it was unnecessary. And how, at length, a series of such touches, administered (too infrequently) over years, should awaken a dormant world of feeling, or perhaps, in all innocence, create an entirely new one – no, one must be forgiven for wanting this.

Mr Voreas led her to one of the two armchairs placed at an angle across from his walnut pedestal desk and waited for her to sit down before stepping around to his desk chair and, plucking at his trousers, taking a seat himself. No sooner had he done so than he made to rise again.

‘I am terribly sorry – let me take your coat.’

‘No, please, I am quite all right, thank you,’ she said. She did not wish to get too comfortable, not today. She sat there, rather rigidly, with her coat buttoned up and her handbag on her knees.

‘Are you cold? Would you like me to close that?’ he asked, nodding towards the partially open window.

‘I am fine, thank you. Not too bad today – the weather. It is just... I cannot stay long.’

'A pity,' he said with a rueful smile. 'I trust there is nothing wrong?' he added quickly, the smile faltering. 'You are well? And Mr Petrou? Yorgos?'

'Oh – no, very well. We are all so very well.' She often felt like a fool upon finding herself in his company, repeating the same few phrases over and over, unable to formulate one sentence without recourse to some negative. (Did she fear so much that she would say 'yes' to him? To what? He, out of – decency? kindness? she would not call it love – had not, in all the years of their acquaintance, not once allowed her to believe he expected to hear it, though she could not doubt he longed for it.) She paused, waiting for the feeling to subside; it always did after the initial rush, settling into an agitation so barely perceptible that she could get on with the business at hand. She could afford to wait, their silences were companionable, had always been so. What a relief they were, next to the mute combat of the Petrous' silences. Her husband did it all without speaking, when he could: rebuffed her, opposed her, resisted her, pressed opinions on her, or simply ignored her; his muteness was a negotiation with no clear objective in sight, other than the confirmation of his high idea of himself.

'I am happy to hear that,' Mr Voreas said. 'Do not tell me you intend to join the festivities at the square? They have been making quite the ruckus since early this morning,' he continued, gesturing towards the window. His tone was exquisitely judged: amused, ever-so-slightly disapproving, finally noncommittal.

'I had hoped you knew me better than that,' she retorted, mock-offended, playing along. 'You yourself are here, after all.'

'Too much to do,' he said with unexpected seriousness, showing her the neat stacks of files covering most of the surface of his desk. He hesitated, as though he were considering what to say next, how forthcoming he should be. 'In any case, true patriotism does not need to posture, whether to others in public or to itself in private, would you not say? Is not the essence of it to get on with our duties regardless, as we have done until now?'

'One can only wish more of our fellow countrymen saw things with such clarity,' she said, thinking of her oaf of a husband. She knew immediately something in her voice had given her away.

'Of course, one should not rush to condemn those patriots whose enthusiasm gets the better of them,' Mr Voreas said, holding her gaze.

‘No, of course not,’ she said, grateful for his tact and understanding. Though they were united in thinking Mr Petrou an oaf, this unity was acceptable only for as long as it remained unspoken. In this, like in so many other things, they operated in delightful harmony. He said nothing that would require her to defend her husband, and she said nothing to praise him; it would have impelled Mr Voreas to assent to the existence of qualities in Mr Petrou they both knew the man to be without.

There followed another pause. Mr Voreas appeared to be staring out through the half-open window, deep in thought. The sky had turned a darker grey. Black clouds roiled in the distance like ink spilled in water. From where Mrs Petrou was sitting, the sky, seen through the glass, seemed to have become one ghastly smear pressed up against the windowpane.

‘It is not always easy, perhaps...’

She waited for him to go on. He did not. She turned and examined his familiar handsome face; saw it – truly saw it – for the first time since entering his office. She was shocked to discover he looked unwell. His complexion was sallow, his eyes bloodshot. He had not shaved that morning. He was impeccably turned out as usual, yet his suit jacket did not sit well across the shoulders, his tie was loosened a fraction, and the top button of his shirt was undone. As pale as his skin was, a faint redness shone through the pallor like embers glowing beneath layers of ash. Was that what he had looked like ever since opening the door? It seemed incredible that she could have failed to notice. She searched for something to say. ‘Easy...?’ was all she could manage, finally.

‘To perform our duties correctly, I mean,’ he said, then hesitated once more. ‘Or – no, that is not at all what I mean. Forgive me, I am not making sense, I know...’ The sentence petered out, as though he had lost interest in his own apology.

‘If this is a bad time...’ she offered, greatly moved by his distress. But that was the wrong thing to say. She would not dream of abandoning him now. To witness this considerate, capable, self-forgetful man lose the tranquillity and poise that were so natural to him – she felt tears welling up in her throat. Whatever it was that troubled him, she wanted to know. She wanted to help him, to mother him, to heal him; she would take him in her arms – no, she would not. Of course not. If she could not do away with his difficulties, she would at least abstain from adding to them. But perhaps she could do away with them. She had to fix this, let him know she did not mean to leave. She set her bag on the floor by her feet, undid the top two buttons of her coat.

‘As hard, as distasteful as our duties may be on occasion, we get on with them,’ he said. ‘What else should we do?’ he said with a smile that was a little more uncertain than she would have liked.

He reached inside the inner pocket of his jacket and produced a silver cigarette case. He opened it and offered it to Mrs Petrou. She refused with a shake of her head. He drew a cigarette out, tapped it gently against the case and brought it to his lips. He dug a box of matches out of a vest pocket, and in one smooth motion struck a match and lifted it to his face, then put out the match with a flick of his wrist and watched a thin plume of smoke rise from its spent head before dropping it in the amber glass ashtray on his desk. He smoked for a minute with his head thrown a little back, taking in the white ceiling.

(As a child he would hide out in the small cellar of the house in Kifissia, striking then putting out match after match, the whitewashed walls and wine barrels jumping at him, trembling and granular, before retreating back into darkness while he blindly brought the extinguished match to his face and breathed in its sulphurous fumes. Set on their sides, the barrels squatted aggressively on short, stout legs, round-bellied and watchful, like bulls in a pen. Their spigots hung over the earthen floor like wet muzzles lowered before the charge, giving off a sharp, vinegary stink. His father was forever losing his matchbooks, his mother was convinced the man was losing his mind; it was not until their gleeful son had graduated to pilfering their cigarettes, misplacing their keys, and rearranging the bric-à-brac into subtly accusatory compositions that they had finally caught on. At which point, rather than coming to an end, their arguments had focused on determining whose fault he might be.

It seemed strange to him that at the time he must have failed to interpret their quarrels as evidence of their mutual loathing and contempt; so obvious was in retrospect their hatred for each other that he often wondered whether he had only pretended not to see it, even while the pleasure he took in keeping his secret was somehow predicated on the severity of its consequences. And though he could not quite feel any regret for what he had done to them – having done nothing more than expose what they already felt – he sometimes wished to be granted access to that younger self whose actions were known to him but whose reasoning and complexities of motive the intervening years had all but obscured. Had he been punishing them, or attempting to educate them? Had he been horrified, or amused? And what was it that he had objected to: his parents’

attempts to conceal their enmity from him, or their failure? He could make some reasonable conjectures regarding all this, he felt, but he was not one for guesswork; he needed to *know*. The farther the past receded the more present he sensed it to be, and the more desperate his need grew. But once it came into view, it would not hold still long enough to be submitted to his gaze. As if he were down in a cellar with it, lighting matches to bring it forth. Match extinguished, it would be plunged back into darkness until the next match was lit, and there it would be again, threatening to make its move and never making it.)

'...job well done is its own reward, of course,' Mrs Petrou was concluding. Once she fell silent, a startled look crossed his face and she realized he had not been paying attention. It did not become him, this air of distraction. A moment of weakness was one thing; extended, it came too much to resemble a character trait.

'Quite so, quite so,' Mr Voreas said. 'But tell me, Mrs Petrou, do you ever wonder whether the ambition to perform our job well could prove to be an ambiguous virtue?' His gaze lingered on the wisps of auburn hair framing her long neck, took in the white skin near the base of her throat, crossed here and there by delicate blue veins; then, disguised as the unfocused, blind gaze of introspection, was drawn lower still, to the flesh above the low-cut square neckline, broken up into a cluster of tiny diamonds that he found more appealing than any necklace she might have worn.

'Consider the current situation,' he continued. 'Despite the difficulties we faced, there were those of us who did not neglect our duties. In the face of everything, we performed them, to the best of our ability. Not only because we desired to be of service to our country, but also because it is our lot to be compelled to – as you so wisely put it – do our job well, no matter what... But now it appears we are about to be called to account by those who, as the last few years have so amply demonstrated, would have preferred that we had let things fall apart.'

'Preposterous,' said Mrs Petrou.

'They would have us believe that our jobs, adapted in their particulars to fit our constricted circumstances, yet unchanged in their essence, had somehow, by virtue of the subjugation of our country, become services to the enemy. And that therefore we should have done them badly. Or not at all.' He shook his head in disbelief.

'What nonsense,' Mrs Petrou said, her indignation roused to a higher pitch.

‘Nonsense indeed,’ Mr Voreas said with a snort, his attempt at derision undercut by the dourness of his expression. ‘Yet this is the kind of thinking we are up against. And I suspect it is more widespread than either of us would care to admit.’

As if in illustration of this point, another burst of noise came through the window. Slower to die down and with a hysterical edge to it, it sounded to Mrs Petrou less celebratory than menacing; less a cheer than a call for blood.

‘We are being unfairly judged, I am afraid. Judged, in the absence of any understanding, by those we helped save, because we did not save them in the manner they would have chosen.’

Seeing the look on her face, he started to apologize. ‘My dear Mrs Petrou, I did not mean to—’

‘These are trying days for everyone,’ she cut him off. ‘The uncertainty, the rumours...’

She paused and deliberated whether to seize this opportunity to sound out Mr Voreas upon the matter of her son, discover whether he might know anything of relevance without alerting him to what she was doing. (She had never quite figured out what to do in order to either allay or confirm her suspicions. Searching through Yorgos’s things had yielded no useful information, other than the disturbing recurrence of the initial V. written in cursive – elegant cursive, a part of her had been pleased to note – in the margins of his notebooks; involving her husband, which she had been loath to do and had only embarked on because their son appeared, inexplicably, to respect the man, had proved impossible; attempting to interrogate her son herself had produced nothing more than one-word-long answers – ‘Out’, ‘Friends’, ‘Late’ – delivered with great resistance and a secretive awkwardness that could have been signs of participation in some leftist conspiracy, or might have been signs that he was in love. She was either a bourgeois enemy, or just his mother, but one way or another, the message was clear: she did not need to know.)

‘It is difficult to know whom one can rely on. With the exception of one’s family, naturally,’ she heard herself say, and realized she had decided to somehow broach the subject after all. ‘And how is your family? Well, I trust?’

‘Very well,’ Mr Voreas said. ‘Everyone is doing splendidly.’

‘And your daughter? We have not seen her in too long.’

‘Oh, Vassiliki is fine. Of course, we hardly see her ourselves nowadays. She is so busy with her studies. You know, just the other day I mentioned to her we had not seen Yorgos in a while.’

This was enough to crush Mrs Petrou’s hopes. ‘The children are so busy nowadays,’ she said. ‘Was it ever like that for us at their age?’

‘I suspect it might have been. May I take this opportunity to remind you my offer still stands? My door is open to him once he graduates. Once all this has blown over – and it *will* blow over – there will be much to do. We have a country to rebuild.’

She should say something. She should ask him to find out what he could. He had connections; it should not prove difficult. But what would he find? The shame of it. The danger of it, too: she did not know enough of Mr Voreas’s connections to be able to predict the consequences of their discoveries. ‘You are too kind, Mr Voreas,’ she said.

The forced smile did not fool him, overruled by the slight forward tilt of the head that showed the part in her hair. He could not pity her – he was too close to her for that – but sensed once more a great sorrow stir within him, the vertigo of standing near the edge of an abyss he had been walking parallel to for many years, a chasm he was unable to either draw away from in self-protection or allow himself to fall into in self-indulgence, and wondered once again how hard it must be, how hopeless, to have to return home each day to find there no person that you wanted, a spouse to commune with, one who would not walk by you without speaking. This Mr Voreas could not imagine, any more than he could fathom what his own parents had ever seen in each other to make them suppose they belonged together. He knew himself to be that rare thing: happily married. And so also knew that, as much as he cared for Mrs Petrou, as great as his need was to be near her, as desperately as he wanted to comfort her in the way he intuited she sometimes wished, he would never take that leap into the abyss – either pulled by desire, which he resisted, or pushed in by misery or routine, which were unknown to him – but would continue walking by its edge for as long as it were possible to do so. And at the end of every day would return home to his family and marvel at the simplicity and ease of his happiness – which he knew should have been neither simple nor easy and yet, mysteriously, was – and forgive himself his frequent dreams of Mrs Petrou, feverish but somehow coy dreams that, he was certain, operated in deference to her desires rather than his own.

A loud cheer was heard, then died out, like shingles coming to rest behind a withdrawing wave. He looked towards the window. There came a brief lull, then another, louder cheer.

‘Not at all, Mrs Petrou. It is my own gain I am considering.’ He pointed at the folders on his desk. ‘This is all becoming too much for me to manage on my own.’

He picked up his pen and then put it down again, laying it slantwise across a contract for the sale of a property in Theseio, covering the surname of the seller. ‘Mrs Zoe...’ he read, and struggled to put a face to the name. Then he remembered; poor woman, he thought. A cramped little flat, he recalled, but with a lovely view of the Parthenon through the kitchen window.

He lifted his gaze over Mrs Petrou, to the bare white wall across the room, and briefly occupied himself with thoughts of finally decorating it in some manner, so that his eye might have something to explore in moments such as this one, when it seemed to him that he was not so much directing his intellect towards some conclusion as waiting for one to emerge, fully-formed and inarguable, from some part of his mind communication with which appeared to him to be conducted solely in the form of the receiving of what, though masked as suggestions or possibilities, were in effect orders. He wondered briefly whether this part was responsible for his dreams of Mrs Petrou, and wondered next whether one could refuse to be held accountable for decisions consciously made but incompletely understood. A wall hanging perhaps, printed with leafy arabesques, complex yet patterned, to compete with the extemporizing discord passing itself off as ordered thought, helices and vortices to trace and surrender to until patterns emerged, cohered, only to be subsumed into larger patterns, with no end in sight until the border of the tapestry was reached, at which point one could with only a little effort extend the pattern as one pleased, allow it to spill across the border into the white void of the wall until one found oneself in the centre of – what exactly? Another world, or yet one more thing in this one?

(Mrs Petrou had sank into the armchair and let her gaze drift to the lit torchère and its lovely blossom-shaped porcelain shade, shining like a small sun at the centre of which could be made out a still brighter star. She could smell dust burning on the bulb. She felt suddenly feverish with thought, felt at her temples a pulsating pressure, building then waning, building then waning, and imagined what the urgency of their reflections

must be doing to their minds, and it occurred to her that if this were the case there could be no means of knowing – the dialogue of the mind with itself being held in an idiolect mutually apprehensible no matter how deformed – save by opening themselves up to the scrutiny of others, forgoing the sanctity of their innermost meanderings, their private climates and weather systems with their haphazard turns and peculiar constancies, their sunny spells and scattered showers, choosing instead to parade their emotions – *stretto* passages in the fugue of their selves – rephrased as if they were single statements, one after the other, transfigured to the point where they came to seem even to them spurious or excessive, arid or too fructuous, nothing, substantially, but so much air, pushed outward by the central pulse of themselves, what the ancients, Mr Voreas reminded himself, called *pneuma*, air in motion, that was all, just wind; once it died out, it were as if it had never been.)

A look at her wristwatch informed Mrs Petrou it was already past noon. She was running late, would have to make her excuses and go, lunch – lunch! It had completely slipped her mind. She started to say something, then hesitated. How did one bring up potatoes at the tail end of such a conversation without seeming utterly vacuous? And yet one needed to eat, after all.

Mr Voreas recognized the hesitation for what it was. He sat up straight and said, 'My dear Mrs Petrou, I do apologize – you did say you were busy. Was there anything I could help you with today?'

'Oh please, there is no need. You know full well how much I enjoy our little *tête-à-têtes*,' Mrs Petrou replied. 'But now that you mention it... Mr Petrou is in the mood for nockerls,' she said, with just the right note of exasperation at her husband and his trifling obsessions.

'But of course. An oka, let us say?'

'Yes, that would do,' Mrs Petrou said, glad to have glided through the exchange with the minimum of embarrassment. 'Though first, if you do not mind, there is the matter of payment.'

'Oh – but there really is no need, please...' he said.

'I insist,' Mrs Petrou said.

'Well, I suppose under the circumstances...' Mr Voreas said. 'You would be paying for the potatoes only, I assume?'

'No, I would like to settle the account please,' Mrs Petrou said decisively. Too decisively, he thought, and felt panic rising inside him. The prospect of communist rule had convinced the Petrous to leave. Where would they go? Egypt? He would never see her again. He found himself resisting the urge to lean towards her, launch into an appeal. Was that the real reason she had come – to give him a chance to convince her they were safe? Why had he failed? What else could he have said?

'I trust...' he began to say, then stopped. What could he say? It was too late. It was over. (What was over? He would not tell even himself. It would be hard enough to live with the loss without having to acknowledge it.)

'As you said, under the circumstances... I should not impose on your kindness any longer; I could not continue to rely on your services otherwise.'

(She was not leaving. Everything would go on as it had, for the rest of their lives.)

'My dear Mrs Petrou, there *really* is no need,' he repeated. This time he meant it; he did not care about the debt, would forgive it this very instant if she would only consent to its forgiveness.

'I must insist,' she said.

'Very well,' he said, ready to agree with whatever would please her.

'Unless I am mistaken, the total stands at...' She paused as if she were performing a silent calculation, and named a sum in the thousands of billions.

Though he knew her calculation to be correct, he produced a small black notebook from an inside pocket of his jacket and riffled through its pages, looking for her entry. Discounting so as to arrive at a round sum, he presented her with the new total. She reached for her bag, took out a red handkerchief from whose folds she produced a silver rose brooch. 'I believe this should cover it,' she said.

He took the piece from her and examined it. 'Oh, absolutely,' he said. It could have been worthless, for all he cared. Though it was obviously not.

'Well,' he said. He stood up, accepted the bag Mrs Petrou proffered, and left the room.

In his absence, she examined the picture of his wife resting at the corner of his desk in a filigreed gold frame. Mrs Vorea, posed in three-quarter profile, sitting in a cushioned wicker chair on the veranda of a country house, the only thing visible behind her a long expanse of green grass. She was peering into the sky to her left, and though it

was clearly intended that she appear lost in pleasant contemplation, there was a tension in her features that made it seem as if she were looking for some predator gliding above, ready to descend upon her at any moment.

Mr Voreas returned. She stood up, buttoning her coat, before she took the bag off his hands and thanked him. 'I am always at your service,' he said. He showed her to the door then came and stood by the window to watch her make her way up the street.

Once she was gone, he glanced in the opposite direction and his gaze was drawn to a man standing at the corner of Merlin Street and Vasilissis Sofias Avenue, facing towards Syntagma Square. The man was tall, and impossibly, shockingly fat. He stood there, immense and careless in appearance, in a white shirt and no tie, unshaven, his hair unkempt. The cut of his shoes seemed odd in some way that Mr Voreas could not pinpoint. Presented with a perfectly ordinary right profile, Mr Voreas nonetheless grew certain that there was something wrong with the half of the face he could not see. The man turned his back to him and walked away, disappearing around the corner, and Mr Voreas closed the window.

He returned to his desk, reached into his pocket, produced a key and opened a drawer, from which he retrieved a sheaf of papers tied together with a piece of frayed string. He undid the string, arranged the papers in a neat stack and set them aside, keeping in front of him only the last page, with its last, incomplete, troublesome sentence. He scanned his desk for his pen, picked it up and crossed out the sentence and wrote instead about the small cellar of the house in Kifisia.

All day long my sister had been waiting for our father to come. Sitting on the small landing outside our door, staring at the house across the street, the rocks scattered across the roof, holding down the loose shingles. The street was a narrow gully sloped in the middle, where the rainwater pooled in brown puddles that vanished slowly in the sun, gathering their edges inward like breath on a mirror.

The street was empty. None of the other children could be heard playing anywhere nearby. Only a few of the neighbourhood elders had made their appearance since early that morning. Everyone else was gone. Some, like Aunt Aliko, on errands that would keep them gone till late in the afternoon, the rest to Piraeus and Syntagma to

welcome the British. Even most of the EAMites had vanished – my sister had spotted just a single patrol all day, five or six men instead of the usual ten, in worn-out suits, rifles slung over their shoulders with rope. Katerina had wanted to go to Syntagma. She'd heard the buildings in the city centre were taller than you could even imagine. But our mother had the baby to take care of, and Aunt Stella was ill, so there'd been no one to take her.

Three or four days a week, Aunt Aliki would leave the house before dawn, would come back late in the afternoon with a few potatoes, a little olive oil or flour, some of which she'd hand over to our mother and Aunt Stella, some of which she'd set off early the next morning to sell at the black market. When first she'd heard of this market, my sister had imagined the crowds, the old bent-backed women in their heavy shapeless skirts, kerchiefs over their hair, the old slow-kneed men with their bushy pointed moustaches, flat caps and shepherd's crooks, their jackets draped over their shoulders like capes, the children wild with motion, more often than not barefoot, dressed in hand-me-downs from older brothers or sisters, the girls in hemmed-up dresses, the younger boys in shorts, the older ones in trousers, the shorts or trousers held up with a length of rope or cord instead of a belt, or rolled down at the waistband to make them tighter. All ambling from stall to stall, some of the stalls nothing more than handcarts, others made from sheets of wood laid on wooden trestles, a canopy overhead to protect them from either rain or sun, and spread out beneath it whatever was in season, broad beans and artichokes, beets and cabbages and leeks, carrots and tomatoes, tangerines and oranges and lemons, radishes and eggplants, peas and apricots and peaches, potatoes, figs and onions and melons. She had imagined it all – the market in Lamia, really, before they'd left it behind, before they'd come to Athens – imagined it all the same, only black. Black stalls and black carts and black canopies, and the people all dressed head to toe in black like Aunt Aliki, walking on black dirt, and the odd dropped fruit or vegetable an exploded colour mashed into the dirt, being sniffed at by black dogs and black cats darting between the black legs of black horses.

She'd been six and a half then, and not very clever. Now that she was almost eight and knew better, it was embarrassing, how naïve she'd been. How she would plead to accompany Aunt Aliki on one of her trips, then beg, then cajole, then threaten. Then would march out of the house, hands balled up in fists, arms rigid at her sides, and throw herself into the deepest puddle she could find. Venturing outside the limits of Kaisariani

was supposed to be dangerous, but my sister hadn't cared. Aunt Aliko did it all the time, and nothing bad ever happened to her. Still, the answer had always been no and with time Katerina had stopped asking. As unhappy as it made her, she'd resolved to say nothing with the same singlemindedness that before had had her railing at the injustice of it all, thinking her ceasing to ask would get her what she so wanted to ask for. The more she did this, of course, the more it seemed impossible to ever go back to pleading.

She'd never received any indication from our mother that her behaviour made the slightest difference. Yet she'd gone on trying to act in the way she imagined our mother would have wanted her to, even as she'd grown less sure what that could be. Much later she would tell me she'd resolved to so perfectly emulate our mother in her self-restraint that she'd come to forget, genuinely forget, that there were other alternatives. She said this, not with a note of complaint, let alone self-pity, but rather with one of wonderment, as though she were waiting for confirmation that, yes, it had been the same for me. How could it have been otherwise? My family practiced enough self-restraint for a dozen families, for all the good it did us.

Grey clouds had come across the sky, turning the pale autumn light murky and flat. Behind them an invisible sun glowed mutely. My sister looked up and down the street for our father. Perhaps today would be the day. Minute after minute, he failed to appear.

'Katerina!' our mother's voice drifted from inside the house, accompanied by the banging of a wooden spoon on the lip of a pot. My sister stood up, took one last sullen look down the street, leaving the door open so our father would know he'd come to the right place. He had never seen this house, had never been to Athens, but still, she was certain, he'd see the open door and know.

Our mother was standing by the stove, peering through the steam rising from the pot. It smelled of nothing at all. She moved over to the washtub. She wore an apron contrived out of an old sheet, no longer white but the grey-white of too many washings. A dark line went across it near her waist, from leaning over the washboard. She put her arms in the washtub up to the elbows.

Once a week, on Saturday evening, in preparation for church the next morning, our mother would heat water on the stove and move the washtub to the middle of the

kitchen floor and my sister would take off her clothes and stand in it. Our mother would pour the weak soapy water over her and let her scrub herself clean before wrapping her up in a big towel, worn thin with use, and drying her off. Back in Lamia, before our father abandoned his command and took to the mountains to join ELAS, he'd sometimes take her in his lap, wrapped in her towel, and rub her down, and even if his big hands were not as gentle as our mother's, my sister liked this best. All the while, our father would tell her stories, and she'd lean against him and listen to his voice through his chest, comforted by his depth, his solidity. She remembered him to be tall and barrel-chested, though in his photographs, which our mother kept hidden and only very rarely brought out, he looked nothing like that. Neither taller nor shorter than the other gendarmes, a slender man in a dark uniform, sporting a toothbrush moustache.

Katerina stood and stared at our mother's back, bent low over the washtub. 'String those for me?' our mother said, nodding over her shoulder to a small pile of string beans on the kitchen table, next to an earthenware bowl. My sister went over and sat at the table and hugged the beans and pulled them close – the blue and white oilcloth was cracked like old skin, and sticky – then reached for the empty bowl and slid it close too. They'd save the strings for later, boil them in salted water, slice a carrot or an onion or whatever else was in hand into the broth, and call the result bean soup. Our mother returned to the stove, stirred the pot, went back to the washtub.

It was our grandmother – Grandma Katerina, our father's mother – who'd taught my sister how to string beans. She lived in Pougakia, a village high up on a mountain called Sarantaina. My sister had only ever seen the village in summertime: low stone houses crouched on the mountainside, the big church of the Virgin Mary in the village square, the tall walnut and chestnut trees, the blackthorns with their purple-blue waxy plums, the sweet, stick smell of the firs, the hollow boles of the enormous planes whose branches stretched over the stream, the cool water, thick and green like olive oil, rushing over flat slabs of rock, the flashes of orange darting through green that were the closest Katerina thought she'd ever come to glimpsing a fox. She would've liked to have seen the village in winter when, according to our grandmother, it was much the same, only covered in two metres of snow for months on end. But Grandma Katerina spent winters

in Lamia, sleeping on the divan in our kitchen. She'd get up very early in the morning to make our father's coffee, her eyes fixed to the window, as if she were searching for Sarantaina in the distance. The mountain was too far to the west to be visible and anyway, my sister came to realize years later, it must have been an east-facing window, judging from what she remembers was the block of light it would let in soon after dawn, which would slide across the wall and be gone by midmorning, full of dust motes darting to and fro, halting then changing direction, like indecisive birds.

No one's quite sure how the village had got its name. There are those who believe it's a corrupted form of 'suntraps' – apagakia – and that it was given to the place during the reign of the Ottomans, when would-be rebels took to the mountains in search of a haven beyond the reach of Turkish rule. Others claim that the name literally means 'Pougas' children', after an obscure Greek revolutionary who'd settled in the area at the turn of the nineteenth century. My sister favours the latter explanation.

There was never any such dissensus when it came to the naming of the mountain. One winter evening long ago a wedding procession had been crossing a long, exposed, north-running ridge when out of nowhere a terrible blizzard had descended upon them, our grandmother had told my sister. There'd been forty of them – saranta – men, women, and children. They'd all perished. The groom had been the last to die. He'd thrown himself off a cliff rather than be the only survivor. An awful sin, what he'd done. Having recovered his body, and desperate to stop him rising from the grave to haunt the living, the locals had been unable to agree on how best to deal with him. After much deliberation, they'd buried him at a crossroads with an iron nail driven through his heart, and a wax cross and piece of pottery inscribed with the words 'Jesus Christ saves' sewn up in his mouth. As a precaution, they'd also buried him face down, placing a large wooden cross on his back. Otherwise – this was known – he would have risen and returned to his village, knocking on doors deep in the night, calling out the names of the sleepers inside. Anyone who answered the door at the first call would have died within days and shared the man's fate. This is why, deep in the night, there should be no light at your window; this was why you should always wait for a second knock before answering the door.

'How about in the daytime?' my sister had asked, in the grip of a luscious horror.

'Then too. A second knock,' our grandmother had said. 'Better to tie your donkey than go searching for it. Why, last winter –'

'That's enough, mother,' our father had cut in. 'That's no kind of story to be telling a little child.'

'Kind of story I raised you on,' our grandmother had said. 'Don't look to me like it did no harm.' But she hadn't gone on.

If she had, my sister thought now, maybe she would have explained how it was that anyone could have known the groom had been the last to die. Or that he'd thrown himself off the cliff. Maybe he'd just fallen. There hadn't been anyone there to see it happen. Or had there? But everyone had died, according to our grandmother. Had someone else come back from the dead to warn the villagers? A ghost, a wraith? Or had an angel warned them? This seemed less likely. If an angel had wanted to help, he could have warned the villagers about the blizzard. Wraiths, on the other hand – not all of them were evil, our grandmother was adamant about this. Some were messengers from heaven. They meant to do good, it was just that they went about it the wrong way, having forgotten what it was like to be human, tied down to one place and time. So they would scare and confuse those they were trying to warn, and were often mistaken for the evil they were trying to avert.

'All done,' my sister said. Our mother walked over, drying her hands on the edge of her apron. 'Thank you, sweetheart,' she said, picking up the bowl.

A block of wood crackled and collapsed in the stove. Directionless pale light filled the room, giving everything a dark yellow tinge: the walls, the dirt floor that was deeper at one end, the oilcloth, the rickety chairs whose cane seats sagged in the middle, our mother's face, the closed door behind my sister's back that led to the next room where Aunt Stella lay in bed and I slept in my cot. It made everything resemble an old photograph of itself. Or, no, not everything. My sister sat examining what she could see of our mother's face. It was true that the light gave it the same colour it had in a photograph my sister had seen once, taken before she was born. But it was otherwise not the same face. The one in the photograph had been younger, fuller, unlined, with no deep creases at the corners of the mouth. Nor was the set of that mouth so hard and unsmiling. It wasn't that our mother no longer ever smiled. But compared to that photograph, it was a dim enough thing she produced that, for my sister, its infrequent appearances only

served, in their occluded glow, as evidence of some kind of awful general truth about adulthood whose exact nature she couldn't quite grasp. It was perhaps, she tried to explain to me once, that given enough time, sorrow could cost people their personalities, overlaying the qualities in them that you loved and turning them into shadows of what they used to be. Time waged a war of attrition on every capacity but those for disappointment and longing. It corroded people, left them insubstantial and trembling, like reflections on water. Perhaps this was why our mother kept the picture hidden.

'Mum,' Katerina said.

'Yes?'

'We should clean the house before Dad gets here.'

Our mother turned away from the stove and looked at my sister quizzically. She took some time answering, as though she were giving this some thought.

'Your father's not coming today, sweetheart,' she said.

'When the Germans are gone, you said.'

Our mother didn't respond. She stirred the pot once more, banged the spoon on its lip, set it aside. She came to the table and sat down. My sister waited for her to say something, but my mother just gave her a stern look.

'Tomorrow, maybe?' my sister asked.

'Probably not,' my mother said, her voice softening. 'But soon, God willing.'

'But how soon?' my sister insisted.

'Soon enough,' our mother said. She'd taken hold of the corners of her apron and was rubbing them together, as though trying to remove a stain.

'So we should clean the house *today*,' my sister concluded triumphantly. 'Just to be sure.'

Our mother threw the corners of the apron away from her and stood up. 'The house is clean,' she said. She smoothed the cloth down over her thighs and walked to the stove, picked up the spoon and stood staring at the pot. It still didn't smell of anything at all. 'Clean enough,' she mumbled.

But the house was not clean. Dirt from the floor was everywhere. It lined the walls, descended on the cupboard shelves that held the few dishes with their pretty floral patterns, their faded colours and chipped rims; it coated the glass of the oil lamp set on a small round table in the far corner of the room, gathered in every angle and crevice of the stove, settled in the pots and pans hanging from their hooks as still as the dead, the pots

and pans that were scoured daily but were never truly clean – dirt, dirt, dirt everywhere. My sister swore that she could taste it in every meal, that it was often the only thing she could taste. She hated it, the dirt of Kaisariani, the dirt of Athens, which, she had decided, somehow felt much less *clean* than the dirt of Lamia. She hated the city, its narrow dirty lanes, the sky that pressed low over shacks and houses in the absence of trees to hold it up in their many hands. At first, she'd hated the unfamiliarity of it all, then had come to hate how it all became familiar. 'You'll get used to it,' our mother had told her. She hadn't wanted to. It had happened regardless. And too quickly, which had made her feel even worse.

She'd been scared at first, the night they'd left for Athens. The house, dark and letting loose a series of low moans as if in warning. The light wind rushing through the trees outside – the cool air of early spring, seeping through the window, seeking her out in the room behind her as our father carried her across the threshold. The floorboards beneath his feet bending as they took the weight, then springing back, creaking and groaning. Not a warning now, but a farewell: *good-bye, good-bye*. Our mother walking ahead with a gunnysack on her back. Our father carrying my sister in one arm, his right hand resting on the holstered service revolver. The smell of damp earth, the silence rising up with the mist from the ground. The road, empty under dark clouds. The whole world holding its breath, watching them. The grove where the man waited for them – big, bigger than her father, a long beard growing out of his face like moss from a rock. It was the man who frightened her the most, stepping out from behind a tree in response to our father's whispered 'Achilleas', a giant with arms thick as a horse's shoulders, a rifle in his hands, a knife in his belt. She made to scream but only a choking sound came out of her mouth before our father shushed her. But the man's voice was reedy as a boy's, and gentle, as he greeted our father with a meek 'Commander' and smiled at her.

Then she grew afraid again when a third man appeared, the shepherd, old and short and thin, and our father hugged and kissed her goodbye and said, 'This is Menelaos, he's going to take you and your mother to Athens,' and let the man take her from his arms. The man's cloak smelled of manure and curdled milk. Our father went to our mother and hugged and kissed her too. He whispered something in her ear and stood back and looked at her and our mother said, 'Yes'. Our father and the giant moved away

and the trees closed in around them and they were lost from sight. Again my sister wanted to scream, but knew she shouldn't. She looked to our mother, standing there with her arms hanging down her sides. She wasn't crying. My sister resolved that she too would not cry. She reached out and our mother turned and took my sister in her arms and held her, too tightly, though my sister didn't complain. The wind had picked up and the clouds were scurrying away. Through a gap in the canopy overhead moonlight fell on the ground in front of our mother's feet where leaves from a kermes oak lay, serrated and shining greenly, as if they didn't yet know they were dead, or were pretending not to know. Our mother loosened her grip on my sister, let her slide down and held her against her hip. 'Let's go,' she said.

The last thing Katerina can recall our mother telling her before they reached Athens was that she should tell any stranger who might ask that her father was dead; killed fighting the Italians, she should say, if pressed for details.

Why Athens? Why Kaisariani? It seems to me our parents believed it would be easiest to vanish amongst the multitudes of the capital to which, additionally, we had no ties, as far as my father's former colleagues knew. Aunt Aliko and Aunt Stella were my mother's second cousins.

They'd all grown up together in Koutsoufliani. Ten years earlier – it must have been the summer of '34 – at the age of fifteen, Aliko had got pregnant and run away with the man responsible, Fotis, an itinerant labourer her father had hired for the harvest. The family had disowned her. Only Stella knew where to even find her if need be. Eventually they'd graduated from thinking of her as dead to them to thinking of her as though she'd actually died. In fact, according to Stella, shortly before he'd passed away, their maternal grandfather had been found more than once wandering through the village cemetery at five in the morning, searching for his granddaughter's grave, whose location, he maintained, he could clearly recall, even as his senses asserted again and again that what he was being led to stand in front of was a bronze-leaved Barbary fig tree.

Aliko and Fotis had settled in Athens in '38. They'd been happy there for a while. Then the Germans had come. Fotis had joined no resistance group, had attempted no act of sabotage, had engaged in no criminal activity. Had only taken their son out for a walk one Saturday morning, from which neither had returned.

As for Aunt Stella: she'd been married for just under two months when, in early '37, her husband, Thomas, had been arrested and sent to the Acronauplia Citadel in Nauplio, alongside another six hundred or so communists. When the prisoners had been handed over to the Germans in '41, he'd been moved to an Italian-run concentration camp in Larisa. She hadn't seen him since. Soon she'd gone in search of her sister, and the two had lived in that small house in Kaisariani, alone, until our arrival.

You're too young to understand this – and I so dearly wish you never have to – but even the smallest house may come to seem too big when it is empty, filling with echoes that don't match up to the geometry of its rooms; sounds that come at you from impossible distances; as though it is larger than you thought, possessing rooms you've never entered. You find yourself leaving the television on all night, letting its noise rush to fill the spaces left vacant, like the air, parting before you when you walk from room to room, then moving in behind you to occupy the void of where your body has been.

Whatever hour you wake, there are doors open. From room to room you go, closing here, opening there – making sure. 'Here – I'd closed this one,' you say. And, 'Ah, this one too.' The doors stand open, the house all empty, only the pigeons bubbling with content on the balcony handrail and the hum of the refrigerator sounding from the kitchen. 'What did I come in here for? What did I want to find?' Your hands are empty. You begin to suspect the walls have been drifting apart while you weren't looking. You turn your head to catch them out; but they remain where they've always been, even if the air between them appears to be pulsing, as though something has just gone by. The shadow of a thrush crosses the floor; from a deep well of silence the pigeon draws its bubble of sound. 'Empty, empty, empty,' the pulse of the house beats softly.

A moment later the light has faded. The wind roars up the street, trees stoop and bend this way and that. Moonbeams splash and spill wildly in the rain. Wandering through the house, closing windows and doors, you whisper. 'Here we slept.' 'In the morning—' You stop at a doorway. The wind falls, the rain slides silver down the glass. A beam of moonlight crossing both floor and wall stains your pondering face. 'Long years—' The doors shut with a gentle knock like the pulse of a heart.

At night you're jolted awake by questionable shapes on the wall; they're nothing but shadows thrown by the furniture. You check your bedside clock. For a long moment

the red digits refuse to resolve, then it's quarter to five and, knowing that sleep is now impossible you sigh and get up to turn the light on, the television off. You shuffle to the kitchen to turn on the radio and get the coffee going, and you sit at the table holding a mug you keep forgetting to drink from, the coming day a cliff you will need to climb, at whose top there is nothing good awaiting you to give the effort meaning. In other words, as much as Aliko and Stella were saving us, I suspect we were also saving them.

'The house is clean,' our mother muttered once more. Talking to herself again, Katerina thought. Though often enough it was to our father such comments seemed to be addressed. Because of the way our mother paused between utterances, cocking her head to the left as if listening, these instances had the feel of conversations of which Katerina was only getting to hear one side. They often seemed to devolve into arguments, if one were to judge from our mother's suddenly saying, as though she were interrupting someone, things like 'You better, Andreas. You hear me? You better.' This had the effect of confirming that these exchanges were imaginary, since in reality she would have never spoken to him like that. (She had done so once. Just once. My sister remembered this well, though she preferred not to.)

The wood in the stove popped and crackled. Our mother pulled the pot from the stove, took her apron off and returned to the table.

Katerina heard the bedroom door open and turned to see Aunt Stella coming into the kitchen, leaving the door behind her slightly ajar.

'The baby?' our mother asked.

'Still asleep,' Aunt Stella said.

I was an unusual baby, everyone admitted as much. At ten months old, I had never been known to cry upon waking. Leaning over my crib to check up on me, they would find me with eyes wide open, looking around me with an expression of fascinated puzzlement, silent, as if I didn't want anyone to know what I was up to, as if I was harbouring suspicions about the world and was after a kind of private verification. Realizing I was being spied on, I would turn and smile, gurgle with pleasure, and reach out my arms to be picked up, or promptly begin wailing – either way, it was difficult for my family not to wonder whether they were being had.

Aunt Stella slumped into the chair next to my sister.

'Food's ready,' our mother said.

'Maybe in a bit,' Stella said.

'You need to eat,' our mother kept at her.

'Could do with some coffee first.'

'We're out of chickpeas. Maybe once Aliki gets back.'

Stella let out a soft groan and slumped further down in the seat.

'Could you check on Michalis, please?' our mother said, turning to my sister.

'Yes, mum,' Katerina said, certain she was being sent away so as not to hear whatever was said next.

Inside the bedroom it was cold and stuffy. The window shutter was cracked open, the room cast in semi-darkness. She walked around Stella and Aliki's bed and past the bed she shared with our mother, approaching my cot at an angle, stealthily, hoping to catch me out. She trailed her fingertips across the wall. The plaster was cold, damp to the touch. She'd left the door to the kitchen half-open, and through it she heard the drone of our mother's low, urgent voice. The cot creaked. My sister inched closer, peered over the headboard. I was awake, naturally, my head turned away from her, to the wall on my right. She stood there for an instant, looking down at me, then took a step back and waited. She decided to leave me be a while longer and tiptoed to the door. She stood behind it, listening. Our mother said something else my sister didn't catch. This time Stella's voice rose high and clear in response: 'I'm fine,' she said. Neither said anything for a few seconds, then Stella spoke again. 'I'm just a bit tired.' A few more seconds went by. 'That's all,' she added.

It was a habit of Stella's, these silences between sentences that should have been packed closer together. Was the space left between them indicative of the space between one thought and the next? Or was there really so much more she considered but didn't say? By her late seventies these silences had become so protracted they made her seem like a figure in a daydream, sitting in a corner, immobile and decorative, animated only intermittently, when you had something for her to say. Often, when I turned to look at her, I found myself expecting her not to be there until it was time for her to speak. I guess in a way she wasn't.

'Anyway, you—' Stella started saying, but our mother interrupted her, calling out for my sister in a kind of whispered shout. My sister let a moment pass and appeared at the door. 'Yes, Mum?' she said.

'Is your brother awake yet?' our mother said, giving my sister a sceptical look.

'No, Mum,' my sister said. 'I was just watching over him,' she added by way of explanation.

'Wake him up then. It's time for his meal,' our mother said.

Re-entering the bedroom, my sister found me standing up. I was holding onto the side of the cot, stamping on the blanket tangled around my feet. Once I'd managed to kick it off, I looked up and, seeing her, let out a little cry of joy.

'Nina!' I said.

My sister smiled despite herself. 'Katerina,' she said, coming near me. 'Say it right.'

'Nina,' I said. I half-turned and pointed at the wall behind me. 'Da?' I said.

'Wall,' my sister said. 'Wall.'

'Da!' I said.

'No, not da. Wall. Can you say wall?' This seemed to confuse me. I looked at the wall, then back at my sister.

'Da!' I insisted, pointing.

'Okay, fine, dah,' my sister said with a sigh.

I smiled at her. 'Da,' I said.

And my father? Where is he during all this?

He must be approaching the northern edge of Kaisariani by now. Despite what our mother has said, today's the day he will come find us. It is late afternoon. The sun soaks through the heavy, bulbous clouds over his right shoulder. The shadow he throws is long and soft-edged, almost shapeless. He's wearing a field grey uniform from which the insignia have been stripped, has a black wool cap in his hand, but no bandolier, no knife in his belt, no rifle slung across his back: all that he has left behind. He's moving through the streets at a steady, confident pace, as if he knows where it is that he's heading. (Not deep in the quarter, near the two- and three-storey tenements the Refugee Settlement Commission put up in the '20s, but near the southern outskirts, between the rifle range and Formionos Street, in a warren of narrow alleys and one- or two-room hovels, shacks and lean-tos, the open sewers that pass underneath the floors of the wooden sheds that

serve as our latrines, whose doors have no latch or lock, and are kept closed by a length of wire wrapped around two nails.) Any minute now he'll break out into a run. He is held back, perhaps, only by the last few remnants of his uncertainty regarding his destination, the suspicion that by being impatient he will delay his arrival at the place towards which he would run. Or so he might claim if there were anyone there for him to speak to, but the street is empty and quiet and still. So he might claim, but there is, too, in his unhurried rush, just a shade of trepidation. He's been gone some eighteen months. Three, maybe four letters have been exchanged, terse and short, easily carried or hidden or disposed of, through a secret network about whose workings neither my father nor my mother knows, or has wanted to know, the first thing; letters composed with great care, unlikely to give away too much if they fell into the wrong hands, and as a result revealing all too little once placed into the right ones. In short, my father is concerned his arrival will not play out exactly the way he has imagined it. His wife may hold him at a distance; his daughter – what will she see when she looks at him? Will she run to him or shy away? His son – he has a son. This is something he has known for months, but he's never seen him, and therefore has not really *known* it. He thinks of his own father, killed in Sarantaporo in October 1912, during the First Balkan War. He'd been thirty-five. My father had been ten. He's now forty-two; he's outlived his father by seven years. This seems to him a sad, awful thing.

Later, the light is fading, the shadows become even fainter, dissolving into each other like streams of black water running together. A band of sky to the west clears and in it blue gives way to yellow, orange and red. My father is almost there, though he has not yet realized this. He will be hopeful, he decides. He will soon find the house, will walk up to the door, knock, call out my mother's name. The door will open, and there we will be, waiting to welcome him home.

After several hours of being mobbed as he'd made his way from Syntagma Square to Omonoia Square and back again, all that Byford-Jones wanted was to find a quiet place to eat. Head aching from the perpetual noise and excitement, he re-entered the Grande Bretagne, crossed the lobby whose marble floor was visible only in part, being otherwise

concealed under thick Oriental carpets, marvelled again at the marble pillars and green marble walls, the plushly upholstered sofas and fauteuils, and found himself in the adjoining banqueting hall, where the tables had been put away and chairs lined the walls, and in the middle of which stood a grand piano, seated before which was a naval officer playing, with more merriment than skill, a vulgar little number whose lyrics were sung in a shrill, ear-piercing squall by a number of dark-suited civilians that turned out to be British and American war correspondents.

One of the civilians, a man in a tweed suit and green tartan tie, broke away from the group and introduced himself as Mr Eric Grey of the *Daily Express* and, following a brief exchange during which Byford-Jones proclaimed himself famished, invited the latter to join him for dinner. Discovering the hotel kitchen closed for the evening, they wandered the streets around the Grande Bretagne until coming across a sign for 'Jimmy's Restaurant'.

They limped in and sat down at a table near the back. The room was square and low-ceilinged, the tablecloths chequered blue-and-white. The wooden chairs were narrow and had wicker seats; a good few of them were crooked and all of them were unoccupied.

A waiter appeared, a man in his twenties dressed in dark trousers and a white shirt that was spotless and well ironed but frayed at the cuffs. Grey attempted to make himself understood in a mixture of English and Greek (much heavier on the former than the latter), to which the waiter replied in relatively fluent, if thickly accented, German.

Both astounded and amused, Byford-Jones and Grey proceeded to give their order in the same language. Jokingly they asked for '*Frankfurter Würstel*', '*Sauerkraut*', and '*Löwenbräu-Bier*', then '*Apfelkuchen – und Kaffee mit Schlagsahne*'. To their bewilderment, the waiter nodded at each request then went away with a '*Jawohl, meine Herren*'. Soon the meal had been served, exactly as they had ordered it.

Having had to suffer too many months of meals of bully beef and biscuits, Byford-Jones found everything exquisite.

'I thought there was no food here,' Grey said. 'Starving Greeks and all that.'

'So did I,' said Byford-Jones.

'This *is* a little different from what we were led to expect, isn't,' said Grey. 'It's as good as anything you'd be served in Cairo.'

'Every bit as good,' Byford-Jones said, mouth full of sauerkraut.

'It's out of tins, of course,' Grey reflected, 'but even so – they'd love to get this back in England.' He raised his glass to his lips and drank deeply. 'Excellent beer,' he said.

'German beer is very good,' Byford-Jones agreed.

The waiter came back and stood watching them.

This is the first good meal I've had in months,' Byford-Jones told him.

'No good food in England?' the waiter asked, looking perplexed.

'I didn't come from England,' Byford-Jones said.

The waiter nodded. 'No good food in the English army?'

'Not as good as this,' Grey said. 'I thought the people of Greece had very little to eat.'

'Very little,' the waiter agreed. 'The poor – they are, underfed? Is that the word?' He looked at them for confirmation, then continued. 'In Athens, it is very bad. But the people with gold – for them it is not so bad.'

'Gold?' Grey said.

'Sovereigns. The Germans brought them. Also, you English dropped many from your planes, to pay the andartes – the guerrillas – and the people whose houses the Nazis burned. So those who could bought them and – hoarded them?' the waiter said.

'Why not pay in drachmas?' Byford-Jones asked.

'Drachmas!' The waiter burst out laughing. 'What good are drachmas? You'd need a wheelbarrow – this is the word, *schubkarre*, yes?' he said, making a pushing motion with both arms. 'A wheelbarrow to pay for this meal. A full one. Yesterday, you would have needed a half-full one. Tomorrow you will need two. Drachmas! Pfff!'

'We have neither sovereigns nor drachmas,' Byford-Jones said. 'We have English money. B.M.A. pounds, we call them.' He paused. 'British Military Authority,' he added.

The waiter was already waving an arm in a placatory manner. 'Pounds are good. Dollars are good. Marks, maybe. *Reichsmark* – not *Reichskreditkassen*! Olive oil. Wheat. Cigarettes. But drachmas? No. Only the government tries to deal in drachmas.'

They finished their meal and lit cigarettes, and contemplated them as a means of exchange before offering one to the waiter, who took it as he pulled up a chair and joined them at the table, and still the place remained empty but for themselves, and no other waiter appeared, or a manager wanting to check on his staff of one. The waiter helped himself to the last of their beer, straight out of the bottle. He found them friendlier than

the Germans, he told them. The more they spoke, the more animated he got. He was enjoying himself now. This was an opportunity to educate the foreigners out of their ignorance. Or, better still, to educate them *about* their ignorance. A faint smile flickering about his lips, speaking as if far removed from it all, he told them many more things – about the war, the winter of '41, the black market and ration books and soup kitchens; told them about the death squads and the bloccos, the reprisals and counter-reprisals, the villages razed to the ground, the Tagmatasfalites (the Security Battalions, he'd explained in response to their uncomprehending looks); about the Resistance, which half the time fought against the Germans, the other half against itself: EAM and ELAS and OPLA, EDES and EOEA, EKKA and PEAN and ESAP, acronym after acronym until Byford-Jones could no longer keep track of the names the waiter rattled off, could not recall which group belonged to the Left and which to the Right, who was fighting whom and why. The waiter told them all this but, Byford-Jones thought, whatever he said, he meant only: 'You cannot understand; so why bother?' The more he told them, the plainer it became he only wished to impress upon them that the facts he related explained nothing; on the contrary, they required explanation. But this was not what he was offering. He was attesting only to their reality, not to their meaning.

Grey seemed delighted by the waiter's performance and so, at first, was Byford-Jones. But he soon found himself losing patience with the waiter's garrulousness, becoming frustrated with his assumptions. Before he knew what he was doing he'd interrupted him: 'ὦ γέρον αἰεὶ τοὶ μῦθοι φίλοι ἄκριτοὶ εἰσὶν / ὥς ποτ' ἐπ' εἰρήνης· πόλεμος δ' ἀλίσστος ὄρωρεν.'

The waiter gave him a blank look.

Byford-Jones made him wait a second or two more before adding, 'The *Iliad*.'

The waiter smiled back at him. 'Ah, yes,' he said. 'The Germans liked Homer too. Hauptsturmführer Lautenbach would often, what is the word...' He looked at them expectantly.

Byford-Jones hesitated, then said, 'Recite?' He couldn't say why he thought so, but he was certain the waiter already knew the word.

'Yes, thank you,' the waiter said. 'Recite, yes. Hauptsturmführer Lautenbach would often *recite* Homer, only in German. Not like you.'

Byford-Jones felt as if he were being accused of something. He fought the urge to tell the waiter he had a degree in Classics; by now it would sound too much as though he were mounting a defence.

'Never read him myself,' the waiter said. He looked behind him, leaned closer and stage-whispered, 'To be honest, I can't read very well.' It was a boast, not a confession. 'Don't tell the boss. He thinks I can read the menu. The cook helps me learn what's on it.' He sat back and laughed. Byford-Jones and Grey exchanged a glance. Did the place even have menus?

'What does it mean?' the waiter said.

'What does what mean?' Grey said.

'What your friend *recited*,' the waiter replied. 'What does it mean?'

'Ah,' Byford-Jones said, relieved to be back on safe ground even if crossing it would not prove as pleasurable as he'd anticipated, 'it's Iris addressing Priam while disguised as his son. "Old man, words, endless words – that is your passion, always as once in the days of peace. But...ceaseless war's upon us",' he tried. A tad too loose, perhaps. Closer to stacked prose than verse. It would have to do.

The waiter thought this over. 'That is a long way to swim just to see if the water's cold,' he said and stood up. 'It's true what they say about you English,' he added, more contemplative than insulted. 'We are more direct here.' As though summoned to prove him right in whatever he was suggesting, two British officers walked in, looking as if they'd just left a rugby scrum. They collapsed onto two chairs and waved him over. 'Excuse me, gentlemen,' he said, and went to them.

Byford-Jones looked at Grey. 'That was interesting,' he said.

'Yes – quite educational,' Grey said.

They smoked another cigarette and asked for the bill. The waiter came over and produced a small notebook and a pencil nub out of a trouser pocket and took a seat and began writing down numbers. This soon proved to be more than he could cope with on his own. He called the manager, who turned out to be a middle-aged version of the waiter, thicker around the waist, with hair worn longer and combed over his balding pate. Bent together over the notebook, they looked like a pair of down-on-their-luck astronomers still reaching for the night sky, writing out numbers in the billions, then the

thousands of billions, working out a sum plainly fantastic, as though they were attempting to confirm the distance to an unknown star.

‘Yes,’ said the waiter at last. ‘Five pounds.’

‘Five pounds? For these two meals?’ asked an incredulous Grey. ‘In Cairo we’d get the lot for less than one pound.’

‘Five pounds *each*,’ said the manager, leaving both Byford-Jones and Grey temporarily speechless. ‘Ten English pounds. Two English sovereigns. We have only a little food here and it costs a lot,’ he said with an apologetic smile.

Byford-Jones and Grey gave an uncertain laugh. The man did not know what a pound was. He probably thought it had the same value as a mark. Very patiently, in slow, clear German, they explained what a pound would buy in Cairo or in England. He had made a mistake, they told him, but only out of ignorance. They didn’t blame him at all.

The manager was unmoved. ‘You see,’ he said in German just as slow and clear, ‘food is very expensive here. This is what it costs. There is no food in Greece. Anyone who wishes to have food must pay for it.’

In the end they paid him eight pounds. Four for their dinner, they said, and four for the lesson that would keep them out of Greek restaurants thereafter. As they were leaving, they stopped to speak to the British officers who were working their way through a substantial meal.

‘Excellent food,’ one of them said, using his fork and knife to point at the plate of chicken in front of him. ‘After all these stories of starving Greeks—’

‘We thought there would be no food here,’ the other officer cut in. ‘This is wonderful.’

‘How much do you think your meal will cost?’ Grey asked them.

They hesitated. ‘A quid...?’ said one them.

Byford-Jones proceeded to tell them what they’d paid for their own meal. The officers glared at the chicken left on their plates as if it had begun to smell.

‘Sorry to upset your appetite, gentlemen,’ Grey said. ‘But at least you can still cancel the dessert.’

Stelios's home was to be found two miles north of the port, in a neighbourhood called Krini – a part of Kokkinia, which like Kaisariani was a settlement created in the '20s to house refugees from Asia Minor. Located north of Kokkinia proper, Krini was a rough rectangle dog-eared by Mikras Asias Avenue at its northwest corner and subdivided into thirty-two standardized blocks though, as the street plan reveals, blocks 21 and 27, being the sites of the amputation, were much smaller than the rest. Each block had been split into twenty plots on which ten prefabricated panel-board structures were to be erected, each structure straddling two plots and comprising two houses under a single pitched tile roof. Out of a theoretical total of 320 structures, only 276 had been erected, housing 572 families. They had been provided by the Germans, as part of their reparations after the Great War, which was why Krini was at first known as 'The German Sheds': 'Yermanika Parapigmata', or 'Yermanika' for short. The Abatzoglou home sat just off the corner of Filadelfias and Vithinias Street (block 7, on the southeast edge of the neighbourhood), only three streets away from the nearest water tap, located at the corner of Filadelfias and Okto Street.

(You won't find Okto Street on any map. It's been Panagi Tsaldari Street for decades now; not that this was ever acknowledged in any of Stelios Abatzoglou's personal writings. His exactitude in recording his life in minutest detail, dissecting every fact of it in the hope – this is my own supposition – that he might, by accident if not by design, hit upon the one fact that would explain it all to his satisfaction, is matched only by his intractability in limiting his examination to such a small part of his existence, such a temporally narrow set of events – bookended by his sister's death on one side and his infamous 'vision' of late May 1963 and subsequent breakdown and first hospitalization on the other. As if everything that mattered had happened to him in this interim, in a free-floating world that came into being, discrete and fully formed, just after noon on January 11th, 1944, and just as suddenly ceased to exist on a clear spring morning nineteen years later, even while the man at the centre of it went on to live an additional twenty-five. This is certainly strange, for two reasons. First, that what his many novels – from the early, seemingly realist works such as *Two Times for Stavros Yeorgiou* or *Haji on the Mountain* to the late alternative history duology of *The Nearer Distance* and *The Common Expanse* and the overtly theological science fictions such as *And the Mourners Go About the Streets* – refuse to do is present worlds that hang together, that are unities rather than

assemblages of atomized facts. In other words these are novels in which nothing is or *could* ever be explained, by recourse to fact or otherwise. Which is why, admittedly, a number of them only ever seem, for most readers, to raise but one question: whether they should be called novels at all. Second, because whatever else they appear to be about, Stelios's novels are, always, also about Maria, who is present in them all, sometimes very young ('Evi', in *The Stones, the Rocks, the Trees*) sometimes very old ('Sophia', in *Valleys*) but invariably alive. And though they often look to be approaching, in their crablike way and myriad pretences, the moment of his sister's death, they never quite get there, which makes their relationship to his non-fiction an intimate but asymptotic one.)

It was shortly before sunrise and the house was dark when Stelios rushed into the living room. He'd woken up with a start from a fever dream he was still trying to shake off even while finding it difficult to recollect with any precision, had sat up and turned around to find his parents' bed empty, had dressed hurriedly and rushed to the living room, expecting his father to be gone, his mother to be sitting at the table, silent and still, but the living room was empty. He moved quietly through the confined space, squeezing between the sideboard and the small square table that stood, minus two of its four chairs, in the centre of the room, and went up to the single, west-facing window, pushed the curtain aside and peered out at a flat indigo sky and part of the roof of the house across the street.

Realizing it was earlier than he'd thought, he turned and headed to the kitchen, rubbing the sleep out of his burning eyes, wiping beads of perspiration from his forehead. He poured himself a cup of water out of the calabash, gulped it down. It was tepid but felt like ice in his throat and made more sweat break out on his brow. He poured himself another cup and took it with him as he stepped out through the open back door onto the small landing from which four whitewashed stone steps led down to the courtyard. The air was cool on his face and hands, the stone under his feet cold and uneven. The whitewash had the texture of very fine sand; he felt it stick to his socks. He sat down on the second step and the coldness spread through the thin fabric of his trousers and moved down the back of his thighs. Stelios shivered, set the cup down and hugged himself but stayed put. The cold would help with the fever.

Halfway up the courtyard, sitting with their backs turned to him on the chairs missing from the living room, were his parents, Philippos and Dorothea. They made no sign they'd heard him, sat with the exact same hunch to their backs that more even than their drawn faces revealed how thin they'd grown over the last few years. How fragile, how breakable they'd come to look. He did nothing to alert them to his presence.

The chairs had been placed about three feet apart, turned slightly northwest, towards the jagged black line of Mount Aigaleo, on either side of the small wooden crate that served as the Abatzoglous' outdoor coffee table. Stelios's mother was wearing her mourning dress but not the black kerchief she put on in public. Every morning she would catch her hair in a tight bun, pulling and twisting until the skin around her hairline turned white. Rather than make her face look exposed, this had the curious effect of making it look disguised, as if it were some sort of mask of serene sorrow behind which she was restraining herself with an iron will.

Stelios's father reached for his demitasse, took a small sip, returned it to its saucer. Stelios wondered about the coffee – chickpeas, barley, or lupin? His father was partial to lupin, his mother, barley, and neither liked chickpea-coffee much, but they drank it when they had it, even though it gave Philippos stomach cramps. He was wearing his brown suit jacket, the black armband on his left arm. There was a small bald spot near his crown, around which his hair swirled like water around a drain.

'Is it time yet?' Philippos said. No response came. He turned towards his wife. 'Dora?' he said, a little louder, then repeated her name when she didn't respond.

'Yes?' she said turning to look at him.

'Is it time yet?'

She took a long while to say, 'Not yet.' She tilted her head down, as if she were nodding off, or looking at something in her lap. She turned towards her husband once more.

'Shouldn't you be leaving?' she asked.

'There's no rush. I'm always too early.'

They were quiet for a while. Stelios took a deep draught of water. He felt bloated already, but soon he would drink some more, then more again, until peeing didn't hurt anymore. The first time this had happened, two years earlier, his mother had taken him to the American Hospital, where the doctor had told her there was nothing he could do

for them, he could only write a prescription for medicine that would prove impossible to find, unless she could afford to pay for it. He was sorry, very sorry, but that's how things were, she should take her son home, treat him herself with whatever she had at hand. So his mother had taken him home and boiled herbs for him and he got better, and this was what she did as he grew thinner and thinner and these episodes became more frequent, served him teas made of dandelion or wiregrass roots, arctostaphylos or malva or althaea leaves, and when she had none of these to give him she made him drink as much water as he could without vomiting and this proved enough, sooner or later.

Philippos drank some more coffee and absently patted first one empty breast pocket, then the other. He sighed, braced his hands on his knees and leaned forward as if to stand, then checked himself and relaxed back into his seat.

'So what happens now?' Dora said.

'Happens? About what?' Philippos asked.

'Will you be sacked?'

'Sacked? What on earth for?' he said.

'The Germans are gone,' she said.

After losing his job driving the water truck, Philippos had worked at the Vivechrom paint factory before being conscripted. Once the war had been lost he'd come home and got a job at Dilaveris's brickworks, then Keranis's tobacco factory. Eventually he'd gone to see an acquaintance who'd nabbed himself a job at the newly formed Ministry of Mercantile Marine near Pasalimani and was owed one more favour by an undersecretary who had the minister's ear. On his first day, Philippos, whose relative lack of education meant he'd been hired as a – truth be told, superfluous – general factotum, had discovered two things. One, that there was now one chair for every four employees. Civil servants were not paid well but at least they were paid regularly, and part of their wages came in the form of olive oil, beans, pasta, rice, sometimes eggs or even meat. It was also rather easy to be hired even if you couldn't do the work, provided you had the right connections. The government was willing to tolerate the practice if it meant fewer bodies for the municipal carts to collect from the street every morning.

'So what if they're gone?' Philippos said. 'Have you seen any more food out there? Is anything cheaper?' he said, turning to meet her gaze, frustrated but not angry.

'It's only been a few days,' she said.

'Which is why no one's losing his job just yet. And anyway sacking civil servants is unconstitutional—'

'Because we all saw how the constitution stopped Metaxas and the King.'

'Well, no. But Papandreou is not Metaxas. And the King's not coming back anytime soon, I don't care what Kosmidis—'

'Not again with Kosmidis.'

The second thing Philippos had discovered at the Ministry was that of the seven factotums in the General Directorate for Administrative Support, he and Kosmidis were the only ones who could read. This had marked them out as the intellectuals of the group, which had both exposed them to their colleagues' scorn and meant that they were the only two who were assigned duties additional to the delivery of the odd form or interoffice memorandum, while the other five spent most of the day sitting around looking bored, and exasperated at being forced to sit around looking bored, and collectively indignant if one of them were, say, asked to do anything other than sit around looking bored. Their superiors, having no means at their disposal to make them work, had soon given up on them and learned to rely exclusively on Philippos and Kosmidis, whose industriousness meant they were regularly run off their feet. Beset on all sides, it would have been natural that they form their own alliance; but rather than improve their relationship, this situation had only served to strain it.

'You know he—'

'Please,' she said. Philippos relented with a shrug.

Stelios needed to pee all of a sudden. He picked up his cup and stood up as quietly as he could and disappeared round the corner of the house.

Something small flew in a low circle overhead, emitting a piercing squeak. Philippos and Dora watched for it but it was already gone. They'd eaten bats too, after they'd run out of dogs and cats and mice and rats. The bats reeked of urine while they cooked, a smell that not even garlic could entirely mask. Their meat had a strong, gamy flavour, and tasted vaguely of cod-liver oil, their bones were needle-thin and crunchy like the bones of deep-fried picarel.

'Oh, I meant to tell you yesterday,' Philippos said. 'But then I stopped by Pavlidis's on the way home, he's digging a new basement and I'd offered to help, and by the time I got back you were asleep.'

He wouldn't look his wife in the eye. They had, long ago, in those first unpassing months since Maria's death, come to accept each other's way of mourning, as unfathomable as it had seemed. Dora would not be forced to leave the house for long, hardly ever ventured outside the neighbourhood if she could help it, had to be close at all times to where her daughter had lived, as though to physically distance herself would have meant betraying her memory, while Philippos would rather be anywhere than there, for as long as he could, and constantly made up reasons for his absences, though he was never asked where he'd been and didn't know that Stelios had spied him more than once spending an entire afternoon at his daughter's graveside and had been instructed by Dora, who seemed to find it impossible to even approach the cemetery, to keep quiet and appear to accept his father's excuses.

Dora picked up her own demitasse, sipped, put it down again. Philippos waited for her to spur him on, but she didn't. It was possible she'd already forgotten they'd been talking.

Philippos sighed and said, 'They arrested Plytzanopoulos. He's being held at the Averoff prison.'

There was a pause. Dora sat back and stared at the distance where a light mist was lifting from the southern slope of Mount Aigaleo, burning off to reveal the mountainside to be bare, the pine forest gone, though she might, at that moment, have been blind to the sight. What might she have been seeing instead? Perhaps this: a sunny Thursday morning in August, the men lined up at Osia Xeni Square. 'All men between the ages of fourteen and sixty,' was the shouted order that awoke the people of Kokkinia in the dead of night. The men have been made to stand there for hours in their thousands, guarded by German troops and tagmatasfalites while hooded informers walk up and down the lines, stop and point at one face or another, then move on. These men are taken away and shot, to the cries of the women and children who have surrounded the square and are being held back by the soldiers. A young man in a torn and bloodied white shirt is being led away when he breaks free and lunges at a short, portly officer in a field green uniform, wrapping his hands around the officer's throat before the soldiers catch up with him and drive the butts of their rifles into his back and head, knocking him to the ground. The man he attacked straightens his jacket, removes the forage cap knocked aslant during the scuffle. He blots his brow with the back of the wrist of the hand holding the cap, then settles the cap back on his head, adjusts it with slow precision. This is

Colonel Ioannis Plytzanopoulos, commander of the Security Battalions. The soldiers wait, their rifles trained at the prostrate man, who hasn't moved since he hit the ground. Plytzanopoulos nods and the man is shot, the body dragged away. (It will be said his name was Perivolas, that he was a local tough who may or may not have been involved in the resistance, who was being taken away either because he was a communist or because the informer was a man who owed him money. Much later it will be said this was a case of mistaken identity, Perivolas was already dead, stabbed to death by two men over gambling debts; or Perivolas was alive and well and in prison in Aigina and passed peacefully in his sleep in 1983. Here's what Stelios will write: the imprisoned man was Perivolas's brother, Sotiris. Perivolas was not dead but in hiding. The boy who was killed was their seventeen-year-old nephew, Yerasimos. He'd been a bully like his uncles, and Stelios hadn't liked him much. While they were taking him away one of his shoes had come off – he hadn't been wearing socks – and Stelios had briefly wondered whether he'd feel cold in the grave and whether someone should pick up the shoe and run after him.)

'They've also arrested Dakos and Bourantas,' said Philippos. Dew was rising from the ground and when he crossed his legs he flicked off small beads of moisture from the cuff of his trousers. There was a bite to the breeze. Across two courtyards, he saw the Oikonomous' kitchen door open. A flickering orange light filled the frame, then went out.

Dora, brought back to herself, sat up straight in her chair and reached for her demitasse but didn't drink from it, sat there turning it around in her hands.

'Not one of them will ever be convicted,' she said.

'You don't know that,' Philippos said.

'It'll be like '36 all over again,' Dora said, sounding neither indignant nor fearful. Sounding, actually, disinterested, as though she were recalling a distant, immutable past, not predicting an imminent future.

'I know, I know,' Philippos said. 'But we can still hope for justice.'

'Only thing I'm hoping for is that Stelios has enough to eat. That he goes back to school. If I was after justice, I'd want to start with the men who killed my child.'

Philippos reached over and took hold of her hand. She didn't pull away, nor did she lean closer. He didn't push; this was the most he'd been able to get out of her in days.

At one time he'd hoped that – he didn't know what he'd hoped. Not this. They would not, he knew, ever get over losing Maria. Not that he wanted to. But this was different.

The breeze picked up, turned into wind. High above their heads the sky had turned ultramarine. To the east, hidden from their view behind the house, a sweep of cerulean gave way to a stretch of slate-hued grey that pressed down on the orange and gold flame blazing just above the rim of the horizon. Dusty light sharpened the walls of the house attached to the Abatzoglous' and fell upon an unshuttered living room window, made the glass gleam. The blinds stirred, but all within was dim and insubstantial, the Fotious nowhere to be seen. Around the corner of the house Philippos and Dora still sat in silence. Through the open kitchen door a gust, detached from the body of the wind, ventured indoors; entering the kitchen, it toyed with the flannel rag hung by the cast-iron stove, as if to see, would it hang, would it fall; brushed the wall like a trailing fingertip. In the living room, a board sprang, a table leg creaked. On the sideboard stood the framed photograph of Philippos and Dora on their wedding day, arm in arm in front of a plain black background – in the top right corner a loose flap of black cloth, revealing the rough wall of the photographer's studio. Behind and to its side, another framed photograph, Stelios at age six, in grey jacket and shorts and black lace-up oxfords, holding his baby sister in his arms, Maria, in a striped knee-length toddler dress whose Peter Pan collar is trimmed with white lace, white cotton stockings and black Mary Janes, turned towards the camera but looking sideways at her brother, smiling.

In the bedroom, the shutters had been opened, though the window was closed against the chill. Stelios was sitting on his bed, facing the door. He had put on his black wool sweater. In his lap there was a small wooden box from which he extracted a thin buff booklet. Its cover was plain, consisting of an upright rectangle that contained the title, subtitle, and place and date of publication:

The Trial of the Rallis Government

A Summary of the Official Stenographer's Minutes

Athens, November 1943.

Stelios kept the booklet hidden at the bottom of the box, covered with odds and ends: a 1940 issue of *I Diaplasis ton Paidon*, two 1939 issues of *Paidikos Kosmos*, a papier-mâché centaur, a three-inch chenille-and-wire chick, a folded-up poster of the RHN *Papanikolis*, periscope down, slipping back under the vast swells of a boundless green sea while in the background Italian troop carriers and cruisers were engulfed in flames and

sinking fast, and boats rode the knife-like edges of the green waves, picking up survivors, and high above four blood-red planes circled a yellow sky – desperate or raging, exultant or indifferent, it was impossible to tell. On the back of the poster Stelios had pencilled the date he'd bought it ('12th Jan 1941') and the price ('six drachmas'). It had seemed like a lot of money at the time.

The booklet had been circulated by an organization called 'Ellinikon Aima' – a bunch of lousy monarchists, according to Philippos, who questioned whether they even deserved to be called a resistance organization in the first place since, while they published an underground newspaper that talked a good game, they were not known to do any resisting themselves. And what kind of a name was 'Greek Blood', anyway? Nationalist shit. ('Philippe!' Dora had glared at him.) Probably the same people who back in '22 when they'd come over (and then '23 and '24 and '25) had called them 'Turkseeds', beaten them, stolen their jewellery, set their tents on fire.

So Stelios knew his father would not approve, and kept the booklet hidden. Yet he wouldn't get rid of it. It was the strangest thing he'd ever read. Though published in November of '43, about a month or so before it had fallen into his hands, it claimed to be reporting on a trial that had taken place in May of '44, shortly after liberation, which, it was intimated, had occurred in early spring, though no precise date was given. The proceedings, held in an unspecified 'largest available hall in Athens', and broadcast live over the radio, involved the prosecution of Rallis and a number of ministers in his government for high treason. They stood accused of 'working to undermine the state from within, wrecking the national economy, condemning the people to death by starvation, benefiting from and enabling widespread corruption.'

A lot of this Stelios couldn't follow. Some of the concepts were unknown to him, and even when it was dealing with ideas he thought he understood, the text itself, written in the katharevousa he'd been incompletely taught at school rather than the dimotiki his parents and everyone else he knew actually spoke, often made them as hard to identify as familiar faces glimpsed from a great distance.

But it didn't matter. Here was, he'd been shocked to realize the first time he'd riffled through the booklet, something he'd never come across before, something that he wouldn't have conceived of even as an impossibility: a *history of the future*. (Revelation did not count, he figured, since it was dictated by God and only physically written by John.

And though he could not yet express this with any clarity, as he would do much later in his infamous 'Exegesis of an Occurrence at a Pompeii Overpass, 1977' from *Three Instances of Life as a Morale-Boosting Exercise*, he already had an inchoate idea that prophecy was not to be confused with prediction and that neither bore any relation to future history, that vantage points had consequences, and that, as he put it, 'looking ahead and seeing ahead are not to be taken for synonyms; and witnessing the fire spread is not the same as having lit it.') Not even the fact that the future the booklet portrayed had not come to pass had proved sufficient to extinguish what those forty-five pages had set off in Stelios. The days that signalled the consignment of that future to the immediate past had provoked the dizzying thought that what the booklet now recorded was a history of a *past* future; one in which things had turned out differently; one that, while it had not transpired, had also not been entirely lost.

Stelios would have found it hard to explain any of this to his father. He could barely explain it to himself. But, as many times as he'd read it, he hadn't been able to locate anything in the text he could be sure his father would have found objectionable – at least until today. Because as he sat there on the edge of the bed, hunched over the booklet with the box now balanced on his knees, the long ridge of his spine visible through his thin shirt, his wrist bones jutting out as big as walnuts, his skin grey in the faint morning light, listening, while in the fading dusk the first sparrows began to twitter, for the possible occurrence of sounds less natural, finding himself consciously starting as though soft footsteps were passing before the room's door, he felt something stir in his mind that had not been there a moment before. It didn't resolve immediately, but he registered its slow movement inside himself, then sensed it gather speed like something given a small nudge at the top of a steep incline.

He flicked through the pages, was reminded of all their various threads, realized which way they all ran, what figure they formed, saw what he had not seen previously: what was missing. There were no communists at the 'special tribunal'. No EAM members. Also, no one who'd suffered, no one who'd starved, no one who'd resisted, no one who'd been directly harmed by collaborators had been called to testify. Not a single person who'd come to speak for their dead. There were seven witnesses for the prosecution, and all were either politicians or industrialists.

Stelios sat staring at that booklet for a long time before closing it and returning it to the bottom of the box. Sweat trickled down his brow. His eyes had taken on a glassy,

feverish sheen. He took the sweater off and laid it beside him on the bed. He didn't know how to feel, was proud for having seen beyond the immediately apparent, for having thought about what the text didn't say as well as about what it did; but he was also troubled by its elisions, and confused as to what they suggested or were meant to suggest. Did this mean he shouldn't like it anymore? If so, should he throw the booklet in the stove when no one was looking, or would it suffice never to read it again? Maybe he *should* read it again, to see if he would understand it any better. It wasn't even the thing itself that meant so much to him. He had to admit that a lot of it was, well, kind of dull. But its very existence had been a miracle of a kind that habituation had done nothing to diminish. He arranged the poster over it, then the magazines, finally the centaur. He held the chenille-and-wire chick in his hands. Its beak was bright orange, its head red, its body azure and the nubs of its wings green. Such an ugly bird, Stelios thought.

A floorboard sprang in the living room, startling him. He looked up but there was no one there. A gust of wind hummed through the house. Another board sprang, behind him this time.

Stelios went very still. 'I didn't mean it,' he said.

An intense hush fell over the sounds of the morning. The sparrows stopped twittering in the sky, the dawn seemed to lose, for the minute, all its voice. The shadows in the room began to pale and fade, as though a thin layer of cloud were passing over the sun, but Stelios felt he saw with a strange sharpness that, he'd come to learn, coincided with the appearance of his sister.

'I'm sorry. It's not ugly. Really, it's not.' He waited but the silence only seemed to deepen. 'I said it's not! Stop being such a baby!'

Outside, a single sparrow twittered in acceptance of his apology.

'All right then,' he said.

'Appearance' was not quite the right word here, at least not in the sense most commonly denoted. Stelios did not ever lay eyes on Maria. This was, in fact, a rule whose existence he'd grasped instinctively the very first time she'd come to him, sensing in the very next instant that to violate it would mean to lose her, again, possibly for good: she would make her presence known only to him and only as long as he did not ever attempt to look around for her. Nor did Maria *speak* to him, exactly. Not using her voice anyway. She communicated instead through whatever means might be available, animate and

inanimate both. It made for surprisingly intelligible conversation. (It was not for lack of asking that he didn't know whether a second loss might not be followed by a second recovery. Maria never divulged a single thing about the afterlife, other than what her manifestation itself had already demonstrated. He had, once, in a frustrated rage, accused her of hiding the true nature of the hereafter from him, not because she was not permitted to reveal it, but because it was too horrible to bear, or because – he'd only at that moment considered the possibility, and only because, whatever else she might have become, Maria was still his baby sister – she herself did not *know* it. There had come no answer to that, only a feeling in the air, something tense, a holding of the breath, and he had almost told himself he would be right in thinking his surmise to be true.)

So he'd told no one. What could he have said? He was being visited by his dead sister, whom he never saw but who was nevertheless there, definite as a picture in a frame; who spoke to him through sounds attributable to natural causes, telling him things he already knew, or things impossible to either confirm or refute; who also showed him things, unimportant and too easily predictable, that demonstrated no special knowledge of the future or any hidden present. He could guess how such a conversation would go:

How did he know someone was really there, then?

He just did. It couldn't be explained – you had to be there to understand. To sense the intention in things.

But how could he be sure that this someone was his sister?

Of course it was Maria. Who else would it be?

But if he never *saw* her, never even heard a voice–

Did they think he didn't know his own sister?

How often did she appear to him?

Often enough. When he was ill, mostly.

Ill...?

Feverish, sometimes.

...

Because that's when she was most worried about him!

...

He was ill all the time anyway! They didn't have enough to eat, so he was ill all the time. It didn't prove anything.

...

And so on. So he would have told no one even if Maria hadn't made it clear (a silence, a carob leaf seesawing to the ground to land next to his foot, his cup having moved since he'd last reached for it) that he wasn't supposed to, that she was there for him alone. This had been hard to accept, and had with time become even harder to bear. Watching his parents mourn while being just as inconsolable had been one thing, but getting to witness the hopelessness that moved beneath their every emotion like bone under skin while himself being granted even the partial consolation that was Maria's, not return, exactly, rather, perhaps, Maria's *persistence*, and knowing this consolation to be predicated on the continuance of their suffering – it was not unbearable, he knew enough not to call it that. There was, it had come to look like, nothing in this world that couldn't be borne. He'd thought digging through rubble in search of his sister couldn't be borne; but it had been. He'd thought finding his sister's body couldn't be borne; but it had been. He'd thought seeing her miraculously untouched face with its frozen expression that looked for all the world like a grin – he'd thought that couldn't be borne; but it had been. He'd thought living on after her funeral couldn't be borne; but it was. Therefore no, watching his parents suffer so might not have been unbearable, but it was as close to it as he'd known.

Stelios laid the chick next to the centaur and closed the box. He sat there, waiting. Behind his back, the wind brushed against the windowpane.

'I'm fine.'

The wind held off.

'Really, I'm fine. I feel better already,' he said, palming his forehead.

From next door came what sounded like the stomp of a heavy boot.

'You *can* tell if it's your own forehead.'

A floorboard let out a slow creak that turned into a question.

'I am,' Stelios said. He set the box next to him on the bed, leaned forward and reached for his cup of water on the floor. It had moved an inch from where he'd set it down.

'I said I am!' He brought the cup to his mouth but pulled it back to get a good look at it before drinking. It was almost empty.

'What's that supposed to mean?' he asked. He drank the remaining water. There was a knot the size of an eye in the floorboard next to his right foot and he set the cup down on top of it. He sat back and listened.

'I know. What do you want me to do? You said I can't tell her.' The temperature in the room seemed to drop, and Stelios shivered.

'Oh really? Like what?' He paused, waited. No reply came.

'See? You don't know either.' He felt pressure building up in his groin. He crossed his legs at the ankles, clamped his thighs together. The scent of almond blossom wafted in from somewhere.

'You wouldn't have to worry if you just spoke to them,' he said. 'Mum, at least? I don't understand—'

Almond blossom, it occurred to him. 'You should be more careful,' he said. 'It's almost winter now—'

He paused, wondering. Did she do it on purpose? Maybe she was hoping to be caught out. Though maybe it was just that she couldn't tell the seasons apart anymore. Maybe they all looked the same to her from where she stood. Was there even such a thing as time there? Since she only ever appeared when he was alone, it had been reasonable to assume she still understood the difference between distinct moments. But maybe she didn't.

'It's almost winter,' he repeated. 'You do know that, right?'

The scent faded, but not in a communicative fashion. There was no sense of retraction – it felt more like a completed sentence.

'Well?' he said. The pressure in his groin had increased. He squeezed his thighs tighter together.

The light in the room shifted, turned buttery yellow, as though the sun had jumped ahead in its course, was out from behind the clouds.

'Fidgeting? I'm not. I said I was fine.' He didn't feel all that great, it was true, but he didn't want to cut the conversation short. He could feel drops of urine leak onto his underwear, and the pressure in his groin had turned to pain. 'I just need to pee,' he admitted. 'Don't go.' He was already on his feet, rushing from the room.

In his absence the room brightened, then darkened once more. A dull thud was heard from behind the wall, as though a cupboard had been closed slightly too hard by

the heavy hand of a person still half-asleep. The box lay on Stelios's bed, 'Fehlfarben Ne 444' printed in black on the lid.

In the living room and kitchen nothing stirred. The sideboard sat there, all sharp edges and firm bulk. There was an empty green cut-glass vase standing on the middle of the table, a layer of dust covering its wide, shallow grooves. One corner of the kitchen window was covered with a square sheet of wood with a hole in the middle, through which stuck out the blackened pipe of the Oberlin stove. The wind whistled softly through the small gap between the metal and the wood.

Stelios came in through the back door, a little unsteady on his feet. He was looking flushed again and fresh sweat glistened on his forehead. He crossed the kitchen but hesitated just inside the living room, tried to sense his sister's presence in the house, found her behind him, a gentle pressure at the back of his neck, a wave of benign intent. 'I'm okay,' he said.

There was a short burst of rain-like patter against the roof.

'Of course I'm going to work.' He entered the bedroom, got on his knees, picked up the box and pushed it under his bed. Standing up, he felt faint. His knees wobbled and he swayed. Marcasite dust fell on the world like snow. He sat on the bed with his head down, taking deep, slow breaths and waiting for his vision to clear.

The air filled with the smell of burnt feathers.

'Oh, shush. We still need to eat, don't we?'

He made another attempt to stand up. A pink light flashed in his eyes and the room spun around him, drained of colour, and he let himself drop back onto the bed. He leaned forward and put his head in his hands. His forehead was covered in a film of cold, clammy sweat. Underneath it, his skin burned. 'See? You *can* tell,' he tried to say, but something stuck in his throat and he coughed instead. Somewhere else in the house, floorboards responded with a series of strangely inarticulate – though, he thought, sympathetic – groans, as though Maria were too alarmed to speak clearly.

'What is it?' came the voice from the living room; it took him an instant to recognize it as his mother's. He looked up to see her hurrying towards him and felt an emptying out of the air in the room that reminded him of swimming, of hearing the distance in his ears when he surfaced after a dive, and the light turned pink again, as though he'd been floating in the water for too long, staring at the sky through closed

eyelids. Maria, taking her leave, but not before bestowing her usual parting gift. A glimpse of what was to come. Not as possibility or likelihood, not as guidance or warning, but as brute, inescapable occurrence, as though it were something that, for her, had already happened or was, right that very moment, happening.

This was what he was shown: He'd lower his hands and sit up straight and again his mother would ask, 'What is it?' And he would say, 'Nothing. Overslept. Still trying to wake up,' making a show of rubbing the heels of his palms over his sockets, and his mother would eye him, reaching out to cup his forehead before he could stop her. 'You're burning up!' She'd order him to bed and he'd refuse, would claim he was well enough to go to work, not really meaning it – he'd be feeling even worse by this point – but needing his mother to contradict him, to make the decision for him, assuage his guilt. And his mother would know and would contradict him, make the decision for him, tell him it was all right, it wasn't his fault. And he'd strip down to his underwear and then shiver and put his sweater back on and get in bed while his mother brought him some stale bread dipped in water and made him a cup of wiregrass tea, and he'd eat the bread and drink the tea and would almost immediately need to pee and would barely make it to the lavatory and it would hurt, and he'd get back into bed and lie there while his mother brought over the Fotious' mending and sat down on the edge of his bed so that he could feel her weight press down on the mattress, pulling him closer. She would sit there working while he slept his uneasy sleep, would from time to time lean over him and put her lips to his forehead to check his temperature and once would leave the room and return a while later with some kind of poultice she would apply to his forehead – he could not say what, smell being the one sense unavailable to him during these visions, but he could feel it, cold on his skin, drawing the heat out of him. In early afternoon, his mother gone off to do the Oikonomous' washing, he would awaken into a groggy stupor from a nightmare he'd be unable to recall, and would find the house quiet and still, the mending basket set down on his parents' bed with a white shirtsleeve hanging over the lip like the pendulum of a dead clock.

November 1944 (2015)

[Summary of excised section:

The reader is first presented with one of two extant entries from Mr Petrou's diary ('discovered sometime in the '90s in a folder of EAM-related documents at the Contemporary Social History Archives'). The entry, made in early 1943, records a dinner at the residence of General Geloso, commander of the Italian occupation forces in Greece, to which the Petrous were invited to accompany Hauptsturmführer Lautenbach. The dinner, also attended by Mr Voreas, is derailed by an Italian-German disagreement over the taking of hostages, but not before the Petrous discover Mr Voreas is collaborating with the Nazi 'Agency for the Custody of Jewish Property' which is about to extend its operations from Salonica to Athens.

In November 1944, the Petrous, out for a walk, decide on coffee at Yannis's kafeneio, which they used to frequent before the war. There they run into their son, Yorgos, and his mystery girlfriend, Victoria, and Mr Petrou realizes his wife led them to the kafeneio somehow knowing their son would be there. The four of them are watched by another patron, a man with a disfigured face. During a seemingly neutral conversation on literary matters Mrs Petrou becomes convinced Victoria is a communist who has involved Yorgos in some leftist conspiracy. Mr Petrou, who appears unaware of this possibility (though, as the narrator implies, he might in fact know exactly what he's doing) brings up Mr Voreas's involvement with the Agency and thus, the narrator suggests, brings Voreas to the attention of EAM and seals the fate of both families. See appendix, p. 385.]

It was late afternoon when the bus reached Kalamos, hours behind schedule. My sister and Aunt Aliko had waited for it sitting side by side on a flat rock a little off the road. A few metres away a loose crowd laden with haversacks, betel bags and satchels, cardboard boxes, and baskets covered with cheesecloth tied with string, had gathered by the bus stop, which consisted in its entirety of a sign atop a wooden pole at the road's edge. Katerina had watched the expectant passengers aim aggrieved looks down the

road, emit loud sighs, mutter oaths. Or take turns eyeing one another warily, assessing what the others had brought with them, guessing at weight and possible contents, wondering what might have been found, where, and at what cost. Katerina did not share their impatience, was in no hurry to see the bus nose round the bend. It was only going to take them back to Athens and bring the day to a close.

When the bus pulled up she dragged her feet to the stop, steering clear of the large gazogene cylinder mounted upright over the rear bumper. She didn't trust the device, no matter what anyone said. It made too much noise, produced too much smoke, and the smell made you think the bus was on fire. Plus the whole contraption was too exposed to be entirely safe. She marvelled that the adults around her didn't seem to grasp this all-too-obvious fact. That morning the other driver had loaded the cylinder full of wood and pumped the bellows to stoke the fire till the flames turned blue, had lifted a lid and brought a lighter near to see if it would catch, then, satisfied, had returned the lid to its place and got behind the driver's seat to start the engine, and Katerina had watched and questioned whether she should get on or not, and in the end had insisted to Aliko that they not sit near the back.

This driver said nothing about the delay, and the men who had been promising to give him a piece of their mind barely said a word as they waited to climb aboard. They'd all gathered by the doors and were pushing to be the first through, laden once more with all their mysterious things, which included one small trunk that emitted a briny stench and ended up on the luggage rack on the roof after the driver refused to have it in the cabin, even though, as the man who had been carrying it said, it didn't smell any worse than anything else that had come on board, including some of the other passengers, and certainly no worse than the cabin itself. He wasn't wrong, a sour smell did hang about inside the vehicle despite the open windows, and was made worse as more and more passengers squeezed into the already crowded vehicle, throwing themselves on the nearest empty seat, squeezing parcels under their legs, hugging their bags close to their chests. As though someone might grab them and – go where? Katerina thought. It was the right fear at the wrong time.

Aliko chose a bench seat near the middle and waited for my sister to slide over to the window before taking the aisle side. A woman in a black kerchief took the window side of the bench seat in front of them. Seconds later her head drooped forward.

The engine coughed to life and off they went. Katerina set her satchel down by her feet, put her face against the window and stared out. The conductor walked the length of the bus, collecting fares. He made to disturb the woman in the kerchief but seemed to recognize her and walked past her. Aliki reached into her bag.

‘So here we are again,’ the conductor said.

‘Yes,’ Aliki said. ‘Here we are.’ She handed over a fistful of notes.

‘Your daughter?’ he said, nodding at my sister while counting out change from his leather bag. He was pretending the answer mattered less to him than it did, but when Aliki hesitated he stopped counting and looked up.

‘Yes,’ Aliki said, giving my sister a look. ‘Katerina, say hello to Mr Alexandros,’ she went on.

‘Hello,’ my sister said. ‘Nice to meet you.’

‘Hi, little one,’ the conductor said, making a half-hearted effort to mask his disappointment, but then finished counting the change in silence.

A few fat raindrops exploded against the window, slid across it in muddy diagonals, but nothing came of them. My sister looked up but didn’t see a single cloud in the sky. They crested a pine-covered hill and the sea came into view in the distance, the winter sun turning the trees, rocks and water gold. A fresh breeze rushed in, bringing with it the smell of grass and resin. The wind made the sea shiver like cold skin. Down below, right at the crook of the elbow of a small gravel beach, were clustered the houses of a fishing village. Light boats at anchor rose and dipped with the waves. My sister looked on.

After a while Aliki leaned over and said, ‘There’ll be other days. Maybe you could come with me again soon. If you’d like to.’ My sister turned to look at her. ‘Provided your parents agree, of course,’ Aliki added.

My sister had been certain her comportment was as opaque as could be, her expression as impassive as an icon’s. She pretended to think about the offer. ‘Can I come with you tomorrow?’ she said.

‘Tomorrow I’m selling, not buying,’ Aliki whispered with a small nod at the satchel by her feet. ‘I’ll only be going down to Asyrmatos.’

My sister hesitated. It was a bad neighbourhood, the worst in Athens, everyone always said. Father could perhaps be talked into letting her go – had he ever even heard of Asyrmatos? – but Mother would never allow it.

‘When will you be buying again?’

‘Not for three or four days, I think,’ Aliki said. She saw the look on my sister’s face. ‘We’ll ask your parents about tomorrow. See what they say,’ she said, as though she didn’t already know. ‘But wouldn’t you rather be with your father? It will be really late by the time we get home today, and I think he’d be really sad if he didn’t get to spend some time with you two days in a row.’

‘It’s Monday tomorrow. Dad will be gone all day,’ my sister said. This was an argument, not a complaint. Aliki frowned at her.

It’s true, my sister says, that it must have seemed a little strange, how quickly she’d got used to our father’s presence. Having spent every waking hour of the first three weeks after his return clinging to his side – she would, by all accounts (though she claims this to be an exaggeration) latch on to his leg and let loose great howling sobs every time he attempted to leave the house without her – she had, suddenly and for no apparent reason, accepted that he had to leave for work most weekday mornings, and had never again cried to see him go. What this work might have been was never specified, though it was evident he had not returned to the gendarmerie – he never wore his uniform, for one. There was no gendarmerie in Athens, either, though it had taken a while for Katerina to think of that. But, she says, everything else seemed such a duplication of the old routine – his leaving in the very early morning, his occasional return home for lunch and a short nap around midday, his second departure in the afternoon, his final return home in the early evening, and, most crucially, our mother’s apparent lack of concern as to his comings and goings – that it is no wonder she adjusted almost overnight.

And yet.

Did Katerina ever really adjust? Watching her with her husband and sons all those decades later – the way she was when they weren’t home, the way her eyes constantly darted to her watch, the grandfather clock, the blue-silver light of the muted television, anything that would tell her, were they late, how late, was it yet time to panic – I would think, no, she didn’t. Or maybe she did, maybe she had, at that time, adjusted, and it was everything that came after, the civil war, our father’s imprisonment, his death – maybe it was all of that she proved unable to get over. It’s sometimes hard to say now, when the

whole of our past exists at the same time, like houses along a street, and remembering is like driving around in the dark by all their lighted windows.

I don't mean this to sound as though my sister failed in some way. Did any of us adjust? No, I imagine your father would say; no, we didn't. Sure, we were resilient. We endured. It could even look, from the outside, as though we adjusted. Unless you got to look closely at us. You probably could see it then, how we had learned to bear things, to hide our weak parts, and what the ways in which we hid those parts had done to us in return. Being resilient meant only that we withstood, not that we were undamaged.

Aliki examined my sister's face for what seemed like a long time. She didn't find whatever it was she was looking for. 'Well, we'll ask your parents and see what they say,' she repeated, forcing a smile. It never reached her eyes. They were large and watery, as though always on the verge of tears. 'All right,' my sister said. She knew what our parents would say. She turned her attention back to the window.

The light dimmed and night came on and my sister listened as the chatter of the other passengers faded to the odd whisper. Soon even the whispering stopped, as one after another they fell silent, convinced that every extinguished voice belonged to yet another eavesdropper. My sister heard the sound of a match being lit, the crackling of tobacco meeting flame. The smell drifted through the bus. Whatever it was, it wasn't tobacco – the smell was too heavy and acrid. Somewhere close a man hissed, 'Fourth one since Kalamos.' My sister couldn't tell if he'd been talking to himself or someone else. She didn't hear anyone answer.

The bus stopped. My sister looked out the window, saw nothing but black tree shapes against the dark blue tatters of the night sky, and the first few metres of a narrow dirt path leading downhill. There was another bus sign, this one slightly canted. It was difficult to picture anyone getting off here, but some people did. Three or four new passengers took their place. All save one sat near the front. Only the last one to come on board, a short, wide-shouldered, white-haired man walked further back, taking the aisle side of the seat in front of my sister and Aliki, next to the woman in the kerchief.

The bus set off again, the conductor came along with his little torch and the man paid his fare. It wasn't long before he began to sing in a low voice. The song sounded vaguely familiar. Or not the song itself, maybe, but the tune – it sounded like something

our grandmother would sing. My sister leaned closer, straining to hear the words over the engine's noise, the rattle of seats, the wind at the windows.

‘My little darling bird, the winter shears,
The world turns like a wheel and spring is near.

My little darling dove, dark night descends,
One turning of the wheel and summer ends.’

The old man was singing ‘You made a promise you will keep, by God and all the angels...’ when my sister heard someone behind her say – the same voice, it could be, that had been counting cigarettes before, but softer now, kinder – ‘Maybe try a merrier one, Barba-Stefane?’

‘Who’s that over there?’ said the old man, turning to look over his right shoulder.

‘It’s Nikos, Barba-Stefane,’ said the man. My sister half-turned and looked too, with her nose squashed against the seat back, her eyes just over its edge, but all she could see in the dark was a face-shaped blur.

‘Which Nikos is that?’ asked the old man.

‘Nikos the fisherman, from Agioi Apostoloi,’ the other man said.

Nikos, it turned out, was the man who’d been carrying the small, funny-smelling trunk. Packed in ice inside the trunk was the eighteen-pound seabream that he and his brother had caught that very morning. He was taking it to Kifisia to sell to Christos the fishmonger.

‘This morning, bah!’ someone said. ‘I got a good whiff of that trunk, and let me tell you, ain’t nothing fresh in there! Found it washed up on the beach, more like it!’

‘Not what you said when you offered to buy it earlier,’ Nikos said.

‘It weren’t me.’

‘Fresh as the day is long,’ Nikos said.

‘It’s November,’ said the man.

‘It was no more fish for us, once they put up the big hotels in Kifisia,’ Barba-Stefanos said. He’d twisted sideways in his seat, was sitting with his right elbow resting on the seatback. ‘No more mullets – proper hook-caught ones, not the ones from Mesologgi. No more cuttlefish in the winter, meat so white they looked like ghosts made of snow. No more Elefsinian pandoras, big as angels, hundred dramia each they weighed. So fresh they’d leap up in the pannier and point at their neighbour when you as much as glanced at them.’

My sister let out a giggle. The old man turned her way – in the dark his face looked bruise-blue. He smiled and, she thought, winked at her.

‘We all got to make a living,’ said Nikos. ‘Hotels buy a lot and pay well, day in, day out. Can’t blame Christos for aiming to please them first. / won’t blame him, anyways.’

‘Easy for you to say – you’re the one whose wares he’s selling!’ said the unknown man.

The bus pulled up at the stop in Bogiati. A single streetlamp stood a few metres up the road, casting a weak grey haze over the vehicle’s interior.

The woman in the kerchief got off and the old man scooted over to the window side, called for Nikos to join him. He came and sat down and my sister got a better look at him. He was short and wiry, with mussed hair and a few days’ worth of beard. He looked younger than she’d imagined. The bus set off again.

‘What’ve you been up to today, Barba-Stefane?’ he said.

‘We took a daytrip to Kapandriti,’ the old man said. ‘We?’ my sister wondered.

‘Had our fill: school-shark with skordalia, tomatoes, feta drenched in olive oil and oregano. Peaches as round and juicy as Aphrodite’s bosom. Washed it all down with the tangiest retsina. Must have drunk twenty jugs.’

‘They serve it in water glasses, I hear,’ Nikos said.

My sister was nonplussed. If Kapandriti had so much to offer, why hadn’t Aliko taken them there? The contents of their own bags were much less appetizing. A moment later her confusion was compounded by the realization that here they were in mid-November, yet the man was talking about tomatoes and peaches.

Katerina turned to Aliko, started to say something. Aliko put a hand on my sister’s forearm, shaking her head. My sister kept quiet. No doubt Aliko would explain later. (Aliko always did. In dealing with us, my own memories confirm, she would not opt for authority over transparency; and as a result, though quite without meaning to, she often gave us reason to think poorly of the well-meaning but tight-lipped strictness of our mother, whose orders were tender and sensible, but still orders.)

‘Good strong wine,’ Stefanos said. ‘Stars and fireworks in a glass. Foam rising to the top like pearls on a branch. Pour it, it gurgles like a rock partridge.’

Nikos laughed. ‘That’s the living, eh?’ he said.

'That's nothing,' said the old man, abruptly serious. 'Less than nothing. You want to know about life? I'll tell you about life.'

He was quiet for so long my sister thought he might have forgotten what he meant to say, then sniffed as though he were holding back tears. Only then did it occur to her that the old man was drunk. (The thing she would not think of. Again she saw our father stumble into the house, his face flushed, his uniform in disarray, the rowels of his spurs – he'd been too drunk to remember to remove them – clinking like pocketfuls of loose change with every step; saw our mother rush at him, consumed with fury; saw our grandmother move to get between them; saw the raised hand.)

Some memories, she told me once, should be approached as though they're open fires, and for exactly the same reason.

'...and he'll cry out, "You're late, grandpa," ' Stefanos was saying. 'Understand?' Nikos gave the old man a hard pat on the shoulder, left his hand where it landed. 'You're a lucky man, Barba-Stefane,' he said, his voice sounding all wrong, serrated, too jovial.

'The Lord giveth,' said the old man, ' and the Lord taketh away.'

Nikos nodded once in agreement, mumbled something that might have, with a little more breath behind it, turned into an 'Amen'. Then both men were quiet, as though they were taking stock of where and how the conversation had got away from them. They stayed like that, Stefanos looking out the window, Nikos looking straight ahead, neither saying a word.

It wasn't long before Katerina fell asleep. By the time she awoke, they were nearing Kifisia.

'...saddles, horse collars, halters, is how I make my living,' a voice was saying. Barba-Stefanos, she realized after a moment. 'My shop's near the war memorial. We live round the back.'

'I know it,' the unknown man said. 'Kind of on the small side, ain't it?'

'We make do.'

'Bit out of the way, too,' the man said.

'That it is,' Stefanos agreed. 'I hired a barker, maybe more people would find me, says the wife. I say, if her yelling's not done the trick, nothing on this earth will.'

This drew scattered laughs from nearby passengers. Nikos seemed to take a long time to join in.

'I swear, when I'm dead and gone I'll still be hearing that woman's voice through six feet of dirt,' Stefanos went on, playing to his audience.

They came to a stop in front of a dark building whose ground floor consisted of a wide shuttered shopfront. Curtains were drawn across dark first-storey windows. Nikos made his goodbyes and got off, walked around the side the bus to retrieve his trunk. Stefanos stood up and lowered the top half of the window, stuck his head out and cried, 'Tell Christos to set that head aside – I'll be coming for it tomorrow!' The engine started, the bus drove off.

Soon, winding their way through Kifisia proper, they went around a wide corner and light flew at them from up ahead like a false sunrise and when they pulled up near its source it turned out to be the lighted shopfront of a patisserie. Behind the big plate-glass window, draped in thick white linen, decked with lit candles in shiny silver holders, in the dazzle of a crystal chandelier as blinding as the sun, were laid out small round tables on which sat large round plates that held golden-brown pastries, and pink-and-white cakes on whose tops, crimson and glistening like insect wings in sunlight, half-submerged in blobs of whipped cream, sat maraschino cherries waiting to be spooned up by the men and women sitting at the tables in their best Sunday clothes in the spendthrift light, the men in three-piece suits, the women in ankle-length dresses, bejewelled, behatted, and begloved.

It was so extraordinary a sight my sister had difficulty believing in it. Yet here it appeared to be, as definite as the sound of the hammer on the gong of a clock. Was Aliki seeing this? My sister would not turn to check – the spectacle might disappear the moment she took her eyes from it. But she heard the whispers and mutterings from the seats around her and though she registered them as so much contentless noise, the hiss of a radio dialled between stations, she didn't have to turn to know that she wasn't the only one watching. A feeling rose inside her, a desire to be granted entry to this world, she thought at first, before realizing what she really wanted to do was put a rock through the glass.

Stefanos walked up and paused in front of the window, blocking her view. He was looking up the street, saying, voice raised as though he were addressing someone who

was walking away, '...head down, turn onto Trikoupi, stay on it. Can't miss me, I'm up two streets to your right. You hit the Cecil, where the RAF boys are quartered, you gone too far!'

He waved goodbye and strode off. My sister didn't watch him go. She turned her gaze back to the shopfront as the bus doors screeched and the engine turned over and caught. It was only when they'd rounded the next corner that she gave up looking, turned to Aliko and asked her what it was she'd just seen.

Katerina did end up accompanying Aliko to Asyrmatos, she says – just the once. She isn't sure whether it was the next day or not. It must have been sometime in November, considering that just a few weeks later Athens was a war zone and Aliko's trips had come to a stop.

Aliko and Katerina wound their way through alleys narrow as bridle paths, ravine-wide passageways, the shacks on either side closing up overhead as though they were buckling under their own weight. They stepped around the rivulets and puddles of black washing water, passed cramped doorways, dark approximate rectangles that smelled of coolness and earth and vinegar and were blocked by black marketeers slouched on chairs tilted against the doorframe who touted their wares quietly, conspiratorially, not making eye contact, whispering things that my sister can't recall hearing but is certain were words like 'olive oil' or 'pulses'. It made her feel as though Aliko and she were intruders in the men's dreams.

That's the strangest thing about her memory of this whole episode, she says, how it doesn't include a single sound. It plays in her head like a silent movie, a montage of suggestive images. The screen often turns black but no intertitle appears to help her figure out what she's watching. The men all look alike and Aliko moves past them without giving them a second look.

They are standing in front of such a man. There's nothing distinctive or remarkable about him. He looks up at Aliko, gives her a curt nod. He says something. Aliko responds. He says nothing. Aliko speaks again. Eventually he stands up, but instead of pushing his chair aside and letting them through he takes off down the street with Aliko and my sister in tow.

They are being delivered to another man sitting in another chair in front of another dark doorway. He takes them through it down a short corridor.

Aliki and my sister are standing just inside a room. A door closes behind them. The room contains two chairs, a narrow bed, a man who steps forward and motions for them to sit. Aliki hands over a satchel. The man looks inside. They talk. He drags a large chest from under the bed and opens it, fills a bag with something – beans? They talk some more. Aliki hands over a second satchel. He looks inside, raises an eyebrow. He fills a second, smaller bag with – salt? Sugar?

They are being led out through a different door. They are crossing a room containing another narrow bed. On it is a person lying or laid under a thin blanket. On a small triangular shelf in the corner a vigil lamp throws bronze ripples of light on the icon of St Phanourios.

They are out in the street. A long line of men are waiting to use the latrine. On a different street, a line of women are waiting to fill jugs at a public tap.

They are going down some stone steps.

An alley that widens as it runs downhill, all dirt and rocks, like a dry riverbed. Standing by its side, a horse cart, but no horse.

It's strange, how you can't tell in advance what you'll be able to recall and why. Certain things stay with you, and it's no great surprise; some that you want to remember, some that you'd give anything to be able to forget. But then there are the things that belong to no order of events, that are unconnected to a before or after, things that are simply there, flotsam rising up to the surface long after the ship was wrecked – clues at best ambiguous, at worst nugatory.

For example: I'm eighteen or twenty or so, and I too am riding a bus, cross-country. We're on a motorway heading south, and I'm sitting at an east-facing window, my bag on the empty seat next to me with my jacket neatly folded on top of it. The sun is low on the western sky. A bright flat plane of red-gold radiance sweeps across the cabin like a searchlight, touches my right arm at the elbow, just below the rolled-up sleeve of my shirt – I can feel the heat on my forearm. The air from an open window whistles past my face, cool and dry. I look up at the sky and am surprised to see a half-full moon melting into the blue like a scoop of vanilla ice cream, and say to myself, 'Why, yes, how appropriate. I will remember this.'

But am I eighteen, or twenty? Where am I going, where have I been? What's so appropriate about seeing the moon in the daytime sky? I can remember none of these things. I can recall the moment, but not what it means or why it might be significant.

A while back I was talking about all this to your father and he mentioned in passing something called the 'Zeigarnik Effect'. It's to do with remembering details about uncompleted tasks better and more frequently than completed ones. Interrupting people before they've had a chance to finish what they're doing is supposed to result in a kind of psychic tension that can't be relieved until the job is done. I told your father this sounded like a fancy way of saying 'people like to finish what they've started', and he laughed and said, 'That's what I thought too,' but after the video call ended I got to thinking whether this was something that could be applied to memory more generally – whether it's not the case that, no matter how long it's been, you recall most clearly what you aren't yet done with, or isn't yet done with you.

[Summary of excised section:

Shortly before he is to report for duty at the Averoff prison (where the most high-ranking members of the collaborationist Rallis government are being held) Byford-Jones is summoned to General Scobie's office at the Grande Bretagne. They discuss the situation regarding the disbandment of ELAS, and Byford-Jones confesses he feels the British hard line might be a mistake. They watch as a procession approaches the hotel, carrying what are purported to be the bodies of communists murdered by right-wing elements. Scobie reveals his true intention in summoning Byford-Jones was to ask that, since the general himself cannot be seen to be visiting the collaborators in prison, the lieutenant engage them in conversation and assess the 'political outlook' they represent. He shares a telegram sent by Churchill which reveals the PM is seeking to send more troops to Athens in anticipation of a clash with the Left. Byford-Jones is driven to the prison by Trooper McAuley and spends that time contemplating the financial straits the country is in. See appendix, p. 397.]

Stelios had only been waiting for twenty minutes or so when he saw his father leave the Ministry. One half of the building's double doors opened inward, just enough for Philippos to slink through, pulling the door shut behind him, throwing all his weight into it, the door fairytale-tall and -wide, a black iron frame around a rectangle formed of thick amber-coloured glass lozenges separated by black iron tracery and overlaid by a wrought-iron grate. The thick glass turned everything behind it to a suggestion, dark shadows moving liquidly over weird planes that were now horizontal, now vertical, now somehow both, or neither.

Ten minutes into his wait, Stelios, seeing no lights at the building's windows and fearing he had arrived too late, had approached and tried to peer through the glass, and had almost been caught by a shadow whose trajectory it had taken him too long to interpret correctly. He had been rescued by the door's weight; by the time the little man in the pale suit had succeeded in wrestling it open Stelios had run down the steps and was watching from across the street. The man had paid Stelios no mind, nor had Stelios been interested in him – just a short man in an old suit, holding a briefcase tied with string. But his exiting the building had meant that Philippos was still there. He was always among the last to leave, he said, long after all the briefcase carriers were gone.

So Stelios had waited some more, and now here was his father, pulling the door shut behind him; looking, next to it, himself like a small child. He turned away with a frown, felt his pockets for the cigarettes he wouldn't find.

'Dad?' Stelios said, crossing the street.

Philippos looked up, slow to recognize his son; first puzzled, then frightened.

'What... is your mother okay?' He made as though to come forward but stayed rooted in place, looking like a tree bending in the wind.

'Dad – no, she's alright, we're alright,' Stelios said, reaching the bottom of the steps. He'd been so focused on delivering his message he'd not given any thought to this part. 'Everything's all right.'

With a sigh, Philippos came unrooted from the ground, took the steps down one at a time.

'What are you doing here?' He patted his suit pockets again. He had not smoked a cigarette in two years, yet had not ever stopped patting his pockets. Stelios thought he never would. Whatever in his head was doing the remembering, it wasn't him.

'Mum' – he saw the look on his father's face, knew he had to get where he was going quickly – 'she's having one of her bad days. She's been sitting in the garden all day. Just staring. She won't talk.' He forced himself to say it. 'You should come home, dad.'

Philippos took a long time answering. 'Of course I'll come home.'

'I meant now, dad.' He didn't want to be doing this but his sister had made him promise he would. 'It's important,' he added. He didn't know why it might be important, this was yet one more area Maria had remained silent about other than insisting that it was, so that's what he told Philippos, even though he doubted anything he or his father did at this point could have an effect once his mother fell away inside herself like that.

Watching her trying to snap her out of her trances he felt sometimes as though he was standing at the top of some cliff, looking down at a small cove where a human figure stood in the sand at the water's edge with its back to him, gazing motionless out to sea, a figure that from this distance, with the sun in his eyes, might as well have been nothing more than a child's drawn approximation, a shape that only said 'human', but unquestionable even so, known to him, not because he recognized the figure but because he recognized the artist, and he would shout down, hard as he could, desperate to get her attention, but it would be no use, the beach would be too far down for his voice to reach and the sound of the waves too loud in the figure's ears – the sound which, never reaching him, confirmed his powerlessness worse than any thunderous crashing would – and yet he would go on screaming until his voice grew hoarse, until his throat started to close, until somehow, it would seem, the figure would hear – something, enough to make her turn, look around, look up, see him standing there too far away to reach, too far away to know, a mere shape himself, calling out things barely heard, waving his arms now in gestures she couldn't seem to decipher, pointing towards the water and yelling something about the tide, but not quite being understood, the figure appearing to wave at him to 'Come down', 'Yes, the sea, look', why can't he make her understand – this was what it felt like, seeing his mother respond eventually to the sound of his voice if not always the meaning it carried, seeing her mind surface slowly in her eyes and struggle to make sense of where it was, almost as though it had forgotten it existed inside a body, and was surrounded by other bodies that, too, carried other minds – minds that, it could

tell, wanted something from it, though what was not at all clear. This was what it felt like, this image that had started life as fragments in a fever dream before being refined by successive attempts at recollection, this image that he had taken to be about one thing but might very well have been about another, depending on whether he thought he was the one shouting from the clifftop or the one struggling to listen down at the beach; depending, finally, on whether he believed it to have simply been a dream, or yet another message.

So here it is, something like the raw material for the final image of that horrifying late science-fictional story, 'The Midnight Ocean', published pseudonymously, under the nom de plume 'H. P. Barlow', in the third issue of *Apagorevmenos Planitis*, in 1988, mere months before Stelios's death. Pseudonymously because the magazine was still only supposed to be publishing non-Greek writers, though one would argue that, a. no one who had previously read his work would have been fooled for a second and, b. he more or less gives the game away when he identifies the supposed translator as one 'Karolos Dextros Kamaris' – i.e. 'Charles Dexter Ward'.

A rather funny prank, not despite its obviousness, but because of it, seeing as how the blatant references to H.P. Lovecraft – more whole-body jerks than nods, in keeping with the forebear's literary qualities – were missed by the (few) scholars still showing (mostly hostile) interest in Stelios's books; your father's personal favourite way-off-the-mark attempt at criticism being Spiros Koutsoulelos' conclusion that the story was a poorly-executed Kazantzakian homage, an allusion to the 'heap of bones that wails on the cliff's edge' of book seventeen of *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, despite the fact that Stelios had repeatedly and very publicly (ergo most of the hostile interest), characterized Kazantzakis's work as 'pseudo-Christian, pseudo-Buddhist, pseudo-existential, sub-Nietzschean *couleur-locale* bollocks'. Koutsoulelos's argument being, according to your father, that the story represents 'variously – and confusingly – a Bloomian *clinamen* / *tessera* / *kenosis* / *daemonization* / *askesis* / match-to-the-death with the precursor (note here that it is Koutsoulelos rather than the author who is unable to decide, and that, in the case of *daemonization*, he keeps using that word but I do not think it means what he thinks it means).' Stelios's private response to this critique in his final journal entry being,

again according to your father, 'Like I'd spend another minute of my life reading that shit even to ridicule it'.

'Straight home, Dad,' Stelios repeated. 'No more politics, no more meetings. The neighbours can get by on their own for a while. You come home to Mum. Please?' He would have mentioned his father's going to the cemetery too if he hadn't been under strict instruction not to do so.

Philippos glanced up and down the street, looking anywhere but at his son, until Stelios began wondering whether he'd even heard him. But then he sighed and his shoulders slumped. 'There's things I need to do, son. People I can help...'

'Unlike your mother,' the sentence had meant to end. He put his hands in his pockets, glanced up and down the street once more. Sighed once, quietly. 'Let's go, son,' he said, resigned to going over something too big to go around.

'Mr Abatzoglou?' They turned to see standing behind them, at the top of the steps, a young man – a boy, really, despite the suit, despite what he looked like to Stelios at the time – rail-thin, narrow-shouldered, somewhat hunched, looking timidly down at Philippos.

The door behind him was shut. Stelios had not heard it open or close, and the man looked in any case too frail to manage it on his own. It was as though he had walked through it – literally through it – or had simply materialized where he stood because the moment had required him to.

'Orestis?' Philippos said, and in that one word, much to his surprise, Stelios heard, clear as the church bell on Sunday mornings, the practiced rasp of parental reproach. 'Didn't I send you home half an hour ago?'

'Mr Kosmidis wanted me to sweep up Mr Margaris's offices before I left.'

'Orestis, this is the last time I'll say this. You don't work for Mr Kosmidis.'

'Yes, Mr Abatzoglou.'

'This is what you'll say to Mr Kosmidis next time he tries to order you around. You. Don't. Work. For. Mr. Kosmidis.'

'No, Mr Abatzoglou. I mean – yes, Mr Abatzoglou. I mean, no, I don't –'

'I know what you mean, Orestis,' snapped Philippos. 'Just' – in the softer tones of fatherly reasonableness – 'this is what you'll tell him, okay?'

'Yes, Mr Abatzoglou,' Orestis said on the brink of tears, a wounded expression on his face.

So this was 'that poor boy, Orestis', which, thanks to the manner in which Philippos spoke of him, you could have been forgiven for thinking was his full name. That strange, unwelcome thing that Philippos had had thrust upon him despite his demurrals, his protestations, his better judgment: his very own self-appointed lackey. Stelios watched him come down the steps. He took them one at a time, just as Philippos had, but coming at them slantwise, leading with his left shoulder and dragging his right foot across each step, as though not yet done sweeping. Down on the pavement he employed an odd, lopsided gait, right foot swinging forward in tight arcs close to the ground like a scythe or sickle, right shoulder dipping and rising like that of man ducking under an awning.

'Orestis, this is my son, Stelios,' Philippos said. 'Stelios, this is Orestis.'

'Nice to meet you, Mr Orestis,' Stelios said, the deference automatic, drilled to the point of deep instinct. He sensed his father's approbation without having to look.

'Nice to meet you too, Stelios,' said the man. He came closer and, with an almost avian bow from the waist, extended a hand. He put too much effort into the handshake, kept at it too long. Stelios felt the urge to pull away but didn't.

'Going home, Mr Abatzoglou?'

Philippos took a moment, and threw Stelios a sidelong glance, before saying, yes, they were.

'Could I walk with you awhile?'

Another short silence followed before Philippos said, 'Come along then.'

'Thank you, Mr Abatzoglou.'

'I don't own the street, Orestis.'

'No, Mr Abatzoglou.' Stelios could already see how several hours of this a day would grate on his father's nerves.

They set off up Grigoriou Avenue, moving at a pace accommodating to Orestis. At that rate it would be hours before they got home. Stelios found himself wondering whether this might have occurred to Philippos before he'd accepted Orestis's company, and wishing it hadn't.

They'd just turned left onto Tsamadou Street when Orestis said, 'How's school, Stelios?' The road ahead ran straight and narrow, at a slight inclination, and was empty of people. A last glimpse of the sun made them shield their eyes, then it was gone behind low rooftops.

'I don't go to school. I haven't in a long time. I *work*,' Stelios responded, unaccountably offended.

'Oh. I see. Do you want to? Go back, I mean.'

Stelios took his time answering. 'I don't know,' he said with a shrug, casting a glance in his father's direction. 'I guess I will when things are better.'

'That's good,' Orestis said. 'Schooling's important.' How would he know? was the uncharitable thought Stelios made a belated effort not to have.

'Though how would I know, right?' added Orestis with a brief laugh. Stelios felt the hair on his nape bristle. Had Orestis read his mind? Did he have his own dead with him, telling him things? He felt for the marble pouch in his pocket, held on to it, thought his sister's name. Emboldened enough to turn and get a better look at Orestis's face, he saw nothing in it that he would call definitive, no hint of the concentration that listening to the dead required. Still, Stelios reserved judgment. He accorded as little belief to the existence of coincidences as he did to that of divine plans. Believing in the former would have meant there had been no reason for Maria's death, beyond her arbitrary decision to spend that Tuesday afternoon at her friend Yanna's house, around the corner from the Abatzoglous' own, and the indifference or incompetence the British had demonstrated in their aim; believing in the latter would have meant that, even worse, there *had* been a reason, and the bomb had always been meant to land two miles off target.

'It's easier to know what something's worth when you ain't got it,' Orestis went on. 'That's what my grandpa, God forgive his sins, used to say. And he weren't ever wrong. Not once. At least by his own counting.' He let out another brief laugh, and this time Philippos joined in. Then the street grew quiet again, as quiet as a room emptied of all its ghosts.

Further up the street they came across the ruins of three small houses that stood in the middle of the block, bracketed by a pair of buildings untouched by the catastrophe that had befallen their neighbours. Which bombing would this have been? By which side? Why this street? Why these houses?

Why not? seemed to be the ruins' reply. A dropped bomb must fall somewhere, after all. The rubble looked like piles of wet cardboard, torn and wadded up. The last house was the only one parts of which still stood, charred and crumbling or covered greenly here and there with a thin felt of moss dotted with heather. (Was the moss edible? Stelios wondered, then wondered in turn why the question had never occurred to him before, and whether this was a good or a bad thing. Good, the moss's not having been harvested already would appear to suggest. In Stelios's experience, you would almost never be the first to consider eating some particular thing. Then again, that kind of thinking was guaranteed to deprive you of the opportunity.) A tattered triangle of wall had attached to it an external stone staircase that led nowhere. Though the front door was gone, its frame was still in place, and through it could be seen part of a glassless window set in what was left of the house's back wall. Through window and frame shone a red blaze that for a moment made it seem as though the house was still on fire. Stelios imagined he could hear the street's silence emanate from the ruins as though it were the negative form of a scream.

Soon they turned right onto a thoroughfare that compared to the gorge-like street behind them seemed almost unbearably wide, too open to the sky. The buildings were much grander here, three-, four-storey-tall and commensurately wide affairs, availing themselves of columned porticoes and eaves, cornices above elaborate, heavy corbels and block-like dentils. Several were places of business, though the only way to tell them apart from the private residences were the phrases spelled out grandly across their facades, which included words such as 'BANK' and 'POST OFFICE'. Wide plate-glass display windows reflected the street back to itself, a grey, ghostly duplication that made it seem twice as incredible that the entire thoroughfare was untouched by bombs or fire. There were, finally, other people to be seen, many more than Stelios would have expected, moving along the pavements, and even a few cyclists, a couple of horse-drawn floats, even the odd car speeding along the road, and for all of them there was their twin, caught at a limpid glide along that third world beyond the glass but not behind it.

Orestis and Philippos, deep in conversation, paid it all little mind. It was a very one-sided conversation. In the interest of accuracy, one could possibly have even called it a monologue of sorts, punctuated by Orestis's attempts at contribution or requests for clarification.

‘And what will happen now, do you think, Mr Abatzoglou?’ Orestis was saying. ‘I mean, with the Germans gone, and the King—’

‘So the Nazis are gone, so what? You seen any more food out there? Is anything cheaper? No, you say?’ Philippos said, though Orestis hadn’t spoken. ‘I didn’t think so. You might say, “But Mr Abatzoglou, it’s only been a few weeks,” to which I say, that’s why no one’s losing his job just yet. And as for the King, he’s not coming back anytime soon.’

‘Mr Kosmidis says in his opinion the foreigners—’

‘“Mr Kosmidis”! Pfft! *Mr Kosmidis* never had an idea in his sorry life he hadn’t read about in a newspaper. *Mr Kosmidis* doesn’t have opinions, he has excuses. The foreigners! They’re not helping us out of the kindness of their hearts – what hearts? There’s no room for hearts in politics, don’t you know? If there was, there’d be no need for politics – everyone would be a communist. No, they’re helping us for the same reason they’ve always helped us, there’s something in it for them. First they needed to push the Nazis back, cut them off from their troops in Africa. As long as that was the goal, they didn’t care a fig if you were a communist or not. Now the Nazis are gone and Churchill wants to bring back the *King*, all of a sudden it matters a great deal, no?’

‘And don’t you go thinking the Russians are any better, you hear? Sure, sure, they’re our *communist brothers* – but they’ve a horse in the race too, they want access to the Aegean, and the King’s not all that likely to give it to them now, is he? But mind you, that’s just politicians for you. That’s the people we work for. And don’t you go telling me we should go work for someone else. We would, if there was anyone else to go work for. But there’s not. That’s how come the boss is the boss, see? First, he needs to be the type who can’t see a mule without wanting to ride it. Second, he needs to be the type who doesn’t much care whether the mule wants or needs to be ridden. As for the mule, now there’s—’

For the last few moments Philippos’s voice had found itself in competition with a kind of chopping, rattling growl that had grown louder as the vehicle responsible for it had drawn closer, and it was at this point that the culprit, in the process of overtaking them just as Stelios turned to look, finally succeeded in drowning out Philippos’s words. The lorry drove past, much slower than the noise it produced had suggested, and Stelios, transfixed, followed it with his gaze.

In the back, under a canvas cover the sides of which were rolled halfway up against a metal frame, were seated a dozen soldiers in khaki-drill uniforms and slouch

hats with crowns worn slanted on their wide foreheads, the men's skin the honey-brown of a chestnut, their cheekbones high, their noses wide and flat. He had never seen the likes of them before, but had no doubt as to who they were, even if the Gurkhas looked nothing like the beasts his fellow porters had described. Stelios watched the lorry recede into the distance, the engine's noise fading, then dying away altogether.

They walked on, Philippos picking up where he'd left off, Stelios not listening any longer, first preoccupied with the lorry's loss, then concerned with the intensity of his preoccupation, asking himself how it was possible that it could matter so to lose from sight what has barely been glimpsed. In the back of his mind an answer began to surface. Without quite acknowledging it, he pushed it back down.

They did not have to go far before they saw the lorry again, pulled up by the kerb, engine off. The tailgate doors were open, some of the soldiers were standing on the pavement, stretching, smoking, looking up and down the thoroughfare. Philippos, brought up short, made a gurgling noise in his throat, making both Orestis and Stelios pause and turn to him. He looked across the street, then back at the soldiers, as though working something out. Whatever conclusion he reached, it was not a pleasing one.

'You ever seen them before, Mr Abatzoglou?' Orestis asked.

'No. No, I hadn't. You?'

'Down at the port the other day, helping unload a Red Cross ship. They gave me a cigarette I traded for figs.'

A float went slowly by them, reeking of horse droppings and wet hay, drawn by a spavined, thin-haunched horse, the driver leading the stiff-gaited, palsied creature along with a loose grip on the lead shank, more an expression of partnership than an attempt at control. The driver, a tall man in a long winter coat, mumbled something that Stelios assumed was directed at the horse, a few words of encouragement or commiseration perhaps, though the one fragment he caught clearly enough – 'die in here' – made him wonder.

'Let's go then,' Philippos said. He set off once more, taking his time now. Stelios followed, itching to break out into a run but holding himself back. A few moments later they overtook the float. The driver was still talking, but the horse snorted and he fell silent. The horse snorted again, tossed its head and a bell clanged. The man nodded his head up, as though rejecting whatever the horse had said. Up ahead the Gurkhas were

turning this way and that, pointing out the surrounding buildings to each other, aiming now at a doorway or shopfront, now at a mansard roof, now at a flat one, with gestures more casual than precise and of a decidedly unmilitary air. Nevertheless it was obvious that their behaviour, if not their very presence in the street, was inducing in the majority of the locals a nervousness they made very little effort to hide. Quite a few would give the soldiers a wide berth – slowing down as they approached, then opting to cross the street, casting the odd hurried glance behind them – while others would squeeze past them with heads tilted forward and shoulders hitched up. The Gurkhas gave no indication they either noticed or cared, and smiled and greeted back those few who greeted them.

The trio were just metres away from the soldiers when Philippos made them stop. They were standing in front of a square, single-storey building entirely taken up by a haberdashery. The sign over the shopfront spelled 'STASINOPOULOS & SON' with solid bronze-coloured letters on a white background. Four mounting holes followed the second word, forming a ghostly terminal 'S'.

'I need to talk to Mr Stasinopoulos,' Philippos said. 'I'll be right back. Orestis, you should go if you're in a hurry.'

'That's all right, Mr Abatzoglou, I don't mind waiting,' Orestis said.

Smiling Gurkhas stepped aside and Philippos nodded his thanks and entered the shop. Stelios paid not the slightest attention to him; the soldier was all that he could see, all that he cared to see, and he would not for anything take his eyes off him.

He was seated in the back of the lorry, near the open tailgate door on the left-side bench, facing the pavement, leant forward with his feet wide apart and his elbows on his knees. He was slicing an apple with a small pocketknife, using his thumb to pin each slice against the blade and bring it to his mouth. He'd taken his hat off; his hair was cut very short. The face below the low smudge of a hairline possessed a square, unlined forehead, high cheekbones, a deep groove of a philtrum below a fleshy nose, a small, delicate mouth, and the kind of yellow-brown skin that wouldn't look out of place on a tanned Greek. Stelios guessed him to be in his early twenties. (He was, well, beautiful. No other word would do, though as unsure as Stelios was about what his choosing it meant, he knew enough that he would not have used it anywhere but in the privacy of his own thoughts.)

The Gurkha wiped his lips with the back of his hand, threw the apple core inside a bag at his feet, pulled a piece of cloth from a pocket and wiped the knife blade. The karda

looked like a regular three-inch pocketknife but the blade was fixed, Stelios saw. The Gurkha picked up a large leather sheath from the bench next to him, and pulled from it a heavy-bladed knife that was, it seemed, near half a metre long, the blade curved inward like an arm bent slightly at the elbow. Stelios had heard the other porters talk about the monstrous knives the Gurkhas carried. Rumour had it that it was the kukri's strange blade that caused it to return to its owner's hand if, once thrown, it missed its target; though as far as Stelios could tell, the porters circulating the rumours always knew someone who knew someone who'd seen this trick performed, but seemed never to have seen it for themselves.

The Gurkha balanced the kukri on his knees and slid the karda into a small compartment near the sheath's belt loop before re-sheathing the larger knife and putting it away. Cloth folded and returned to his pocket, he leant to the right and was about to shout something to his comrades when he saw Stelios staring at him.

He smiled. He had small, even teeth. 'Yeia sou,' he said. Hello.

Stelios hesitated. 'Yeia sou,' he replied.

The Gurkha's smile grew wider. 'Ramesh,' he said, putting his hand to his chest.

'Ramesh,' Stelios tried after a moment, imitating his mother shushing him. The sound didn't come out quite right – too thick, almost a serpentine hiss – but the Gurkha looked pleased. He pointed at Stelios.

'Stylianos,' Stelios said. The moment seemed to have required his given name.

'Styli-anos,' Ramesh said, separating the vowels the way most foreigners did.

'Stylianos,' Stelios corrected him. Ramesh tried again. Yes, nodded Stelios. They sat there, gazes locked, smiling at each other.

(Something happens to time: the moment stretches out, opens up, and hidden inside it Stelios finds an expanse whose crossing, like the interval from an object's accidental dropping until it hits the ground, goes on forever and is over in no time at all. For the endless duration of this instant of no-time, Stelios feels *seen*, recognized for some aspect whose existence in the map of himself he has long suspected but whose precise contours he has never traced. Behind him another soldier says something that makes Ramesh look over Stelios's shoulder. Instant or lifetime, the interval ends as all intervals will: too soon.)

Ramesh's response to whatever it was he'd been told sounded like a single, impossibly long word.

'Funny language, isn't it?' Orestis said. 'It's not even words, just a bunch of sounds tripping all over each other.' Hearing this, Stelios saw for the first time how in speech there were no breaks between words; you imagined you heard them, but they weren't really there.

Ramesh looked him up and down. 'Hungry?' he asked. He reached into his bag and held up another apple.

Stelios didn't know what to say. The question, having laid bare the misconception of his interest, tore through him, finding that part that he had, mistakenly it seemed, imagined had been reached, and severing it once more from its surroundings. He should shake his head 'No'; should, as hungry as he was, refuse the fruit; should say, voice clear and steady, 'No, thank you', and turn away. He would not let the soldier see him cry. He heard a whimper escape him instead. Something was written all over his face – he had no idea what, had no control over it. Ramesh misread it as a confirmation of sorts. He threw him the apple with a gentle, underhand toss, as though throwing a ball to a toddler. Stelios watched it travel through the air towards him, had enough time to consider letting fall to the ground before reaching out and catching it in one hand.

Ramesh let out a small, almost surprised cheer. He gazed at something to Stelios's left. 'Yes?' he said.

'Yes,' came back Orestis's voice.

Ramesh reached into the bag, threw another apple.

Orestis caught it two-handed, slipped it into a pocket. 'I'll eat it later,' he said. 'Thank you.'

'Is good,' Ramesh said. Another Gurkha approached the lorry, said something to him. Stelios didn't need to understand their language to hear it as some kind of complaint, nor Ramesh's response, and accompanying gesture in their direction, as an exasperated plea. 'What are you doing?' he translated. 'Do you wanna start a riot? Or do you think we have enough apples to feed every passerby?' 'Just those two. What would you have me do? Look at them.'

An English soldier came running across the street, ginger-haired and freckle-faced, holding a shapeless parcel wrapped in butcher paper in his hands, shouting

something in English as he approached. He raced past Stelios and Orestis, opened the passenger-side door and jumped in. The door closed with a loud thud. A moment later a long, freckled arm swung out the window to slap an open palm against the metal of the door. There was more shouting in English.

The Gurkhas responded by putting out their cigarettes, and filing up to climb aboard with what looked like deliberate slowness and much amused commentary in their own language. 'Yeah, sure,' Stelios translated, '*now* he's in a hurry.' 'I told him he'd make us late, but does he ever listen?' 'No way are we getting there before nightfall now. Let's see him explain *that* to the Lieutenant.'

The Gurkhas climbed into the back of the lorry, the tailgate doors were closed. Ramesh hadn't moved from his spot. He waved goodbye. Stelios, heartbroken twice over, granted him a stiff little wave in return. The vehicle lurched onto the road and sped away. Stelios watched it go. The sun had dipped below the horizon and in a gap between buildings across the avenue the sky was the egg-yolk yellow of an expiring lamp.

He stuffed the apple in a trouser pocket and sidled up to the haberdashery door. His father was talking to a man behind a long counter. He couldn't hear what they were saying. The man glanced over Philippos's shoulder, saw Stelios looking.

'Dad?' Stelios said.

'What is it?'

'It's getting late. We need to go soon.' What he could see of the shop's interior was weakly lit by three electrical lamps on the far wall. There was less merchandise than the shopfront had suggested, impeccably arranged on half-empty shelves, stands, and display cases.

'I'll be there in a minute. Is Orestis gone?'

'No.'

'Go keep him company. I won't be long.'

'Yes, Dad.'

The shop owner grinned at him. 'Hey there,' he said. Was he Stasinopoulos, or the son? He could have been either. A tinny bell rang out, its trill tailing off on a sharp metallic note that faded into silence just before the bell rang again. It took a moment for Stelios to recognize this as the ringing of a telephone. It took a moment longer for the haberdasher to reach somewhere behind the counter and pick up a black, clublike object with bulbous

ends, from one of which hung a long cord, and which object he held close to his chest as he stared at Stelios and went on staring at him, and it was only when the latter backed away towards the door that the haberdasher lifted the receiver to his face and said, 'Yes.'

Back out on the pavement Stelios found Orestis sitting on the kerb, with his right leg extended, almost but not quite straightened, and turned sideways, so that only the side of his shoe touched the ground. 'My father won't be long,' Stelios said and sat down next to him. He thought about asking what had happened to his leg – had it been congenital or acquired, illness or injury, a beating or a bullet? – but he was unsure how Orestis might react. He leaned to one side, drew the apple from his pocket and examined its glossy, burgundy skin. He took a careful sideways bite, more with cuspid than incisor. Still he tasted blood on his tongue, the metal mixing with the apple's crisp sourness. He nibbled some more. He thought about using his cutter just like Ramesh had used his knife, but decided against letting Orestis see it; he might say something in front of Philippos and Stelios didn't want to have to explain when and why he'd made it.

Orestis held his apple up, offered it to him. 'You can have mine too.'

Stelios shook his head. 'We got one each.'

'No, it's okay, I don't want it. I'm not even hungry.'

The notion that anyone as thin as Orestis could ever be not-hungry was so ludicrous Stelios almost laughed out loud. The notion that any one of them could ever be not-hungry again was next to impossible to grasp.

'But you'll be hungry later,' Stelios tried. 'Or you could give it to your mum.'

'Oh, neither of us likes apples much,' Orestis said with a kind of abashed titter.

Stelios spent a long while mulling over this sentence and failing to make sense of it. There was a time in the distant past, before the war, when such considerations had mattered, but it was hard to see how something as trifling as taste could have survived the intervening years. On the other hand, he supposed it was possible Orestis had taken the fruit with the intention of passing it on, so that accepting it would allow the man to feel good about his own kindness, which maybe in this moment mattered more to him than his empty stomach. And Stelios could just as easily do the same and pass the apple along to his parents.

He thanked Orestis and took the apple, slid it in his pocket and went back to his nibbling. Eating two of them would probably have given him the runs anyway.

The avenue was clearing of people. The streetlamps came to belated life, little blurry suns that gave off a weak radiance. Another army lorry drove past, its headlights gathering their beams in, taking the light out of the air, the soldiers at the back helmetless pale ghosts that didn't hold Stelios's interest. Somewhere down the street another horse-drawn cart clattered and jangled. The fewer sounds there were, the louder they seemed. On the second floor of the building across the street the curtains were drawn back from three closely spaced windows behind whose glass swayed the orange glow of a moving candle. Through the left-hand window Stelios saw a shadow sweep complexly across a ceiling corner, rise while falling, then fall away. The glow settled into an unmoving tremble. He finished his apple in silence and pocketed the core.

'Yes, we neither of us like them much,' said Orestis again, as though between the original statement and its echo he'd offered a justification that had gone unheard by Stelios, or as if he had indeed run through some explanation, but only in his head.

But then he added, 'We used to, to tell the truth,' then paused again. Stelios recognized the moment for what it was: an inching towards confession, towards whatever story had come between that earlier, apple-eating Orestis and the one he was sitting next to, the one preferring to go hungry. Attention piqued, Stelios said nothing, in case he break the spell that Orestis seemed to have cast over himself.

People were often like this, ready to tell of the things that had happened to them until, being reminded that you were there listening, and that you were a child, they either fell quiet or changed the manner of the telling, tried to give their stories a point, a use, make them teach you something, as if that was what stories did, or were meant to. At school, before the occupation, Mr Mavrakis had often done much the same, reciting by heart long brutal passages from *The Iliad* to a sea of cold-blue uncomprehending faces (their ancient Greek not being up to the task of keeping up with Mr Mavrakis's gleeful delivery), only to then seem to recall he had set out to demonstrate the horrors of war, not celebrate them, and to attempt to somehow make up for that by turning all of sudden as solemn as the owl that he – with his flat, yellow-tinged eyes behind round rimless spectacles, his beaked nose, his thick single eyebrow – most resembled. Which clumsily executed turn, repeated on enough occasions, had led Stelios to believe he could identify something like the same tendency in Homer himself, a theory he had of course

never brought up in class, since the students were not encouraged to have an opinion on Homer; he was *Homer*, and they were only ignorant little boys.

(The school: six tiny classrooms and a small teachers' office just off the municipal garden, a small part of which doubled as a playground. Lath-and-plaster walls, the floor raised a foot off the ground, the dust rising into the light through the gaps between the floorboards like glowing smoke, a flat sheet-metal roof. The students sat three to a desk facing an ancient, pitted and fissured blackboard. On the wall above it, an icon of Jesus from which someone had removed all the gold leaf. Mr Mavrakis had condemned the perpetrator to an eternity in hell. Jesus's opinion on the matter had been harder to gauge, though if you'd asked Stelios he would have told you He didn't look too bothered. In the corner sat a globe the children were not permitted to touch without supervision. There was only the one, shared among all six classrooms. The dust settled on it in thick layers left undisturbed until it was time for the globe to be moved again, covering most of the northern hemisphere, pretend-snow really falling on the pretend-world.)

In the event, Stelios was not given the opportunity to hear Orestis's story. Philippos came up behind them and said, 'Why so quiet, you two?' and that was that. They got to their feet – Orestis with a little twist and hop that spared him having to put any weight on his bad leg – and Philippos handed his son something soft, bundled in brown paper tied with twine and said, 'For your mother,' but the pleasure Stelios searched for in his voice wasn't there. He looked crestfallen. Behind him the haberdashery door was closed, the lights off, and Stelios wondered what it was that had really brought them there.

Stelios only ever saw Orestis one more time. He never got to hear his story, but he thought of him often through the years, once in a while picking up a pen and having a go at giving him one that felt true. There are, your father says, multiple drafts of eight different attempts to be found among Stelios's papers, all incomplete. The reason why is plain to see. Their narratives appear so determined to make sense, to *arrive* somewhere, that if not for the odd instance of Abatzoglian phrasing, and the very distinctive handwriting – the miniscule, blocky letters, the lines sloping down the page as they progress – one would be hard-pressed to identify them as having been written by Stelios.

The last of these fragments is dated January 1977. There's nothing more after that. A possible explanation for this is to be found, not among Stelios's drafts and story

notes, but in his diary for the second half of 1981, in which are recorded several conversations he had with his mother in the weeks before her death, conducted whenever she, bedridden and suffering from dementia, was feeling well enough to hold forth while being lucid enough to recognize him as himself – or variously, his father, *her* father, her mother, either of her brothers, three different childhood friends, one of whom she'd address in a way that marked him as her first love, Stelios would decide – as opposed to, during her worst and soon most frequent moments, the German officer who had, she'd shriek, murdered her husband and children with a hatchet while she'd stood there, helpless, being made to watch.

It was during one of these conversations, then, that Dora related to one 'Iasonas' the incident that your father is certain (though Stelios was satisfied to record it without further comment) put a stop, which for all we know might have been a temporary one until it was interrupted itself eight years later by the more permanent cessation that was Stelios's passing, to the latter's attempts at an Oresteian tale. Dora, whose speech at this point was either too lacking in particulars for Stelios to fix its referents with any certainty, or so inundated with them that it might as well have been a coded transmission whose encryption key he didn't always possess, told of a boy of unspecified age who, one autumn morning in the second year of the great blight, is called upon to accompany his mother in the long journey from their house near the sea all the way to the centre of the large city in which they live, to visit a powerful man who had once, long ago, known the boy's father and who might, the mother hopes, be persuaded to find the boy steady employment – this boy being, according to Dora, a good boy, gentle and obedient and kind, but possessed of neither a strong body nor a strong mind; nor is he a master of any craft that could be gainful during this time of terrible blight. So the woman, whose husband is many months dead, and who has no other children or family, and who does all she can to feed her boy and herself without it ever being enough, and who worries, because her own health is frail and the times harsh, that, were she to die, the boy will not long outlive her, has set out to find the powerful man and, in the name of their common past, beg for his help.

But the man makes them wait for many hours before they are brought to him, and has the empty grey eye of a statue, and turns them away because he does not know the woman's husband and has no use for her son. And upon being sent away by the man,

hours late and with the light shrinking and soon to be gone and the streets empty and the boy hungry and the woman hungry and the woman frightened that they will be found in the street at night without permission, they come across a horse-drawn wain stopped by a few men and women threatening, from a distance just longer than a whip's length, the wainman who has stood up from his bench seat and is waving his whip and warning them away, his horse paying no attention to either whip or crowd and not being, from the look of it, a horse capable of trampling anyone should the need arise. And the mother knows at once that there is food in the covered wain and would approach it too if not for the policeman who arrives to silence the crowd and ask his questions.

The wainman admits that underneath the canvas cover the wain bed is laden with apples, hundreds and hundreds of apples, as firm as clenched fists, that the man has been commanded to deliver to the foreigners that rule the city, who are preparing for a two-week-long celebration of the man knows not what; perhaps only their own ability to make such demands and have them met. The foreigners, the man says, have given him a piece of paper that, though he cannot read it, proves that he speaks the truth. And so as far as these here people go, he cannot help them, not without coming to harm himself. Everyone is very quiet.

The policeman reads the piece of paper and declares it is so. But, he says, there is nowhere recorded on the piece of paper how many apples the wainman is meant to be transporting, neither by weight nor by number. So every man and woman here will receive – four, four apples each. The foreigners can spare fifty-odd apples. The wainman makes to complain but stops himself. They must hurry, the policeman says, soon there will be other policemen passing this way. You, boy, he says, climb up there and pick four apples for each one of you, large and firm. And eight for me. The wainman this time says no, he can do it himself, please, let him.

You are not trying to cheat us out of your best apples, are you, the policeman says. On you go, he says to the boy, and you – he points to a man in the crowd – help him, and the boy, who is not yet unable to do such things, climbs onto the wain bed and pulls back the cover and sees hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of fistlike red-and-green apples glinting like wet cobblestones in the half-light. The boy feels dizzy with hunger as he stoops to select the first few apples, then passes them on to the man who's come to stand by the wain. The wainman is muttering something to himself with the whip clenched in his hands, the boy can hear the leather creak, he is praying, but not looking

around for soldiers, he has eyes for no one but the boy. The policeman, too busy watching out for the foreigners, doesn't see this.

Near one corner of the bed the apples are piled a little higher, seem a little larger. The boy moves and the wainman whimpers. His eyes are open wide and the boy thinks about how no matter what colour is the eye, the part that does the seeing is always the darkest black. The boy picks up two more apples, then two more, and then reaches and sifts through the apples and touches something cold, cold and dry and rough, that gives a little before turning hard, and there – the wainman's whimper is too weak to even be heard, it is the last breath of air inside the man – there it is, it is a very small hand, very small, the ring finger is longer than the middle finger, the boy notices this and it somehow stops him from screaming, he doesn't make a sound, is frozen there, can see the hand, the wrist a thin stalk growing out of the fruit like a blade of grass between cobblestones – ration card, the boy thinks, it is the fastest thinking he's ever done, he sees it all in an instant, he sees again the many dead of the first year of the blight, brought under cover of darkness out in the street, laid there for the city carts that would not come till morning, unburied but not unmourned, owners each of a ration card that could still be used if they weren't dead and so they became not-dead, ill, yes too ill to leave the house and I am his/her mother/father/daughter/son/ sister/brother here is also my card, and sometimes, the boy sees in the black of the wainman's eyes, though it's too dangerous, you might decide, if you have a piece of paper that means no one will search your wain and can't bear the alternative, that you will bury your own dead, and the boy looks at the wainman and the wainman looks on but sees nothing and the boy looks at the tall man, who stands there, open hands raised, looking at the wainman, and the boy looks at the policeman who turns and looks at the boy.

That evening Stelios and Philippos got home to find Dora gone from the courtyard. She was sitting in the living room mending someone's skirt by candlelight, pale, subdued, moving with the tentative, underwater slowness of a body in pain, but *there*, the whole of her; inside herself still, but close enough to that surface where the world is met and taken in. She didn't ask how come father and son had returned together; thanked Philippos for the ribbons and thread, nodding in a way that might have meant, 'Yes, you'll tell me later'; thanked Stelios for the apple and asked where it had come from; listened with

exaggerated interest as he, careful not to say the wrong thing, told her about his encounter with the soldier (considering all the while that maybe later he could ask her how it was possible that he found the soldier beautiful and what that meant); stepped into the kitchen and put the apple away, inventing out loud a recipe for a pie that would feed all three of them; turned to ladle out the soup made with yesterday's leftover cabbage. Philippos raised an eyebrow at Stelios, but he was smiling as he did so, as though at least for the moment his joy had overridden his concern over the mystery of her recovery.

Stelios shrugged, every bit as delighted and every bit as confused. It was not like Maria to be proven so wrong; for all his grumbling and his questions, his dragging his feet and his demands for explanations, he never doubted that if she let him know something needed doing, it needed doing. She'd told him Dora needed Philippos home, so he'd brought him home. There had to have been a purpose to her command, but what was it?

He ate his soup in a hurry, declared himself tired and went to bed. He kept the bedroom door open a crack, undressed and got under the covers.

'Well?' he whispered. 'Why did I have to go get Dad?'

A floorboard creaked, but it was only a floorboard creaking. The air smelled of brimstone, but that was only their supper.

'Did you talk to Mum? Is that why you sent me away?' He waited. He heard his parents talking quietly.

Outside a light rain fell, making a hushed, playful sound against the roof. The streetlamp's light was cut into thin horizontal slices by the louvred shutter, soft, smoky beams with the density of candy floss. They came halfway into the room, then dissipated without effect, more like the possibility of light than the actual thing. So, too, the few objects in the room with him: rough sketches of the things that they were. None of it spoke to him.

'Tell me! Does she know you're here?'

The door swung open a few inches. 'I'm right here,' Philippos said. 'Everything all right?'

'Yes, Dad. I was saying my prayers.'

'Oh. Okay.' Philippos was a faceless head-shape in the gap between door and jamb. 'We weren't being too loud, were we? Want me to close the door?'

'No, it's okay, I don't mind.'

‘Sure, whatever you want. We’ll try to keep it down.’

The orange trapezoid of light on the floor contracted into a thick diagonal. He heard his father cross the living room, sit at the table, say something.

‘I’m waiting,’ Stelios said. He still was, a long while later, when he fell asleep.

‘—the whole hillside, it seemed. An audience. New arrivals, sitting there in their soiled suits. Around them a jumble of Italian breeches, British greatcoats, German helmets, black wool caps. Everyone’s eyes following him, hungry for something. I didn’t yet know what. I thought it was freedom. It was, but not only that. My first communist... what should I call it? Not a meeting. He was the unit’s political advisor. Markos. A schoolteacher, not a day older than twenty-four. Walking back and forth, book in hand, as though in front of a blackboard. He was reading from a book. *What is EAM and What does it Want*. Glinos’s manifesto, God—’

Father paused. Mother looked up from where she sat at the kitchen table with me in her lap playing with a kombolói, letting loose a startled giggle at every click, trying again and again to show Katerina in the next chair, who was too enthralled by Father’s story to pay me any attention. Across the table from us sat Stella, busy knitting our winter socks with wool whose provenance was a mystery to my sister. She’d brought over the oil lamp from the corner table and put it down close to her knitting basket and lit it, and soon the lamp’s chimney had blackened and you could taste the turpentine in the air.

Father was standing by the open window, smoking. He took a drag, blew the smoke out through pursed lips, watched it drift out and up against a square of sky the light pink of a cat’s mouth. He’d been installed there most of the morning, smoking one cigarette after another. He seemed nervous, my sister thought. Or maybe he didn’t, but the extravagance of chain-smoking was proof enough that he was. It was strange he was even there. As on most weekdays – it was a Friday – he’d left the house early but had then returned not an hour later with an unsettled look in his eyes and a folded newspaper under his arm.

‘God rest his soul,’ Father said. Experimentally, weighing the words, as though figuring out if he could still mean them. He could, he appeared to decide.

'Glinos, God rest his soul, was a great man. But so Markos read to them and what struck me most was the fixed attention on their faces, whole rows of downturned faces – Markos stood downhill so they could all see him – pale, lined, haggard faces, farmers, shepherders, labourers... Young faces, lined too soon. Brushing thin hair back from their foreheads. Attentive. Not passive, not listeners. Not spectators. Participants. Markos didn't speak *to* them, he spoke *for* them. It was *their* thoughts he made articulate. It was their own voice they were hearing, their own collective thought that they applauded. I stood off from them. Their sense of purpose elated me, but I didn't share it. And I thought, I'm with them, not one of them, but perhaps... Then Markos finished his speech and sat back down amidst thunders of clapping.

'I soon realized that not all the thunder was the earthly kind. The sky to the east was a sheet of foxed paper. A few fat drops came down on our heads like a warning. We dashed for the cave. The wind picked up. It lifted great shoals of leaves from the ground, then the rain came and speared them out of the sky. There was that smell that rain brings out of dry soil. I sat by the cave entrance and thought about the night I left you. It rained then too. Remember, Anna?' he asked our mother.

Katerina could remember no such thing; in fact she was pretty sure the storm hadn't hit until they'd just about reached Athens.

'Andrea,' Mother said. 'What's going on?'

Father took a deep breath. 'The EAM Civil Guard have refused to hand over their arms. They're arguing there was supposed to be an agreement on general demobilisation first, and there hasn't been, so...'

'And?' Mother said.

'I don't know.' He shrugged. 'There are rumours Papandreou is drafting a new decree, ordering the Civil Guard to submit, threatening sanctions if they don't.' He put out his cigarette in the ashtray balanced on the sill next to the newspaper. 'I can't imagine what he thinks this will achieve.'

My sister listened on in silent, confused dismay. She would much rather be hearing the rest of Father's story.

'It will achieve exactly what it's meant to,' Mother said eventually, bouncing me on her knee as she spoke. 'He knows they must refuse. At which point he can accuse EAM of negotiating in bad faith. So much for "national unity".'

Father brought a cigarette to his lips and reached for his matches. He gave her a slow nod. 'You'd make a far better politician than I ever would.'

'I don't know about that,' Mother said with a smile that surprised my sister with its mischievousness.

Father forced out a hollow snap of a laugh. 'No, you're right, we're being played. We should've listened to Aris. He proposed we seize Athens while we still can – take over first, then negotiate the Brits' withdrawal from a position of power. But the Kapetanos voted him down. Diplomacy will win the day, was the idea.'

'As though the day can be won,' Stella sighed, lowering a half-knit sock. Her needles ceased their clicking and scraping, and I looked up from the kombolói in my hands as though astounded to have our conversation interrupted. 'Teta!' I said, and when she ignored me I reached for the V of crossed needles held between thumb and forefinger and said again, louder, 'Teta!'

'You think it can't?' Father said. He turned his back to the window and leaned against the sill, crossing his arms. His shirtsleeves were rolled up to just below his elbows; he'd taken off his tie and his collar button was undone. A long, straight scar seamed the underside of his left forearm. He smoked with the cigarette held between his index and middle finger and tilted his head to the side when he took a drag.

(My sister couldn't quite figure out his relationship with Stella. There was a mutual wariness to it, but tempered with something else, an air not of reciprocal respect, exactly, but a sort of tacit agreement, an antagonism neither entirely embraced nor entirely overcome, that often expressed itself in a strange kind of mutual amusement. They tolerated each other, she would have said, though in reality it was nothing as straightforward as that.)

'You think it *can*?' Stella said, glancing at him over her shoulder. A Stella-pause followed, before she added, 'If I were you, I'd be wishing a bit more fervently for a peaceful solution.'

'Because the world works on wishes, does it?'

'Oh, but it does. That's exactly what it works on.' Another Stella-pause. 'Just not our wishes.' She put her knitting down on the table and, without getting up, shifted her chair around to face him.

'Not unless we make it,' Father said.

Mother gave him a look that my sister couldn't read.

'Teta!' I was wriggling in my mother's lap, trying to shake loose and climb onto the table. Mother picked up the kombolói by its tassel and rattled it in front of my face. Forgetting about Stella, I snatched at it but she pulled it out of reach. I laughed and stretched up both arms.

'There's no making the world do what you want,' Stella said. Paused. 'There's no winning either, not for people like us. Just different ways of losing.' Paused. 'Some less protracted than others.'

'A few million Bolsheviks would beg to differ,' Father said, running a palm up his cheek, as though checking whether he needed to shave.

'Yeah, well, give them time,' Stella said. They'll find out like the rest of us: winning is only losing that hasn't lasted long enough for you to find out just what it is you've lost.' No pause this time, one headlong rush to the truth of the matter.

Father fell into a confused silence. This kind of pronouncement was typical of Stella, but he hadn't known her long enough to become accustomed to the inexorability of her pessimism. It didn't matter what news one brought her, her reaction was nothing if not consistent. When the news was bad, it was an endorsement of her view, and she nodded in agreement as though to say, 'Why yes, this is what life is like.' When the news was good, it was an affront, an attempt at deception, and a trap, and had to be examined until revealed as actually bad, worse than what the anticipated bad news would have proved. She seemed to live by the simple rule that she would find likeliest to happen, regardless of reason and possibility, whatever thing it was that would be most unfortunate for everyone affected, and maintained that the world was governed by a sole principle: there was always help forthcoming, but only for those who didn't need it.

'There's no going back to how things were,' Father said. 'The old world is over. They all know it – the royalists, Churchill, Scobie, Papandreou, all those liberals and moderates.' He waved his cigarette-holding hand, as though drawing a circle of smoke in the air through which the rest were meant to see the past being left behind. 'That's what EAM represents. But that's what ELAS guarantees. Which is why the Brits won't rest until we're disarmed. Listen to this here,' he said, putting out his cigarette and picking up the newspaper from the windowsill.

'Where–' he unfolded the broadsheet and disappeared behind it '–where did I... Ah! Here: "General Scobie reiterated his position. 'It makes no difference to me whether

the Government in power is National, Right, Left or Centre. So long as it is the properly constituted Government I shall support it,' " blah blah and... here... barely a paragraph later, "Today, talk in and around British HQ revolved around what Brigadier Godfrey Hobbs characterized as the infiltration by communists of National Guard Battalions at Corinth, Koripi, and Megara." ' He lowered the newspaper and fixed his gaze on Stella.

'This is the same National Guard they've all been assuring us will be politically neutral. "Enlist! Aren't you a patriot?" they tell us. Then once you try to, it's, "Oh, wait, a communist? Why would *you* want to enlist? What are you planning?" That's who we're supposed to compromise with?'

Beads clattered against each other as they fell to the floor with a hollow thump. 'Oh, Michalis, not again,' Mother said.

'Boi! Boi!' I responded, pointing down.

'I'll get it,' my sister said, ducking under the table. She picked up the kombolói, dusted the dirt off the tassel. It was time to water the floor again.

There was a method to this. Let the water spill from on high, all you ended up with was an otherwise dry floor decorated here and there with muddy craters. You had to get down low, spray the water in a fine mist, let it settle down. Mother would send my sister and me to get the long, narrow plank from under her bed and place it over the damp dirt and all three of us would stand on it and shift our weight from foot to foot to cement the dirt together, move the plank over, stand on it again. For a year or two, it was my favourite indoor game. (This was later, when Father was imprisoned in Makronisos and we could never see him, and my sister kept reminding me, 'If anyone asks, your name is Michalis Loukopoulos,' and I'd stomp my feet and pound the bottom of my fist against my palm and chant, 'My name is Michalis Xenidis! My name is Michalis Xenidis!' We'd evened out the floor by then, with dirt carried in from the street, and it no longer canted down catty-corner from the stove. It was our mother's one gesture of capitulation, once it had become clear that Father wasn't coming back any time soon, nor would we be returning to Lamia. She had made no change to the house for as long as it remained Stella and Alikis, and we mere guests in it, an act of improvement being, in our mother's eyes, tantamount to an admission of permanent residence, of our never being able to go home.)

My sister got out from under the table, climbed back onto her chair, finished dusting off the beads and handed me the kombolói. 'Don't you drop it again now, you won't be getting it back,' she said.

'Boi, Nina,' I said.

'Kombolói. Katerina,' she said. 'Say it right.'

'Nina!'

Any day now things would improve. I'd talk more; I wouldn't lop words in half; I'd be steadier on my feet; I'd grow a bit bigger. That was the consensus in the house. Once I could eat properly, a doctor had told our mother, I'd be fine. There was no sign of any long-term problems, I was just a little weak and underweight. As for my speech, some babies took their time with it, there really was nothing to worry about.

'Ka-te-ri-na.'

'Nina!' I laughed.

'If I didn't know any better, I'd swear he does that on purpose,' Stella said. 'Are you?' she asked me, her voice thinning to a high-pitched register. 'You doing it on purpose, you little rascal?'

I stared at her with an expression that almost might have turned into a grin, held it long enough that it too, my sister says, started to appear not quite incidental, then, finally, I smiled. My few teeth sat on my gums like pieces of broken china. The smile turned into one long yawn. I dropped the kombolói on the table and commenced rubbing my eyes.

'And there he goes again,' Stella said. 'The minute he's under scrutiny, he just happens to get sleepy.'

'Maybe,' Mother laughed, 'but it so happens it really is his bedtime.' She made to rise.

'I'll take him,' Father said. He came over, folding his paper, dropped it on table and leaned close. I was already reaching for him and, finding myself in his arms, grabbed hold of his shirt and plopped my head on his shoulder, letting out a contented sigh.

Katerina picked up the kombolói from the table and ran her fingers through the tassel. Stella went back to her knitting. Our mother picked up the folded newspaper. After a moment she let out a dry cough that turned out to have been a snigger. Stella's needles clicked, scraped, clicked over an almost-knit heel flap.

Father came back. When he closed the bedroom door behind him the hinges remained silent. He'd learned by then to pull upwards at the handle as the door described the final third of its arc.

'Out the moment his head touched the pillow,' he said. He approached the window, reached for his cigarettes.

Mother rummaged in the knitting basket and came up with a pair of scissors, set to cutting the newspaper into tidy squares.

'I wasn't done with that yet,' Father said, but with no real urgency.

'Yes, you were,' Mother said, without looking up at him. The squares would be added to the neat pile by the kitchen door for us to take a few every time we visited the latrine. There was a proper way to hold the paper so as to get ink only on your hands, but in the at best semi-dark interior of the latrine you couldn't always see well enough for that. You also needed to keep crumpling the paper while you did your business, to soften it up.

Father shrugged in mock-exasperation, winked at my sister. He turned to the window, bent over from the waist and propped his elbows on the sill to stare outside. My sister got up and joined him. She had to stand on her toes to put her elbows next to his. The sourness of his cigarette smoke mixed with a different, more pleasant scent, milky and sticky like fig leaves hot in the sun. But outside there were neither fig leaves nor heat, and overhead the sheet-metal lid of the sky was rusted red.

The sound of Mother's scissors slicing through paper stopped. 'Huh,' she said.

'Yes?' Father turned to her.

She pointed to a page half-cut into two long strips.

'Did you know there was a "vast, silent majority anxiously awaiting the King's return" out there?'

'Oh, that. Yes. Very silent. It's why no one ever hears from them.'

'That's only because you've got your fingers in your ears,' Stella said.

'I'm sorry?'

'What, you really don't know this country's full of idiots?'

'That's not very helpful,' Mother said.

'Happens to be true, helpful or not,' Stella said. 'Unless you have some better word for peasants who vote for kings.' She gave Mother a quizzical look.

'Unenlightened?' Father said.

Stella put her knitting down on her lap, rubbed her hands together. She took one long deliberate breath to let him know her patience was being tested and was proving up to the challenge, but only so far.

'You can try riding your dog all you want, it's not turning into a horse.' She shook her head. 'No, the world's full of people who couldn't empty a pail of water if they took it for a hat, and don't you know it. It's why your communism won't work. Can't work.' She was massaging the fingers of her right hand now, one joint at a time. She dug a nail into the ball of her thumb, rubbed in tight circles.

'Is that so? Maybe we should shut up then, us little people at the bottom? Let ourselves be ruled by our betters?' Father said, stabbing a finger upwards, as though at a spatial manifestation of this arrangement.

'You're not listening. There are no betters. Man's too dumb a creature for what you're proposing.'

'Wasn't it a man who proposed it to begin with?'

'It sure was.'

Mother guffawed. Father didn't, but neither could he quite suppress a grin.

'Oh, I see. Is that how it is, then?'

'That's about the long and the short of it,' Stella said.

The silence that followed this was not, in Father's case, confused; nor in Stella's that strange interim between successive utterances; nor in Mother's that tense period of wordless observation that often preceded her peacekeeping efforts. It was rather a companionable silence, the stillness of the water once the stone has sunk and the ripples faded, indistinguishable from the stillness of there having been no stone. Stella picked up her knitting, Father what was left of his paper. Mother went to the pantry – in reality half of a narrow cupboard in the corner of the room next to the stone sink – and brought back a plate, a knife and four potatoes that she proceeded to peel, cutting off inch-long yellowish sprouts smudged purple at their feeler-like tips, which put my sister in mind of garden slugs.

Katerina was puzzled by this development. There must have been a moment when something had shifted, when their mood had turned from combative to amused, but somehow she'd missed it even though the shift had occurred before her very eyes. Or was it that there'd been no argument brewing, that what she'd taken for disagreement

had been mere banter all along? Had the change been in them or in her? And yet, she thought she knew, what Father and Stella had said were things they actually believed, things they had argued about before, and most certainly not pretend-argued.

She has come to suspect and fear, years too late for there to be anyone she could ask for a comparison of remembrances, a second reference point for triangulation, that there is some gap in her recall, that the conversation could not have ended so abruptly, that part of it has been redacted by – well, herself, the underlying mechanism of whatever it is that we call memory.

‘What then, is memory?’ I joke, seventy-one years later. ‘I know well enough, provided that nobody asks me. But if I am asked and try to explain it, I can’t recall.’

‘Augustine?’ Katerina pauses and I think of Stella. ‘Really? I thought you couldn’t stand him.’

‘He’s grown on me in recent years. Don’t get me wrong, I still find him an idiot half the time. But strangely compelling in his idiocy and confusion, is what I’ve discovered. I mean, here, listen to this.’ I pull my laptop close and fire up the word processor, find the document I’m looking for and Ctrl-F ‘Augu’. ‘Here it is: “I understood–’

The waiter arrives with our coffees. As we’re thanking him, I hear his mother raise her voice from behind the counter. ‘Thanasis!’ she shouts. I tilt my head and look around him as he turns, tucking the now empty tray under his arm. She’s pointing at a loaded tray next to the till. ‘Hurry up will you. Upstairs – two coffees, one lemonade, for Doctor Papageorgiou.’

‘Yes, Mother,’ he says. He smiles apologetically, embarrassed by her shrillness. He gives a kind of shrug that would have confirmed, if we didn’t already know all too well, that this is her preferred mode of communication; he doesn’t mind her, not anymore, but he feels sorry for us, who haven’t had two decades of practice at tuning her out. I nod and the nod says don’t worry, we’ve had enough practice. Too much.

‘You were saying?’

‘Oh, sorry, yes. “I understood with complete certainty that what is subject to decay is inferior to that which is not, and without hesitation I placed that which cannot be harmed above that which can, and I saw that what remains constant is better than that which is changeable.” Have you ever heard anyone get it more exactly backwards?’

'You tell yourself what you need to,' Katerina says. 'Don't you.'

'So what happened then?' I ask, even though I'm not sure I can hear this again, not right now. But I need to say something, so that's what I say. This turns out to be a difficult question to answer with regard to strict chronology.

The next thing Katerina recalls is actually two, mutually exclusive, things.

In one memory, she quickly grew tired of the silence and excused herself to go stand outside and look for Aliko coming up the street, maybe bringing them something they could add to the potato soup. No one questioned this proposal, despite the fact that it was still too early in the day for Aliko to be coming back. It is possible they wanted Katerina out of the house, if only for a couple of minutes, to say whatever it was that couldn't be said in her presence. Whatever the case may be, once she returned she found Father and Stella sitting quietly in the same positions she'd left them and Mother standing by the stove, but, for no reason she could pin down, was left with the impression the mood in the house had soured yet again. She pressed her way onto Father's lap and together they practiced her reading on a couple of passages from the newspaper.

In this version of events, it is then that she hears the familiar hollow throb, first almost too soft to register consciously but there as a kind of gentle pressure at her nape, a disquiet with no locatable source, then picking up volume as the plane draws closer and flies, it seems, directly overhead, too close, too low. She stops reading and looks at the ceiling and listens and so do our parents and Stella, and they all stay very still like that, looking up, listening, not tense or frightened in any way, but puzzled, uncertain; stay like that until the plane has flown past and the engine's noise dies away and off and is replaced by the sound of thousands of sails crackling in the wind, and the light through the window turns a shade darker and is filled with the faint seesawing shadows of an impossible rain.

In the second memory, she quickly grew bored of the silence and pressed her way onto Father's lap and together they practiced her reading on many passages from the newspaper that she selected by closing her eyes, swirling a finger in the air and letting it fall on the page at random, then tracing the line of print and attempting to read whatever came after the first full stop, until she grew tired of struggling with the unfamiliar, unwelcoming words and excused herself to go outside and see if Aliko might be coming, and whether she'd brought them anything to add to the potato soup.

In this version of events she's crossing the street, hopping over a rill of yellow water, when she hears that familiar hollow throb, first almost too soft to register consciously but there as a kind of cold pressure at her nape, a disquiet with no locatable source, then picking up volume as the plane draws closer, too close, too low. She stops and watches it, not entirely without fear or trepidation, trying to hold on tight to the knowledge that there will be no more bombings, that it is possible for a plane to come across the sky in all innocence – it has happened before so there's precedent to compare this to now – possible that planes can carry things other than bombs. It is for this reason that when the plane releases a dark, roughly spherical mass into the air almost directly overhead she is, somehow, both shocked into stillness and not at all shocked, a conjunction of opposites that almost leads to the expected cancelling-out – almost, so that all she does is flinch, rooted in place, as she begins to gather breath to scream.

But already something about the mass stops her, in this first slow instant of its tumble. It does not plummet as she – having never seen one as it fell, having only ever heard the rise and fall of the panic-stricken sirens and the rolling, throaty whine of the planes and that avian screaming that swelled and shifted as it came down, having more felt than heard the thump of impact, having sensed the awakened ground jolt under her feet, the great invisible blooms and crashes, the heat building in the air, having tasted smoke and dirt and ash on her tongue, having smelled the fires burning and the houses burning and the people burning, turned to ash on her tongue – imagines a bomb must. No, the bomb, once dropped, does not plummet but catches in the air in that first slow, slow instant of suspended fall, then is yanked back, far behind the plane, and breaks into a thousand fragments that turn and spin and wheel and pulse from grey to black in great smooth ripples like starlings harassed by a falcon. One more instant and this synchrony too comes to an end and the fragments go their own ways, blown here and there, mindless as leaves, falling without structure or order, too half-heartedly to be malevolent, and it is the image of leaves falling from the tree that turns them from bombs to pieces of paper.

She watches them come, swooning, mesmerized by the swither of their silent descent. She's not concerned by the spectacle, but only because she hasn't yet considered paper as a mode of transport for writing, thought back to previous examples of the dropping of leaflets from planes, the drama of information, threat or persuasion

coming down like something out of myth ('they fell,' Byford-Jones writes, unable to help himself, 'like feathers from the burnt wings of Icarus'). Coming down, in fact, like what they are: a literal omen.

But for now the spectacle is beautiful. Down the leaflets come in thick drifts (ten million copies are being dropped all over Athens) so many that, Katerina would swear, the sky turns a shade darker, rufous like the tail of a scrub robin, and soon fills with the sound of sails crackling in the wind. Down they seesaw, and my sister thinks to call out to someone, anyone, everyone, to come see, but she looks around and there's no need, people are already standing mutely in doorways, leaning mutely out of windows, stepping out to the middle of the street with heads upturned, gaping mutely at the sky – she doesn't recall seeing our parents out in the street, though they must have been there with everyone else – so that by the time the leaflets start landing in their untold thousands all around her there seems to be scarcely anyone in the neighbourhood that doesn't know something bad is about to happen.

'... "to all officers and men of the Greek Resistance"... "in an orderly and soldier-like manner"... "You will then be at liberty to return with honour to your homes"...'

Father went from the window to the table and back to the window as he read Scobie's orders out loud, once in a while pausing and reading a sentence again before straightening up with a twist of recoil to his face and resuming his patrol.

The repetitions were not an attempt at increased understanding. The text was simple enough to follow. Both the guerrillas and the Civil Guard were to demobilise and disarm within forty-eight hours or be decreed enemies of the state. Rather, this second reading was the stoking to a blaze of a fire already alight.

He reached the end of the text. 'Nonsense. Scobie doesn't have the authority,' he commented, turning the leaflet over to examine the proclamation 'to the people of Greece' printed on the back. He scanned through it, still talking. 'There's no corresponding order from the Government. Unless the Cabinet issues one, this is nothing—'

My sister was the only one to see the look on his face. Mother was standing at the stove, stirring a couple of fistfuls of collards into the steaming pot. ('Ugh,' my sister had thought at the sight of the clump of heavy, ruffled green. More often than not, they made her feel a little sick. The weather hadn't even got cold enough yet for the taste to get

sweeter. 'Go ahead and don't eat them if you don't want to,' Mother would say. 'Starving isn't much fun either.')

Stella was hunched over her knitting again, though she was listening, you could tell by the set of her shoulders, the slight sideways dip of her head. So my sister was the only one to see that look, his eyebrows pulling together and under them his eyes flitting back and forth as he read and re-read whatever it was that had given him pause. 'What?' Mother said. Only impatient, not yet afraid.

' "I stand firmly behind the present constitutional Government, until the Greek state can be established, with legal armed force behind it, and free elections can be held." ' There was something wrong with his voice, a tremor of indignation, nascent rage.

'We've heard all that before,' Stella said.

Father read on. ' "Unless we all together succeed in this, the currency will not remain stable and the people will not be fed." '

Neither Mother nor Stella had anything to say to that. They knew a threat when they heard one. So did Father – my sister could see the fear in him now; it was what his anger had found purchase on. She'd seen him like this before. (Stumbling into the house, face flushed, uniform in disarray, the pocketful-of-change clink of his spurs. Mother rushing at him, our grandmother getting in her way. Father not knowing where to look, talking to the floor, the walls, the ceiling. Then the gasps, the silence, the shouting, the raised hand.)

The potato soup was on the boil but Mother was paying it no mind. Wool, needles and a not-quite-a-sock lay in a tangle on the table in front of Stella. Katerina was back in her seat, holding on tight to Father's kombolói, anxiously monitoring the grown-ups' behaviour: Father's aimless pacing, Mother's taut stillness. Worst of all was Stella's calm scrutiny. Here, it said; there's nothing to object to. This is as bad as it gets.

Katerina couldn't recall picking up the beads but found herself squeezing them so tight they hurt her palms. Father stopped by the window. He raised the leaflet up and held it against the light, as though he was trying to see through it, read both sides at once. Then he crumpled it and held it in his fist, stood there tense as a wire, as though he were contemplating throwing the thing out. Instead, he came and sat next to Mother and set on the table a little paper ball that bloomed open like a flower – a black-speckled grey

flower rushing through its life in but a moment's time, the way, Aliko had told my sister she'd been told, things could often do in movies.

Only then did Katerina relax her hold on the beads and gently lower them onto her lap. Sharp stabs of pain shot through her knuckles. She flexed and extended her fingers, kneaded one palm near their base moving from index to little finger then back, then switched to the other palm, just as she'd watched Stella do so many times.

Mother got up and took the pot off the stove, then sat back down and looked at my sister and said, 'Hungry?' My sister tilted her head back no and Mother said, 'All right then, a little later.'

She turned to Father and said, 'Andreas?'

Father, still sitting there with his head lowered as though in prayer, looked up and said, 'No, thank you.' His gaze met my sister's and he gave her a small, tight-lipped smile. He picked up the leaflet and held it in his hand and unfurled it, spread it out on the table and swept the flat of his hand across it, glanced through it again.

She saw what was coming, she says. Father finished with the leaflet and again tried to smooth the crinkles out of the paper. He proceeded to fold it in half, then quarters, and put it in his shirt pocket, then pat the pocket down.

Father's gaze sought out Mother's and they watched each other carefully for what felt to my sister like the longest time but might have been only a second or two. Something seemed to pass between them. Mother said, 'Yes.'

Then said, 'Go.'

And then he was gone.

Late that afternoon, a rain came down and turned the few remaining leaflets the wind had been blowing here and there into mulch. Very few; the enterprising people of Kaisariani had probably known what they'd do with them even before they'd hit the ground.

My sister sat on our landing and gazed at the house across the street, the rocks holding down loose shingles, the shuttered window, the fat drops dripping from the low-hung eaves like another rain inside the rain. The rainwater flowed in a slow stream down the slight slope of the street, a long strip of liquid mirror whose surface kept breaking into ripples and unbreaking and breaking again.

My sister looked up and down the street for our father. There was a chill in the air. The smell of wet earth. Her feet were muddy. Her stomach hurt. She waited until darkness fell, then waited some more. Mother called her in, but half-heartedly, as though she knew. My sister ignored her. She thought she understood what this second leaving meant. But understanding didn't do her any good; she couldn't help waiting. She waited and waited and waited. Minute after minute, he failed to appear.

Saturday, 2 December 1944 (2015)

So here we are. Here we are with these strands laid out not-quite-parallel, about to be pulled into the braid for which they were always meant. Followed backward to a kind of start – followed that far, and no farther, for no good reason other than time, which is reason enough for everything – then traced forward once again, to get us here, to their conclusion and beginning.

Nexus point. Point of divergence. The forking place.

A Jonbar hinge, your father says he'd call this moment, if he could convince himself he believes in Jonbar hinges as anything but a literary device.

'Inevitability, then? The war was unavoidable?' I ask him.

'Maybe? Seems like it from where I'm standing. I don't know, Dad.'

'You don't believe that Sunday matters. Not in the long run.'

'Did I say that? Of course it matters. But it's a flashpoint, not the cause. It's Princip shooting Franz Ferdinand. It didn't do much more than speed things along to where they were maybe always headed.'

'Easy for you to say. You don't understand what this was. Proof that there'd be no justice. Proof that we'd never be allowed to decide for ourselves what was to become of us.'

'...'

'You weren't there.'

'Neither were you, Dad.'

'You know what I mean.'

'Yes. Yes, I do.'

'...'

'Okay, you're right. By Sunday evening I might have felt like taking a torch to the world too.'

But for now it's still Saturday morning. Scobie's Friday order has not been obeyed. It's not clear to me if even he thought it might be.

Papandreou has drafted his decree, called his Cabinet meeting. The EAM ministers were not invited to attend. It has been suggested to them that they co-sign. They have not. Nor were they expected to.

An explanation can be found in a day-old telegram from British Ambassador Leeper to the Foreign Office, which in part reads: '1. Papandreou has just sent me following message. As EAM Police refused to hand over their arms today, 1 December, which was the day unanimously decreed by Government, he is this evening drafting a decree which will be sent tonight to all Ministers for signature. He is sure the Communists will refuse... Six Ministers of Left will resign from the Government. 2. Papandreou is now forcing the issue on a breach of faith over the issue of the EAM Police. He is therefore not making the question of demobilisation the issue. This is very much better.'

Indeed it is.

At the Grande Bretagne, Byford-Jones, seated at his room's cramped dressing table with the curtains half-drawn against the glare, is composing a long message of his own. 'The EAM ministers have all resigned. This is it, seems to be the general consensus. The question on the lips of every Greek who has remained loyal to General Scobie is, "If ELAS attacks us, will the British fight?" From a military perspective, this is indeed the only question that matters. The Mountain Brigade, the Police, Colonel Grivas's Organization X, all the sundry forces the Government can rely on – alone they are no match for ELAS. If it comes to an armed confrontation, active British help is the Government's only hope.'

In Kolonaki, the Petrous stay home, make phone calls, listen to the radio, then, later, go out to buy newspapers they read aloud to each other, often simultaneously, dancing around one another's predictions and opinions, too agitated to put up with one another's errors of judgment, too troubled to object and risk having to spend the rest of the day alone. Yorgos goes for a walk early that morning; he wants to get some fresh air. He does not return.

In Kifisia, Mr Voreas makes and answers a series of phone calls, speaking in a low but urgent voice, breakfasts with his wife and children, takes a few minutes to assure them everything will work itself out, then leaves. He promises to be back well in time for their customary Saturday evening constitutional. He returns, nervous, tight-lipped and somewhat late, and cuts the family's walk short to have them drop in unannounced on the Petrous.

Despite the lateness of the hour, and the incivility of not having called ahead, they are greeted with what looks like warmth mixed with not a little relief. They sense the latter without being able to interpret it. Later that night, Mrs Voreas will attribute it to the general principle that governs the halving of burdens. Mr Voreas will not contradict her, nor will he explain they were saving the Petrous from having to continue speaking to one another.

Yorgos's absence is noted, once. Excuses are made. As he is bidding the Petrous goodnight, Mr Voreas is reminded of the invitation he extended to them days previously. Will he be seeing them in the morning, then? Yes, they are set on attending the reception. Ambassador Leeper – they would not dream of turning down such an honour. (So much for really believing a revolution is coming, you might think.) He also finds an opportunity to whisper to Mrs Petrou that he has not as of yet succeeded in acquiring the information she requested. He assures her it is only a matter of time.

In Kokkinia, Stelios listens to Philippos try to make sense of the situation, predict outcomes, in long, rambling monologues addressed to his wife, as well as Orestis and his mother, who arrive well before noon and spend most of Saturday in the Abatzoglous' courtyard. Stelios can hear a kind of lift in his father's voice, a thinning-out that is in part rage, in part disgust, in part fear. It lets him know Philippos doesn't have a clue what's coming. He wishes he could tell him it would be okay to just say so. He looks over and sees his mother is thinking the same thing. At twelve years old, he is convinced she lets his father go on and on for Orestis's benefit. He approves, and holds his peace.

Seven years later, at nineteen, he will realize his mother let Philippos go on not for Orestis's benefit but for Philippos's own. He will approve. He won't write to her for confirmation

Another ten years after that, at twenty-nine, he'll realize he's been wrong and revert to his original opinion. He won't be sure he approves anymore. He still won't write to his mother for confirmation.

It will be 1981 before he finally asks. His mother will have no idea what he's talking about. The dementia has taken the memory from her. Or perhaps old age. Or it was never really an important enough memory for her to hold onto. Perhaps she's letting Philippos go on and on because she is comforted by the sound of his voice, or is

evaluating his assessments or is so busy with her own attempts at prediction she's not even listening; Stelios can't know.

He goes on listening until he begins to feel the familiar pain build up in his groin, the fever come on. Dora sends him to bed and makes him some tea. He lies under the covers and waits for Maria to come to him. He's shaken awake by the touch of some invisible cool hand on his upper arm.

In Kaisariani, these same hours my sister spends sitting on our landing. She's no longer waiting. She's instead holding vigil; fighting to push the world in a certain direction through steadfast adherence to a position of hope. None of this can she put into words, but she so evidently burns with something, conviction maybe, that our mother lets her be while she herself sits in the kitchen with Aliko and Stella and an assortment of neighbours who come and go, bearing or seeking news, newspapers and reports heard on someone else's radio. The younger neighbourhood children, solemn at first, standing in front of their homes or congregating at street corners to marvel and worry at the grownups' agitation, get bored after a while and are off to play, though carrying with them and introducing to their games a contagion of tension expressed in the raising of voices in disagreement about rules never before invoked, and the odd harder-than-required bump or shove.

Byford-Jones is composing the remainder of his message from a table in the officer's club situated in a room behind the restaurant of the Grande Bretagne. In a couple of weeks' time the place will be so heavily guarded it will come to be known as the 'Fortress Bar', with the requisite banner bearing the name printed on a long arc of cut-up bed sheets and taped to the six-panelled mirror that takes up most of the wall behind the bar. He puts his pen down, finishes his coffee, lights a cigarette. Through the mirror he sees a tall officer with a WG-Grace-esque ginger beard enter the room. 'Colonel Woodhouse!' He waves the man over, invites him to sit and orders him a coffee.

'What is your take, Colonel?' Byford-Jones asks. 'Are we heading for a coup, or some kind of provocation? Or are the communists being outmanoeuvred?'

'It's hard to judge,' Woodhouse says, 'who's provoking whom. But I will say this. Should we measure each side's intentions by the efficacy of the preparations made to impose its will by force, neither side has any firm intention, because neither has made any adequate preparations.'

They take a long triangle of a stroll, from the Grande Bretagne to Omonoia, then to Thissio, then back to Syntagma through Monastiraki. They find the EAM propaganda machine at work, megaphones on every street. Woodhouse, who speaks excellent Greek, translates: Papandreou is working towards a new dictatorship, the Right is planning a coup that will put the King back on the throne. There's no intention of the collaborators ever being put to trial. There will be no purge of pro-German elements from any civil service.

The megaphones carry on, wave upon wave of piercing noise from which Byford-Jones once in a while picks up fragments: 'Churchill' and 'arch-fascist'; 'Scobie' and 'Gestapo'. Woodhouse registers his dismay, attempts to explain Greeks and their passions to him, their lack of belief in moderation. But it is not the vehemence that frightens Byford-Jones, it is the ease with which even these distinctions can collapse.

Back outside the Grande Bretagne, the two men go their separate ways. Up in his room, Byford-Jones pulls the window curtains wide open, sits at the dressing table and resumes composing his message.

'The news is disconcerting,' he writes. 'Everyone, we are hearing, has begun filling baths with water, collecting fuel, searching for candles or olive oil. Whole families are moving from the outskirts to the houses of friends near the British headquarters. And yet despite this only a crazed optimism is visible on the surface. It makes one doubt the evidence of one's own eyes.' He sits back and is for a few moments lost in thought. He can hear the EAM megaphones at work outside.

Late in the afternoon, there's a knock on his door: the General summons him. It takes him a moment to recognize the youth standing there as Trooper McAuley. He puts the letter away unfinished and follows McAuley downstairs. Waiting outside the General's office he finds his second-in-command, Major Bennedik. Bennedik, who has a habit of taking a short walk every afternoon in the area adjacent to the Stadium, is there to report that today ELAS officers refused to allow him to climb a hill in the neighbourhood – there were guards posted at the foot and he could hear what he had no trouble recognizing as sounds of digging. Digging what, if not defensive positions?

By the time Byford-Jones returns to his room in the early hours of Sunday morning, he is dizzy both with the fatigue of long hours of trying to keep up with developments, counter-developments, rumours both confirmed and unconfirmed, proposals both

advanced and rejected, as well as the several shots of whisky he takes on an empty stomach during what will prove to be the last Liberation party held in Athens, an already somewhat subdued event gone ahead with out of sheer obstinacy and attended by dour-looking British, American and Greek officers and diplomats, which comes to an abrupt end upon the receipt of a phone call informing the well-connected host that an ELAS formation is believed to be marching on Athens, and one ELAS unit is approaching the boundaries of the Athens-Piraeus area, in direct contravention of General Scobie's standing orders.

By Saturday afternoon, there's been another Cabinet meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, resulting in another decree, which orders the demobilization and dissolution of every existing resistance organization by 20th December. All regular officers are to report to the Ministry of War – the same authority to which all matériel are to be handed over. Further measures are taken. Police detachments are placed at strategically important locations in the city; public buildings are put under guard; British tanks are on patrol in the streets.

While the meeting is still in progress, the Cabinet is informed that the communist leaders have also met, and have decided to call a general strike on the 4th, and to reconstitute the ELAS Central Committee, taking back control of the andartes from Scobie. They are appealing to the governments of Great Britain, Russia, and the United States, protesting the General's intervention in the country's affairs, in particular his connecting the continuance of Allied help to questions of politics, 'injuring the people's feelings, and fomenting civil war'. They demand that the Allies 'acknowledge the right of the people of Greece to settle their own domestic affairs alone'. There is to be a demonstration in front of Parliament at 11 on Sunday morning, for which EAM, sticking to the letter of the law, is requesting the Government's permission.

This is where things get complicated.

Byford-Jones will later report that EAM had asked for permission to hold the demonstration, and that it had been granted, on condition that a written petition was submitted. The petition was not delivered, he will suggest, and the Cabinet 'thereupon decided to forbid the demonstration and to make the fact widely known'.

Others will claim, pointing for confirmation to next day's newspapers – both the communist organ, *Rizospastis*, and the government's own *Kathimerina Nea* – that

permission is in fact granted, at first, only to be withdrawn late on Saturday night, at which point EAM will maintain – whether reasonably or not depends on one's allegiances – that it is now too late to get the word out; the demonstration will perforce go ahead as planned.

Sam Modiano of *Reuters* will report to Richard Capell of *The Daily Telegraph* that the decision is changed once Papandreou is reminded by a Cabinet member that Ambassador Leeper is scheduled to speak at a reception of the Parnassos Literary Society on Sunday morning (a reception that Mr Papandreou himself as well as various members of the Cabinet have been invited to attend); in addition, that this reception is also to be attended by General Scobie, and to be held at the Society's hall just off Syntagma Square, also at 11 in the morning; that at the very same time there is also to be performed by the Athens Symphony Orchestra a concert of Allied music (a concert that Mr Papandreou himself as well as various members of the Cabinet have also been invited to attend).

Modiano, who's present in the ministry while the Cabinet meeting is taking place, will later tell historian Lars Baerentzen that Capell got certain things slightly wrong. It is actually Athens Police Chief Angelos Evert, speaking to foreign and Greek correspondents, who will express his concern at the coincidence of these events, and his ability to find enough men to prevent any incidents, and will interrupt the Cabinet meeting to warn the PM.

Baerentzen will note that this may seem as a 'somewhat frivolous motive, which can hardly be the only or main reason for the ban', but there's no question the matter is raised and perhaps ends up influencing Papandreou's decision – the latter being notorious for the ease with which he changes his mind. Baerentzen draws our attention to Greek-American correspondent Constantine Poulos's telegram from 4th December: 'Papandreou's constant vacillations have angered both the Right and the Left. "He always agrees with the last person he talks to," one Greek Minister explained.'

The official explanation for the ban will be printed alongside its announcement in the Sunday papers. The Government has 'received new information to the effect that the demonstration was not going to be a political manifestation only,' but constituted 'one of a whole series of revolutionary acts'. Papandreou will stick to this defence while confronting a far more hostile press on the 7th. 'The Government forbade the demonstration because it understood that it was the beginning of a revolution.'

There will be, finally, reports that Papandreou will consult Ambassador Leeper and that is the latter who will demand the demonstration be banned – a request supported by General Scobie who assures the PM that ‘he himself will take the necessary measures to ensure that it does not happen,’ both British representatives impressing on the prime minister that now is the time to stand up to the Left.

Sunday, 3 December 1944 (2015)

My sister comes awake to my crying as our mother, up already well before dawn, slinks into the room to take me from my crib. She's too late; Aliko and Stella sit up in bed and look at me in sleepy shock and confusion. It is not unusual that I would wake up this early, nor that I would begin the day displeased. Already my life-long aversion to morning has become the stuff of family lore: I come awake surly, suspicious, prepared for the worst. But never crying.

It's not peculiar then, that my sister hears my cries as some kind of ill omen, nor that she will find confirmation of this belief in our mother's unaccustomed failure to calm me down. For I appear to be neither hungry nor thirsty; have not soiled myself; am not, as the minutes pass, quieting down as though I had simply woken up from some nightmare. I go on refusing to be comforted. I do not wail or howl, or shriek or waul; I do not keel or bawl, or scream or squall. I refuse to utter anything that could pass for a word. Inconsolable, I cry steadily, unceasingly.

This outburst is treated first with surprise; then puzzlement; then irritation; then, finally, concern shading into fear. The possibility of illness or injury is raised, a cold, an ear infection, colic. It is pointed out by Stella that these seem unlikely. There is no tension in me, no stiffened legs or arms, no clenched fists. I do not thrash about or shake with effort. I do not cry myself breathless or turn red in the face. I show no sign of physical discomfort. I simply cry and cry, with a kind of measured resignation that looks a lot like long-held hopeless grief, as though suddenly I know the world to be irremediable.

'He just misses his father,' Aliko offers, and attempts to convince me of his imminent return. I pay her no mind.

'Maybe he knows something we don't,' Stella says darkly.

My sister stifles a surprised giggle. What could I possibly know? I'm just a baby. She examines Stella, decides this isn't meant to be one of her strange jokes; she's being serious. It's quite unexpected.

It soon occurs to my sister to be angry that no one has made any similar effort to comfort her since Father left. It's not as though she's taken steps to hide her pain. But then again, she tells herself, she's not a baby and would not listen to any attempt to

mislead her like this. He'll be gone for a long time. She doesn't know how she knows this, however – our mother has avoided answering her questions. The mechanism involved might be one that could also be available to me. If so, she thinks, I am far more cunning than she could have imagined.

And then I stop. I don't quiet down gradually, I don't exhaust myself then give up, I don't advance from sobs to silent tears. I simply stop, and look around me as though puzzled at all the attention.

My gaze comes to settle on Katerina, a bland, expressionless stare that doesn't fool her for a moment. The 'little baby Buddha stare', she'll start describing it as eventually, but this will not be for many, many years. For now she has no words for it. She stares back, looking for some way to figure out what it is I know.

It is just past seven in the morning when some familiar sharp crack of a noise awakens the Petrous. Mr Petrou sits up in bed, looks around, reaches for his glasses on the nightstand, then holds them instead of putting them on. Mrs Petrou rushes to a balcony door, opens it just wide enough to peer out. It is all wrong, out there. The gust of bitter air that would pierce through her never materializes. The ground is clear of the slightest dusting of snow. A perplexed Mrs Petrou tucks a lock of hair behind her ear, then remains very still and does not at first hear her husband ask, 'What is it? For God's sake, Ourania, what is it?'

'Nothing,' she says. 'Nothing. A door, probably.'

Saying this, she knows exactly which door this would be: their own. She throws on her dressing gown, clutching it at her throat.

Yorgos's bed is made but here and there ruffled. He must have come in while they were asleep, and now is gone again. She returns to the living room and looks around her, feeling somewhat lost amidst the rosewood chairs and sideboards, the two sofas with their flower-patterned cushions, the heavy maroon draperies at the row of tall windows. She picks up a silver etui, puts it down again. She sits herself at a stiff-backed chair upholstered in green velvet trimmed with gold. It is, all of it, too much, the room too cramped. '*C'est comme un petit musée, tout,*' she recalls Hauptsturmführer Lautenbach noting, and imagines she can, several months too late, detect the amused contempt in his voice. She says her morning prayers.

She heads to the kitchen to make their coffee. Hears her husband moving through the flat, then the flush of the lavatory. He comes and sits at the kitchen table, picks up

To Byford-Jones the morning seems as bright as any since the liberation of Greece, the city centre as peaceful as on any other Sunday. Birds twitter in the pepper and tangerine trees that line the streets. The sun shines over Parliament; Panepistimiou Street, all the way northwest to Omonoia Square, and Vasilissis Amalias Avenue, all the way south to Hadrian's Gate and the Temple of Olympian Zeus, are filled with people who, one would think, have not a care in the world: the families out on their morning stroll, the children well-comported but chafing to be less so, the parents forbearing but on alert; the young women pretty in their best frocks; British paratroopers in their maroon-coloured berets, attended on by pale-faced and bare-footed children selling single cigarettes; street vendors ready to sell or barter their wares for chocolate or bully beef; scores of beggars. It is almost enough to do away with Byford-Jones's overnight fears.

By nine o'clock the rumours filter into the city centre. EAM officials have spent the night making arrangements for the demonstration that is to go ahead despite the ban even now being proclaimed in the front pages of the Sunday newspapers. Immense preparations have been taking place. Throughout the night, church bells rang and air-raid sirens sounded in the working-class districts, and small groups of non-uniformed, and supposedly unarmed, communists paraded the streets calling on the Government to resign, and urging their fellow Athenians to prepare for the 'final battle for liberty'.

And yet here the people of Athens are, walking untroubled the streets around Syntagma Square, packing the many coffee houses; some of them, Byford-Jones presumes, whiling away the time before heading to either the concert or the reception, others perhaps simply wanting to be in the area when the demonstration takes place. Believing, perhaps, that one more demonstration could make little difference. There have been so many of them before.

There is one more rumour to report, one that Byford-Jones will not record; that for the past two days, Police Chief Evert has been giving pro-EAM policemen leave, while their colleagues are trained in the use of their new British-provided Sten submachine guns, and in how to confront demonstrators. In his 'Mission Pericles' report from Athens, Office of Strategic Services officer C.G. Kouvaras notes being informed that 'in place of the pro-EAM policemen reliable men are taken on.'

One of these men might be Nikos Farmakis, who belongs to Organization X, and who's been stationed by a first-floor window inside Parliament, paired up with a

Peloponnesian gendarme whose name he will later be unable or unwilling to recall, a short wine-barrel of a man who smells of onions and engine oil and has only just arrived in Athens this morning. Farmakis has been given a German MP 40 and one hundred and fifty rounds of ammunition, a Luger, and a single Mills bomb whose pin ring caught in the crook of his thumb as he was pocketing the grenade and was almost pulled loose.

Farmakis is fifteen years old, and has never carried a grenade before, and is a little scared of it. He feels its weight pressing on his hip, disproportionate to its size, and wonders how far he could throw it if he had to. He would rather not die because he couldn't throw it far enough. He's not afraid of dying, he hastens to explain to himself. It would just be an embarrassing way to go.

What nonsense, he decides. He could throw it a stadion. If he had to. How long is a stadion? Four hundred podes? No, he's thinking four hundred metres, that's modern running tracks. Five hundred podes, he wants to say. He forgets.

Next to him the gendarme looks outside with a somewhat bored expression. He wants to get this over with and head back home. He has been in Athens for three hours but it's more than enough for him to have decided he doesn't belong in big cities. He has already listed his complaints for Farmakis to comment on, and they are the expected: too many people, too much noise, the streets are too busy, the women nowhere near demure enough. Also, there are obviously too many communists. While Farmakis agrees with this final conclusion, it's unclear to him how the gendarme has had time to reach it.

Down in the street, Byford-Jones is deciding not to attend the reception at the Parnassus Society. Having been recommended by General Scobie as, not any kind of professional authority on Homer, but certainly a very well-informed layman, he has already read through a draft of the Ambassador's speech, which, somewhat disappointingly, is much more a political than a literary pronouncement, and while Byford-Jones would be the last man to ever suggest the irrelevancy of Homer to the present moment whatever that moment may be, he cannot help but feel that Leeper's series of poetic analogies is not quite what the occasion calls for in a public statement. The concert is more appealing, and the Palace Theatre is so near Syntagma Square that should anything exciting happen during the demonstration he will immediately know.

Well before ten he strolls over to Voukourestiou Street, just around the corner from Police HQ, to find a small crowd of impatient music lovers is already gathered by the

still-closed iron gates in front of the theatre. He joins them. Eventually a man appears, carrying a violin case.

‘There’s no use waiting,’ he informs the crowd, speaking in Greek and waiting for someone to translate. ‘Some members of the orchestra and staff belong to EAM. They won’t be coming.’

There is barely time to register the cancellation before they hear the distant sound of marching and the shouting of slogans through megaphones. Byford-Jones rushes back to the Grande Bretagne. The sight that greets him now is very different to the one he left behind not even an hour ago. Police HQ is being guarded by a substantial force. So is Syntagma Square. Cordons have been thrown across all the streets that lead to it. There are policemen armed with Italian carbines on the roof of Parliament. Most of the policemen in the street are also armed with rifles; a few carry Stens. He looks across the square to the rooftop of the KKE headquarters. He can’t see if the machine-gun nest is manned from where he’s standing.

There are three Staghound armoured cars parked inside the square, a fourth one on the pavement at the corner in front of the Grande Bretagne. From its open turret McAuley is reporting into his wireless. He has just discovered the headphones are on the blink, but not much can be done about it now. A few Gurkhas come and stand by the car, alert but unconcerned. This is the sum of British forces present. The demonstration is an internal issue and they will not be seen to be policing it.

The steps at the hotel’s entrance are crowded with foreign observers and journalists. Byford-Jones spots Eric Grey talking to two other men, one of whom is fiddling with a 35mm Leica. These turn out to be the *Life* photographer, Kessel, and an American Kessel introduces as Connie Poulos.

‘And Mr Capell?’ Byford-Jones asks Grey.

‘Otherwise engaged.’

‘Really?’ Byford-Jones says. ‘He has business to attend to more important than this?’

‘He’s seen enough demonstrations, he said. He expects we’ll be kind enough to let him know if anything worth reporting transpires.’

Behind them, General Scobie exits the hotel.

‘Gentlemen,’ he says.

Byford-Jones turns and salutes. ‘General,’ he says.

'Aren't you attending Ambassador Leeper's speech, General?' asks Grey.

'In view of all this,' Scobie says with a disgusted gesture, 'it was deemed wiser that the speech be postponed.'

'Are you expecting trouble?'

'No more than usual, Mr Grey,' Scobie says. 'Lieutenant,' he turns to Byford-Jones, 'a word.' He takes him aside.

'Sir?' Byford-Jones says.

'I will be monitoring the situation from HQ,' Scobie says. 'I take it you aim to be in the vicinity throughout?'

'That is what I had in mind, sir.'

'Good. Can I expect you in my office once it's over? I would hear your view on recent events.'

'Of course, sir.'

'Very well.' Scobie turns to leave.

'Sir?'

'Yes, Lieutenant?'

'This feels like a mistake, sir.'

'What does?'

'Banning the demonstration, then not preventing it from going ahead anyway.'

'What would you have them do?'

'I don't know, sir, but this seems to me like the worst of both worlds. It's like breaking a horse. You control it only as long as you keep it from realizing that actually you cannot.'

'That's very good, Lieutenant.'

'Thank you, sir, but I only read it somewhere. In any case, there's been talk coming from the Left that the government's handling of this only proves its impotence.'

'My dear Wilfred. Did I ever tell you about my time in Tobruk?'

'I'm sure you have, sir.'

'I must have mentioned my good friend, Mr Ford?'

'The engineer, was it, sir?'

'Indeed. I was still a little wet behind the ears, I must say, regarding such things, and he took me aside and told me what it is now my turn to tell you. He said, "The first

thing one learns in Tobruk, General, is not to listen to the damned nonsense the natives are always talking.” ’

‘Right, sir. Of course.’

With the General gone, Byford-Jones joins Grey again. Kessel and Poulos have drifted off to look for a better vantage point. There are still onlookers milling around near the Staghounds, waiting for the demonstrators to arrive before presumably moving to the west side of the square – the side farthest away from Parliament – to observe events from a minimum safe distance. This is in fact what soon begins to happen. The crowd of sightseers is herded back to stand behind a line of grey-uniformed police officers.

Among them: Mrs Petrou. She does not appreciate being removed to such a distance from the focus of her concern. The protesters, when they come, will no doubt congregate at the eastern side of the square, as near to Parliament as possible, and she will be too far away to spot her son. Not that this would be easy to begin with. She can hear the demonstrators approaching from what seems like multiple directions, and the noise is already tremendous. There must be many thousands of them. It is possible she has again underestimated the astounding idiocy that, it is sad to say, remains the rule in this country rather than the exception. Yes, underestimated the idiocy, as well as – she thinks of Victoria – the treachery, the sheer cunning shamelessness of the communists. The immorality. The villainy. But this is also what she tells herself gives her hope. She is so obviously on the side of what is right and good and proper that she must be meant to find her son no matter what. Following Mr Voreas’s example, she moves slightly back from the crush near the police line, dragging Mr Petrou along with her. He is still expressing his disappointment at the cancellation of the reception. He was looking forward to both the Ambassador’s speech and the refreshments that would have followed it.

The man standing next to him, a squat, frog-like fellow wrapped in too heavy a coat, is sweating entirely too much and reeks of camphor. There are tufts of cotton where a couple of the coat’s buttons should have been. Mr Petrou wishes to spare his offended sensibilities from continued exposure to such affronts, and makes this position known to his wife as he attempts to lead her away, but she will not be moved. Whatever is about to happen she intends to be here to see it. Listen – the protesters cannot be far, Mr Voreas advises. At this point they would be harder to avoid if one attempted to leave. The trio might as well stay right where they are.

Mr Voreas is not wrong. There are at this moment three enormous columns of protesters converging on the square. The first one has its origins in the eastern districts of the city – Hymettus, Vyronas, Kaisariani – and is tramping down Vasilissis Sofias Avenue. This is the source of the tumult heard by Byford-Jones outside the theatre. In the column's midst are to be found Aunt Aliko (defiant, swept up), Mother (determined, grim-faced), and Katerina (exhilarated, expectant, a bundle of hopeful fury). Stella, who holds the demonstration to be a complete waste of everyone's time, was only too happy to stay home with me. There are more people around them than my sister has ever seen gathered in any one place. In the middle of the widest street she's ever walked, under the widest blank sky, she feels the press of the crowd on her as an incipient sense of claustrophobia. Yet it doesn't matter. What matters is that Father surely has to be nearby, even if Mother and Aliko have not once mentioned this possibility. He has not come home, so she has come to find him instead, here among the anonymous thousands carried on the sound of rally chants – rhythmic shouts of 'Down with Papandreou', 'Down with intervention', 'Down with Glücksburg' – this mass longing that will, must make something happen, and in its midst her own small longing, only a part of this vast tumble of body heat and noise bouncing off concrete and marble.

This column will not reach Syntagma Square. It will be stopped by the police just over half a kilometre away; just outside, in fact, of the building at number 6, between Rigillis and Irodou Attikou Streets, the current occupant of one of whose flats is, on weekdays and whenever as today the business of state has kept him away from his home in Kifisia, a Mr Georgios Papandreou, Prime Minister of Greece.

But here come the second and third column, the southern districts, Kallithea, Nea Smyrni, Faliro, Voula. The second column – McAuley thinks he hears on the wireless the claim it is at least a quarter of a mile long – in its orderly march north along Amalias Avenue, the third and smaller one, in a parallel northward march along Philellinon Street, coming up on the southwest corner of the square, near the KKE headquarters. Shouting their slogans and singing resistance songs, carrying banners and waving their large Greek flags alongside Russian red-and-golds, and red-white-and-blues in configurations both American and British.

Near the front of this second column – where they have remained for most of its long march despite the young man's limp and at his own mute insistence – are to be

found Stelios, his parents, and Orestis, who once again showed up at the Abatzoglous' door earlier this morning, carrying two small Greek flags, one of which he offered to Stelios.

Here is Orestis, hopping along, sweat pouring down his brow, waving his flag in a kind of interrupted rhythm that mirrors his gait but doesn't match it. Every so often he lags behind the pace he is himself setting, catches up, lags behind, then catches up, and when Stelios and his parents slow down to join him – they have somehow along the way become his guardians, it seems – he rushes forward again, as though discovering anew some strange stamina he has held in reserve for just this moment.

The constant noise in-between the chants, the crowd's surge like some ambient, breathy rumble building and breaking upwards into shout, a defiance without aggression, responding to the cries made by the tin and cardboard megaphones either side of the procession in a kind of raw animal call, the announcement of presence – Stelios discovers in this moment the thought that they might not, in fact, be insignificant, that it is possible they might be, if not listened to, then at least heard. The crowd pushes forward. Stelios waves his flag.

The third column reaches the southeast corner of the square, at the intersection of Philellinon and Othonos Streets, comes up against the police line. There is a short scuffle but no real violence. The policemen do not put up too much resistance, and a number of protesters rush into the square without a shot being fired. One hundred metres ahead of them Mrs Petrou is engaged in a desperate scan of as many faces as she can discern, the crowd's very size making a mockery of her plan, which suddenly seems as though it were never much of one, only the kind of desperate maternal belief her two men, standing right there beside her, cannot share, cannot even imagine. Where is her son? Is he even here? Is it possible – please, Lord – she's mistaken? Could he be, would he please be, anywhere but here? She reminds herself to also be on the lookout for the girl, Victoria, but there's no point. Every girl in the crowd looks like her.

There is, finally, a fourth column of demonstrators – the western districts: Agia Varvara, Aigaleo, Peristeri, Petroupoli – that will soon be making its way up Ermou Street to come at the square on its west side, barely fifty metres away from the spot where Mrs Petrou is currently standing. Soon, but not soon enough. By the time these protesters reach the square, it will all be over, and they'll only play a part in the aftermath. Yorgos and Victoria will rush past this small area of pavement, and will never know who it was

that so recently vacated it. Here they come, a little late, but by the measure of such things, not really late at all. Twenty-odd minutes, no more.

‘I’m going upstairs to get a better view,’ Grey tells Byford-Jones, pointing behind them, where from the windows of the bedrooms of the Grande Bretagne are sprouting the heads of war correspondents who had been sleeping late. Around the corner more faces are peering down through the windows of Police HQ, while below, on the building’s ground floor, behind the plate-glass, floor-to-ceiling windows of Jannakis’s Confiserie Royale, the faces are gone, their owners having departed sometime after Byford-Jones headed to the theatre, leaving behind empty tables that no waiter has yet cleared.

It is just in front of this building that Byford-Jones, having decided to remain at ground level rather than follow Grey’s example, takes up position. From here he can see down the length of both Vasilissis Sofias and Vasilissis Amalias Avenues as well as all the way across the square to the building of the KKE.

Not allowed to push forward, the crowd gathering near Papandreou’s flat is getting bigger and louder by the moment, and the policemen guarding the building’s entrance are working hard at looking untroubled even as the officer in charge is anxiously checking his watch every few seconds. It is almost eleven o’clock. The PM should be coming through those doors any second. But the chants of ‘Down with Papandreou’ soon convince the officer to send a man upstairs to advise Papandreou to delay making his appearance until the crowd either disperses, or moves on to Syntagma – neither eventuality looking very likely at the moment, as the officer’s colleagues will not allow the protesters to pass, and they certainly have no intention of leaving in any direction but one.

Katerina can’t see the policemen from where she’s standing, can’t see much of anything, in fact, other than the bodies around her, pushed up against one another. Mother and Aliko fight against the jostle to fall back, away from the crush. The crowd around them thins out just enough for Katerina to see the building’s highest couple of floors looming over their heads, the long balconies, the strange-looking windows she does not yet know to call bay windows, and over it all, all across the edge of the flat roof, a green hallucination – it must be – of trees lining the roof, the tops of the trees’ crowns leaning over greenly to gaze down upon them, or about to topple over, fall to the street. Then some weight hits her in the back, hard – it feels as though she had run full tilt into

something monstrously big and immovable. The impact shocks her off her feet, knocks the wind out of her. The thin little sound she makes is drowned out by the loudest noise she's ever heard.

Ambassador Leeper has been standing by one of the windows of his study in the pink-washed building of the British Embassy half a kilometre to the east, looking down upon the last section of Vasilissis Sofias Avenue before its final bend to the right turns it into an arrow aimed straight at Syntagma. He first became aware of the mounting murmur and tramping of a great but orderly crowd marching his way, then watched as the procession passed by, observing the usual forest of banners, hearing what he imagines were the usual slogans. Now he hears the sound that can only be that of an explosion and then, seconds later, another. Bursts of automatic fire. A great rushing vibration. Right away he knows the sound must have come from near Papandreou's flat. There will follow endless minutes of relative silence. Then, from farther away in the direction of Syntagma, there will come – not yet – what may be the firing of yet more weapons, a hollow, sharp rattle – 'like that of musketry', he will record. This was always a possibility, even if not a pleasant one. Locked in a desk drawer behind him there is a copy of his final telegram of Saturday to the Foreign Office, sent late at night, which in part reads: 'Min of Supply Tsatsos told me that the view of the Government was that there would be some fighting tomorrow but they were sure that in a few hours situation would be under control. British troops will be held in readiness and may be involved.'

Byford-Jones, as close by as he is, hears neither the explosions nor the gunfire nor the screams of the crowd in front of Papandreou's flat breaking into a headlong, disordered rush; the larger procession moving up Amalias Avenue is too close, too loud. Here they come, men women and children, marching, ten abreast, with every third or fourth person holding a Greek or Allied flag, or banners in neat red print, engaged in a constant back-and-forth with the megaphones wielded by their KKE handlers. He scans the first few rows of protesters. Men and women as old as sixty or more, children as young as maybe ten. A preponderance of young women; far fewer young men.

The column reaches the southwest corner of Syntagma Square, and some of the protesters at its head attempt to turn left onto Othonos Street and the KKE headquarters. The policemen blocking off access to the square cannot hold them back, and after another short-lived scuffle the protesters join their comrades already there. Still, the main

body of the procession pushes forward and comes to a halt with the square to their left and Parliament to their right, thirty metres or so away from two ranks of yet more policemen, lined up across the juncture of Amalias and Vasilissis Sofias Avenues, with the right flank placed at the corner of the Grande Bretagne. These are the men who will have to stop the crowd if it advances on Police HQ. They are heavily armed. Still, Byford-Jones doesn't like their chances. But for now the protesters demonstrate no such intention. Byford-Jones can see nothing sullen or menacing about them. True, some of the men are screaming invective with particular fanaticism, yet there's also what looks like a great deal of humorous banter, and jokes being exchanged in great happy shouts between the protesters and those watching from the kerbs. This doesn't strike him as curious. Crowds can be like this, stirring the soul into a kind of happy belligerence, into believing victory already accomplished in the fact of having gathered.

Whatever is being reported through the wireless comes in distorted bursts McAuley can't quite make it out. Nor does the roar of the crowd help. Something about a – shooting? Following something that only through intonation, length and convention does he manage to understand as 'I repeat', he thinks he hears the word 'explosion' in the middle of an otherwise hopeless jumble of sounds right before the transmission ends. He glances to his left, between the car and the hotel. The Gurkhas are gone. He turns and turns, searching for them, until he finds them slightly in front and to the right of the Staghound, taking in the spectacle, standing very still, as though watching with their whole body. He shouts down the wireless, hoping to be heard.

Mrs Petrou watches Mr Voreas also shouting something – impossible to tell what from even so short a distance – right into Mr Petrou's ear, the latter wincing before nodding in agreement. Mrs Petrou would scream at them if she thought it would do any good, 'Look for him, for God's sake–' but there's no time, she's left it too late to solicit their help, explaining would waste precious moments, one of which, no doubt, would be the one that would have presented her with her one and only chance to spot – *there*, there he is. The man turns and he's not Yorgos. Tall, lean and bony like a bird, just like her son, the same tangle of black hair, but older, with a terrible scarred face. He sees her looking and something unexpected happens to his expression, a softening that looks like pity. As if he *knows*. He cannot, of course, but somehow he does.

Stelios, his flag writing smooth infinities in the air, spins and spins around, looking for the gaps between bodies through which he can catch glimpses of the Grande Bretagne and Parliament, Lycabettus Hill looming in the distance between them and, behind and to the procession's left, over the row of trees that separates Amalias Avenue from the square, the rooftop of the KKE building with its enormous sign. There are more and more protesters coming up behind them, the column is too long for those further back to know that those preceding them have been stopped in their tracks. Soon he's pressed against his father's flank. His mother pushes her way to them and he takes her hand. He tries to look for Orestis but can't find him. The three of them pick up the crowd's chant. 'Down with Papandreou', they shout. 'Down with intervention.'

Katerina is for a moment sprawled flat on the ground on her back on the cold earth, gaping helplessly up at a sky that's low and a featureless washed-out grey. Then a shadow leans over her, a hand reaches out and she's pulled to her feet, hard enough that she cries out at the pain that runs up her arm. They are already moving. She has some vague sense of the person dragging her away. It might be Aliki, her vision is still too blurry to tell.

She can feel more than see the scattering around them, the protesters breaking apart like a flock of birds after a gunshot. Quick bursts that she not so much hears as feels in her stomach and throat and that, she realizes, *are* gunfire. A painful ringing in her ears and underneath it a confusion of sounds of screaming, shouting, running.

Then nothing, almost, no awareness of a world, her whole being reduced to a feeling of speed, a kind of flight, a surge through slow space.

Next come fragments: running through trees, a forest, stumbling through shrubs and feeling their sticky sap coat her forearms and shins where the skin will soon break out in blisters. (She's heard of the Royal Garden before but will not make this connection until later.)

She's lost track of time, can't tell how long they've been running for. There may be others too, running, somewhere near them, expressed as sounds – trampling, panting for breath – and the sweep of fast shadow.

Then a sudden exit onto another wide street, another wide grey sky, the sun a suggestion, a threadbare patch, a weak spot in metal. The street taken over by another huge crowd, at the edge of which they come to a stop. They're on Amalias Avenue, just

three or four hundred metres south of Syntagma Square, though neither my sister nor Aliki have in that moment any idea where they've ended up.

Aliki lets go of my sister's hand. They double over with their hands on their knees and take big, gasping breaths.

Only now does it occur to my sister to look around for our mother. Her disappearance doesn't come as a shock, Katerina is already in too much distress for that. But something inside her pulls back, as though in a kind of contraction that makes her vacate most of her body, turns her into a tight little ball of injured attention right behind her breastbone. Mothers may disappear just as easily as fathers do. Katerina doesn't know why this hadn't occurred to her before. She turns to Aliki, who kneels in front of her and looks her over, turns her around, runs her hands over her, through her hair, looking for blood, wounds, broken bones. Finding nothing, thank God.

Aliki doesn't know where our mother is. What happened? She doesn't know exactly. But that doesn't matter, the important thing is to find Anna. Anna – of course she's all right. She must already be looking for them herself. But where? Would she turn back or push ahead, try to make her way to Syntagma? Where would she look for them? She can't decide. It's impossible. She's fine, she tells herself. Anna's fine. But this wouldn't be the first time she's told herself something like this and been wrong.

In her desperation she turns to Katerina. What would her mother do? What does she think? Forward or back? All this has to be yelled right into my sister's ear over the oceanic surge of voices shouting what they themselves were shouting not long ago.

It is in this moment, she'll recall later, looking into Aliki's eyes, that my sister learns there's no such thing as habituation, that you don't cease to be afraid just through living in fear long enough. Which means, if you think about it, that her own current impassivity is proof that something's gone wrong with her. She should be scared. Why isn't she?

Well? Where to now?

What would Mother do? my sister thinks. Then, very calmly, she thinks no, the correct question is what would Mother have *them* do? This is a much easier question to answer, so she does.

They stand for a moment and watch the people go by as though standing at the bank of a slow-moving black river. My sister doesn't register the skin of her forearms beginning to burn; not just yet. They move against the current.

Byford-Jones watches the front rank of demonstrators. Faced with those two police lines they look uncertain about what they ought to do next. A group of them come forward to engage in lively conversation with the higher-ranked officers, attempting to persuade them they should be let through. Parts of this exchange are overheard by the OSS man, Kouvaras, from where he's posted on the first-floor balcony of the Grande-Bretagne, almost directly above the two groups. He tries to follow the discussion, carried out entirely in shouts and accompanied by much gesturing. Under the circumstances it doesn't seem to him to be anything exceptional. The demonstrators are demanding to be allowed through, the police officers will not hear of it, but Kouvaras sees nothing in the confrontation that would threaten imminent violence.

Byford-Jones turn his back to the sight to look up at Police HQ. He is surprised to see a group of grey-uniformed officers on the balcony of the second floor with their rifles pointed at the crowd, some standing, some kneeling so that only their heads and guns peak above the parapet. A precaution, he tells himself. Merely a precaution.

Across the street, at that first-floor window inside Parliament, Farmakis and the gendarme also have their MP 40s trained on the crowd below. They wait. The gendarme is murmuring to himself, tapping his finger on the trigger guard as though keeping a beat. It's possible he's singing. It's a cool day, but Farmakis finds himself blinking sweat away from his eyes. The reds chant Papandreou's name, calling him a mountebank; he's secretly a member of X, they shout. Farmakis wishes the second characterization were true. There's a tightness low in his abdomen he can't ease, but it's more exhilaration than nerves. He's forgotten about the grenade. Exhilaration and a sense of clarity with, all right, maybe a little fear mixed in, and a certain degree of impatience he does his best to tamp down. Every few seconds he glances over to Police HQ, looking for a signal. This is an area where his orders have not been entirely clear, a fact he puts down to the last-minute nature of his conscription. He can taste collective impatience permeating the air inside Parliament like some kind of charge, the hum near high-voltage lines. The other pairs of marksmen at the windows, the policemen on the roof, all of them waiting.

Kessel and Poulos are standing outside Parliament, across the street from Police HQ, Kessel taking pictures of the demonstration, Poulos observing. Not ten metres away,

near the edge of the crowd closest to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Kessel spots a young boy in a grey suit jacket and grey shorts. There's no adult standing near him who seems to be paying him any mind, and Kessel wonders if the boy might be there on his own. He points the Leica at him, turns the focusing lever, depresses the shutter release, turns the winding knob, and depresses the shutter release once more.

Stelios, Dora and Orestis have shouldered their way through the throng in an attempt to get close enough to catch a glimpse of Philippos negotiating with the police. They are being observed by Byford-Jones, who sees Stelios but doesn't recognize him. Nor does Stelios recognize him.

See this, see them all, suspended in time: Byford-Jones, a uniform and half of a face, framed by the floor-to-ceiling windows of the deserted Confiserie Royale, with his eyes, hidden in the shadow of his cap's visor, presumably turned on the crowd; Stelios and Dora and Orestis with their eyes on Philippos, Dora holding on to Stelios's hand, Stelios holding his flag low, Orestis caught in a shout, mouth wide open, revealing his ruined teeth, sparse gravel-grey little shards crookedly embedded, like stones in mud; Philippos arguing with the police officer, caught, in this moment of stasis, gesturing with one hand raised, ring and middle fingers curled, index and middle fingers and thumb extended upward into a kind of pyramid – when the hand is shaken back and forth like this, this may mean, 'What do you think you're doing?' or 'Have you gone mad?'; just a few metres away, Kessel with his face obscured by the Leica aimed at the protesters, and next to him Poulos, looking off to the side, as though attempting to gauge the length of the procession that extends down Amalias Avenue as far as the eye can see; behind them, Parliament, and at an open first-floor window, two gun barrels and behind those two faces, Farmakis's big-eared and straight-nosed and small-mouthed, with a gleam of anticipation to the eyes, the gendarme's round and heavy-browed and otherwise somewhat of a blur; across from them, near the north-western corner of the square, McAuley caught in the impossible task of trying to hear whatever is coming through on the wireless, head tilted sideways, palms pressing the headphones to his head; further back, on the other side of the square, in the midst of a crowd of onlookers, behind a line of policemen who are no longer interested in holding anyone back and have turned their backs on the crowd so that they too can watch, none of the onlookers themselves in any

case any longer interested in breaking through the cordon, not even – yes, there, Mrs Petrou, frozen, shoulders slumped, in an attitude of horrified resignation, while next to her stands Mr Voreas, shouting something in her ear, and a couple of metres to their left, face hidden behind a pocket square – how Mrs Petrou hates that habit of his of removing it from his pocket and giving it an ostentatious flap before crushing it against his face as though he means to suffocate himself – there is Mr Petrou who, it is known, scents his handkerchiefs with eau-de-Cologne, and who therefore might either be blowing his nose or shielding it from the stench of his fellow man.

See them in this moment, at the crest of the wave before the wave breaks. Quick, look. Time will only stand still for so long.

And what of our family? Where are we?

Katerina and Alik: somewhere on Amalias Avenue, heading away from Syntagma. Once past Hadrian's Arch they'll turn left, skirt around the First Cemetery, then turn left again, briefly following Imittou Street northeast to Pagrati, there to get lost in the quieter side streets, climb further uphill into Vyronas, where they'll find the Church of the Ascension, the one landmark whose spatial relation to home Aliki is too deeply familiar with for even shock to dislodge from her head. But here they are now, frozen in the act of inching along at the edge of the crowd, holding hands, their faces in this instant both blank, giving away nothing.

Your great-grandmother; where is she? She doesn't know, so neither can we. Her vision was first blurred, then doubled, the indistinct shapes she saw also existing to the right or left of themselves, as though she were two people doing the seeing from two slightly different angles, or as though she was seeing the shapes themselves at two different times, the thing and where the thing had been, or perhaps the thing and where the thing would come to. Then came the nausea, the taste in her mouth suggesting she must have already vomited though she had no memory of that. The ringing in her ears that made it difficult to understand the disembodied voices around her. The hands lifting her, carrying her, more voices, close. She might have mumbled. She might have moaned. She might have screamed. Why would she be screaming? The light hurts her eyes. No, it isn't that. The pain in her side, the pain in her leg, maybe that's it. But then that must have come first, before the moaning or screaming. She can't think straight. Thinking

hurts. Her head hurts. She tries to touch the side of her head where it hurts but can't find it where it's supposed to be.

She'll wake up in hospital. She'll never know who got her there; there'll be no one there to thank. Much later the doctors will tell her the limp will get better, but it won't. Neither will the headaches.

Me and Aunt Stella: I'm crying again, steadily, unceasingly, in the arms of my exasperated aunt, who's been pacing from bedroom to kitchen to front door to kitchen to bedroom, rocking me back and forth, shushing me. All the usual remedies are about to fail once more, and with no one present to doubt her conclusion, or be a witness to her terror, Stella is about to begin questioning me, begging to be told what it is I know. But for now we are just crossing the threshold from bedroom to kitchen, and this is where the moment finds us, right on that cusp, neither in one room nor the other.

Your great-grandfather: he's already left Athens behind, heading north, back to ELAS territory, from where his division will set off for Epirus to fight against EDES. By the time in late December when, with Athens all but lost, they are ordered to move on the capital post-haste, it will already be too late, and they'll be forced to retreat back to Lamia, where they'll remain until February, when the Varkiza Treaty will be signed and they'll be made to surrender their weapons. Despite the political amnesty, he won't get to return to Athens. He'll be accused of having participated in the execution of three 'suspected' collaborators in the wider Lamia area and will go into hiding until the civil war erupts anew in early 1946 – a non-political (and therefore still prosecutable) crime of which he would be guilty, if it had been a crime, if they had not in fact all three *been* collaborators, responsible between them for well over one hundred deaths and convicted by a people's court comprised of their fellow villagers, for all that there is still, to this day, a memorial to be found in a village square near Lamia that bears their names under the inscription 'Heroes of the Resistance'. It isn't the only one of its kind.

But now, where is he now? Still on his way north, he's camped inside a shallow cave near the crest of a small hill. He's sitting on a flat rock by the cave's entrance, from where he can see all the way downhill to where a dirt road crosses his field of vision left (Athens) to right (Lamia). One of Mother's widow's-black kerchiefs is spread out before him; on it a piece of bread, a smaller piece of cheese. An army canteen full of water. What you cannot see is the pistol in his pocket. He's just brought something to his mouth or

might be pinching his lips pensively, as he's wont to do. There's a gleam in his eye that's halfway to hopeful – I can't explain it, and probably neither could he. It is, maybe, a trick of the light. Behind him spreads the pitch-black darkness of some small underworld – not as immense as the real thing, but just as dark.

There. The moment is over. The wave breaks. Time moves on. There's no stopping this now.

When next Farmakis glances over to Police HQ, Chief Evert is standing on the second-floor balcony behind the policemen still aiming at the reds. Evert is without his service cap and is in the process of removing his spectacles and pulling from a pocket a white handkerchief he snaps open and waves once in the air before proceeding to wipe the lenses. A moment or two later forty or fifty armed policemen are lining up across the width of Vasilissis Sofias Avenue, forming another cordon, perpendicular to the one blocking off access to Panepistimiou Street. The protesters are

pinned in, thinks Byford Jones, watching the new cordon form, then turns his attention back to

the negotiations between the protesters and police. They seem to have either concluded or broken down. Kouvaras watches from above as the group led by Philippos makes its way back to the head of the procession. The chants and slogans die out in a slow southward fade as information makes its way back through the crowd. Then it happens, they march towards the police, perhaps in response to the pressure exerted by the constant arrival of more of their comrades behind them, perhaps because an order to proceed has been given – Kouvaras can't tell and

neither can Kessel who watches through the Leica's viewfinder as the policemen form a line between him and the procession and takes one more photograph as the boy in the grey suit drifts further out from the edge of the crowd and

neither can Stelios, who only knows the concussion of sudden movement forward, the body which comes between him and his mother, causing them to let go of each other's hand, and the confluence of footfalls and raised voices that sounds like no not here not this far from home but it maybe sounds like Maria saying 'Now, now, look left, left' and he does and the marchers there are just perfectly aligned and beyond them there is the armoured car and in front of it the soldiers and amongst them

Ramesh

and the noise saying, 'Go, go, now,' and there is no thought, Stelios breaks off left and is running to reach Ramesh not knowing what he'll do once he gets there and behind him Dora is calling her son's name as she runs after him and

the crowd surges forward and

Mrs Petrou has been growing increasingly afraid, having long given up on the idea of spotting her son, but there is no relief to be found in surrender, he must be exactly where she fails to see him, and the crowd, there are always good reasons to be fearful of crowds, and what if Yorgos – and the crowd swarms forward and stop them what are they doing the police

are going to be overrun, McAuley sees, there's a voice panicking in his ears but the headphones crackle and die and the crowd

they're coming, they're thirty yards away when Byford-Jones's attention is again drawn to that second-floor balcony at Police HQ where there is what sounds like the barking out of an order, and a moment later not in unison like a disciplined unit, but hesitantly, one after the other, the policemen up there begin to pull back the bolts of their rifles. He looks again at the approaching multitude, they're coming fast, stretched across the street and

the first shot is fired.

The crowd freezes. They remain motionless, as though dazed. Then another shot.

People fall flat to the ground. They fall in heaps, throwing themselves on top of one another.

Another shot. Another.

An order is shouted – 'Move back!' – and the policemen blocking off Panepistimiou withdraw about twenty paces while raising their rifles.

'They're firing in the air,' Kouvaras thinks but then, looking directly below the balcony just before the retreating policemen disappear around the corner of the building, he sees them pointing their rifles at the crowd.

In the instant before what is happening registers on a conscious level, Kessel captures the moment after the bullet hits the grey-suited boy, who can be seen as he starts to double over as though punched in the gut – this is in fact where the bullet has hit

him, there will be no saving him – while in the background immediately to his right a man in a long grey overcoat almost the exact shade of grey of the policemen's uniforms (Philippos) can be seen having turned to throw himself at those marching right behind him, expecting, probably, the persons he's attempting to protect to be his wife and son, and wrapping his arms instead around a young man in a dark suit and a wide-lapelled white shirt (Orestis) whose right hand is grabbing Philippos's left forearm as they start to fall just before the first bullet grazes Philippos's left shoulder and finds Orestis's throat and the second lodges itself into Philippos's back and then Kessel lowers the camera and squats down behind the low wall of the old palace's driveway, dragging Poulos down with him as the policemen fire and

one of the first shots hits another small boy, a cigarette seller, who was nowhere near the demonstrators, was far in front of them, inside Panepistimiou Street, behind the police line and

Farmakis curses and turns his MP 40 back on the protesters, the recoil on the submachine gun is something fierce, much worse than he'd imagined, and within two short squeezes of the trigger his aim has drifted so far to the right he's been shooting over the heads of the policemen blocking off Panepistimiou Street and he swivels the gun around and the policemen

on the balcony now empty their rifles into the procession, and Byford-Jones watches as flags fall to the ground, men, women and children fall to the ground, blood pouring out of their heads and bodies on the road, on the flags, a young girl with a grey blouse flowering black with blood near her breast, a man with a mark on his face that might have been made by a fish-hook writhing for a moment on the ground and then dying, a child screaming in horror and clutching her head as though she were trying to hold in her brains – she is; she fails – the shots ring out, echoing and re-echoing among the high buildings, and screams of fear and cries of pain ring out between the volleys and the police keep firing and Byford-Jones looks on helplessly, and now a wild stampede of people falling over bleeding bodies as they start to run through the row of trees to their left, jump down into Syntagma Square, throwing themselves behind balustrades,

behind trees, behind walls, but there's little shelter to be found and most fall and lie flat on the ground while the firing continues over their heads, there's precious little that might provide cover like the low wall Kessel and Poulos have ducked behind, Poulos shaking Kessel off and making to stand, shouting 'Blanks! They're firing blanks!', Kessel

yanking him down, shouting back 'Real bullets, you fool!' and a few metres in front of them a young man in a dark suit and a wide-lapelled red shirt is holding his throat and struggling to rise from the ground and then falls back and is still and then the empty space between the demonstrators and police explodes and

Byford-Jones hears the explosion and sees the smoke but can't tell where the grenade came from and

Kouvaras sees the explosion and the black stain it leaves behind on the road but not where the grenade came from – he can't see the retreating policemen any longer unless

he tries to poke his head over the wall again, and now that he knows nobody's firing blanks Poulos has no such intention, the grenade landed so near, and where one grenade is thrown more will follow but

more don't follow and

the shooting grows less heavy, peters out and

(it is twenty-five past eleven)

Kouvaras sees the people in the street start to rise but every time someone stands up the police start firing again but still soon only the dead and wounded remain; they must be over a hundred.

This is when Byford-Jones first thinks he should have done something to stop the massacre. But what could he have done? He only watched, while British red-caps ran into the building behind him, but did they do something to stop the shooting? He doesn't know. He now sees the demonstrators return to stand in groups looking down at the bodies, giving them names, crying hysterical cries and throwing themselves over them.

Poulos and Kessel stand up and look on. None of the wounded scream or cry out, they only moan softly. Some of their comrades pick up the fallen red-stained flags and wave them at the policemen while the latter hold their fire and begin retreating behind the tall railings that surround Police HQ. Kessel is still holding the Leica but seems to have forgotten about it and doesn't lift it to his face.

The wounded are being taken away. A young woman whose legs are covered in blood is being lifted by two Gurkhas into a British army lorry. Poulos goes over to help. More and more protesters are once again filling the space between Syntagma Square and

Parliament, and they once again move towards the police station. Several shots are fired, and Poulos flinches, crouches low. But this time no fusillade follows, the gathering crowds neither run away nor fall to the ground, and he stands up, sees that the police are now shooting in the air, and only then comes to realize the crowds would no longer care either way.

Byford-Jones watches the demonstrators go mad. There are now thousands of them roaring threats and defiance at the police. British tanks are already arriving, taking up positions around Police HQ, attempting to push the crowd back. The demonstrators care not; they stand there, shouting and screaming, tearing their shirts open to yell, 'Shoot me next, you cowards, you bastards.' But neither do they swarm forward.

There is no doubt that if they are not rushing the police it is only because something even worse is about to happen. Byford-Jones looks to the KKE building. But the machine gun remains silent. How long for? he wonders. He goes to help with the wounded.

Kessel has pulled himself together and is taking picture after picture: the dead being mourned; the injured being carried away; demonstrators raging at the police; the Brits moving in. He starts making his way to the Grande Bretagne. He can get better shots from one of the first- or second-storey balconies. The world needs to see this. He's near enough to the police station to hear a British major – a red-cap, military police – arrive and, too late, ludicrously too late, shout up to Chief Evert to 'Cease fire immediately!', and to hear Evert reply, in lightly-accented English and with an innocence too exaggerated to be believable, which Kessel assumes is the point, 'Firing? Who's firing?'

Stelios is lying on the pavement a few metres away from the Staghound. He doesn't think he's been hit but the pain shooting up his right leg from his ankle is so excruciating he's afraid to look. When he does he sees his foot turned the wrong way and a wave of nausea goes through him and he turns and vomits. Then he's being lifted in the air by someone in an army uniform and he's shrieking and he can feel the weight of his foot pull at his ankle at a strange angle and this time he doesn't look. It's Ramesh whose arms he's in, he's certain, who else would it be, and this makes him forget about the pain for a second but when he looks up at the man who's carrying him he sees an ugly Englishman, a thin and long, lightly freckled face under hair that straw-yellow colour that he's only ever seen in other ugly Englishmen.

The Englishman is talking to him. What is he saying? The tone suggests an attempt at reassurance but Stelios can't understand anything but the word 'okay', which the soldier is repeating as though it's some spell meant to fix things. Stelios won't be comforted by murderers. He searches around for his parents but can't see them anywhere, takes a deep breath and screams their names.

McAuley keeps talking to Stelios even though it's obvious the kid doesn't understand him – couldn't even if he'd stop screaming long enough to hear him. He in turn has a pretty good idea what Stelios is yelling, because 'mama' is too close to 'mum' to mean anything else, and the kid is just a kid and of course he's screaming for his parents and they're both obviously here somewhere, hopefully not dead, and if they're not dead McAuley can allow himself to be angry at them for dragging a kid along to their fucking march, what the fuck were they thinking.

This is the very same conclusion Byford-Jones arrives at while carrying a little girl, who can't be more than ten or eleven, to one of the waiting lorries, where he hands her over to someone he only then realizes is Poulos. She's been shot in the leg and also has a shallow wound along one side of her head, where her light brown hair is matted with blood. She's pale and underfed and she smiles weakly at him as he steps back, and he's furious, not just that the police should have opened fire, but that EAM should have allowed mere children such as her to take part in a protest at a time when tempers run high and absolutely anything might happen.

Kouvaras, meanwhile, has left his position on the first-floor balcony of the Grande Bretagne to cross a corridor to the other side of the building, and is now looking out of a window that faces Police HQ, and he too is witness to the exchange between the British major and Evert. He turns his attention to the street, where a few young men begin to climb the railings behind which the policemen watch them with their rifles lowered. But the men are dragged back by their own leaders who are mostly trying to keep the crowd at a safe distance and orderly in its fury. There are men with megaphones going around, calling the people to gather once more in the square at half-past twelve. He looks at his watch. It is now eleven forty-five.

Around noon he's out in the street in front of the hotel, watching as RAF Spitfires and light bombers begin to fly low over the city. These flyovers will go on for a good two

hours and be reported by the BBC as 'demonstration flights' with no other purpose behind them.

He's still there shortly before twelve-thirty, when more British tanks make their appearance via Vasilissis Sofias Avenue. After a brief stop near the corner where the shooting took place, they form a cordon around Syntagma Square. The people part for them with applause and much waving of Union Jacks. But they are all the time calling out for the Allies to mete out the justice their own government is incapable or unwilling to, which makes Kouvaras more than a little nervous about what might follow any suggestion their demand might not be honoured.

Soon the crowd is being addressed from a balcony of the KKE building. Kouvaras is back inside the Grande Bretagne, and looking on from a balcony, examining the scene through field glasses and identifying the speaker: Partsalidis, Secretary General of EAM. 'Crowd heavier at this time,' he jots down in his field notebook. 'Thickly packed more toward Communist Party offices.' Partsalidis calls Papandreou an outlaw. The people, he says, will fight for liberty. No sacrifice can be too great. Kouvaras can sense the crowd's mood harden now that the initial shock has worn off, evolve into something that frightens him a lot more than the sight of those men trying to climb over the railings.

The speeches come to an end after forty-five minutes or so. Byford-Jones watches a reformed procession push down Panepistimiou Street. There are no more police cordons in their way, the police officers that had formed them having sought refuge inside Police HQ. 'Long live Democracy,' the protesters chant. 'Long live Churchill, Long live Roosevelt. Down with Papandreou.' Before them they carry Allied flags, some of which are stained with blood.

Seeing this makes Byford-Jones look down and become aware of the state of his uniform, the dried stains on his tunic, his hands. There's blood everywhere he looks now, it seems, great gouts of it on the ground congealed to a deep purple. He doesn't whisper to himself 'Tyrian purple', doesn't think of Homer, Ajax's belt or Odysseus's wedding bed; all this will come later.

Those gouts are approached, now that the crowd has departed, by relatives and friends of the dead who come accompanied by EAM officials to lay small crosses where their dead fell made with branches from the nearby pepper trees. People bring flowers. Some kneel and pray and cry, others harangue and tirade. Despite their efforts to protect the police station from reprisals, there is no apparent enmity towards British troops who

are cheered and given 'V' signs before it is demanded that they intervene to arrest the perpetrators of the massacre, starting with Papandreou. There are now however to be heard a number of chants directed against Ambassador Leeper and General Scobie. Considering the circumstances, Byford-Jones reflects, this is the best they can expect. As little as could have been done at the time, 'We didn't take part. We only sat by and watched,' is not going to sound like much of a defence. And there is the matter of the red-caps who rushed into the police station and probably stopped the shooting. How many more victims would there have been without their intervention? Many, many more. This must count for something.

Though of course the real question is what is to be done now. It seems to Byford-Jones, who heads back to his room to change before heading to HQ to see the General, that the officer in charge simply lost his head. There had been to that point no indication whatsoever that the crowd posed a threat. But nor was there any indication this tragedy resulted as part of anyone's – the government's – plan, as difficult as it will surely prove to convince the people of that. He can imagine the kind of graphic, heart-rending reports the war correspondents present must already be composing. He can picture them making their way across the entirety of the Allied world. He can guess how they will be greeted. Not if they had spent a million pounds on the most astute propaganda for their cause could the EAM Central Committee have derived even a fraction of the benefit those reports will gain them.

Kessel too has been watching from a second-storey balcony of the Grande Bretagne as the crude crosses are lowered to the ground. He sees a woman kneel by a pool of blood and scoop it up in an old can and is too perplexed to take a photograph. The next day, covering the victims' funeral, he'll see three young women in black kneel in the middle of Amalias Avenue, holding up a banner that reads 'When the people face the danger of tyranny, they must choose either chains or weapons', and the banner will be splattered with red. This time he will take a photograph, right as one of the women turns and looks straight into the lens and he recognizes her as the woman with the can.

As for the Petrous and Mr Voreas: they have, all three, while our attention was turned elsewhere, made their escape and are now at Mr Voreas's home, apparently; exactly where, Mrs Voreas's memoir assures us, they have been all Sunday morning, partaking of the lunch she had invited the Petrous to during the previous evening's

impromptu visit to their home. They have yet to hear a word of what is transpiring in Athens. When they do, they will agree that the story promulgated by the communists is patently absurd, and that the Greek Police would never fire without provocation, let alone against an unarmed crowd; and they will (once they have been informed by shall we say more objective sources that what had been disguised as a peaceful demonstration had in fact been an attempt by ELAS to march on the city centre, masked by a crowd of women and children until they could get close enough to Police HQ to storm and seize control of the building) also agree that it is a tragedy and a horror, how the communists are prepared to sacrifice their own children to push the country into civil war, just think what they would do to everyone else's children if this is what they would do to their own, and they will agree, finally, that the question of what the government should do with the communists – whether it should appease or crush them – has thus been answered, and that it would be best that the government acknowledges this while it is still possible for the Allies to assist in what must be done.

Unusually, the two set of parents have been joined for the first time in a long while by all three of their children, Mrs Voreas is careful to stress. Watching Vassiliki and Yorgos renew their bond over their shared sorrow and pity for those poor innocent dead children is the one ray of light in what is otherwise the darkest of days. Her husband leads them all in prayer for the souls of the dead. The guests are invited to stay on for dinner, but there is a radio announcement that a curfew will be in place in Athens and Piraeus from dusk to dawn – the government has already ordered that electricity be cut off so that places of public entertainment will not be able to operate – and the Petrous bid a hasty goodbye and are gone.

Several demonstrations are held during the afternoon. One takes place outside British Army HQ and sees reports of two members of ELAS, armed with pistols and knives, walking right up to the British guards and pulling down from the wall a copy of General Scobie's proclamation. The guards, already in receipt of orders relating specifically to such eventualities, watch them calmly and allow them to walk away untouched.

Another takes place outside the American Embassy, where the crowd has obviously come in search of support rather than someone to blame. They stay a long while, chanting 'America, America' and 'Roosevelt, Roosevelt' before dispersing as peacefully as they had gathered.

The final demonstration of that afternoon takes place outside the British Embassy, where a large procession arrives around half past two. The Embassy guard has been turned out, but there is to be no violence. The demonstrators carry what look like the usual banners, with some of them apparently dipped in blood. There follows quite a lot of shouting, which only stops once a delegation is received, on the condition that the rest of the crowd move on up the street and refrain from making a nuisance of themselves.

The delegation consists of a 'typical young lower middle-class politico, an equally typical female medical student and a young workman from the electricity company. The first two spoke very good English. The latter none.' They are received, not by the Ambassador, but his deputies, who judge that they 'hardly knew what they wanted'. Their eventual list of demands holds no surprises: the demobilization issue, the punishment of war criminals and collaborators, justice for the events of that morning.

Leeper's deputies relate to the delegation how 'unhelpful the present disturbances are' and advise them to forget about their politics until the next election and let the British government get on with the humanitarian work of bringing relief to the people of Greece before sending them on their way. They then report to the Ambassador, whom they find sitting on the terrace basking in the – most generous for December – sun and fondly imagining that for the moment everything is quiet.

'The revolution,' Byford-Jones writes in his memoir, 'can be said to have started at 12:30 the same day.' He goes on to describe how he had barely arrived at British HQ when a dispatch-rider rushed up to him to report that a skirmish was in progress at the neighbourhood of Theseio, near the Acropolis – the stronghold of Organization X. There followed more such minor skirmishes throughout the afternoon and until early in the morning of the 4th, when ELAS launched a major attack that drove the Chites away from the hill of the National Observatory. This news had just reached British HQ when other reports started pouring in. All over Athens, ELAS was attacking and taking over police station after police station. They wouldn't fire on British troops, while the latter were instructed not to engage them but, wherever possible, to rescue the besieged policemen and transport them to safety.

But it couldn't last, Byford-Jones knew. And it didn't. It took less than a day for Scobie to receive a telegram from Churchill which in part reads, 'Do not... hesitate to act

as if you were in a conquered city where a local rebellion is in progress... We have to hold and dominate Athens. It would be a great thing for you to succeed in this without bloodshed if possible, but also with bloodshed if necessary.' His telegram to Leeper, meanwhile, read, 'This is no time to dabble in Greek politics or to imagine that Greek politicians of varying shades can affect the situation. You should not worry about Greek Government compositions. The matter is one of life and death.'

Once the medication takes effect, Stelios dozes off for a while. The hospital bed is hard, the pillow too soft and thin, but the sheets are clean – albeit rough against his skin and carrying the ghosts of old stains that no amount of washing will ever get rid of – and give off the sharp smell of green soap that previous hospital visits have taught some part of him to treat as a signal of permission to rest. Whatever he's been given is dulling the pain in his ankle to a weak pulse beating against the inside of the cast as though looking for a way out. All the weight in his body is pushed up behind his eyelids. The nurse checks his temperature: another bout of fever. He dreams of existing as a head woundlessly detached from its superfluous, cumbersome body but the dream turns into a nightmare of decapitations and dismemberments and he wakes up screaming. The sheets are drenched with his sweat. The room is half-dark and he's not quite sure where he is but he senses the unfamiliarity of its dimensions in the way his voice bounces back at him and he's crying for his parents until a nurse comes in and calms him down.

She puts a cool hand to his forehead and clicks her tongue. His parents haven't turned up yet, she tells him, but she's sure they're fine. They're probably out there looking for him. Underneath the cast his skin is on fire, as though the plan of escape involves burning down the prison. This may translate to, 'She doesn't really believe that, she's only trying to quiet you down.' The nurse brings him a glass of water and a pill that he eyes with suspicion. 'Aspirin,' she says, and he takes it and the nurse tucks him in. He's asleep before she's out the door.

Much later light comes in through the window and the room's walls brighten to the palest green. He has wet the bed. The nurse comes in and purses her lips. He looks at her and she says, 'It's all right.' She has him strip down and hands him a hospital gown meant for adults to wrap himself in and takes the sheet from another bed and makes him sit in a chair with his blanket thrown over his shoulders while she makes the switch.

There are seven more beds, but six of them are empty. The woman in the seventh bed hasn't moved once since they brought her in. Not even his earlier outburst roused her. Maybe she's dead and no one's noticed. He spends a long while staring at her chest to make sure she's breathing. Her head is wrapped up in bandages with only a small part of her face left visible. She could be anyone under there. Though not his mother, he can tell that much. Also bandaged is her entire leg. The white has turned pink in spots.

(I want to think it's your great-grandmother. There's no way to tell. By the time Dora finds Stelios and takes him home later that day, the woman won't have awakened at all and nothing else will be known about her. So I can't say. Though that only means it could just as well be your great-grandmother lying there. It would mean nothing even if it is. It's my need for it to be her, to forge – force – this connection that is the event's meaning and the fact of it, I know, I know.)

The pain is now only a thread of ache along Stelios's calf. His head is clear. He sits up and tries without success to lean his too-pliable pillow against the iron-bar headboard. He gives up, bunches up his blanket and uses that to support himself instead. Covered only in the rough sheet, he feels a shiver go through him. He welcomes it. He's used to feeling cold, and it will keep him sharp.

He needs to pee now. He's not sure he can stand up though, let alone walk, is scared of putting weight on the cast, doesn't even know where the toilet would be. He'll hold out for the nurse for as long as he can. It's not even important. There are other things on his mind.

Slowly, carefully, he pieces back together his fragmented memories of the day before: the crowd surging forward, his mother's hand slipping from his, seeing Ramesh, running to him, the gunfire behind him, the crowd running. He remembers being knocked to the ground. Then lying there for a long time with other bodies on top of him. Struggling to breathe while the pain builds and builds. Then he remembers the weight lifting. He remembers screaming, the soldier picking him up.

He looks over to the woman in the next bed. There are no signs of life in her. No, wait, she's still breathing. She's only unconscious.

Satisfied he won't be overheard, he whispers, 'Are you there?'

There is no reply. Previously he wouldn't have expected one so far from home, but now he thinks he might know better. 'Don't. I know you're there. Where are Mum and Dad? Are they okay? Tell me.'

When again and again there is no reply he wavers. Maybe he got it wrong. Maybe it wasn't Maria speaking, just some random sound. Just a coincidence. He's not sure now, is it possible he saw Ramesh first and then heard the injunction to look where he saw him, or was it the other way around like he thought?

'Please,' he says. 'Tell me.'

It can't be just a coincidence. She sent him off to see Ramesh the first time. She knew. She must have. If it's just a coincidence, then she didn't know. If it's just a coincidence, she wasn't even there. She was never there.

'Please,' he says and it comes out as a whimper, and too loud, but now he doesn't care who hears him. 'Tell me. It was you, wasn't it?'

He waits. Every soundless second is a ratchet working one more turn on his chest.

'Please,' he tries. 'It was you, wasn't it? It wasn't just me.'

Part Two

Tuesday, 20 June 1995

They were somewhere near Corinth, not yet over on the Peloponnese side of the isthmus, when the fight first took hold. Not the main event. A preliminary skirmish of sorts. Andreas was saying something like, 'You'll see. They do *everything* differently,' or, 'And that's that, we're gone and we never have to come back.' And then Zoe said, 'Jesus! What is it with you and goddamn leaving? Can't we ever talk about anything else?' And suddenly there was this terrible silence between them, full of all the things they weren't saying, and screeching past their ears was only the wind from the open windows of the borrowed car that was going about eighty-five kilometres an hour to Patras, the wind making sounds like 'But I,' 'But you,' 'But if'.

Then it was quiet again. She'd taken off her t-shirt and was down to her bikini top and cut-off denim shorts, aiming her chest at the passenger side window, working on her tan. That this had her turned away from Andreas was unfortunate, if convenient.

'What are you yelling like that for?' he muttered. He kept his eyes on the road.

'Never mind,' she said. She fell back in her seat. 'Just drive.'

It was ten past eleven, the dashboard clock said, and they still had more than 160 kilometres to go. She'd told her parents they'd be there around lunchtime, which for her family meant half past noon on the dot. There was no chance they'd be making it. He ought to be trying to minimize the delay. Instead he braked and aimed the car toward the shoulder of the motorway. Zoe, not yet ready to talk to him, gave him a look and he said, 'Need to pee.'

He got out of the car and rushed behind some bushes. There would be a service area somewhere up ahead, but he couldn't wait any longer. Plus, this was an opportunity to regroup, work out his position. Truth was, he wanted the whole thing over with without having to go through it. This wasn't cowardice. It might have seemed too close to cowardice for comfort, but was actually just last-minute nerves.

She'd be home for a month or so. Then they'd do the couple thing and go off on their own for a bit to one of the smaller islands. She'd meant to take the coach down, then had sort of last minute suggested maybe Andreas could borrow Dimos's car, drive her down, meet the family, then drive back. Quite the round trip to make in a day. Andreas had hesitated only a little before saying sure, why not, even though the idea of hitting a motorway for the first time – this motorway especially – was a little frightening. But he wouldn't refuse. He knew what this was. An official introduction. Not as a 'friend' this time. An audition of sorts; a request for approval, a ritual to go through if he wanted to be anointed, allowed in.

'Do you want to ring them?' he asked as they were coming up to the service area. 'Let them know we're late? There should be a cardphone.' He eased off the gas.

'Nah, keep going,' Zoe said.

'It's no hassle.'

'I've had to work hard to wean them off expecting me to check in all the time. We'll get there when we get there.'

'Fair enough,' he said. They *were* twenty-one after all, no matter what both sets of parents seemed to think. Still, Andreas hated being late. And it was rude, not calling ahead, no matter whom you kept waiting.

Zoe didn't particularly care. Her timekeeping was atrocious, her consideration for those expecting her minimal at best. The cause-effect relationship between these two facts was not clear, but he had ceased investigating it after their *n*th fight. There was no use getting into it now.

'Glovebox,' he said, in English. 'Glove compartment.'

'Huh?'

'Gloveboxes.'

'Yeah, so?'

'Good example of semantic shift, no? No one keeps driving gloves in them anymore. Nor are they boxes.'

'Some people must keep driving gloves in them,' she said. 'Formula One drivers?'

'Okay, yes, but that's not really the compartment's primary purpose anymore, right?'

'Do Formula One cars even have gloveboxes?'

'Good question. I haven't got a clue.'

She pulled out her tobacco pouch from the rucksack at her feet. Soft leather, the colour her skin would turn in early July.

'Do you have to?' he said.

She gave him a sidelong don't-be-stupid glance. 'Open windows,' she said.

'It's still disgusting.'

'I'm an addict, Dionysis! You knew that when you married me!' she whined, lifting the back of a wrist to her forehead. She held the pose for a moment before they both laughed.

'You need to get a different flatmate.'

'Evi's the best.'

'Is there like one soap she doesn't watch?'

'Whatever's on Monday afternoons? It's the only time she ever goes to lectures.' She turned serious. 'Don't think she was keeping up with the material either. She might have failed an exam or two.'

'No wonder, with all that soap-induced brain rot.'

'Don't,' she said.

She licked the edge of the rolling paper and rolled the cigarette one-handed, with a motion he had not in three years of trying been able to fully make sense of but had to admit was impressive in its effortlessness. Until you considered the hours of practice it would have taken to get right, at which point it just seemed like a lot of misdirected hard work.

'Where's it from, that line?' he said. She lit up. The cigarette smoke tickled his throat and he dry-coughed and lowered his window all the way. The car was starting to smell as though something plastic was on fire. Something plastic *could* be on fire, he mused – it was an old car.

'It's either *Good Morning, Life* or *Kissed of Eden*. I get those two mixed up.'

'"*Kissed of Eden*"? Seriously? What does that even mean?'

She made him wait a long time while she picked a shred of tobacco from the tip of her tongue, examined it and thumb-flicked it out the window. She didn't believe in filters.

‘Nothing, as far as I can tell,’ she said finally. There was still tension in her voice but he could also hear the effort she was making to mask it. ‘Some TV producer’s idea of a clever title.’

‘Pfff,’ he said.

A car drove past them with a sharp sonic thump, going the opposite direction, towards the isthmus, towards Athens. Then another. The third car drove too close to the dividing line. Andreas felt its passing vibrate up his arms through the steering wheel. He hugged the right shoulder and slowed down. The next stretch of road would be one blind turn after another.

‘A median strip would be nice,’ Andreas said.

‘Mmm,’ Zoe answered. She seemed to be back to staring out the window. He couldn’t tell whether her eyes were open or not.

‘I guess it’s just too civilized a thing to ask for.’

‘Mmm.’

‘May I have some water?’

She unscrewed the top and handed the plastic bottle over. He drank in small sips, keeping his eyes on the road. The water was already tepid, with that plasticky taste from having been left too long in the sun. She accepted the bottle back and took a sip herself before putting it away, started rolling yet another cigarette.

‘So what’s your point?’ she said.

‘My point? Look at the oncoming cars and tell me—’

‘No, I mean about...’ she said, gesturing towards the glovebox.

‘Oh. Nothing – I don’t know, it just struck me that in Greek we call it the “co-driver’s compartment”.’

‘Yeah, so?’

‘A co-driver is like a navigator in a rally car. Whoever’s sitting next to the driver is just a passenger.’

‘Unless it’s a person who’s actually doing the navigating.’

‘Sure, but still, it’s not quite the same thing. And just because the compartment is over the passenger footwell, it doesn’t belong to the passenger, does it. The genitive indicates possession.’

‘Or close association. Here it refers to a spatial arrangement.’

'But that is not at all clear unless you consider the context.'

'Isn't that always the case? The meaning of a word is its use, etc.?'

'Well excuse me for bringing it up, Ludwig.'

'That's Late Ludwig to you. The big double L.'

'Wasn't that the cattle ranch in that John Wayne movie?'

She let her cigarette dangle from her lips, made pistols out of her forefingers and thumbs, said 'Cool off, pilgrim,' in an impersonation so bad it hardly deserved the name, and shot him multiple times, gunslinger-style, making 'bang-bang' noises. He pretended to start to slump over the steering wheel.

'All I was trying to say was I prefer the English version,' he said.

'What you mean is, you prefer the temporally inaccurate *and* misleading-when-taken-out-of-context version to the more spatially accurate but misleading-when-taken-out-of-context one.'

'When you put it like that...'

He couldn't find anywhere to go from there so he dropped the issue. Not at all sullenly.

The motorway cut through a narrow strip of land between the mountains to the left and the sea to the right. Mountains – hills, more like it. Tall ones, but hills, roofed by a low sky. Scrubland or bare rock, for the most. Also, sometimes, orange trees, olive trees, holm oaks. Greys and browns and all manner of shades of sun-bleached green. Nothing vibrant except those flashes of citrus colour. The sun beating everything down like a hammer. Sometimes an actual mountain in the distance, visible in a gap between pretenders.

The foot of some hills came right up to the roadside, covered in thick wire mesh. Now and again you could see chunks of tumbled-down rock by the asphalt. A few hillsides had been cut away to make room for the road. Andreas glanced without curiosity at the exposed strata of striated rock, telling a story he didn't know how to read. Between the motorway and the sea were mostly orchards, groves – apples, more citrus trees, more olive trees – or small corn fields, the odd clustered community of two-storey homes painted the exact same hideously inoffensive beige under their terracotta tile roofs.

The narrowness of the scenery made him feel a little claustrophobic. Hemmed in. The horizon was too near on either side, even seaward. Weather permitting, especially once past Diakofto, you could see right across the Corinthian Gulf to where yet more mountains rose in the distance, jagged cobalt shadows looming inside a powder-blue haze. Weather not permitting, it was enough to know the mountains were there for the sense of enclosure to persist. This was not a phenomenon limited to only this part of this closed-in country; it just so happened that here was a particularly apt instantiation of it.

No wonder Greeks had spent millennia getting to sea as soon as they could. No wonder the ones who didn't so often grew grim about the mouth. A damp, drizzly November in their souls indeed.

He nudged the cassette tape into the deck, turned the volume up as high as it would go. There were a few seconds of hissing before the music kicked in, the rushing four-four beat, a tight back and forth between snare and bass drum, the hi-hat riding it like a wave, the guitars buzzing D and B-minor chords behind those echoey synth stabs coming down in the slightly off-kilter rhythm of rain dripping from a roof, then the jet-engine-overhead whoosh before the chorus. The first lyric came in and Zoe, picking up the cadence of the mother tongue inside the noise, made a face. 'What's this?'

'This? Oh, Xylina Spathia. It's from their new album,' he said casually. The advisability and merits or lack thereof of Greek rock bands sticking to Greek vocals had long been a point of contention between them. Zoe was curiously against; Andreas, curiously for.

She didn't respond and he didn't push it. Part of him, he knew, had wanted to play the track just to annoy her, while another part of him was convinced she'd like it if she ever gave it a chance. The problem was she couldn't; not really. The Mazda had no air-conditioning and with both windows down in the thirty-five-plus degree heat it turned into a wind tunnel whose sonic effects the half-blown speakers couldn't overcome, except in odd spurts determined by vectors incalculable, so that the only way to listen to the song was to already know it.

He sighed and gave up, popped out the tape, the first few bars of the guitar solo at the minute-and-a-half mark already playing in his head, the long sustained notes soaring over the rhythm section then plummeting into short, borderline-chromatic runs – the structure had Hendrix's name written all over it – the same lick played twice, alerting any

decent rock listener to the upcoming shift, a climax that never came, what you got instead was the most abrupt of interruptions, the rhythm section dropping out, the down-shift into a gloriously awkward three-note descending scale, then the resetting into the next verse. The real magic came at the two-fifty mark, when the solo came in for the second time, again the same lick twice but then, not the interruption, but the burst-through to that promised climax...

‘It’s sheer snobbery, you know,’ Zoe was saying.

‘Huh? What is?’

‘Your thing for Greek vocals. It’s a kind of negative preference, isn’t it? What it’s really about is your disdain for thick-accented English vocals.’

He thought about this. ‘So what you’re saying is I’m choosing not in order to maximize my pleasure’ – he raised a flattened palm near the roof of the car – ‘but in order to minimize my frustration’ – he brought his hand down low near the gearshift.

‘Mmm,’ she mumbled, rolling another cigarette. ‘Negative utilitarianism.’

‘Didn’t the guy who introduced that also decide that–’

‘The “benevolent world-exploder” thing, yeah, that’s him.’

‘That’s what I’d call my death metal band, if I had one.’ The motorway curved left and dipped. He aimed the car at the inside of the turn and felt himself begin to slide right on his seat. The sun swivelled like a spotlight, found the driver’s side window and scorched his left elbow, resting on the inside edge of the frame. He tucked the elbow against his side.

‘Lose the “benevolent” bit, you might be on to something,’ Zoe said. ‘Though you might want to learn how to play an instrument first.’ She sank deep in her seat, kicked her sandals off and braced her feet against the dashboard. At least she hadn’t taken off her seatbelt.

‘It didn’t hurt the Sex Pistols much that they didn’t.’

‘Didn’t help them much either.’

‘True.’

The skin of her insteps was pale and cold-looking, shot through with light blue veins. Her second toe was longer than her hallux. This creeped him out a bit, but he thought of it – knowing full well how bathetic it sounded – as the inclusion in the diamond. It was another thing he’d never told her; he knew she’d laugh at him.

'It's not true though,' he said. 'The whole *no-English-vocals* thing. And I can prove it with but two words.'

'I'm listening.'

'Rotting Christ.'

'Pfff. First of all, that's hardly *singing*. Secondly – metal band? Stricken from the record.'

'Objection, Your Honour – move to unstrike.'

'On what grounds?'

'While it cannot be denied that Rotting Christ are one of the finest, yes, black metal bands in the world, it remains the case that Sakis's English accent is—'

'Awful?'

'—yes, Your Honour, thank you, awful, thereby proving my contention that my client's enjoyment of said vocals acquits him of the charge.'

'Well done, counsellor. I rule in favour of the defence.' She slow-clapped and he pretended to take a bow.

Around noon they came up to a wide lorry doing sixty, taking up the entire lane. Tailgating it was pointless, there was nowhere to go: too many blind turns, the straights too short, the Mazda too slow. Andreas fought down a spasm of irritation and gave the lorry a wide berth, in anticipation of the morons guaranteed to show up behind them, take a second to assess the situation, proceed to lean on their horns as though this would somehow either widen the road or slim down the lorry, then decide that, sod it, life was cheap and time was money, and ghost-drive straight up the middle of the eastbound lane.

That day's first two daredevils turned up in dark-coloured BMWs, leading Zoe to note, 'Not *all* wankers drive German, but all German-car drivers *are* wankers.'

'I love you, you know,' he said. He kept his eyes on the road.

'Sure, you say that now. Wait till I get my licence, see what I buy.'

To begin with, his second attempt at broaching the subject of their escape seemed to be going better.

'I'm thinking either Leicester or Southampton. The guy at the British Council says the Southampton MAs are the better courses teaching-assessment-wise, though only by a hair. But Leicester's much cheaper. And I really like the sound of the "Modern Literature:

Theory and Practice” course. London’s out of the question on our kind of budget, and ideally neither of us should have to get a job. It will only be a year anyway, we’ll make do. After that there’s the PhD funding. The guy says HRB grants are minimum-wage level but tax-free, and there’s enough of them to go around provided you’ve got the marks. Which, please, he took one look at our transcripts and offered—’

‘Our transcripts?’

‘Yeah, he took one look at them—’

She sat up in her seat, unbuckled her seatbelt, turned her whole body to face him, putting her back against the passenger door.

‘Can you not—’

‘Our transcripts?’ Said levelly, but with a kind of incipient coldness, a hint that, on the verge of accelerating into some terrible outburst, she was going to give him half a chance to talk her to a halt.

He swivelled his head to stare her down for the briefest of moments before returning his gaze to the road.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘Our transcripts.’

‘When?’

‘Yesterday afternoon, all right? During the appointment you said you’d forgot about and couldn’t make it to. The one I said I’d go to on my own. The one you didn’t bother to ask me anything about this morning.’

‘Your transcript. That’s what you said. You’d go along and show him *your* transcript. Where the hell did you even get mine?’

‘You gave it to me to put in my bag when we picked them up, remember? Then forgot about it. Like you *forgot* about the appointment.’

She was always claiming to have forgotten about all sorts of things – appointments, meetings, deadlines, friends’ birthdays, the way to get from (familiar) point A to (familiar) point B – but could recall almost every line of dialogue from every film they’d ever watched and, he sometimes suspected with an astonishment touched with no small degree of horror, every sentence of every book she’d ever read. So he could never be entirely certain this wasn’t an excuse to get her out of things she didn’t feel like doing. (‘Different type of memory,’ she’d shrug when cornered.)

‘I *did* forget about the appointment. And about the transcript.’

'So had I. About the transcript, I mean. And then I got the folder out of my bag and there it was, so—'

'You still had no business showing it to anyone.'

'You *had* said you'd come and do it yourself.'

'No, what I'd *said* was I'd think about it.'

'You've been saying that for like a month.'

'That's because I'm still fucking *thinking* about it.'

'What is there to *fucking* think about? I thought we'd agreed we're going.'

'...'

'Well?'

Still, no answer came. He fought down a wave of panicked nausea and stole a glance at her. Head down, rolling yet another cigarette. He noticed sometimes how elegantly she used the ritual to put the brakes on conversations whose course she wanted to correct while she worked out how a correction could be implemented. It almost made him want to take up smoking himself.

'Look,' she said. The wave surged forward again, and this time he had nothing for it. The road was coming at him too fast, the broken white line to his left flying past like projectiles just missing their target. He took his foot off the gas until everything became just slow enough. Zoe lit her cigarette, inhaled, French-exhaled.

'I've been thinking about it, and I'm just not sure about the PhD.' She paused, waiting for a reaction.

'Oh?' was all he said.

'It's just – I don't know, the closer we get to graduation the less certain I am about academia. I mean, I still want to do the MA, you know, it makes you far more employable, but that's the thing, if I'm not going to go the PhD route it's even more important I pick the right MA course, right? All of a sudden, another year of convenient coincidences, shocking sentimentality, authorial intrusions, and meticulous page-long descriptions of people's drawing rooms doesn't seem as much fun.'

'Was it *ever*?'

'You *like* authorial intrusions and long descriptive passages.'

'Not that kind of descriptive passage. And certainly not that kind of intrusion.'

'The omniscient kind?'

'The *innocent* kind. The kind that's not about either the author's guilt or the author's failure.' He was surprised she didn't already know this. It seemed quite an obvious distinction to him. He had to have made it a thousand times before.

'You know those times I'm compelled to tell you to lighten up? This is one of them,' she said.

He spun a forefinger in the air. 'Anyway, you were saying.'

'I don't know. Just maybe it turns out that's not what I want to stick with. Not if that's where the end of the line is for me, academically.'

'So what you mean is, you're done with the nineteenth century.'

'Kind of? I guess?' She tilted her head to the side with avian bafflement. 'I'm not sure. That's the thing, I'm just not *sure*. And I'd rather not show up at the British Council before I am. We've got another year to make up our minds anyway.'

'My mind's made up.' He immediately regretted the note of grievance this sounded. He took a hand off the steering wheel and raised it in the air as though he were interrupting himself. 'I mean—'

'Fine, yes, okay, I've got another year to make up *my* mind.' She grabbed a new water bottle from her rucksack, full of half-melted ice and wrapped in a plastic bag. She unscrewed the top and took a swig, held the bottle out to him. He took it and drank. The icy water made his teeth ache. He winced, took a smaller sip and gave the bottle back.

'Thanks,' he said.

'A drink of water to quench your fiery face.'

'Dickens?' he guessed, glad to accept the peace offering.

'*Hard Times*, chapter four.'

'You should have said.'

'Yeah, I should have. But – I don't know. I just wanted it to be my own choice. You're always talking me into things.'

'You're always asking me to help you decide.'

'Exactly.'

This was fine. This was nothing. They were still getting out. If she didn't want to be an academic, so what, she'd do something else. Was he happy she hadn't told him? No. Was the secrecy a reason for concern? No, not if you didn't look at it too closely, which he wasn't going to do. Nothing could withstand that kind of scrutiny, he knew that much.

'I'm sorry about the transcript,' he said. It seemed like the right thing to say, though he wasn't at all certain he meant it.

They crossed a one-car-wide bridge spanning a dry riverbed. The road doglegged left then right up a small hill. At the top a sharp turn brought them to one end of a level stretch of wide straight road that went on and on and vanished in the distance of the flat horizon.

'Here we are,' Zoe said, putting her t-shirt back on.

As far as the eye could see the road was lined with enormous eucalyptus trees, easily over twenty metres tall, evenly spaced, two rows of soldiers at attention, their trunks a patchwork of taupe and bone-white strips. Andreas didn't know enough about the trees to tell which was the dead bark peeling and which the new bark showing underneath; he guessed white meant dead. Long leaf-laden branches reached out to form an almost solid canopy overhead. Cornfields to the left and right, burning green in the sun. The temperature seemed to have dropped a good five degrees.

He slowed down to take in the view, enjoy the shade. The wind's noise fell away—there was, really, no wind – and was replaced by the sound of the car's wheels rolling over the asphalt, and the pulsing buzz of great choruses of cicada tymbals, like an engine turning but never catching. Behind that noise there was nothing, just a heat-stunned silence in the liquid-thick air.

The cornfields to their left came to an end, were replaced by an empty field bordered by a dirt road that seemed to lead nowhere in particular, then a new-looking boxy bungalow set back off the road, in the exact middle of a lot just preceding the village-limits sign.

They drove on to the road's end, turned a corner and came upon what Zoe said was the village square. She pointed to a kiosk up ahead. 'Tobacco,' she said. Andreas pulled up to the kerb, killed the engine and sat back, undoing his seatbelt.

Directly across the street stood a taverna, empty behind its long plate-glass window, and next door from it, a kafeneio, this one full, table after table of men – some middle-aged, some old, some very old, no one, at a glance, under the age of thirty-five, no women except the frumpy, tray-carrying one doing the serving. Every single one of them eyeing Andreas. Hardly even moving, as though he were an animal they were stalking rifle in hand. The look on their faces going beyond curiosity, into a realm of almost televisual

spectation. It was the brazenness that did it, the impression that they looked on as though you were behind a screen, unable to look back.

Behind the kiosk stood two two-storey houses with boarded-up windows and a slight forward tilt that, were he the kiosk's owner, would have had him considering immediate relocation. Zoe was chatting to whoever was inside the thing. Off to the right, next to a sealed-up water spring, was a plane tree encircled by a low retaining wall. The tree looked as though a long time ago someone had grabbed it by the crown and roots and twisted. It occurred to Andreas that there existed no actual square.

He leaned over to fiddle with the car radio, felt his t-shirt stick to the backrest and peel wetly off his back. All he could get was static, more static, then some dreadful mewling that turned out to be Greek folk-pop. He twisted the dial off, sat back and looked out. Still under surveillance.

Zoe flopped back onto the passenger seat, holding two packs of tobacco that she dropped into her rucksack.

'The *square*?' Andreas said.

She shrugged. 'It's just something to call it.' She winked at him. 'Context, right?'

She was pulling the door shut when a Corolla pulled up tight alongside them. The driver lowered the window, letting out a blast of frigid air, the bite of some cheap high-alcohol aftershave and, for the second before a radio was turned off, a snippet of what could have been either a man, singing, or a ram, bleating. He looked straight through Andreas to Zoe. Middle-aged, with heavy, pockmarked jowls, slicked-back widow-peaked hair, a thick moustache, wearing a white pinstripe shirt with the top three buttons undone, a white undershirt, and a gold cross dangling from a thin gold chain around his neck.

The man and Zoe exchanged greetings and asked after each other, then each other's families, Zoe giving perfunctory answers to what were only prefatory questions. He was doing a terrible job hiding his intent to pry and kept glancing from her to Andreas and back to force the introduction she was refusing to make.

Zoe was fine. Her parents were fine. Her brother was fine. Her studies were going fine. Athens was fine. Coming back home for the summer was fine. No, she hadn't seen Yerasimos yet, she'd just got here. Yes, it would be great to catch up. Eventually the man seemed to accept the failure of his current method and adapt. He turned his attention to

Andreas as though he were only now registering his presence, and twisted in his seat to stick his right hand out the car window.

‘Hello there. I’m Kyriakos; Kyriakos Vgenopoulos.’ Zoe had already mentioned she shared her last name with about half the village or so. ‘I’m the village *mayor*,’ the man said, as though himself just then impressed with the meteoric heights he had risen to in his political career. It was disconcerting, how much sweat was pouring down his face in all that cold.

Andreas turned in his seat and extended a hand and shook the man’s clammy claw. ‘Hello. I’m Andreas; Andreas Xenidis. Pleased to meet you.’

‘Xenidis... Xenidis... Xenidis,’ the man said, as though he was cross-checking the name against some list and drawing a blank. ‘No,’ he decided. ‘Whose are you, then?’

Oh, just piss off, Andreas thought. Here it was, the epitome of Greek rural life, the first question directed at newcomers in every godforsaken unpopular-with-tourists shithole up and down the country. Not even the equally rude but at least conceding of your personhood, ‘Who are you?’ No, the interrogative was always *whose*. Who are your parents? Who owns you?

‘I’m not from these parts,’ he said.

‘Oh,’ the man said. It was kind of a wonder, if you thought about it, just how much dismissal, distrust, and lewd suggestion could be conveyed with a single exclamation.

‘We should go,’ Zoe said.

‘Oh, yes, don’t let me keep you,’ Kyriakos hurried to say. ‘I’ll see you around. Say hi to your folks for me!’

He drove off and Zoe said, ‘The *mayor*,’ stuck her finger in her mouth and made a gagging sound. Andreas glanced at the rear-view mirror, saw the Corolla take the corner too wide and disappear. The men inside the kafeneio still looked on with that same vacant stare. They were bound to go looking for Kyriakos later, or pull him over when he drove back the other way, to get the low-down on Andreas. Perhaps they wouldn’t even need to hear the details; they’d absorb them osmotically instead. The mayor had been so perfect an embodiment of their gestalt it was just about possible they had extruded him just for the occasion and would now re-assimilate him, and with him, his experience.

‘Thought you said he drives a Porsche,’ Andreas said, putting his seatbelt back on.

‘Oh, didn’t I tell you? I must have. He wrecked it.’

'He looks very much unscathed for a guy who wrecked a Porsche.'

'Oh, no,' she laughed. 'Not like that. The exact opposite, actually. He blew the engine. Had the thing for like two months but never shifted past second gear. What I heard is he worried if he went faster people wouldn't get a good enough look at him when he drove by. That just now was the wife's car, I believe.'

This was funny, though Andreas wasn't laughing. It was the kind of anecdote guaranteed to amuse him and yet he was only now hearing it. Zoe was looking around with the restless evaluating gaze of the returnee and this was, maybe, why she wouldn't look at him. There was something else about the way she was telling the story that turned it into a kind of tease, or maybe a provocation, but he couldn't decide what that was.

'There, on the left,' Zoe said.

He drove through the open wrought-iron gate, and there they were, just over two hours late. He pulled up behind the one car already parked in the driveway, a jet-black Toyota Crown with a red-on-white rear licence plate signalling some tax exemption or other. Not feeling charitable, and knowing of no reason why Zoe's father might be eligible, Andreas chalked up the plate to some kind of minor fraud.

He killed the engine. Already Zoe was climbing out of the car. He sat there with his hands on the wheel. The house was a single-storey bungalow with a wrap-around veranda, the whole thing raised about a metre and a half of the ground to make room for an open space about one-third full of firewood. A short flight of steps at the left corner of the house led up to the veranda and the front door. Next to the door was a French window with a small rectangular table and two plastic chairs placed in front of it. Both chairs faced the street but only one was occupied. The very old man who sat on it, dressed, despite the heat, in what looked like a buttoned-up – dear Lord, wool? – check blazer, hadn't reacted at all to their arrival. This would be the grandfather, obviously. His hands were resting on the grip of a wooden cane slanted between his spread-apart knees. His eyes were closed and his chin jutted in a way that made Andreas realize his head was propped against the window. He could have been either asleep or long dead. Either way, what he reminded Andreas of was a ship's figurehead, or those wooden cigar-store Indian chiefs in American movies.

The front door opened and out came a middle-aged version of Zoe in a blue paisley cotton dress. She smiled at her daughter and pattered down the stairs with a familiar kind of smooth lightness. It was already unbearably hot inside the car. Andreas sighed, pulled the key from the ignition and got out.

There was a twelve-person trestle table under the shade of a Munch-style expressionist olive tree by the side of the house. Seven garden chairs were spaced out around the table, seven places already set, the plates and glasses covered with white paper napkins. The napkins and table both were garnished here and there with fallen olive leaves and a few clusters of small cross-shaped white-and-yellow olive flowers. He heard a rustling overhead followed by the sound of wings flapping away and a branch shaking, the dry scraping of leaf on leaf, and down came a pair of leaves still attached to the same small length of twig, a miniature bird dropping from the sky, landing on the table with a faint scratch, bouncing once and coming to rest dead against an upside-down water glass.

The back yard, which extended much farther out than he'd expected, held a small shed, a couple of dozen more olive trees, spaced out in roughly even rows, a coop surrounded by chicken wire, partly in the shade of a – he wanted to say acacia tree, and a patch of vegetable garden.

Zoe's mother bade him sit. 'Zoe will get you some cold water,' she said. 'Can we offer you a coffee? It must have been an exhausting drive in this heat.'

'Thank you, no, it wasn't too bad, but I'll take that coffee, thank you very much.' He stopped himself from wincing at the second 'thank you' and took a chair, dusting the olive leaves off the seat.

'Just Greek coffee we've got, mind you. None of that instant stuff you young people drink.'

'That'll be fine, thank you, Mrs Vgenopoulou.'

'Mrs Voula will do. Medium-sweet, sweet?'

'Sketos, thank you,' he said. Fuck's sake, he thought. Also, no sugar? He'd tried it once and poured the coffee down the sink. Too bitter. What the hell had possessed him to ask for this now? He didn't know.

'Sketos it is,' Zoe's mother said with a grin that he tried to interpret but, really, could have meant anything. Perhaps even nothing.

'I should wake up Grandad, let him know I'm here,' Zoe said.

'Let him sleep a little longer - just till we get your grandma out of bed. He had a rough night with his emphysema.'

'Where's Dad and Manthos?'

'They went up to the fields.'

'Mum, they knew we were on our way,' Zoe said.

'You were late. I wouldn't let your father eat before you got here, so he went to check on the Albanians.'

'But we—'

'Take it up with your father when he's back. I've already had this conversation once today.'

Zoe looked as though she was about to say something but held back. 'Grandma?' she asked instead.

'The sound of the car woke her. Come along, you can say hi and help me lift her out of bed after I make the coffee.'

'What kind of day is she having?'

'Not a great one,' she said with a sad little grin, first directed at her daughter, then swivelled at Andreas, as though in apology over his being caught up in the family drama.

He couldn't tell whether he was supposed to say something and, if so, what that could possibly be. 'It's tough,' he nodded, as though he had even the slightest idea.

He had three grandparents whose minds were sound and health relatively good, and one grandfather already dead twenty-odd years before he'd been born. No one he cared about had ever been seriously ill. What he knew of infirmity and death he'd learned in the same manner he'd learned most things: by reading about it. On most days he didn't believe this was quite enough to claim any kind of expertise; on other days he told himself reading had already given him the experience of a thousand lifetimes and that had to count for something.

He asked to use the bathroom and followed Zoe and her mother inside the house, tiptoeing past the grandfather. He heard the low hum of an air-conditioning unit just as the cold enveloped him and he tasted the air cooling the back of his throat.

Just inside the door was a short landing overlooking a recessed living room, at the far end of which, partitioned by a countertop, was the open-plan kitchen. The living room: a small couch, two wooden armchairs and a square coffee table, all facing a large fireplace. Not one book anywhere in sight. Next to the fireplace was an equally large, ancient television set in a wooden cabinet.

In the kitchen, a table just big enough for six provided they kept their elbows tucked. The reason they wouldn't be eating inside, he guessed. A modern gas stove and microwave oven, but a bulky cream-enamelled round-cornered fridge. A kind of residue, in all likelihood, a leftover from the house that used to stand here before making way for this one, a thick-walled, low-ceilinged nineteenth century cottage that, according to Zoe, had had all of two rooms, a kitchen and one 'bedroom', large enough for all three generations of the family to share, and had come with an outhouse and a pervasive sense of living inside a Vizyinos short-story, 'Just without, you know, all the cross-dressing, prolicide, alcoholism and mental illness – well, at least so far.' (He hadn't known, but had kept that to himself.)

The cicadas chirred louder and louder, whipped into a fury, a kind of alarmed mania, as though tuned in to the approach of something detectable only at their own level of reality, then abruptly gave up. Their song turned quieter, less manic, as though whatever it was that had stirred it had come and gone.

A chicken clucked. Andreas looked but failed to spot it. The coop door was open. Weren't the birds supposed to be out and about during the day? He thought so, but wasn't sure.

Everything was still, then one short exhalation of a breeze came from the depths of the yard, bringing with it a suggestion of the smell of damp straw and chicken shit – sharper than the rich stench of cow dung, more acerbic.

He looked over at the car getting pounded by the sun. Zoe's suitcase was still in the car boot. He didn't know whether it contained anything that could be damaged by what had to be the hellish temperature building up under all that metal. It would be better not to have to find out. He gulped down the rest of his water and got up.

He took the suitcase up the steps and was met at the front door by Zoe, who took it off him and sent him back down to his seat at the table. He also handed her the bag

with the two bottles of the family white wine his mother had made him take along. 'It's from my grandparents' vineyard,' he said. 'Tell your mum my mum says hi.'

He'd been right about having made a mistake with the coffee; it was silty and scalding hot and almost too bitter to swallow. He swallowed his sip anyway and forced a smile and told Zoe, 'Yeah, it's good.' She gave him a bemused version of her who-are-you-kidding look and went back inside the house.

From all he'd heard he'd envisaged the grandmother being transported to the table like an infant, but when she hove into view she did so under her own steam. Granted, relying on a Zimmer frame she pushed ahead of her in small increments achieved with incommensurately terrible effort, the thick grey rubber ferrules on the tips of the frame's legs scraping against the paving stones of the narrow path that moated the house. The old woman refusing Zoe and her mother's help, forcing the two of them to walk on either side of her, one excruciatingly slow step at a time, ready to catch her should she fall.

Once she was helped to her seat, she turned and clawed at the Zimmer frame, which was brought next to her chair. Compared to her husband she was dressed lightly, in a skirt and blouse, but still, the skirt was ankle-long, and the blouse, though thin, was long-sleeved. Her face was as grey and cracked as old bark. A small woman sitting there, quietly falling apart, thermogenesis shutting down in old age, imparting an incipient coldness to everything, a sense of permanent winter.

He gave Zoe a questioning look. She pursed her lips and tilted her head back no. Her grandmother scanned her surroundings as though unsure about where she was. Spotting Andreas, she looked him up and down and said, 'Yeia sas.' Second person plural form, which Andreas was not used to being deemed old enough to merit.

'Yeia sas,' he replied.

'Welcome,' the old woman said, with enough formality and trepidation to lay her confusion bare: she didn't recognize him and was afraid she was supposed to.

'Well met,' he said.

Zoe dragged a chair over and sat next to her, moved close and said, in slightly too loud a voice, 'That's my friend, Grandma. His name's Andreas.'

This seemed to have the desired effect. Until, that is, the woman turned to scrutinize her granddaughter's face and said, 'Aphrodite?'

'It's Zoe, Grandma,' Zoe said evenly. 'Your granddaughter Zoe,' with just a hint of an upwards inflection. Not quite a declaration, not quite a question either. A coaxing into recognition.

'Of course you are,' said the old woman. 'I only have the one granddaughter, you know.' She thought about this. 'Too many men in this family, I reckon.'

'Isn't that the truth,' Zoe laughed.

'How are you, child?'

'I'm fine, Grandma. How are you?'

'Can't complain. Not at my age.'

'You look well.'

'Don't you talk that nonsense to me, child.'

'Grandma—'

'Nonsense. I get enough of it from your father when he comes into my bedroom every morning to check if I'm dead.'

'Mrs Zoe!'

The old woman seemed entertained by her daughter-in-law's exasperation. 'It's fine by me. Grigoris and I, we've taken up the Lord's time long enough. Soon He'll be deciding what to do with us.'

'Grandma!'

'Hush, child,' she said, not unkindly. 'It's your mother you should be worried about. She'll be the one who has to mother my son once I'm gone.'

'Dad doesn't need mothering, Grandma, he's a grown man.'

'Ain't no such thing,' the old woman concluded. 'No man grown enough not to need mothering. Your grandfather? Every day for thirty years the man's been needing someone to remind him to take his pills. Now if that ain't childish, he must be in an almighty hurry to get away from me. And don't—'

'Please Mrs Zoe, that's enough. Our guest—' Voula said.

Just like that, she was confused again. Another uncertain scan of her surroundings revealed Andreas for a second time. She looked him up and down.

'Welcome,' she said.

Over her shoulder, Zoe waved him on.

'Well met,' he said.

'I don't know you,' she said. Neither question nor challenge. Confirmation, for both their benefits. Andreas managed to see past the moment's awkwardness and wonder how aware she was of what was happening to her, whether this too was something she would forget, then recall, again and again. Felt sorry for her, and not a little horrified.

'Zoe Vgenopoulou,' she said, turning herself, as though to justify his horror and despite the lack of the slightest resemblance, into a future version of Zoe.

'Andreas Xenidis,' he said, turning himself – not that anyone here would know – into a past version of his grandfather.

The old woman pondered the name. 'Whose are you, then?' she asked.

Zoe picked up a paper napkin and spread it flat on the table, rolled one edge over, then used both palms to work it like a pastry sheet.

Her family knew she smoked. How could they not? It was hardly the most concealable of addictions. They told her off, but put up with the idea as long as she didn't smoke in their presence. This, she claimed, was a good enough compromise, in a path-of-least-resistance kind of way. He would point out he had plenty of experience with how she got when she hadn't had a cigarette in a few hours, and there was nothing least-resisting about it. 'You have to pick your battles,' she'd shrug. 'No, you have to *fight* your battles,' he'd say. 'Because you're not the one doing the picking.' Then he'd remind himself he was now almost sort of arguing in favour of a habit he wished she'd quit, and resolve to keep his mouth shut. The truly stupid thing about all this, and the one argument that Zoe never seemed to want to put forth, was that her father and brother were both chain-smokers.

'Do you like school?' her grandmother asked her all of a sudden.

'Oh yes, Grandma, I like it very much,' Zoe beamed.

'Are you doing well? Good marks?'

'Yes, very well.' She paused. 'Even better than some,' she said with a glance in Andreas's direction. This was not untrue, but neither had it been necessary. What the hell did I do to you? he thought.

She smiled at him, a little too wide-eyed, as though to say, Sorry. It got away from me. It was meant in jest.

He raised an eyebrow at her. She saw he wasn't close to accepting the apology and looked away.

'Where do you go to school, child?' Grandma Zoe went on. 'I should know, but my memory's not what it used to be.'

'Athens, Grandma. Remember? Athens.' Andreas heard the little drip of sadness in the back of her throat and instantly forgot about the barb; went into comforter mode, sought her gaze, if only to let her know. I'm here. I'm sorry. I'm here. But she wouldn't look his way, wouldn't look anyone's way.

'Athens,' Grandma Zoe repeated, testing the name's familiarity. 'Yes,' she said. 'My granddaughter goes to school in Athens. Zoe. Do you know her?'

He looked at his watch. Two-thirty. He pushed a button. Thirty-eight degrees, if the thing was to be believed. The sweat evaporating from his forearms was leaving behind a faint crust of salt. He was beginning to regret the chinos. Zoe had questioned the decision, but he'd felt shorts would be too casual. The shadows of branches stirred on the light-dappled table, then settled again into immobility. Varnished wood the honey colour of a basketball court, with black tracks and whorls of grain, one whorl near Andreas' plate hollowed into powder at its heart. He put down his water glass on top of it. A fat brute of a fly landed near the rim of his cup, bottle green, metallicly iridescent. It explored a lip-shaped coffee smudge with sped-up laziness, then dipped over the rim into the cup. He waited for it to reappear for what felt like a very long time. When he bent over the cup and looked inside, the fly was gone.

It was Zoe's grandfather's turn to be led to the table. Grigoris came leaning on his cane, dragging a left leg stiff and unbending at the knee. (Zoe: 'Bullet, Albanian front, 1941. Don't get him talking about the war.') Sat at the head of the table, his eyes blazing at Andreas until they were introduced, at which point he said, 'Welcome, young man. Make yourself at home. Have the women been taking care of you?' and it transpired he hadn't really been glaring at all. The eyes were red-rimmed, the lower eyelids loose and about to fold over themselves, and what Andreas had taken for unfriendliness was probably just dry eye syndrome.

It didn't take long for the old man to decide it fell to him to keep the guest occupied and to attempt to engage Andreas with a variety of subject matters that included

where Andreas was from (Athens, an answer that was greeted with a scoff and dismissive wave of the hand. No one was *from* Athens. People were *born* there, but that was not where they originated. They were brought to land there on complex waves of family history, they did not rise from Athenian soil as though they were stones thrown by Deucalion and Pyrrha. Which observation led to subject matter number two, this being)

where his parents (Michalis, Aggeliki) where from (his father was from Lamia but *he too* had been born in Athens; his mother's family came from Arta). Which information led to subject matter number three, this being)

whether Andreas had any siblings (yes, a younger brother, Tasos, a year away from finishing school) and

how well-acquainted he was with the birthplace of both his parents (not at all; he'd been to Lamia twice, Arta once. Which admission led to observations about)

the importance of not remaining ignorant of or indifferent to one's roots (this more of a mini-lecture than an invitation to converse, albeit one delivered in as grandfatherly a manner as could be, which more or less forced Andreas to assent by silence to a number of statements he would otherwise have described as unadulterated shit, which assent encouraged the lecture's author to proceed to reaffirm)

the sanctity of hearth and home, and the variant recognition of said sanctity by Greeks of diverse persuasions – Mainlanders: poor, Islanders: better, Peloponnesians: best (by which point Andreas, stupendously bored yet also grateful that the grandfather, while a stupendous bore, was at least proving far less difficult than what he'd been led to believe, had more or less stopped paying attention, contributing only a few noncommittal nods and exclamations).

Only then did Grigoris's attention shift to

how had Andreas come to know Zoe (university, first lecture of their first year) and

whether, then, he was also a philologist-in-training (yes, English philology, just like Zoe) and

whether he had completed his army service or gone straight to university (straight to university) and

whether he hoped to be appointed at a public school once he was done with the army (no, he would be pursuing a career in academia; 'Who said anything about serving?' Andreas did not add) and

whether he was aware how difficult an appointment in Greek academia was for the non-connected (yes, yes he was – 'Who said anything about *Greek* academia?' he also did not add) and

whether, then, he was himself connected and how did his father make his family's living (no, he was not; Andreas' father was in data processing. 'Data processing,' he repeated faced with the old man's blank stare, 'You know, computers?' 'I've seen those on the old devil-box,' the old man responded with a grin.' Come on, you're just taking the piss now,' Andreas thought. Andreas' *mother*, meanwhile, sewed from home; Andreas himself worked four shifts a week at a city-centre bookstore; that's how the *family* made its living) and

what about his grandparents, what did they do, did *they* by any chance have any connections, maybe away from Athens, which was to Greece as the plughole is to the sink – the analogy was not further elaborated upon, so that it remained unclear whether the point being made had to do with gravity or cleanliness or something else entirely – and would Andreas–

Grigoris did not get a chance to complete his question. Just as he was asking it – and just as Andreas was considering with a feeling of dread how he would be interrogated like this again before the end of the day, which interrogation he had been prepared for, it was just that he'd rather not have to go through it twice – the shrill putt-putt of a scooter was heard coming up the road and Zoe said, 'They're here,' and the scooter turned into the driveway, the son driving, the father riding pillion, holding on to the metal bar at the back, and Zoe and her mother stood up and so did Andreas.

Now that he had met the rest of the family, Andreas could see how Zoe's father was the middle-aged version of Grigoris in a pair of loose cotton trousers and an untucked white shirt. Tanned, stubbled, balding, with a hopeless comb-over and a permanent look of calculation on his face. Since their first meeting, whenever Andreas thought of him he

always pictured him behind a Greek-island till somewhere, inventing new ways of ripping off tourists.

Her brother meanwhile was to such an extent a male version of Zoe that, upon first meeting him a confused Andreas had almost thought of him as beautiful. He wore a black t-shirt with the sleeves cut off over army camouflage trousers tucked into a pair of heavy black Doc Martens. The attempted cumulative impression of rugged manliness was belied by the delicateness of his features, as well as the anatomical quirk the cut-off sleeves and overdeveloped biceps couldn't quite make up for: the birdlike narrowness of his shoulders.

The pair swaggered over. Stepping out of the sunlight into the shade of an orange tree they removed their sunglasses in unison with the very same tilt of the head to the right. Zoe met them halfway and hugged first her brother, then her father. Andreas gave them all a moment before approaching.

'Welcome,' Zoe's father said, shaking his hand.

'Well met,' Andreas said. 'It's nice to see you again, Mr Vgenopoulos,' he added.

Zoe's father held on to his hand a second too long, giving him a quizzical, I-can't-quite-place-you look.

'You met last year?' Zoe said. 'When I was moving to the new flat?'

'No, I don't think – ah, yes, you're the one who helped Manthos with that sofa, aren't you?'

'Yes, that's him,' Manthos said. 'Hello again.'

He extended a hand, revealing a faint tan line on the inside of his bicep, and Andreas took it.

'Ah,' Zoe's father said with a gesture that seemed to say, I can't be expected to remember you, you were introduced as a 'friend'. One of several. I wasn't paying attention. That's about to change. He turned to Zoe. 'Couple of glasses of water?'

'Sure, dad. I'll grab a fresh bottle from the fridge. Why don't you all go sit down in the meantime?' she said and walked off.

They watched her enter the house. No one made a move for the table.

'So,' her father said. 'You two are dating now.' The metonymy's implicit element was as obvious as it was crude. Or at least that was what Andreas decided. Then again,

perhaps he was just feeling too self-conscious. Or maybe he only hoped he was just feeling too self-conscious.

Manthos was fumbling with a pack of Camels.

‘Yes. Yes we are,’ Andreas said, attempting to inject as much innocence as he could into the affirmation, to make ‘yes’ also mean ‘no’ or at a minimum, ‘No, it’s not like that.’

Manthos’ father took the proffered cigarette, dug a lighter out of a pocket. Manthos thought about it, then presented the open pack to Andreas with one filter sticking out. ‘No, thank you,’ Andreas said. ‘I don’t smoke.’ Manthos shrugged and brought the pack to his face, drew out the cigarette with his lips.

‘Good for you,’ Manthos said, without bothering to specify whether he was talking about the smoking or his sister. He was shifting his weight from one foot to the other, then throwing a little backward kick, like a bull pawing at the ground. (The psychology being thus expressed was not particularly complicated.)

It wasn’t personal, the dislike, at least not according to Zoe. It stemmed, rather, from nothing more than a general tendency to mistrust any man who got close to his sister. No, this was not an excuse, just an observation. Yes, he could be an arsehole a lot of the time; he didn’t always mean to. Yes, the whole sofa thing had indeed been an instance of him being an arsehole without meaning to, a nerve had been touched, because of his size – yes, fine, lack thereof, look who’s being a jerk now. It would be fairer to say Manthos had a limited view of what his fraternal role was meant to entail. But deep down he was a good kid, and too young to know better, considering where he came from. He’d come around. He had done so once before.

Andreas wasn’t convinced. He didn’t know about this previous conversion. Hadn’t asked Zoe about it. He’d insisted early on that their respective pasts were their own business, best kept out of sight. Even so vague a reference as the existence of an ex-boyfriend was a violation of terms he wouldn’t compound by making an exception.

‘Alekos? Manthos? Is that you over there?’ Grigoris said.

‘It’s us alright, Grandpa,’ Manthos said.

‘What are you doing, standing all the way over there like that? Come sit down, will you?’

Alekos and Manthos led the way, sat down on either side of Grigoris, Alekos next to Grandma Zoe, Manthos across the table from them. Grandma Zoe stirred at their approach but otherwise ignored them. Alekos leaned into her field of vision and said, in the same too-loud, too-slow voice Zoe had used earlier, 'How are you feeling, Mother?'

'I just told you, I'm fine.'

'Mother—'

'Don't need you asking all the time.'

'Want some water?'

'I don't want water. I'd ask for it if I did.'

'The doctor says you're not drinking enough.'

'Doctor says a lot of things. Don't want me eating no salt either.'

'Your blood pressure—'

'Didn't get to seventy-four not eating salt.' Her neck wavering unsteadily, she was staring straight ahead, towards the back yard, with a kind of intent, unfocused sadness. Andreas wondered what she saw back there. Half the chicken coop looked washed out, stunned out of its colour by the flattening, surgical light.

'Oh, leave her be,' Grigoris said. 'Fifty years I've been waiting for the woman to listen to reason and where did that get me? She wants to eat salted sardines, I say let her eat salted sardines.'

Zoe came round the corner of the house with a bottle of water in one hand, a metal bowl full of ice cubes in the other, and set both down in front of her father. 'I put a couple more bottles in the freezer,' she said, inserting herself in the seat between Alekos and Andreas. 'Mum's reheating stuff. She'll be a few more minutes.' She turned to Andreas. 'Roast lamb for everyone else, gemista for us two.'

'So he really doesn't eat meat either?' Alekos said. 'I thought you were putting us on.'

'Just lamb, Mr Vgenopoulos,' Andreas said.

'Smells, does it?' Manthos said with a trace of mockery Andreas pretended to miss.

'It's just – you know, in this heat... It's a bit rich and I've got a long drive ahead of me...' He forced a laugh meant to suggest acknowledgment. Yes, it's on me. I'm being difficult.

'Thought my daughter might have turned you into a herbivore like herself,' Alekos said.

'Vegetarian, dad,' Zoe said.

'You eat only plants, you're a herbivore. That's what my sheep tell me anyway.'

'See?' Zoe said to Andreas. 'And you were worried you two might not get along.'

Andreas winced but kept quiet.

'Back in my day—'

'Oh come on, Grandpa, not this again,' Manthos said.

'Back in my day,' he repeated, 'there was food on the table, you ate it. That was that. Because most days—'

'"—there was no food on the table," yes, we know Grandpa,' Manthos said.

'Do you? What do you know?' There was so little flesh on his face you could see all its machinery at work under the skin. 'Do you know hunger pains? Do you know your own bones in the mirror? Do you know the taste of fruit in your mouth? The sleepless nights? Do you know becoming so salt-crazy you're licking the sweat off your skin? No, you don't. You've never gone hungry a day in your life, and not a day goes by that I don't thank the Lord for that. I'd get on my knees if I could.' This sounded much more like the grandfather Andreas had been warned about.

He'd started emitting sharp wheezing sounds while he spoke, distant metal-on-metal shrieks. Now he took a strained breath and gasped the air out with a wet-sounding cough. He pulled a small grey inhaler from a jacket pocket and pumped it twice.

Inhaler tucked away, the old man took a few slow exploratory breaths; the metallic shrieks, still audible, were removed farther in the distance. Satisfied, he went on. 'By the end of the Occupation we didn't even *have* a table. We'd burned it to stay warm.'

Andreas couldn't tell anymore if this speech was meant to be sincere or not. The content sounded progressively deranged, albeit delivered in the measured tone of a late-night weather report. There was even been a hint of — he wouldn't call it wistfulness. He didn't know what to call it. Something chambered inside Grandpa Grigoris' voice that Andreas didn't have access to, other than to recognize he didn't recognize it.

The old man's gaze searched his granddaughter's face. 'So who's that doctor to tell your grandmother she can't have salt? The woman's crazy, sure. It'll kill her. But who's that doctor to tell her she can't have it?'

'All right, Grandpa. We get it,' Manthos said.

'Calm down, Dad. It's okay.'

The old man turned to his son. 'Do I sound upset to you?' he said, as reasonable as could be. He had a point. Demented, perhaps, but not upset.

'No, Dad, you don't.'

'Well then.'

'You tell them, Grandpa,' Zoe said.

'I could do with a couple of salted sardines,' Grandma Zoe said.

'Wife!' Alekos shouted.

'Dad, just—'

'Wife!' he shouted again.

A window at the side of the house opened and Voula stuck her head out.

'What is it now?'

'Is the food ready yet?'

'Do you see me bringing it out?'

'That's why—'

'It isn't ready then, is it?'

'But—'

'Only got the one pair of hands,' she said. She held them up. 'Here, count them yourself.'

'But we're—'

'Late. You were *late*, is the word you're looking for. So now you get to be *patient*.'

'But the children—'

'They were late too. So they also get to be patient. Notice how good they are at it? Now shush – it's bad enough I have to reheat *today's* food before we even touched it.'

The window banged shut with a gun-like report – a retrospective addition of violence to an exchange that had seemed more playful than adversarial. Playful, but with an undercurrent of acrimony to it, as though it was the danger of skirting close to some suppressed truth that made the game fun. So much for them being on their best behaviour. Zoe should have been mortified but wasn't. In all fairness, this was the kind of thing she'd warned him about. He should just ignore it; it meant nothing.

'Women, huh?' Alekos said, giving Andreas a conspiratorial look.

No way am I getting roped into this, Andreas thought.

They ate. The food was good. There was a lot of it. The stuffed peppers were a tad too bitter, the tomatoes just sweet enough. There were also two different salads, thick slabs of feta cheese, olives the size of quail eggs, homemade bread.

Andreas complimented Zoe's mother on her cooking,
was offered retsina, which he declined,
was offered some of his own family's wine, which he declined,
was offered a soft drink, which he accepted just to say yes to something,
was offered 'some lamb or at least a few roast potatoes', which he declined, was offered seconds, which he declined,
was chided on looking too thin, so tall a boy needed to eat more, was everyone in his family tall (yes), was everyone in his family rail-thin (no, his father was a big man – too big, he didn't add),
was he absolutely sure he didn't want seconds (he really couldn't eat another bite).

'You were expecting us, Dad. You didn't need to go,' Zoe said.

'You heard your mother. You were late. Your brother and I thought we'd do something useful with our time. You know what those Albanians are like.'

'You mean how they work really hard and don't complain about how little they get paid?' his wife said.

'Sure, Voula, they work hard – as long as they've got you there, breathing down their neck. You're gone for five minutes, they start taking "breaks", don't they.'

'And *were* they taking a break, when you got there?' Voula replied.

'Nah,' Manthos said with a grin. 'Half-done already. Told them they should go ahead and take as long as they wanted for lunch.' He winked at his mother and Andreas almost decided to like him.

'Only after I made it clear to the basta—'

'Aleko,' his wife warned.

'Leave him be, Mum,' Zoe said. 'We're just talking.'

Alekos peered at his wife, then waved his comment away.

'How about another beer?' he said, looking up as though he were addressing the tree over their heads. 'Get me one, love?' he asked Zoe.

'Sure, Dad,' she said and made to stand. 'Anyone else want anything?'

'I'll have one too,' Manthos said.

'Grandpa? Grandma?'

'I'll have a glass of the good stuff. No ice.'

'One Coke for Grandpa. Grandma?'

Grandma Zoe was still working on her first glass of retsina and didn't want anything else.

'How about it, Andreas?' Alekos said. 'Nice cold beer?'

'No, thank you, I'm driving.'

'Don't worry about it. You'll be here awhile yet. Plus, a beer or two with lunch, that's nothing. It's not like anyone's going to pull you over around these parts.'

'I'd rather not, thank you. Truth is, I'm not much of a drinker. Not at all a drinker, in fact.'

'Oh,' Alekos said.

Manthos looked up. 'Not a drinker, not a smoker, not partial to meat. Hmm,' he said.

'Not all meat. Just lamb,' Andreas said. He reminded himself he was there to win over the family. Antagonizing Manthos wasn't going to get that done; they'd close ranks instead. Andreas would almost have to think less of them if they didn't. It was too soon for him to expect any one of them to side with him against one of their own. He could put up with Manthos for a few hours.

Then he thought about Zoe's father and his sheep joke and almost saw, too, just for a moment, how antagonizing Manthos would not endear him to Zoe either; that it would prove something she probably didn't want proved, had maybe even brought him here to rule out. He almost saw this, like something out of the corner of his eye, a blur that was there just long enough for him to turn for a better look and know that whatever it might have been, he'd missed it.

Alekos and Manthos polished off their third beers and, following Grandma Zoe's example, switched to retsina. Andreas did not consider this an auspicious development. Alekos grew more boisterous; Manthos grew morose.

Grandpa Grigoris reached into a jacket pocket and pulled out a transistor radio. He extended its antenna and worked the tuner. Fragments of sounds crackled through the speaker, faded, then returned, it seemed, though the hiss and spatter of static from which they emerged was bad enough it was hard to say whether the audio spectres that returned were the same as the sounds that had faded away. He fiddled with the dial some more, caught the high whine of clarinets. The sound came through clean and loud, an androgynous voice yearning – what else – for some lost thing, a lost love, a lost motherland, a lost place in a lost time. Satisfied, Grandpa Grigoris, turned the volume up and set the radio down by his plate, picked up his fork.

With the food came more flies, tracing confused spirals from plate to plate, lazily dodging swatting hands. With the soft drinks came the heavy parentheses of wasps with their helicopter buzz, their sugar-crazed persistence, that the family treated at most as annoyances and Andreas as a minor but real danger. The threat of their stings kept him on edge, a situation not improved through the inevitable comparison of his own nervousness to the others' nonchalance, to how casually they shooed the wasps away with no worry of being stung.

'The nest under the eaves,' Zoe's mother said.

'I said I'll smoke them out later,' said Manthos, as though she'd taken some kind of tone.

Grandpa Grigoris drank his second glass of Coke. Offered Andreas a short lecture on American crimes against humanity, the addiction of entire populations to Coke came near the top of his list, right up there with handing half of Cyprus over to the Turks in '74. 'This is how they get you, see?' he said, pointing at his drink.

Andreas, finding himself on safe ground with at least this final item, agreed. 'I do avoid it, myself.'

'Good for you, young man,' Grandpa Grigoris said. Then asked for a third glass. Voula reached for the Coke bottle.

Manthos glanced up at Andreas. 'You strike me as one of those negative personality types.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Seems to me you do a lot of avoiding stuff.'

Andreas pretended to consider this. 'I guess I do. No more than anyone else, I don't think.'

'Andreas just knows what he doesn't like,' Alekos said.

'Just asking what he *does* like, that's all.'

'Well, your sister for one.'

'Dad!'

'That's enough from both of you,' Voula said. 'Don't pay the pillocks any attention,' she told Andreas. 'It's only their way of making you feel welcome.'

'Of course it is,' Alekos said. He burst out laughing. 'Just letting the boy know what he's in for, aren't we, Manthos?' He emptied his glass and set about refilling it.

'This ain't a family for the easily offended, let me tell you,' Manthos agreed, pushing his own glass forward. There was a kind of livid flush to his cheeks, a gloss of sweat on his face.

The silence that followed was not given an opportunity to become awkward thanks to a voice that came from the direction of street, wishing them a good afternoon. They turned to find a man standing just outside the still open gate.

'Good afternoon,' the man repeated. A short-sleeved colourful shirt, tan cargo shorts. Stocky, bordering on heavysset, crew-cut hair, a broad face half-hidden behind round sunglasses, a wide mouth. Young – his and Zoe's age, Andreas saw. The realization put him on his guard.

'Yerasime! Come on in!' Alekos began to say, but Zoe was already on her feet and moving. She met Yerasimos just inside the gate and threw her arms around him. They went on hugging for longer than Andreas would have liked. He moved in his seat; looked away; locked gazes with a smirking Manthos; gave him what he hoped was his best neutral expression; looked back.

The pair had disengaged and fallen into animated conversation.

'Get out of the sun, you two,' Voula called out and was ignored. 'Get in the shade, I said, will you?'

Zoe and Yerasimos went on talking. Who was this guy? Andreas had never heard of him.

‘They’ve known each other since they were four,’ Zoe’s mother was telling him, as though she’d picked up on something. Was this information meant to be reassuring? Andreas was not reassured. ‘Yerasimos is the mayor’s son,’ Voula added.

‘Yerasime, come sit down, will you?’ Alekos shouted. ‘We’ve all this food to get through.’

‘Thank you, Mr Alekos, but I’ve already eaten,’ Yerasimos said, raising his voice rather than approaching. ‘I’m in kind of a hurry, but I’ll swing by later for a coffee if you’ll have me. Just wanted to welcome Zoe home.’

He turned to her, said something she nodded yes to while her father was shouting his confirmation that, yes, Yerasimos should come by whenever.

Zoe saw him off at the gate. They didn’t hug this time. Not that this proved or disproved anything.

She came and sat next to Andreas and started to whisper, ‘That was the mayor’s—’

‘Yes, I know,’ he whispered back. He’d tried to make his tone stern but worried he came across as merely petulant.

Zoe gave him one of her I-know-what-you’re-doing blank looks, followed by one of her stop-it-right-now hints of frown. This was a shorthand he could read, and was presented to him in the knowledge that he could read it.

‘What?’ he mumbled.

Grandpa Grigoris pulled back a cuff, brought the back of a wrist to his face to examine his watch. He picked up his radio and rolled the tuner, then turned up the volume.

They listened to a short news bulletin. Once it was over, he turned the volume down, switched back to another station. ‘The sun rose red, the moon rose black,’ a man sang, dragging every syllable out into a long melisma.

Then came a period of desultory conversation. Every item in the bulletin was picked up, but none for long. The Aigio earthquake. The upcoming murder trial of the Pallini Satanists. The alleged suppression of the discovery of Alexander the Great’s tomb in Egypt.

Not that there was any real discussion of these things. More of an enumeration, running through a list, checking for areas of agreement.

Earthquakes: bad. State compensation: good.

Satanists: worse. Death penalty: better.

Antihellenism: the worst. Alexander: great.

'They'll do anything to keep us Greeks down,' Zoe's father commented with regard to that final item. Appearing to take his audience's silence as an invitation to elaborate, he took a sip of his wine and proceeded to drop a series of dark hints that, he seemed to be suggesting, linked:

the war in Bosnia and the exploits of the Greek Volunteer Guard in defence of 'Orthodox Serbia';

Alexander's tomb and the pressure exercised on the Egyptian government to put a halt to the excavation in order to dampen Greek national feeling while that 'bastard Nimetz' sold off Alexander's heritage to the 'bloody Skopjans';

the upcoming nuptials of the Crown Prince (Andreas, only half-listening by this point, needed a moment to realize which country's Crown Prince this was meant to be and think, 'Huh') to 'that Miller woman';

and the incontrovertible increase in the number of deadly earthquakes throughout Greece post-1978 ('Wait, what?' was all Andreas had for this revelation)

into – what kind of big picture, exactly, was apparently meant to be self-evident and was, therefore, not at all clear.

Not that it mattered. The end goal of his argument was not coherence, but the suggestion that coherence lurked one dot-connection away, as lethal to apprehend directly as any Lovecraftian god.

Andreas tried giving Zoe a look. She could tell what he was thinking, no doubt, which was probably the reason she wouldn't meet his eye. Her father had been one mention of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion away from conspiracy theorist bingo.

'Dad, what are you on about?' Manthos said, embarrassed and combative and almost pleading.

Alekos gave Manthos a puzzled squint. 'You know,' he said.

'No, I don't, Dad. I really don't. None of us do.'

'I'm just saying, best place to hide a big truth is behind just as big a lie,' Alekos said. 'Andreas here knows what I'm talking about, I bet.'

'Or, even better, *in front* of one. It's the last place anyone ever looks,' Andreas said in a studiedly neutral tone, just about managing to keep the smirk from his face.

'What did I just do?' he thought a moment later, too late to manage some sort of conversational recovery. Now concealing panic rather than contempt, he waited to see how badly he'd messed up. Glanced at Zoe sitting there, looking away from him, very still, as though she too was reading the air for movement, a shift, an alignment into repercussion.

But Alekos, it turned out, was too far gone to register the dissemblance. He smiled a tight-lipped smile while he attempted and failed to parse Andreas' response, then beamed and, turning to Manthos, said only, 'See?'

(As for the rest of the family: neither Zoe's grandparents nor her mother looked as though they'd been paying much attention. They must have heard it all too many times before. There was too much history there for them to even care anymore, probably. DeLillo had Greeks bang to rights. They would never say anything they hadn't already said a thousand times.)

Manthos leaned forward in his seat, blinked the sweat out of his eyes, peered at Andreas.

'What's that supposed to mean, exactly?' he said. Taking issue, while admitting to a small element of genuine curiosity. The issue taken being the obvious one. *You* don't get to mock my father, even when *I* think he's being an idiot.

'Oh, I don't know.' Andreas wasn't going to back down, though he knew he should. Why not? He couldn't say. Perhaps he was just tired of Manthos' imperfectly disguised hostility. Or not even that; the sense that the disguise was imperfect only because it was the point that Andreas should remain aware of it at all times.

'I was just thinking the obvious is what's hardest to see sometimes, you know? It's right there, but it's too big. Too permanent. Too *exposed*. I guess what I'm saying is, sometimes things are nothing more than exactly what they'd appear to be if we looked *at* them rather than trying to look *through* them, don't you think?'

Manthos took his time answering. He plucked at his bottom lip – the gesture was all too familiar – then shook his head yes. 'Sure,' he said. 'People too.'

'People too,' Andreas agreed.

Andreas asked for permission to use the phone.

'Depends on who you're calling,' Alekos told him. 'Local's fine. Long-distance costs.' He waited for someone else to laugh first, but no one did. 'On the shelf next to the coffee table,' he said with a vaguely imperious gesture house-ward.

Andreas walked through the door into a keen frost. He paused as sweat erupted all over his body, accompanying a momentary sense of vertigo, the rush of cold air high inside his chest. He dry-coughed once, twice, and descended the three short steps to the living room. Suspended from a hook on the kitchen ceiling was a black-speckled amber curl of flypaper he had not noticed before. High up on one wall the air-conditioning unit was on full blast, a katabatic wind sloping down a glacier.

'Hello?'

'Hi, mum.'

'About time. Where are you? Everything okay?'

'Yeah, sorry, I meant to call earlier, but...'

'I had my money on "flat tire" or "dead battery". Your father was thinking more "fiery wreck by the side of the road".'

'Sorry, we were a bit late and we sat down to eat and...'

He heard a ghostly trace of his father's raised voice in the distance. Back from work already? A moment later he was pulling the receiver away from his ear just as his mother was calling out, 'Yes, it's him. They're fine.' Then she fell silent.

Andreas started to bring the receiver closer when she called out again. 'I told him.'

'Mum?'

'Yes?'

'Are you done shouting in my ear?'

'Oh, sorry.' She paused while his father shouted something else Andreas couldn't make out. 'I'll tell him,' she shouted back.

'Mum!'

'Your father says, next time you have to drive on that awful motorway maybe listen to him and give us a number to call if we need to. Just to make sure you got there in one piece.'

'Mum, I wasn't about to give you the phone number of people I haven't even met.'

'You met Zoe's father last year.'

'As I was saying, we were late, they hadn't eaten yet—'

'Did you give them the wine?'

'You have their thanks, you shouldn't have, etc.'

'They're very welcome.' She paused again. 'Your father says—'

'Just pass him the phone, will you?'

'We're holding up these people's phone line for no good reason.'

'It's fine, I'm pretty sure they're not expecting any urgent calls.'

'You never know. Also, long-distance costs.'

'So I've been told.'

'You should offer to pay for the call.'

'Mum, would *you* accept if it was Zoe offering?'

'You did not just ask me that.'

'So, then.'

'It's not the same,' she said.

'It's the same, only different.'

'So offer to pay.'

'Okay then, it's different, only the same.'

'Nice try. Now get off the phone. And—'

His father was saying something. Andreas couldn't make out what, but didn't need to.

'Your father says—'

'Yeah, I'll let you know before I set off.'

'Maybe use a payphone?'

'Bye, Mum.'

'Bye.'

What he hadn't said was: he'd been about to suggest he pay for the call anyway, when something in Zoe's father's expression had made him realize just how big a mistake this would have been.

He opened the door and heat billowed into the house. The light baked his face and stung his eyes. Surfaces appeared to ripple and breathe, trembling with arrested motion. The air was viscous and overloaded, the smoke from a swung thurible.

He came down the stairs and turned and almost ran into Manthos. 'Oops. Sorry,' Andreas said, and tried to move past him. Manthos staggered to the side to block his way, wobbled, regained his balance. Andreas took a step back; Manthos responded by shambling forward. Oh, what now? Andreas thought.

Manthos came close with a kind of committed bearing, gathering himself to speak, waiting for the right beat. He gave off a sour, fever-sweat smell, and when he opened his mouth to speak his breath, too, was sour with wine.

The latter, cloying stench triggered in Andreas a flash of something incongruent to the moment that he soon recognized as the urge to kiss that mouth, which in shape and redness and in half-open expectancy might as well have belonged to Zoe.

'You don't fool me,' Manthos said.

'I'm sorry – what?'

'You heard me,' Manthos said. The whites of his eyes were streaked with burst blood vessels.

'Yes, I did. I'm just not sure I understood you.'

'You understood just fine.'

Andreas, his skin buzzing in the sun, went to move past him. Manthos grabbed him by the arm.

Andreas resisted shaking his arm free, refused to even glance down at Manthos's fingers digging into the crook of his elbow. 'You don't want to be doing that,' he said, hearing his voice fray just a bit, take on a burred edge.

'I'm not done with you yet,' Manthos said, but let go.

'Look, just – say what you want to say, but if we're going to do this, you mind if we at least do it in the shade?' Andreas took a few steps into the shadow of the nearest tree, turning to make sure he wasn't about to walk into the field of view of anyone still sitting at the table. He wasn't; past the corner of the house, only a sliver of table was visible, ceded to the sun.

'Are you coming or what?' he told Manthos.

Whatever reaction Manthos had been expecting, it hadn't been this one. He hesitated, ran his fingers through his hair and examined his palm. He came forward, pitching and rolling and swaying. Stopped at a more sociable distance than before.

'Okay, good,' Andreas said. 'You were saying?'

Manthos thought about this for a good while. 'My sister's too good for you,' he said finally, with the air of an explorer emerging from thick jungle into a clearing containing the object of his quest. It was a statement that had a practiced ring to it – it had, after all, driven the explorer's trek – but was nevertheless sincerely felt.

'That's probably true,' Andreas said after a moment. 'It's also up to her what she does about it.'

Now they stared at each other in just about equal disbelief. Andreas had been searching for merely a rhetorical manoeuvre, a way to defuse the situation before they came to blows and had instead heard himself agree to his own disparagement. Manthos, on the other hand, had clearly anticipated a very different response to the insult. He stared and stared while he attempted to puzzle out what was happening. 'I suppose it is,' he said eventually. 'Up to her.'

'Is that all?' Andreas said.

Manthos gave the question some thought. He used a fore finger to wipe the sweat off an eyebrow. 'Yes, I think that's it,' he said. He stood there swaying, a kid much too drunk to even put up a proper fight, and not even all that committed to the role he'd talked himself into believing he should play. It was, almost, a shame.

Now tears were welling up in his eyes. Andreas was mortified. He wanted to hit him in the mouth. 'Come on, man, that's enough,' he said.

'You think it's only the likes of you who have feelings?' Manthos said in a small, wounded voice.

'Oh, for the love of—'

'You do, don't you?'

'Get a grip, will you?' The exasperation in his tone seemed to get through to Manthos. He straightened up, threw his chest out. He held Andreas's gaze.

'You think you're better than us, don't you.'

This was more like it, Andreas thought. This he at least knew what to do with. 'Not at all.'

'You Athenians always think you're better than us.'

'I don't.'

'Oh, really?'

'Yes, really. I don't think I'm better than you, I don't think you're worse than me. I think we're *different*.' (*That's what makes me better than you, he didn't add.*)

'Are we done here?' he said, and walked away before Manthos had a chance to answer.

'Did you thank your parents for the wine?'

'Yes, Mrs Voula. Think nothing of it, they said. Their pleasure.'

'Everything okay?' Zoe asked as he sat down. The sun was in his eyes. He shifted his chair to the left.

'Oh, they're fine,' he said. He filled his glass to the brim with lukewarm water, took a long draught. 'Well, now that my dad's no longer having visions of our bodies being cut out of a mangled Mazda.' He refilled his glass, drank again.

'Sounds like your dad alright,' Zoe said, tapping his bicep once with a forefinger. 'Sorry. We should have called as soon as we got here.'

'They're *my* parents – I should have rung as soon as we got here.'

She let out a little huff of hurt disappointment. 'Fine,' she said.

'No, I—'

'Whatever,' she said. She'd caught both her hands between her knees and was holding them there as though she were holding them back from something. 'Later,' she whispered, looking away.

This was ridiculous. He'd been trying to take responsibility, not rebuff her. What was it with today? All day long they'd been just out of step. He wondered if they were somehow preparing for the month or so they were about to spend apart, creating the required emotional distance. But it wasn't required; at least, it hadn't been so the previous two summers. And yet here it was, being created.

Manthos came and took his seat and said nothing and didn't look Andreas's way once. Yet neither did he sulk or mope or brood, made no broadcast of the kind of ill will that the others would not fail to notice. On the contrary, he appeared to be making an effort – not a great one, but an effort nevertheless – to put on a front, by paying exaggerated attention to a story Grandpa Grigoris was telling involving his long-dead

brother. Andreas, being in no mood to continue trying with Zoe, did the same. And so came to hear, and decide to use to make conversation with, the thing that prompted him to say, in some attempt to signal to the family his intentions, his request for inclusion, 'My grandfather, too, was a gendarme,' and just like that ruin everything.

Grigoris was intrigued.

Which one? Andreas's namesake, his paternal grandfather. Rank? Commander. When? The '40s. Where? Up in Lamia. Oh, it was unlikely then that Grigoris's brother – a lieutenant who with one exception and until his untimely death had spent his entire career with the Gendarmerie stationed near and around this very village – would have known him. What was Andreas's surname, again? Xenidis. No, Grigoris had served in the Lamia area in the '50s but the name didn't ring any bells. No, it wouldn't have, Andreas's grandfather would have been in Makronisos by then. Makronisos? Yes, in the prison camp, he'd been sent there in, if Andreas wasn't mistaken, '48 or so.

The story of Andreas's grandfather did not take long to relate to the Vgenopoulos family. He'd joined ELAS in – Andreas wasn't sure, early 1943 maybe. The family hid in Athens. They were reunited shortly after liberation. He left again right before the Dekemvriana. When was the Dekemvriana, December '44 or '45? Right before that. Then he went into hiding. He fought with the National – no, wait, the Democratic Army in 1946 – it was the Democratic Army, the communists, right? Was taken prisoner in '48, and sent to Makronisos. He wouldn't sign one of those, what were they called, yes, a declaration of repentance, thank you Mr Grigoris. He was already ill by the time he was released in the late '50s, had died within a few years. Thank you, Mrs Voula, but it was a long time ago. In all honesty, this was more or less all he knew about the man. It was all so very long ago.

(The family didn't talk about it much. Even half the things he knew he couldn't tell you how he'd come to know them. Couldn't point to a single conversation specifically to do with his grandfather or the war. It was as though he'd woken up one day to find these were facts he'd always known, maybe through some passive, osmotic-like procedure. They came with no emotion attached, no particular meaning to draw. This was probably why he didn't take the present line of questioning for what it was: another, longer version of 'Whose are you?' How could he have? He knew all these facts, but believed they said nothing about who he was.)

There'd been tragedies on both sides, the family agreed, lives ruined and lives wasted on both sides. Good people, patriots, on both sides. Grigoris signalled no agreement with this latter sentiment. Neither did Zoe.

Grigoris's brother's name had been Manthos, unsurprisingly. A lieutenant in the Gendarmerie, he'd been responsible for an area comprising this village and the four closest neighbouring settlements; a big-enough swath of countryside that for many years he had not been able to find time even to marry. This he'd minded less than one would think. Duty came first.

The Occupation found him discharging this duty as best he could, and if this meant that from time to time he had to answer to German rather than Greek masters, he would not be made to feel guilty for that. The war had been lost for Greece, and there was now nothing to do but buckle down, make do as best they could. The patriotic thing to do was to cause as little trouble as possible, keep your head down, provoke no reprisals; only this could ensure people would have enough to eat. Maybe not all the time, but enough of the time to stay alive. The goal had to be to weather the storm and nothing more, for nothing beyond that was possible. So he did what he had to, what he believed would save lives. At the end of the day, Occupation be damned, law and order were law and order. Other people saw it differently, of course.

'Nowadays,' Grigoris added here, 'people will tell you no, not them, never. They would have gone the other way. Or at least stayed out of it, minded their own business. Well that's what my brother did, he minded his business, it just so happened his business was law and order. These are the same people, of course, that if you ask them their families were all in the Resistance, every last one of them. If you believe them, there was nothing *but* Resistance in these parts, so much *Resistance* you'd have to wonder how the Germans stayed as long as they did.'

He lifted the back of a hand dappled with liver spots to wipe spit from the corner of his mouth.

'No offence, young man,' he told Andreas. 'There's too many folks around here whose families I know for a fact sat out the war beginning to end, but that's not what you hear when they get going.'

'Oh, none taken,' Andreas said.

'As for the rest of it, that's what my brother believed. Your grandfather believed otherwise. It's not for me to tell you who was right and who was wrong.'

'They both did what they thought was best,' Andreas said. 'It's not easy to judge.' He didn't believe this, of course he didn't. But then neither did Grigoris, who had, very carefully, just refused to give his opinion without denying he had one.

Grigoris wheezed and coughed and took another hit from his inhaler. 'The way my brother saw it... He was sitting just about where you are right now talking about going up in the afternoon, fixing the roof – this is the old house mind you not this here thing, something was always needing fixing, and we're looking up at the roof and my brother turns to me and he says, "I'll tell you what, it was no communist that built the Parthenon, that's for sure." That's about as political as I ever heard him get.'

The fucking Parthenon, Andreas thought. It's always the fucking Parthenon.

'That's enough now, Grandpa. You'll wear yourself out,' Zoe pleaded, but he ignored her. She didn't insist. Nor did anyone else speak up.

Manthos, then, did his job as best he could. What opinions he may have had about having to do it under those circumstance he kept to himself. Like Grigoris had just said: he was not political. He had no grand ideas about the world. He wasn't out to change it, let alone save it. God willing, he would have his King restored, his country free, his family safe and prosperous. Until God willed all this, he would not take it upon himself to make alterations to His plan.

Duty and his family. That was all there was. His parents, a younger sister and a younger brother, unmarried both. In time there was also a woman. Much younger than Manthos, but this was not unheard of in those days, was not any kind of obstacle. The obstacle arose in the existence of another man, one with whom the young woman's father had already shaken hands. This man, whose name would never be allowed to escape Grigoris's lips, did not have Manthos's standing in the community, but was closer to her in age. She'd had little objection to the arrangement.

But then the war came. The man went off to fight. The woman waited, and so did Manthos. Soon the young man returned, not a hair on his head out of place, and the very next morning went back to working his family's fields as though he'd never been away. The villagers commented amongst themselves on the charmed life he led and looked

forward to the revelry of his wedding night and, in the way of such things, prevented the thing by waiting for it.

The Italians came. The man's family was taxed and couldn't pay. Their crops were confiscated, their livestock led away. There were rumours now that the man was a communist, this was why his family had been targeted. It didn't matter that the rest of the village had been similarly treated, because in their case this was to do with the evils of war. The man denied everything, of course, but what else would he say?

Manthos went to see the young woman's father. The wedding had to be called off, he told him. For his daughter's sake. But the father hesitated. He had given his word. He didn't think the young man was a red, and even if he was – well, so what? There were worse things to be in this world, provided you were a God-fearing red. He sent Manthos away empty-handed.

Then it happened. The Italian food depot was raided. ELAS, the villagers whispered amongst themselves, nothing to do with us. The Italian commander, in no mood for such fine distinctions, threatened the taking of hostages unless the guilty parties came forward. No one did. But just then, a stroke of luck. Acting on information from anonymous sources, Manthos led the Italians to a barn owned by the young man's family, where a small part of the stolen victuals was recovered.

The young man went on the run, still maintaining his innocence. But next thing the villagers knew, it became known he had joined ELAS up in the mountains, thus proving both his association with the reds and his guilt. His family were imprisoned. The wedding was off and Manthos again paid a visit to the young woman's father. This time he was not sent away. The villagers began looking forward to the revelry of Manthos's wedding night, even more so because the Commander's wedding gift was to take the form of some of the stolen-then-recovered meats. He was not an unreasonable man. Upon the news of Manthos's engagement he had already opened the depot's doors to provide flour and honey and cinnamon for the angel wings. If the villagers were not unaware that this was but a brazen attempt to keep them happy enough to reject the call of resistance, they were also pragmatic enough to know a good deal when they saw one. So they looked forward to the revelry of Manthos's wedding night and, in the way of such things, prevented the thing by waiting for it.

A week before the wedding, Manthos was called to a neighbouring village to settle a dispute over grazing land that was threatening to turn violent. Somewhere along the way he was ambushed by ELAS bandits, who labelled him a collaborator in the note they left on his body. The villagers agreed amongst themselves that a more personal motive for the ambush was also to be suspected. This was never to be proved. The particular group of bandits were soon tracked down by an Italian platoon and killed to the last man. The villagers even now recalled amongst themselves that this last man died with the name of a certain young woman on his lips. (Of course they did, thought Andreas. God forbid they let history get in the way of a good love triangle.) The fact of the matter was, Grigoris, concluded, there'd been no witnesses to the young man's demise other than those who brought it about, and even if he'd said anything, they hadn't been close enough to hear him, and none of them spoke a word of Greek. And that was that.

Grigoris coughed once, wheezed, and took a sip of his Coke. He looked at Andreas as though he expected him to have something to say about what he'd heard. Stared at him without rancour. Not as though he was making any kind of demand, more as though he was inviting – what exactly? Not commiseration. An acknowledgment of his reasonableness. This here, the look was saying, is me being civilized about a terrible wrong done to my family. With all that this would imply about the wrong done to Andreas's family, was possibly the concomitant point? Andreas couldn't tell.

'Bastards,' Alekos said. They all turned and looked at him. He made no attempt to explain whom it was he'd meant, looking around at everyone with the surprised solemnity of the very drunk faced with the incoherence of the sober world.

'What about the young woman?' Andreas asked for something to say.

'The woman?' Grigoris said. 'Oh, third time lucky. She married six months later and had a long, happy life.'

'The thing is–' Alekos started while Grigoris went on. 'In fact, she–'

'That's enough now,' Grandma Zoe interrupted both. Her voice carried in a way it hadn't before.

'I was just–' Alekos tried.

'Enough, I said. The boy doesn't need to be hearing this.' She was sitting up straight in her chair, shaking slightly with either effort or anger.

'The children need to know,' Grigoris said, tamping the ground with his cane.

'What do they need to know? What for?' his wife turned on him. The voice issuing from that cragged face had a force to it now. It was as though some fault line had opened in her from which was pouring out all at once what remained of a formidable younger self.

'The history they come from,' Grigoris said.

'The children come from no history. Neither did we. We were given it, we were thrown in it. Much good it did us.'

'You'd have them forget it then?'

'You can't forget what you don't know. *We're* the ones who could do with some forgetting,' Voula said.

'But that's what *They* want us to do: forget,' Alekos said. 'Kill the roots, the tree dies.'

'It's a good thing people aren't trees then,' Grandma Zoe said.

'They want us to forget our past so we can't be what we were ever again,' Alekos went on.

'No,' Grigoris said, shaking his head. 'They want us to forget our past so we can go on being *exactly* who we were.'

Whether they meant the same 'they' or not was anyone's guess. So was whether they meant the same past.

'That's quite enough of all that for now,' Voula said.

'But Mum,' Zoe said, 'Grandpa's right. Sorry, Grandma, but he's right. Not knowing doesn't make things unhappen.'

(What was she talking about? That was *exactly* what not knowing did. And that's *all* that history was. Precedent. Paradigm. Prison. History was the slow poison in the bloodstream, the residue that killed. Just who the hell was this person?)

Rather than address her granddaughter, it was her husband that the old woman turned to. 'See what you've done?' she said.

'Grandpa didn't *do* anything, Grandma. I can decide things for myself, thank you very much.'

'You're welcome, child,' Grandma Zoe said after a moment. She turned to her granddaughter and Andreas saw that the force pouring out of her had exhausted itself.

There was that uncertainty again in her gaze, that caged, mistrustful look that gave her away. She had no idea what they'd been talking about.

'Maybe you'd like to lie down for a bit, Mrs Zoe?' Voula said. Too gently. As bewildered as she was, the old woman caught on.

'Don't you tell me to go lie down.'

'I was just asking—'

'I know your asking. I know all *about* your asking. That goes for all of you.' She turned from one face to the next. 'Don't you be looking at me like that, as though I can't tell. Always watching me, as though I can't tell.' It was Andreas she glared at, saying this.

'Come on, Grandma. A nap will do you good,' Manthos said and made to stand. 'I'll help you up the stairs.'

'I don't need no one to help me up no stairs.'

As though to prove her point, she grabbed the arms of her chair and strained to pull herself up. She managed to do so before anyone could rush to her aid and paused, seeming unsure of what to do next.

'Where's my—' She couldn't find the word. 'My—'

'Your walker, Grandma,' Manthos said, coming to stand beside her, no more steady on his feet than she was. 'Here it is.' He tried to steer her to the Zimmer frame. 'I can manage myself,' she said and shrugged him off. She manoeuvred herself into position and set off, pushing the walker forward, then catching up with it, one slow drag of the foot at a time, right leg always first, then the left. The slowest storming off Andreas had ever seen, yet there was no mistaking the intent.

She came round the table but rather than turn and aim for the house she pushed on, straight ahead, heading for the back yard. Manthos set off after her but his mother stopped him.

'It's okay, leave her be, you'll only make it worse.'

'It's not like she's going to go far,' Alekos said. He tried for a chuckle but it didn't come out right.

She pushed the frame forward, drawing in the dirt of the yard two arrow-straight lines that bounded on either side the wider, messier grooves she left behind instead of footprints, lifting into the air small clouds of dust that hovered for a moment behind her and came back down whirling and slanting to the ground. She was out in the sun now, but if she felt it bearing down on her she didn't show it, didn't change her course in the

slightest. It looked for all the world as though she had a specific destination in mind. She kept going for what felt like a very long time, with great effort, making very little progress, and then simply stopped, just like that, in the middle of the yard, in the sun, just past the shed, between the acacia and vegetable garden, near the coop and the olive trees, no more than ten or fifteen metres from her starting point, and stood there with her back turned to everyone, until, responding to a nod from his mother, Manthos walked up to her and gently guided her back towards the house.

The table was cleared. Grigoris retired inside to watch the news. Voula would not hear of being helped with the dishes. Zoe suggested a walk. Andreas looked at his watch. He hated driving at night but agreed anyway.

They walked back the way they'd driven in but took the first turn right onto a dirt lane that was lined with houses only on one side. On the other side an orchard lay behind a wire fence. The lane was dotted with sheep droppings, black marbles spread on dirt the colour of ground ginger. The sun was at their backs and their shadows stretched out in front of them, tall and shapeless.

They walked awhile in what could have passed for companionable silence.

'Is that an actual...' he tried.

'An outhouse. Yes. It is. So?'

'Nothing. It's just – it's not often you see one of those.'

'Yeah. And?'

'Jesus. Nothing. I'm just saying.'

'If you *think* about it a bit, it starts seeming kind of perverse, having the toilet *inside* your house. Not as hygienic.'

'So this is, like, what? The latest development in waste evacuation technology?'

'It's just the way things used to be done. There's nothing funny about it.'

'I didn't say there was.'

'No, you didn't.'

They came across a low stone barn. The corrugated iron roof was rusted and half-collapsed. Disused, Andreas guessed, but then heard from inside the soft moans of

several cows and the buzzing of flies and smelled the dung and animal musk and wet hay and sawdust. A horse snorted and a bell clanged.

Past the barn they turned left onto another dirt road. To their right was a broad expanse of empty field; up ahead, cutting from left to right across their field of vision, were two lines of tall eucalyptus trees. The world realigned itself around him. They were on the dirt road he'd seen on their way in, the one that had seemed to lead nowhere in particular.

They got to the main road and turned left, back towards the village. They walked past what Andreas had taken for the village-limits sign, and only now did he notice that next to the village name was printed an arrow pointing straight ahead and the number two.

'Two kilometres?' he tried again. 'Two hundred metres, more like.'

'Five years,' she said and shrugged. 'Our taxes at work.'

'Your taxes seem to have worked a bit harder when it came to paving the road.'

'People have Porsches to drive through here, in case you didn't notice.'

'Sure, yeah. But that doesn't mean you don't benefit if you happen to drive a Datsun.'

'I don't happen to drive anything. But most certainly not a pickup truck.'

'You know what I mean.'

'I always know exactly what you mean.' Somehow she managed to make even this sound like an accusation.

They walked past the olive grove, then turned around and walked back the way they'd come. They reached the dirt road but Zoe kept going.

Andreas blew a drop of sweat off the tip of his nose.

'What?' she said.

'Nothing,' he said. 'Sweating.'

She turned and gave him a long, level look, as though wanting to nudge herself into a decision.

'What?' he said. 'Just tell me, whatever it is.'

'Nothing.' She shook her head. 'Could do with a cigarette.' She started walking again and he followed.

'Pretty sure you can have one now,' he said.

'You'd think, wouldn't you.'

'Who's going to see?' He waved a hand at the empty road, the corn fields.

'There's always someone. And that someone always tells someone else, and that someone else tells someone else, and so on, and it's like the telephone game with your parents at the other end of the line.'

'My grandparents live in a village too, you know. You don't have to explain to me how it works. I'm just saying, in this instance there really is no one around.'

'You have no idea, I swear.'

'Well help me get one then, since I'm so clueless.'

The thing was, coming here seemed to have turned her into more of a mystery to him. Not in terms of facts about her life he hadn't been aware of – this Yerasimos guy, for example. It was what he already knew about her that was turning strange. Surrounded by everything that had made her she was becoming less comprehensible, not more.

'Here's all you need to know about this place,' she said, 'in one little parable that also happens to be a hundred-percent true and accurate, non-exaggerated-in-the-slightest account of events and is nowhere near the stupidest or the nastiest or the most disgusting thing I've ever experienced with the fucking village KGB here. I'm thirteen and it's early afternoon and I'm bored because there are no more books to read and I've begged for someone to buy me one but of course my father points to my shelf of like twenty-odd books that you better believe I can recite word for word at this stage and says, 'You have *books*. You don't need more *books*,' and that's that and I'm fed up with him and also so fed up with this place, and I've hopped on my bike and gone for a ride just to get out of here, even if it is only a few miles out and even if I have to be back before dark and even if this is just the smallest saddest escape in the world.'

'And I'm riding on this very road, on my way back, right up against the side of the road like I've been taught because of course every boy in these parts starts driving at like twelve and by seventeen they all think they're Michael bloody Schumacher, and some asshole comes up behind me in one of those piece of shit *Datsuns* and for a laugh drives

me off the road and almost into a ditch and speeds off honking like crazy just in case I miss the fact he's pissing himself laughing.

'So I take all of maybe ten, fifteen seconds to wish him a slow and painful death and calm myself down and go on my way. Fifteen seconds. That's how used to this shit I am. And it takes me another four-five minutes to get home and I haven't even got off the bike yet when my father comes barging through the front door and you know what he says to me? He says, "Why don't you watch where you're going next time."

'There. That's all you need to know. Now please *don't* tell me you get it.'

The only time she'd turned to glance at him during that entire speech when she'd spat out the word 'Datsun'. It was this look, rather than her coda itself, that got to him enough to induce the desire to prove the coda wrong.

'I'm what, fifteen,' Andreas said, 'and visiting my grandparents – 'I'm what, fifteen,' Andreas said, 'and visiting my grandparents – my mother's side of the family. I'm going to stay with them for like a month and have a literal duffel bag of unread books with me and – yes, I know, I know, okay – and I think I'm well enough prepared but I go through the bag in two weeks flat – there's literally nothing else to do, this is during the '87 heatwave. So two weeks in I'm out of books to read, at this point I'm reading cereal boxes, cookbooks, the phone book, my grandfather's newspaper when he can get hold of one from the next village over. I'm like an hour away from trying to read the embossing on our toilet paper when the heatwave ends. And I venture out of the house and drift over to the schoolyard where they have what passes for a basketball court, it's really just the single hoop planted in the dirt, and I bump into this guy who's maybe a year younger than me, Sokratis. He's not visiting or anything, he's a village kid. Doesn't really have that many friends, quite possibly because he has something I guess they'd call it effeminate about him and you can imagine how well that goes down in those enlightened surroundings, but so we shoot hoops and we hit it off, really he's an okay kid, of course he can't get along with any of them, so anyway that doesn't solve my reading problem but at least makes the situation bearable.

'So we've been hanging out for a week, mostly at his place because my grandparents need their mid-afternoon nap and his parents don't seem to mind having me around, so every day I have lunch with my grandparents and they take their nap and

one way or another I fetch up at Sokratis's place until a week later he comes around and you can tell he's been crying but also acting as though he got told off and cried and *then* got told off *for* crying because of course you know men don't, and to cut a long story short he's been sent over to tell me we can't hang out anymore.

And I can't get the story out of him at first, he won't say what the hell's happened just his parents are sorry but no. And to be honest I won't leave it alone because this is just such shit and so I prod and prod and finally he tells me.

'Sokratis, you see, has a sister. Marianna is eight. I'm more or less her brother's one friend and the one other kid that comes into their house, I'm not sure if this is because she also doesn't have friends, or maybe there aren't many friends her age to be had at the village – I don't know. So anyway she kind of latches on to us and follows us around all day like younger kids do and, you know, you don't mind, up to a point.

'And so but a week in, some villager calls in on Sokratis's parents one early morning, invites himself over for coffee, and proceeds to lay it out for them. He does not, *of course not*, believe what he's about to tell them, but there've been rumours, you see, and though he doesn't himself believe what's being said, he must, as a good neighbour, let them know and decide for themselves the truth of the matter.

'What's being said is that the reason for this formerly aloof, too-good-for-anyone kid befriending their son and spending a some would say unhealthy and suspect amount of time at their place, is that I am, in fact, and they should keep in mind as far as not shooting the messenger goes this isn't the neighbour's opinion, he is merely passing along what he's been told, but, not to put too fine a point on it, I am, in fact, fucking their daughter.'

'Oh, Jesus,' was all Zoe said.

'Now this good neighbour and friend can't bring himself to believe such a thing could be happening, let alone right under Sokratis's parents noses, no sir. But these are the facts, and he's done his neighbourly duty in reporting them and can wash his hands of the whole affair and it will be up to Sokratis's parents to decide what, if anything, must be done.

‘So he’s about to take his leave and Sokratis’s father stops him and says – Sokratis, who’s meant to still be asleep, is listening from behind a bedroom door – he can share his decision with the man right now and his decision is the man should get the hell out of his house.

‘And Sokratis stifles a giggle and he can hear, he says, the shocked silence in the living room, can actually *hear* it, it sounds like a heaviness in the air, a buzz, a kind of drone. The villager leaves, and Sokratis, who experiences in this moment something for his father that he could call pride and starts for the first time to consider the possibility that he might after all be able to talk to his parents about the things he feels and the things he wants and what the other children have been saying about him – Sokratis is about to pretend to have just woken up and push open the door when he hears his mother ask his father, What are they going to do?

‘What does she mean, what are they going to do? his father says. She doesn’t believe the man’s nonsense, does she? No, of course not, not a word of it, they’ve always known what kind of sick minds populate this village, haven’t they. But that’s the problem, she says. They may not believe this nonsense themselves, but they should consider whether others *would*, and while she can’t say for certain who would, she also can’t say for certain who wouldn’t. And after some thought the father agrees, yes, it is likely that the story will be believed, or at least not unbelievably, for haven’t they themselves heard similar rumours in the past and never believed them but never completely wrote them off either, were left with that doubt in their minds, like the first small spot of decay in the fruit.

‘So it’s the age-old question again, Matthew twenty-two verse-whatever-the-fuck, the two commandments on which hang all the law and the prophets. ‘Whose are you?’ and ‘*What will people think?*

‘Bentham? Foucault? They’ve got *nothing* on these fucking people, let me tell you. And to the second question only one answer can ever be given, and that’s that. Sokratis goes home and we never hang out again. So, yeah, maybe give a little more credit than that. Maybe I *do* get it.’

He didn’t get it, she said.

He couldn’t see what was wrong with his story or, better put, the points it actually demonstrated. It wasn’t that his interpretation of events was incorrect. But it hadn’t been

wide enough. His little morality play's scope had been limited to its leading man: himself, of course, since he was ruminating on his own experience. Problem was, he wasn't the leading man and it had barely been *his* experience.

The sky above their heads had turned flame-blue. Up ahead moved a rack of clouds so flat-bottomed they looked cut with a razor.

'...that's not for you to say, Andreas.'

'Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't realize I wasn't allowed to have an opinion.'

'Not about things you don't understand.'

'Don't understand? What happened to learning from the experience of others?'

'There are limits to everything.'

'And who gets to decide those?'

'In this instance, me.'

'Because you know better.'

'Because I *do* know better. Because I live in your world and you've only ever been a tourist in mine.'

'Oh, it's different *worlds* now?'

'There's nothing disgraceful about living this kind of life,' she was saying.

'What kind of life would that be? The one you couldn't wait to get away from?'

'Away from the city. Away from the complications and the difficulty and the people who are not more or less exactly like you. Sure, it's a shitty life most of the time, but there's nothing disgraceful about it.'

'Yeah, well there's nothing admirable about it either.'

'There are responses to people other than judgment, you know. And even so, you're just not qualified to judge,' she said.

'Sorry but no. You're the one who's not qualified to judge – you're too close. Critique presupposes distance from your object of study.'

'Critique's not judgment, how many more times will I have to tell you you've completely misread Kant?'

'...and your father – "Wife! Wife!" And you're just sitting there. What the hell is that?'

'You know very well. You know because I've *told* you.'

'And your brother. "Women shouldn't read so much. It gives them ideas".'

'Oh for god's sake that was a joke. He was just riling you up.'

'You thought that was funny? You?'

'That was part of the joke, you moron.'

'...and anyway you don't get to sneer at my family.'

'I'm sneering? Spare me that shit. You're the one who can't stand them. You're the one who's always trying so very hard to *excuse* them, and not because you believe your excuses. They just prove how clever you are, how sophisticated, how *unlike* them. Clever and sophisticated enough to get out, and even more clever and sophisticated for how you don't look down on them. When really you do, more than anyone, more than me.'

'Oh you don't look down on them?'

'As a matter of fact, I don't. This has nothing to do with any of that.'

'And what was with you today? "Sketos." Is sugar not manly enough for you all of sudden?'

'Look, it's simple. My brother doesn't like you. He doesn't like you because he's a bit overprotective and occasionally a bit of a prick, and because *you* were a prick to *him* when you first met him. That's all it is, the usual macho crap. It's not some kind of epic struggle between worldviews. It's not even particularly interesting.'

'...your father's conspiracy-theory shit. And don't tell me they don't. You know why? Of course you do. Because they've bloody lived here all their lives. They believe everything is connected because around here everything and everyone *is* fucking connected, all the time, one small, pure circle and everyone's forever inside it. No isolation, no escape from connection, nothing that happens that can't and won't be

yoked to everything else. No one that won't be yoked to everyone else. Am I wrong? Go on, tell me I'm wrong.'

'...and as for this Yerasimos guy—'

'What about him?'

'How come you've never mentioned him?'

'Of course I have.'

'I never heard that name before today.'

'Oh yes you have. You just weren't paying attention.'

'...'

'The one in medical school in Bulgaria?'

'...'

'Oh. You think I might have mentioned him before, then?'

'Okay, that rings a bell. But you never let on you were that close.'

'We're not that close.'

'...and speaking of things not mentioned, what the hell was that about Makronisos?'

'What about it?'

'You never said. About your grandfather.'

'Well, it probably never came up. It's not a big deal.'

'It's too big a deal not to have come up in three years.'

'...'

'...'

'You can't be serious, Zoe.'

'You better believe I am.'

'What do you want me to say? I just don't think about it. It was a million years ago.'

'To you maybe.'

'And to you it was what, yesterday?'

'You wouldn't treat this as a joke if it was a member of *your* family that had been murdered.'

'As opposed to what? Being tortured half-to-death for a decade? As opposed to my grandmother spending thirty years scrubbing the floors of those responsible? And being told by some snooty illiterate nouveau riche *cunt* she should be grateful for the privilege, considering what her husband had done? What *her* husband had done.'

'I thought you said you don't think about that. I thought it wasn't a big deal.'

'Maybe it wasn't. It fucking is now.'

'...you heard my grandfather. They could have minded their own business. They could have, I don't know, maybe done the *sane* thing and not got entire villages burned to the ground.'

'Is that what dear old Grandpa Grigoris did? Minded his own business?'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Did he keep his head down and tend to his fucking fields? What about after his brother was killed? Did he mind his own business then? Because if you ask me, he seemed a bit too certain about what that guy said and didn't say right before he died and what I want to know is *how*.'

Their farewell was a show put on for her family's benefit. Andreas could barely bring himself to look at her but didn't want to give Manthos the satisfaction. She waited by the gate while he got the car started and backed out of the driveway and into the street. At the last moment he put the car in neutral and stared at her, waiting. She waved a perfunctory goodbye and turned her back to him, started pulling the gate closed. He put the car in gear and drove off.

He had driven past Patras by the time he realized he'd forgotten to call his parents. He pulled in at a service area but someone had ripped the receiver off the cardphone.

At the next service area the phone was in one piece but when he stuck his phonecard in there wasn't enough credit for a long-distance call. In his frustration he almost threw it away. But it was the rare, hundred-credit one with the photo of the Parthenon lit bright yellow against a black sky. He'd heard collectors would pay anything up to 20,000 drachmas for it.

Fuck the Parthenon, he thought. I'd blow the fucking thing up if I could. Raze it to the ground. He thought about throwing the card away anyway, then put it back in his wallet. Leaving wasn't going to get any cheaper just because he stuck to his principles.

He went into the service station and bought a bottle of water. They were out of phonecards. Swarms of midges flew around the lampposts and smashed themselves against the light behind the glass doors, undeterred by the citronella candles burning on the deserted outdoor tables. The ground was still radiating all the heat it had soaked up during the day. Inside, the entire place smelled of antiseptic soap and burnt coffee.

He had never understood her, he decided. The question that needed to be asked was whether this was his fault or hers, a case of misunderstanding or one of misrepresentation. Perhaps he'd thought he'd recognized her only because he'd been convinced she'd recognized him. He'd never imagined this kind of arrangement could be anything but symmetrical.

Did today mean they would break up? *Should* break up, even? Had they perhaps in effect *already* broken up? He thought back to the way she'd dismissed him, the ease with which she'd turned her back to him and pulled the gate closed. Had she been shutting him out or shutting herself in? This didn't feel like a pointless distinction. Contained within the moment was a lesson in the limits of resistance. Whether fairly or not, it made him want to examine her escape in a different light. And though looking back he swore to himself he couldn't recall a day going by when she hadn't given some indication she was as willing to go as he was, he now saw how he might have been fooled by his own carping.

He drew no satisfaction from this conclusion. Only a belated awareness of his own stupidity.

Next thing he knew he was driving through Athens city centre. The traffic was light and everything – cars, streets, buildings – was bathed in that night-time sodium-yellow sheen. He had no memory of the drive here. It seemed as though only a minute ago he was buying the now empty bottle of water.

He stopped at a red light, his eyes burning. He pinched the bridge of his nose with thumb and forefinger. He checked the dashboard clock and once the digits resolved they confirmed he'd reached Athens much later than he would have liked but much sooner than he'd expected. A quick calculation revealed that he must have been speeding. It turned out that the secret to overcoming his anxiety over driving on the motorway was a simple one. All he needed to do was not be present.

He drove past Dimos's place. It was too late to return the car now, he'd have to do it first thing in the morning so Dimos could get to his lectures on time. He followed Formionos Street uphill all the way past the Kaisariani rifle range, past the Church of the Ascension, past the Vyronas police station, then took a left and he was home.

He locked the car and looked up, expecting to see at least one of his parents on the second-storey balcony, sick with worry. There was no one there. The balcony doors were open but both the bedroom and living room lights were off. They must have given up and gone to sleep.

He climbed the stairs and inserted the key in the keyhole as quietly as he could. He turned once and the door opened. It wasn't like his parents to forget to lock it. He stepped through and closed the door behind him and stood for a moment, listening. He heard a car drive by outside. The hum of the refrigerator in the kitchen. Past that noise: nothing.

The flat was empty, he could tell. All the lights were off, all the doors open, and there was no one there. To his left he could see the lights of Athens through the open balcony door in the living room. To his right the empty kitchen with the small round table, three of the four chairs tucked in under it, the fourth off to the side. Through the curtainless kitchen window he could see Hymettus rising in the distance and high up over one ridge the red cyclopic eyes of aircraft warning lights.

'Mum?' he tried. Softly, just in case. 'Dad?' Then, when no answer came, a little louder. 'Mum?'

His hand found the light switch. He crossed the hall. The bedroom door was open, his parents' bed empty and unmade. He rushed to his own bedroom. His brother's bed was also empty. Where the hell was everyone?

He returned to the kitchen, turned the light on, expecting to find a note on the table. There wasn't one. The living room yielded no clues. He returned to his parents' bedroom, turned the light on, and that's when he saw the blood on the sheets.

A lot of blood. Not I-cut-my-finger-slicing-an-apple blood. A lot. On his father's side of the bed. By which, on the floor, a mound of bloody tissues. A bloody towel. Small drops of blood on the floor that he'd previously missed, forming a trail that led from the bed to the bathroom – the blood dried brown on the white porcelain sink – to the kitchen and that out-of-place chair and out the front door.

He was bounding down the stairs to the first floor to wake up Mrs Alexandrou when he heard the phone ring. He ran back up and answered it.

'Hello?' he managed to get out.

'Fuck's sake, where have you been? I've been ringing every–' Tasos said.

'Where have I been? Where the fuck are *you*? There's all this blood–'

'Dad got a nosebleed and–'

'No way is all this–'

'Just listen. He got a nosebleed and it won't stop. We're in A&E. We don't know much yet but they're saying something's gone really wrong with his blood pressure. They're saying the nosebleed saved him from having a stroke.'

'Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck,' he was saying. Perhaps he was shouting. Perhaps he was only thinking it. He had no idea. Focus, he told himself. Focus.

'How is he?'

'They haven't stopped the nosebleed yet, he might need a transfusion soon but first they need to get his blood pressure down. They've been saying something about an arrhythmia too.'

'Fuck, fuck, fuck.' He could see his father lying there, waiting for the doctors to tell him something. He wouldn't speak unless spoken to. This was neither politeness nor, despite what it might look like, some kind of Buddhist demonstration of nigh-inhuman patience. He was terrified of, well, everything. Hospitals. Doctors. Needles. Blood.

'Mum?'

'She's losing her mind. But quietly.'

Andreas could picture her too, sitting in some waiting area, a hospital corridor. Sitting very still, or maybe in imperceptible motion, a rocking back and forth that you had

to try to even notice. A neutral expression on her face that others would mistake for calm. She was good under pressure in ways his father just wasn't, so it had taken him a longer time than you'd think to figure out she wasn't without fear. Then again, she was his mother, so maybe the delay was excusable.

'Does Aunt Katerina know?'

'I haven't called her yet. Get here now.'

'Which hospital?'

Andreas stood for a while next to his seated mother in the packed waiting area before three chairs in a row were vacated and his brother got to them first. High up on the wall across from them was an air-conditioning unit that made a lot of noise to little effect.

They sat and stared at that wall. There'd been no news since he'd got off the phone with Tasos. The details of everything that had happened up to that point had only taken minutes to relate, then relate again. His father had left work early with what he thought was a migraine. He'd taken some aspirin while waiting for Andreas to ring, then the migraine had got worse and he'd gone to bed, and late in the afternoon had woken up to the nosebleed. Once they'd got to A&E he'd been taken inside and they'd been left to wait. Eventually a doctor had come out to let them know about the fortunate nosebleed, the arrhythmia, the possibility of a stroke. About how they'd injected him with something to get his blood pressure down. This was almost an hour previously. They were still waiting for an update.

The waiting area was actually the corridor outside A&E. The seats right next to the double doors were at a premium. The patients' escorts weren't allowed with them inside, the department was too busy and they only got in the way. The doors would swing open once in a while and a patient would walk or be wheeled out, clutching discharge papers, or a name would be called out, and the escorts would run up to the door to be briefed, or sent to gather paperwork for tests or admission to a ward.

The doctor who most often came to the door was the registrar, not the consultant. He was wide but soft, with an oddly square head, a short tuft of a ponytail. Big feet. His mouth was too wide. He had little experience or interest in building rapport. His brusqueness was, Andreas decided, almost appropriate in its way. It indicated a lack of

calculation that made it easier to trust he would hide nothing, would let you know exactly where things stood. You didn't register as enough of a person for him to concern himself with the effects of what he had to say. It did not take long for Andreas to figure out why despite all this his every appearance at the door was greeted with cautious relief. News that would summon the consultant himself to that threshold could only be miraculous or terrible, and even away from hospitals the former was always much the rarer.

Further down the corridor were two cardphones, each in a plexiglass hood like a bigger, squarer version of a hair salon dryer. Andreas thought about ringing Zoe and decided against it. He told himself it was because he didn't want to scare her or her family. She was so far away, the only thing he'd manage to do would be to make her feel as though she could do nothing to help. Which was actually the case. He wasn't even sure he'd get the number right. He'd have to check his address book. It'd be better if he just called in the morning, from home – they'd be on their way home soon anyway, since there was no way this would turn out to be anything serious. This all made a lot of sense.

He also wasn't about to abandon his vigil near the doors for too long. There was no doubt in his mind that this would spell disaster, in the same way that nothing truly bad could happen while he remained seated here, keeping the world intact with his attention.

Those seated near the doors could also with a little effort hear some of what was going on inside: the patients' moans and groans and complaints and appeals for help, and once in a while, when some body part was palpated or prodded or when medication wasn't forthcoming or a pain worsened, their screams and shouts and cursing.

'Mum?' She didn't look as though she'd heard. 'Mum?' he tried again.

'What is it?' she said, startled. She looked around as though thinking she'd missed something.

'How are you feeling?'

'I'm fine,' she said, sinking into her seat. Alarm over.

'Are you sure? You look a little pale.'

'So do you. So does everyone. It's the light.'

'Do you need anything?'

'Like what?'

'Water. Coffee.'

'I'm good.'

'You sure? Coffee?'

'Maybe I could do with a coffee.'

'Me too,' Tasos said. 'I'll go get them. Could do with a smoke. You want a smoke, Mum?'

'I can't leave here, what if the doctor—'

'It's okay, Mum,' Andreas said. 'You two go, I'll stay here and keep an eye out.'

She took a long time to consider this before she nodded and stood up. She left her bag on her seat, taking out her wallet, cigarettes and lighter. 'Mind that,' she said to Andreas. Hospital etiquette: this seat is taken.

Andreas sat there. Time passed. Or maybe refused to. He couldn't tell. When he came back to himself he didn't know where he'd been or for how long. He looked at his watch but couldn't even recall having checked the time since he'd glanced at the dashboard clock when he'd got to Athens several hours before. Things went out of focus and he rubbed the bridge of his nose, blinked away the burn.

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the wall. He took a deep breath and thought that beneath the disinfectant he could pick up the smell of dust burning on the overhead lamps, the malodorous toilets at the end of the corridor, the blood-drenched and hastily wiped surfaces behind the A&E doors. He switched to breathing from his mouth and kept his eyes closed. It was only the sounds he couldn't do much about.

A man was screaming in pain.

'Don't be afraid,' a doctor was saying.

'I'm not afraid, I'm in *pain*,' the man yelled. He sounded young. They'd brought a guy in earlier with what had looked like a broken arm. He'd had his other arm wrapped around his ribs and had gritted his teeth and moaned at each bump as they'd wheeled

him up the corridor. Motorcycle accident, what else. This was probably him. He sounded terrified.

'Can you believe it's this bad?' A woman's voice from somewhere near.

'I know, right? It's terrible,' another woman replied. 'I mean, I wrote an article about it for *Ta Nea*, but I never thought it would be as bad as this.'

'Nea Ionia. The family owns a small carpet factory. Third generation.'

'Refugees?'

'Yeah, grandparents came over in '22.'

'Together, or?'

'No, they didn't know each other yet, they met over here. Arranged marriage.'

'Those people stuck to their own. Not like today.'

'That wasn't always a bad thing.'

'—I mean, not down here, but if you go up to one of the wards.'

'Really?'

'Yeah, I'm telling you, you can rent anything nowadays, not just your own television. A special bed, a special mattress, a special wheelchair.'

'What happens if everyone in your room rents their own television? Can you rent some earplugs?'

Time passed.

A door creaked open and the sounds of conversation died off as a voice said, 'Xenidis!' There was a moment of silence and then the voice repeated, with just a tinge of impatience creeping in, 'Xenidis!'

That's me, Andreas realized. He jumped out of his seat just as the name was being taken up by other voices.

'Yes,' he said, turning to the open door. 'Here I am.' Waiting for him there was the consultant.

The man took him aside, looked him up and down. Slim, silver hair, a thick white moustache, but an unlined, handsome face – Andreas would not wager a guess as to how old he was.

‘The son,’ the consultant said. It wasn’t a question.

‘Yes,’ Andreas agreed. ‘My mother will be back any moment—’

‘You look just like him.’

‘So I’ve been told.’ Too many times to count. He didn’t see it himself.

The consultant gave him a look that could have meant anything. Unlike the registrar’s, the man’s body language and manner were so muted as to be uninterpretable. ‘Here’s where we are,’ he said. ‘Your father’s blood pressure is way too high. Still way too high, even after three hydralazine injections, just one of which should have been enough.’

‘Okay, but—’

‘When I say too high, I mean dangerously high. I mean when your father was brought in his BP was two-sixty over one-sixty.’

These numbers made no sense to Andreas. He stood there and stared at the doctor and tried hard to take them in, but the longer he thought about them the less sense they made. Surely he’d misheard.

The consultant seemed to take his denial for incomprehension. ‘Anything above one-eighty over one-twenty is what we call a hypertensive crisis. Emergency-type stuff. Two-sixty over one-sixty is...’ he grimaced. ‘As I told your mother, if not for the nosebleed he would have stroked out. The arrhythmia we don’t know yet. It’s mild. It might be due to the high BP, or there might be something else going on.’

‘But why—’

‘Has he been under a lot of stress recently?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘Was he upset about anything today? Did he seem worried?’

Andreas took a while to say, ‘I wasn’t at home. If you wait for my mother—’

‘I already asked her. Was just wondering if you knew something she didn’t.’ He gave Andreas a pensive look. ‘He maybe just stopped responding to the medication, from the looks of it. It can happen.’

‘But how—’

'We're not out of the woods yet. We're waiting to see if the third injection might still do the trick. We'll have to try something else if it doesn't. We're going to admit him regardless, keep him under observation for a while. It could just be a matter of adjusting or switching his medication. But this could be pretty serious, understand? He'll be on his way to the ICU soon if nothing changes.'

'Okay,' Andreas managed. 'How is he feeling? Can I see him?'

The consultant thought about it. 'Maybe. We'll see how he's doing in a bit.'

He sat back down and stared at the wall and tried praying. He wasn't sure how to go about it. After twelve years in the public-school system he could recite the Lord's Prayer and the Credo with ease, could probably recall a couple of other prayers well enough, believed not a word of any of it, and had nothing for this moment.

He tried the Lord's Prayer first, then the Credo. He recited them as flawlessly as ever and only felt self-conscious, then frustrated when he realized how quickly the recitation had turned inert, a mere memory exercise. Even now he couldn't make it mean something. It wasn't just that he could put no genuine feeling into the words. The longer he persisted the more he felt as though he were somehow making things worse by drawing attention to how little what he was reciting spoke to him. It could have been anything. Multiplication tables. A shopping list. Gibberish. It would have made no difference. It was just another thing he knew.

He gave up the subterfuge, deciding that direct bargaining would be more to the point, on the principle that if there even was anything up there to hear him, it already had a pretty good idea what he wanted and would appreciate the honesty. This kept him occupied for a short while.

Needing to believe was not quite believing, he found.

It wasn't as though he didn't already know this. Life wasn't anything but a brief elaboration of matter, a temporarily positive signal-to-noise ratio, the integration into the former merely a setting off of a countdown to the disintegration back into the latter. The idea of permanence, of even simple persistence once you thought over a long enough

time span, wasn't borne out by anyone's actual experience of the world, was only borne out by the persistence of the idea itself. Thus did we mistake the world for our idea of it.

No, this wasn't working either. Not that it wasn't all true – it was. But he needed a series of thoughts that would do something akin to what a prayer might have done; he needed doubt, and had none.

He looked up and took the coffee and small water bottle his brother held out to him.

'What took you so long?' he said.

Tasos looked at his watch. 'There was a queue at the canteen,' he said. 'We were only gone ten minutes.'

This number too seemed as nonsensical as anything. He could have said 'ten hours', or 'ten weeks' and Andreas would have still believed him.

'Any news?' his mother said, pushing her bag to the side and sitting down.

'I spoke to the doctor,' Andreas said.

At this point it was decided they'd put off ringing Aunt Katerina long enough. 'Line's busy,' Tasos said when he came back. 'They've taken the phone off the hook.' This would happen during Aunt Katerina's bi-weekly argument with Uncle Savvas. They usually didn't remember to put the receiver back in its place until the following morning.

Then it was their mother's turn to go ring her brother. She stayed on the line for a good while and when she came back she told them Uncle Pavlos was on his way.

They waited. Gone was their previous stillness. Now they fussed and fidgeted and fiddled with empty coffee cups and plastic water bottles and lighters and packs of Camels and got up and took a few steps and stretched their backs and came and sat back down. Andreas walked first one way, then the other, up and down the corridor, and caught himself counting his steps and only turning and heading in the opposite direction on even-numbered ones. It wasn't that some tragedy would hit if he didn't, but one never knew, after all, now did one.

When he eventually sat back down he stared for a long time at the wall just below the air-conditioning unit, where a long brown water stain cut through the white of the concrete almost all the way to the floor. He stared and waited for something to change but nothing did.

He went off to pee. When he came back Tasos was walking up and down the corridor in front of the double doors and their mother was nowhere to be seen. He ran up to his brother.

‘What?’

‘She’s gone in to see him. His blood pressure’s down. Not great yet, but much better. He’s getting admitted. We’re waiting for a bed to clear.’

‘How’s he feeling?’

‘I haven’t seen him yet. The doctor says we can all go in for a few minutes, one at a time, but we mustn’t upset him. No getting emotional, absolutely no outbursts of any kind. No looking concerned or worried or – I know, I know, that’s what Mum told him. “Within reason,” he said. “You don’t want to seem too cheerful. Patients get scared.”’

‘Did Mum tell him, “No shit”?’

‘She came pretty close, I thought.’

Time didn’t pass.

The doors failed to open.

Time didn’t pass.

Andreas took off his watch, put it in his pocket. Sat back down. His left leg shook as though he was playing the kick drum. He held it down with a hand on his thigh.

The doors opened. Their mother walked out. They jumped up. ‘Well?’ they said.

‘He’s okay,’ she said. ‘A little worse for wear. Wants to see you both.’

Andreas and Tasos exchanged looks. ‘You go first,’ Andreas said.

His mother let herself fall onto her seat. Dry-eyed, with an expression on her face Andreas couldn't read. The spasm of fear this caused in him was such that he had to admit to himself that he was terrified. It seemed important to acknowledge this, even silently.

'How's he doing, Mum? What did he say?'

'He's lost a lot of blood,' his mother said. 'He has a headache. He wanted to know if you got home okay. That's about it.'

Time didn't pass.

He tried to think of something to say and came up with nothing. He had no idea how to comfort her. He'd never had to before. He looked at her and saw someone unreachable, but only because his relationship with his parents had never depended on this kind of understanding, or even, in its way, communication, or agreement, or negotiation, or any kind of mutual benefit; their mutual benefit was himself. They were his parents, his audience. He knew what made them tick, sure, intimately, but mostly in terms of what he or his brother might do or not do. It wasn't that outside of this lay parts of their lives they'd hidden from view. Nothing had been hidden from view. That hadn't made it any easier to see from where he'd been standing.

He took her hand and held it.

The doors swung open and Tasos came through them. He motioned Andreas on. 'The doctor says just a few more minutes, then we have to let him rest a bit.'

'How is he?' Andreas said, getting to his feet.

'The headache's better, he says. Go on.' He was holding it together, but it took some effort.

Andreas pushed the doors open and went through.

The lights were much brighter in here, and made every surface look worn, flat, and bleached. Brighter, but cooler too, with a colourlessness that might have been meant to appear clean, antiseptic, but instead looked merely bleak. Every surface *was* probably worn out by bleach. The temperature too was lower than outside. The loudest noise he could hear, which he'd taken for that of medical equipment, was of another air-

conditioning unit on the wall above his head. There were also the faint whirr and complexly regular beeps of hospital machinery, the hiss of a respirator, the tightening of the cuff of a blood pressure monitor. And still, behind the drawn privacy curtains, either the patients' groans, their complaints and attempts at attracting attention, or the imperious voices of hospital staff surveying what they stood in the middle of and apart from; or silence.

One privacy curtain was open. A middle-aged woman lay on her side on a stretcher, moaning softly, with her legs curled up tight and a hand clenched on her abdomen, her forehead glistening with sweat, her face pale, her eyes closed.

A bit to the side was parked a stretcher with an old man on it, skeletal and pale yellow, his torso twisted to the side and half-covered by a light cotton blanket, his head back, his ruin of a mouth wide open, his fists clenched and wrists bent at right angle at the end of arms folded over his heart, slender like the stems of flowers.

The consultant came out from behind a curtain and headed for the nurses' station. He saw Andreas and pointed to a different curtain and said, 'Over there'. The nurse behind the desk looked up and handed the consultant a chart, saw Andreas and threw him a harried smile before looking back down.

Andreas approached the curtain, spotted sticking out from underneath it his father's thick-soled orthopaedic shoes. The calluses on his heels fissured often, and made walking painful. Once every couple of years he went out and bought a new pair of shoes, always the same brand, the same colour.

He peeked around the curtain, then pulled it gently aside and stood next to the stretcher. 'Hey, Dad,' he said.

His father lay there, in an unbuttoned, bloodstained shirt, a bloodstained singlet, a bloodstained pair of trousers. Dried blood caked his stubble, was caught in a smiling line in the groove of his double chin. There was an area of skin just above the singlet's neckline where the hair had been hastily shaved off, and patches attached, the patches connected to wires that led to a small electrocardiograph on a wheel stand next to the bed. Next to it another stand, a digital blood pressure monitor with its screen turned away from the bed, its cuff wrapped around his father's left arm. One trouser leg pulled halfway up his shin. His legs couldn't stay still when he lay down, he'd rub the inside of

each foot against the other calf. The calf hairless in that patchy, older-man way, more at the calf than the shin, the skin craquelured, like an old painting.

‘Hey,’ his father said, opening his eyes. ‘Still in one piece, I see.’

‘You and me both,’ Andreas said. There was a chair next to the stretcher. He pulled it close and sat down. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘Okay. I’m a little cold.’

‘You want a blanket? You should have said something.’

‘Everyone looked so busy.’

‘Come on, Dad.’

The nurse was on the phone. Neither speaking nor listening, it seemed. Just waiting. Andreas waited too for a few moments, then just asked. She pointed to a folded blanket on the empty stretcher. He picked it up and looked it over. Brought it to his nose. Took it to his father, draped it over him. Then uncovered the one foot, just as he would like it. The one cool spot that gave the heat its pleasure.

‘Thanks.’

‘Need anything else?’

‘No, I’m okay.’

Andreas sat back down.

‘How was it?’ his father said.

‘How was what?’

‘The visit. Zoe’s family.’

‘Oh, that. It was fine.’

‘Fine.’

‘Yeah, fine. They were nice. Hospitable. You know.’

‘That bad, huh?’

‘Dad, really. It was fine.’

‘You didn’t call—’

‘—before I left, I know. I’m sorry, Dad. I left in a hurry, then the cardphone was broken...’

‘Just don’t forget next time you visit, please? That motorway’s—’

‘I won’t. I’m sorry. How are you feeling now?’

‘You mean, compared to a minute ago?’

‘Mum said you had a headache.’

'It's going away.'

'Are you still dizzy? What else are you feeling?'

'I'm okay. There's still admitting me though, right?'

'Yes. But it's nothing. Just to be sure.'

'What are they not telling me?'

'What? Nothing. There's nothing they're not telling you.'

'Of course there's something. Doctors never tell you everything.'

'There's nothing to tell. Your medication stopped working. They'll adjust it and you'll be fine.'

'It's the arrhythmia, then.'

'What about the arrhythmia? The doctor said that's probably because of the blood pressure. It's probably nothing.'

'Never believe a doctor who says it's probably nothing.'

'They say that all the time, and it usually *is* nothing.'

'Sure. Until it isn't. But if you don't believe them in the first place, you'll be ready even then.'

'Ready for what?'

'Whatever it is that's not nothing.'

'Is "not nothing" the same as something? Or is one the contrary and the other the contradictory? I'm asking for this Greimas square I'm making.'

'Smartarse.'

'Runs in the family, I hear.'

Something whined next to him and Andreas jumped up, ready to call for help. The electrocardiograph spewed out a long ribbon of graph paper. Andreas stared at the graph, a city skyline full of low buildings, towering spikes and deep wells. He searched it for something to understand. The line itself he couldn't interpret, other than to tell himself that to his eye it looked mostly regular. There were numbers he couldn't in any way evaluate. The few words were his last hope, but they too were no help. 'Borderline ECG ****Unconfirmed****' What was unconfirmed? What did 'borderline' mean? Was that good, or bad? It couldn't be good. But also 'Sinus rhythm'. Just that, no 'normal' or 'abnormal'. Also, 'Incomplete right bundle branch block [90+ ms QRS duration, terminal R in V1/V2, 40+ ms S in I/aVL/V5/V6]'. 'Incomplete' couldn't be good. But 'block' had to be

bad, in which case 'incomplete block' would be good and 'complete block' terrible? He needed someone to walk him through this, help make sense of it.

'Every fifteen minutes,' his father said. And as soon as it's done—'

The consultant popped his head around the curtain. 'How are we feeling?'

'Better, I think, thank you.'

'Still dizzy?'

'A bit.'

'Blurry vision? Chest pain? Confusion?'

'No, no, and, eh, what was the question again?'

'Very funny,' the consultant said. He pushed the curtain open. 'Excuse me,' he told Andreas, who stepped aside and watched him reach for the electrocardiogram and rip it neatly from the machine. He read it a long time as though he suspected it of lying to him. He paused to push a button on the blood pressure monitor. The thing whined and whined and kept whining and Andreas watched the cuff around his father's arm inflate, the electric pump pushing towards some pressure limit that took too long to be reached. Then it stopped, the cuff deflating in spurts until the machine blipped and the cuff released the remaining air all at once. The consultant glanced at the screen of the blood pressure monitor and went back to poring over the electrocardiogram, but not before hitting a button next to the former that made whatever numbers he'd read there disappear before Andreas had time to lean in and take a look.

'All right,' the consultant said eventually. 'All right,' he repeated, but instead of going on he took hold of the inside of Andreas's father's wrist to check his pulse. He did this for what seemed to Andreas like a very long while. Wasn't this redundant? Or would it tell him something the machines hadn't? He wasn't even looking at his watch.

'All right,' he said for a third time.

'Is everything okay?' Andreas asked.

'Blood pressure's down. Not yet where we'd want it, though. We'll wait a bit longer. Ideally we wouldn't want to administer anything more for now. Wouldn't want to risk an overcorrection.'

'And the arrhythmia?'

'I'm not as concerned about that as I was earlier. Anyway,' he said, 'I'll give you a few more minutes but your father needs to rest. We'll be moving him soon – we're waiting for a bed to clear.' He glanced at his watch. 'Huh. It shouldn't be long now.'

'Thank you, doctor,' Andreas's father said.

'You're welcome, Mr' – the slightest of pauses – 'Michalis. And like we said: lose some weight once you're out. Nothing too extreme. Eat a bit less, exercise a bit more. Let's not just rely on the medication from now on, okay?'

'Yes, doctor.'

'Good. Now get some rest. I'll come round again in a while. Let us know if anything changes in the meantime, no matter how minor.' Then he left, pulling the curtain closed behind him.

'See?'

'See what?'

'Everything's fine. There's nothing he's not telling you.'

'That's what you got from that?'

'Dad, the man was telling you what you need to do once you're out.'

'They didn't tell my father he was dying either.'

'Dad.'

'Neither did I. He begged me to. He knew, he just needed someone else to tell him. He begged me to, but I didn't. Your grandmother had made me promise. The doctors, they said it was better if he didn't know, he'd fight harder. An infection, they told him. He laughed in their faces. He was gone in weeks.'

'That's not what's happening here, Dad, come on.'

'I should have told him.'

'Seriously, Dad, stop it. You're not supposed to get worked up.'

'You'll tell me, won't you?'

'There's nothing to tell, Dad, please stop.'

'If there is.'

'Fine, I'll tell you. If there is. Which there isn't.'

'But if there is.'

'If there is.'

'There's some things you need to know.'

'Right now? About what?'

'Just things you need to know about. Family stuff.'

'Whatever it is, it can wait.'

'You need to know, just in case.'

'There's no case, Dad.'

'In the dresser in my and your mother's bedroom, in the bottom right drawer, there's some folders. Diaries, letters. Some of your grandfather's things. Stuff from the war. From 1920. The Asia Minor campaign. He was there. He was barely twenty. There were things he saw...'

'I know, Dad.'

'And from later. Diaries. From the occupation. The civil war. Other stuff. Letters and diaries smuggled out of Makronisos. They tried all sorts of things. Messages written under the stamps, lemon juice, onion juice. Their own urine. The official post was censored, you know.'

'Yeah, Dad, I know.'

'No. No, you don't. Not really. Look, I know you've never cared much.'

'That's not true.'

'It's okay. What good would it do? It's why I never insisted.'

'Dad.'

'But that stuff's there. I'm just telling you. Whether you want to look at it or not, it's there. Your brother too. I told him too.'

'We can talk about this later, Dad.'

'There might not be time.'

'There's plenty of time. Now stop upsetting yourself for no reason. How are you feeling?'

'I'm scared.'

'It's okay, Dad. You gave the rest of us a pretty good scare too. But you heard the doctor. Everything's going to be okay.'

Uncle Pavlos arrived just before dawn. He came running down the corridor and found all three of them sitting there staring at the wall, awake, silent, and expressionless. This was an hour after Andreas had exited the ward. There'd been no news since. Pavlos got all of them more coffee, grabbed a seat and said, 'Tell me. From the beginning.'

Soon after that Michalis was moved out of A&E and into a six-bed room in the pathology ward. His blood pressure was still elevated but not critically so, they were told; the arrhythmia had stopped.

A few hours later came the overcorrection, his blood pressure plummeting to eighty over forty. He was rushed to ICU where the doctors were eventually able to bring it back up to something approaching normal. But by the time they did, the family were told, the prolonged hypotension had disrupted blood flow through his kidneys. How much damage had been done wasn't yet clear, but things didn't look good.

Part Three

Andreas Xenidis: Four attempts at a history of the years 1995-2015

1. Educational.

- 1996: BA English Literature, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens
- 1997: MA Modern Literature: Theory and Practice, University of Leicester
Dissertation: ' "L' Escalier de l' Esprit", or "Whose Voice Is This Anyway?": Minds, Mediations, and Manifestations in the Fictions of Penelope Fitzgerald'
- 2001: PhD English Literature, University of Southampton
Thesis: ' "So Decide": Moments of Vacillation in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction'

2. Employment.

- 2001-2002: Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Leicester
- 2002-2007: Lecturer in Twentieth Century Literature, University of Leicester
- 2007-2012: Senior Lecturer in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature, University of Southampton
- 2012-present: Associate Professor, University of Southampton

3. Relationship.

- 1995-97:
- 1997-98: Hannah
- 1999: Elpida, John
- 2000:
- 2001-03: Lindiwe
- 2003-06: Tom

Victorious Dust

2006-07:

2008-present: Rachel

4. Familial.

1995-1998:

1999: Death of paternal grandmother (Anna)

2000: Death of maternal grandfather (Themistoklis)

2001-2008:

2009: Death of maternal grandmother (Olga)

Death of uncle (Pavlos)

2010: Marries (Rachel)

2011: Death of great-aunt (Aliko)

2012: Birth of daughter (Nora)

2013-present:

Saturday, 4 July 2015 (2015-1943)

And then he was awake. Shapeless shadows flickered on the wall, the blue light of the TV pulsed on his skin without heat. He checked the bedside clock. Red blurs took their time resolving into digits. He blinked them along: Quarter to five. Andreas sighed. Two hours, maybe, if that. But no point even trying to go back to sleep now. He reached behind his back to the other side of the double bed, sought out the remote. Sleeping with the TV on: he's turning into his father.

He switched on the bedside lamp before pointing the remote at the screen. He checked first his own mobile, then his father's. No calls while he slept.

He got up and walked through the flat. All the doors were open again and he went from room to room closing them. He told himself to remember to do this every night, and every night thought he had, only to wake up in the morning and find them open again and all the way across the flat hear the hum of the refrigerator.

In the kitchen he left both mobiles on the table and got the kettle going. When he came back from the bathroom he turned the radio on but kept the volume low. He made out the opening ritornello from the first movement of the fourth Brandenburg Concerto.

At home he would have switched over to the CD player: Meshuggah, 'Demiurge' probably, that endless circular elastic monster of a riff, until Rachel asked him to play something else and he pointed out that if polyrhythmic brutality wasn't the right way to start your morning, he didn't know what was. This was before Nora, of course. Now they moved around the house in that most peaceful of times quiet as cats. Now he saved the music for the car.

He sat at the table holding his mug without drinking from it, already feeling the weight of the coming day settle on him. Or – not the weight of the day but his own, the weight of the self he'd have to carry up the cliff that would be the day ahead.

It was his third week in the old flat, and still the disorientation persisted. Every morning it was the same, he moved through the old spaces and the things in them all came with some kind of burden of meaning attached. They were either the same or changed, either familiar or strange. Arguments for or against entropy, perhaps. Or enthalpy, depending on where you stood. There were stories everywhere he looked

(‘Here, Dad–’, ‘In the morning, Mum would–’, ‘I told Tasos, the silverfish–’); a kind of historical map overlaid onto the flat’s current layout, or a series of asynchronous maps that you needed to see through to get at things as they currently were. It was too much work. He needed things to go back to just being things.

This wasn’t anything new. Versions of it had occurred in almost every visit over the last couple of decades. But his previous visits had been shorter, the circumstances different. There’d been no time for the pressure to build like this, the clamour to get louder than he could bear. He couldn’t bear it now. But he had little choice, so he bore it.

It didn’t help, being the only person in the flat; sleeping in his parents’ bed.

He finished his coffee. Looked at the clock high up on the wall. Quarter past five. He got the kettle going. He opened a cupboard and got out the Tupperware box of rolled oats. He poured some in a bowl, added cold milk and a little honey. He’d lost quite a bit of weight since he’d got here. In truth, he could stand to lose some more.

He forced down mouthful after mouthful, tasting nothing. He knew what this was. Not just the Athenian heat – he was by now, after almost two decades away, not used to it at all, was like any tourist, stepping off the plane, feeling the hot air like an assault, it wrecked his appetite almost immediately – but also the body’s attempt to shut down, to be enervated into equanimity. To put some distance between the mind and the world, to watch from a remove, look up and out from some kind of great depth, and be too exhausted to react, too exhausted to even feel. He wouldn’t go along. Not only was it pointless – the long day ahead would have to be got through regardless – it was also the sheerest cowardice. He would go through this fully present, every moment of it, one after the other. It wasn’t some kind of attempt at expiation; it wasn’t some form of punishment either, as much as in moments like this one it felt as though it were both; it wasn’t even some kind of karmic circling back. There were no lessons to be learned, no moral to be drawn, no peace to be made. Really it was just life, happening. That was the worst thing about it.

Halfway through his second coffee he fired up the laptop. There were forty-nine unread emails left in his inbox. He scanned down the screen and dismissed about two-

thirds of them. The remaining one third would have to be dealt with sooner rather than later.

The morning news show theme music came on the radio, the palm-muted riff, then the brass section exploding in, and those tiresomely upbeat keyboards. He listened to the two presenters welcome their audience in fits of near-hysterical cheer with the unnecessary reminder that there were just over twenty hours to go before the polls opened. Had their listeners made up their minds yet? Yes or No? Accept the bailout conditions, or tell the EU to stuff their deal? The cheer came to an end alongside the music. This was, they assured their listeners, the biggest decision of their lifetimes. Because no matter what those Trotskyite-Stalinists in government tried to sell them, 'No' meant no to everything: a rejection of the Eurozone, the euro, of Europe itself. It meant Greece left out in the cold, a bankrupt economy, a small nation surrounded by enemies—

He turned the radio off. 'Trotskyite-Stalinists', for fuck's sake. About as coherent as the previous day's 'atheist Satanists'. How could his father listen to these clowns?

'Reconnaissance,' had been his mother's response when Andreas had asked her.

'But every morning? How is it possible they don't drive him crazy?'

'Who said they don't?'

He went through the laptop's music folder. Found a Steve Reich subfolder – 'Nice, Dad,' he thought – wavered between *Music for Eighteen Musicians* and *Different Trains*, went for the former. Finished his coffee. Got the kettle going.

He wanted a cigarette. Rachel wouldn't know. Of course then he'd have to quit all over again – it wasn't as though he'd stop at one – and he didn't want to have to go through that a second time. He suspected it would be made worse than the first by the fact that it would be so familiar a repetition of the same torment. Not to mention that by going through it again you could end up inadvertently teaching yourself the wrong lesson. Periodicity, rather than finality.

From: Kathryn Davies <K.Davies@soton.ac.uk>

To: Andreas Xenidis <A.Xenidis@soton.ac.uk>

Subject: Re: Update

Dear Andreas,

Oh, God, I'm so sorry.

Have you found out anything more? How are you holding up? Your family? Please let me know if there's anything I can do. I can't imagine.

I hate to bring this up, but what are you thinking re: work? Your research leave ends this Friday and obviously you won't be back Monday.

You can take domestic/compassionate leave if you want it, or we can just move your annual leave up if you don't want to get bogged down with application forms etc. You wouldn't have to worry about the form till you get back. HR might ask you for supporting evidence, but I mean come on... [Keep in mind, you only get four paid days with dom/comp, then it's unpaid till you're back. Sorry to bring this up, I know it sounds cold, but I gathered from your email that money might come into this at some point, so...]

If there's anything you want me to take care of until you know what you're doing – were you supposed to be seeing any students? – don't hesitate to ask. I mean it.

Best,

Kathryn

Professor Kathryn Davies
Head of English
Faculty of Arts and Humanities
University of Southampton
Avenue Campus
Southampton SO17 1BJ

He sipped his coffee and thought about his response.

From: Andreas Xenidis <A.Xenidis@soton.ac.uk>
To: Kathryn Davies <K.Davies@soton.ac.uk>
Subject: Re: Update

Dear Kathryn,

Thanks. No, there's been no news. We're holding up, I guess. Something like that, anyway. I don't know what that looks like in such cases. We might not be it.

Apologies for not getting back to you sooner. There was a minor accident involving my laptop the other day – I'm on a borrowed one now but it's taking a while to catch up with things.

Re: leave etc. It's unlikely I'll be back in Soton in the immediate future. Even if everything goes as well as it possibly can – and this isn't looking likely, I'm told – we're talking at least a few more weeks. So consider this email as my asking for dom/comp for the whole of next week (one unpaid day won't hurt – much) and then I'll let you know in a few days and maybe take my annual leave from then on. [You're not wrong about the money. Thank you.]

Re: work stuff: PhD-supervisions-wise, I doubt any of my students are going to need much of anything over the next few weeks, I saw the two right before I left, the third I'm about to email comments to. I'll let you know if anything else comes up.

The Ethics Committee thing: I'd appreciate it if someone could cover. Ditto for the Race Equality Charter meeting. The Research Excellence Framework presentation stuff can wait – forever, as far as I'm concerned, but if Jane insists go ahead and decide without me, I'm sure I'll be on board with any changes you make. To be honest, it's hard to even pretend to care at the moment.

Best,

Andreas

Associate Professor Andreas Xenidis
Department of English
Faculty of Arts and Humanities
University of Southampton
Avenue Campus
Southampton SO17 1BJ

He sat back, willing himself to be absorbed in the music, that hour-long argument for phased repetition and accretion, the impossibility of evolution without repetition, and the further impossibility of repetition without evolution, the world having been already too much altered by the first appearance of the thing being repeated; the pulse of the percussion foiled by the pulse of the wind instruments, the mallet's strict time foiled by human breath.

'Music as a gradual process,' Tom had liked to quote, with the syllables in the adjective ostentatiously stretched out, before pretending to fall asleep. Letting his head rest on Andreas's shoulder, which was no small part of the ritual's appeal. He liked Reich well enough in three-minute increments but could never sit through one of his pieces in its entirety without falling asleep, for real this time.

'Too gradual,' had also been Rachel's take. That was Reich's point, Andreas had suggested. A process so slow that listening resembled watching a minute hand on a watch – you could only perceive it moving after you stayed with it a little while.

'You know our conversation the other day about what Hell would actually be like if it existed?'

'I don't like where this is going.'

'Hell, it turns out, is a Steve Reich opera to a libretto by David Foster Wallace.'

'That's grounds for divorce, I'll have you know.'

'We're not married.'

'We're not married *yet*.'

'Thank God. Imagine if I'd learned of your proclivities post-ceremonially.'

Yes, he now saw the repetition he'd missed at the time, and was glad he only saw it now rather than then. It might have put the wrong kind of thoughts in his head regarding the future of their relationship.

From: Andreas Xenidis <A.Xenidis@soton.ac.uk>

To: Miriam Barnes <ma64g12@soton.ac.uk>

Subject: Chapter Two Feedback

Chapter Two Barnes.docx

Dear Miriam,

Well done. This is a significant improvement on chapter one. The argument proceeds much more clearly, and I'm glad to see you've been more judicious with quote selection and length. You've also done really good work in your engagement with earlier criticism, and your critique of Irwin's Nietzschean take on *Absalom, Absalom!* was especially insightful – I'd agree that Irwin is slightly too willing to grant Sutpen grandeur, rather than a paranoid dream of it.

Please see the attached copy of the chapter annotated with more detailed comments. Here are some more thoughts, in no particular order, re: things I'd like you to address/clarify in your next draft:

P. 19, your discussion of embodied subjectivity and historical fiction put me in mind of Michael Taussig's *The Nervous System* – there's a copy in the library. A relevant snippet (p. 10): 'To take social determination seriously means that one has to see oneself and one's shared modes of understanding and communication included in that determining. To claim otherwise, to claim the rhetoric of systematicity's determinisms and yet except oneself, is an authoritarian deceit, a magical wonder... [what is being called for is] an understanding of the representation as contiguous with that being represented and not as suspended above and distant from the represented – what Adorno referred to as Hegel's programmatic idea – that knowing is giving oneself over to a phenomenon rather than thinking about it from above.' Once you decipher some of the academese, I think you'll find this quite useful.

Re: Jameson, national allegories and

He saved a draft to get back to later. The thing about distracting himself with work wasn't that it didn't always happen; it was that when it did he ended up feeling guilty for allowing himself to be distracted in the first place.

He checked his phone, then his father's phone.

He got up and stretched. Finished his coffee standing up, feeling spent, as though he hadn't slept in days. Which he hadn't. Not really. Two hours here, an hour there. There was a brief moment of disorientation during which he didn't know when he was. The kitchen light was on; the twilight outside could have spelled either dawn or dusk; the

coffee said early morning; his exhaustion said deepest night; the red unblinking eyes over the ridge of Hymettus said there was no such thing as time, there was only darkness and the endless attempt to hold it back.

He opened the window. The air outside was not as cool as he'd expected. He listened for any kind of noise. Somewhere a few streets away a bin lorry was mangling trash, and a dog sounded not very happy about it. In the block of flats across the courtyard all the shutters were drawn.

He took both phones with him to the bathroom and left them on the washing machine while he showered. Once he got out he checked them again and took them back to the kitchen. Got the kettle going. Would this be his fourth cup? Possibly. He couldn't recall making a third but didn't think he'd only had two.

He sipped his coffee standing by the window. The hot water had loosened up some of the stiffness in his back but he oughtn't sit down yet.

A month earlier he'd bent over in a hurry to grab his daughter before she ran straight into a glass door. Once upon a time he could sprain an ankle on a Monday and be back out on a basketball court by the weekend. So? he asked himself. Both these things were true, sure, they just weren't very interesting. Run-of-the-mill middle-age self-pity. He could be in danger of turning into a character in Amis – maybe Richard, *The Information*, feeling sorry for himself because 'girls' looked through him, because he had passed over to some other side, turned invisible.

He thought back to the previous night's reading, Byford-Jones watching the protest at Syntagma, noticing the 'preponderate number of girls between eighteen and thirty years of age'. (His father's copy of Byford-Jones' memoir was everywhere heavily underlined, annotated, argued with, dismissed, approved, embraced, mocked, derided, congratulated. But the sentence about the 'girls' had been passed over in commentary silence.)

But he wasn't in any such danger – at least in part for having read Amis and learned something that might not have been intended. He logged on to Facebook and clicked on a message thread named 'Ad Hominem Lupus'.

Book proposal: 'Martin Amis, Textual Authority, and the Case against Chauvinism' intervenes in recent debates surrounding formalism, historicism, poetics, and textual authority in post-1945

British fiction. The monograph problematizes current discussions regarding authorial intentionality working from a perspective herein called

wait for it

The Unintentional Phallacy

He could already guess the group's responses.

Dana Utley [Groan] Why, oh why

Art Govender Writing the grant application now. Here's what I got so far: The move from a structuralist account in which authority is understood to structure textual relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which textual relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brings the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marks a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of authorial structuration inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of the literary langue (pace Sedmidubský). Thoughts?

Dana Utley I'm thinking this sounds suspiciously like Butler with a few particulars changed

Art Govender [Strolls away, whistling Dixie]

Dave Bowles HAHHAHAHAHAHAHA [Thumbs-up emoji]

He checked his phone, then his father's phone. Then the house phone. It rang just as he took it in his hand.

Synchronicity. Here it was. There was no such thing as coincidence, no such thing as event without meaning.

'Hello?'

'Hi.'

'Hi, Mum.'

'Are you up yet?'

'I'm up.'

'I know it's early but—'

'I'm up, Mum. Any news?'

'No, I just called, no news.'

'Okay. Did you sleep at all?'

'Oh, three or four hours. Did you?'

'About the same.' (He didn't believe her. Nor would she have believed him.)

'Are you feeling okay?'

'I'm fine,' she said.

'Did you eat anything?'

'I said I'm fine.'

'And Aunt Katerina?'

'She just woke up.'

'How is she?'

'Okay.'

'What time are you heading out?'

'As soon as she finishes her coffee. You?'

He hesitated. 'I've got to catch up with some work first. It won't take too long.'

'There's no rush,' his mother said.

'Tasos?'

'He called. He's catching an afternoon flight. He needs to go to the office first.'

'On a Saturday?'

'You know how it is.'

'Did he say what time he's getting here?'

'He'll call once he knows. Can you—'

'I'll go pick him up, yes.'

'Rachel and Nora? Are they okay?' (This was what they did now. Every conversation a variation on the same script. An exorcism, a circling around their dread, the telephone an instrument of violence and last hope: while it kept on not ringing, nothing changed. But also, while it kept on not ringing, nothing changed.)

'They're good.'

'Spoke to them this morning?'

'Mum, it's like—' a glance at the clock '—not even five a.m. back home.' (He regretted the word 'home', as true as it was. As true as it could be, when considered without the complications of emotion or history. But his mother seemed to ignore it.)

'I forget. About the time difference. Call me when you've talked to them.'

'They're fine, Mum.'

'Call me anyway.'

'I'll probably be down there myself by the time they're up. Nora will want to say hi to Grandma.'

'Okay. I'll see you in a bit.'

'All right.'

'Call me if there's anything.'

After they hung up, he checked his phone, then his father's phone.

He stuck with Reich, went for *Eight Lines* next, the long-held tones of the cello the thread around and over and under which tumbled first the syncopated ostinato of the piano, then the flutter of piano, flute and piccolo, the strings drawing out the slowness of the sky seen through a cloud of bird wings: the thing that lasted and the thing that didn't. The way, in the fifth section, it almost seemed as though one could turn into the other. Almost.

He pored through the music folder again and wavered between two subfolders labelled 'Anderson' and 'Xenakis'. The former subfolder contained only *Mister Heartbreak*, the latter only *Palimpsest* and *Analogique A et B*.

He thought about Xenakis, his caved-in left cheek and blind eye where the shrapnel from the British shell hit him during the Dekemvriana. Had his father known about that? So far, Andreas hadn't found any mention of Xenakis in his notes. But he hadn't yet gone through everything.

He shut down the laptop and put it in his backpack along with its charger. Then added the charger for both mobiles and a European adapter plug. Checked his phone, then his father's phone, stuffed them in his pockets. He went back to his old bedroom. Found the door open, again. He was sure he'd closed it. Apparently not. He went through his suitcase, looking for clean clothes – he kept forgetting to do the laundry when he came home at night – and came up with a pair of jeans and an old t-shirt. They would have to do. He stood at the kitchen window for a moment, the air on his face already close, oppressive. He looked at his watch.

He pulled the front door shut behind him and was halfway down the stairs when he realized he couldn't remember whether he'd locked it or not and went back to check. He had.

The fastest way to his destination was one big V. Ride the 214 bus all the way to Syntagma, then take the metro. A taxi would have got him there in half the time. But it was still early. He could delay his arrival. Not inexcusably so, not by so much that he would be risking something bad happening. But even an extra twenty minutes of being away from that place yet still moving towards it would do. This too could be argued as part of the ritual of attendance, the only possible compromise between its horror and its necessity.

This was why it was so shocking to find himself, about forty minutes later, moving down Karagiorgi Servias in the direction of Monastiraki. He had no idea how he'd got there. Could only assume he'd caught the bus, got off at Syntagma and, instead of descending the stairs to the metro station, had kept walking. But he had no memory of any of it. He looked around him and tried hard to bring to mind some detail, an image from the walk to the bus stop, the bus ride, his arrival here. He had nothing.

Across the street, guarding the entrance to the building at number 10, which according to the signage belonged to the Ministry of Finance, were two policemen

wearing bulletproof vests and armed with submachine guns. They saw him looking and stared back, both examining him and declaring their ownership of the street, their right to scrutinize but not be scrutinized back. He held their gaze for only a moment before looking away.

There was a woman in a summer jacket standing outside Matsoukas's Deli, talking to herself. No, she was on the phone to someone, and what she was saying was, 'Yeah, he's still here.'

Then, 'I don't know how long for. Supposed to be for work, but with everything that—'

Then, 'I don't know.'

Then, 'Well, he's sick, isn't he?'

Then, 'No, they didn't say anything. Petros told me. He says finding out is what killed his mother.'

He reached for his father's phone.

'Hello?'

'It's just me, Mum,' he said.

'I forget you have the phone, and the name comes up on the screen and—'

'Are you there yet?'

'Yes, we're here. We're in the cafeteria.'

'Any news?'

'No, nothing. It was a quiet night, Papageorgiou said. Haven't seen Antoniou yet.'

'All right.'

'Where are you? Are you on your way?'

'I'm at Syntagma. I'll be there soon, I just need to take care of some work stuff first.'

'There's no rush, now that we're here.'

'I won't be too long.'

'Okay, bye.'

And yet. And yet he was certain, somehow, that the subject of the conversation he'd just eavesdropped on was none other than himself, though this couldn't be, he didn't even know this wo—

The woman was gone. He looked for her, peering through the deli's window display in case she'd entered the shop but of course the shop was closed, it wasn't anywhere near nine o'clock yet, the woman was nowhere to be seen, and even if this was nothing new – out in the street people disappeared all the time, you looked up or left or right and they were gone, or turned into someone else – he was seized now by the conviction of her spectral status, of having just received some kind of message, the need for interpretation of which wasn't negated by its apparent crudity. Not to imply he didn't already understand it. It was in fact suspiciously obvious what had been meant, the details notwithstanding; so much so that hallucination or supernatural involvement had to be considered the most likely of explanations. A hallucination then. There was no such thing as ghosts.

He checked his phone, then his father's phone.

Religion, he couldn't do. He lacked the gene for the supernatural, whatever it was that gave you the aptitude. Without that, what you got was at most the need to believe, but that wasn't quite believing. He had learned this lesson a lifetime ago, staring at a white wall bisected by a brown water stain.

He felt shaken, despite his scepticism. 'No big deal, I'm not being haunted, I'm either just hallucinating outright or imagining I'm seeing signs everywhere,' didn't do much in the way of appeasement.

The dangers of signification, he thought. Call it an occupational hazard.

He dug into his backpack for his water bottle but he'd forgotten to fill it before leaving the house. He bought a cold bottle of water from the kiosk next to the deli. He drank half of it and transferred the other half to his own, insulated bottle.

He glanced at the newspapers hung around two sides of the kiosk like a row of dentils just inside and below the square valance of its awning. One side political dailies, one side sports newspapers. He ignored the latter, read the headlines of the former without understanding what he read. The referendum: utter folly, and an act of economic

suicide the country wouldn't recover from for decades; or historic moment in a new war for – financial – independence, a new revolution, the throwing off of the foreign yoke. Etc. The majority of headlines leaned towards 'folly'. This didn't tell him much. He couldn't name the owners of about half of them.

In a hurry to get away, he found himself walking not towards Syntagma but away from it, again towards Monastiraki. He needed to head back to the metro. Instead he kept going. He'd turn around at the next corner.

He didn't turn around at the next corner. Nor the one after that. Just one more, he told himself. Then kept telling himself. Just one more. Just one more.

What was he doing? He had to turn around. Why couldn't he?

Another corner. Another.

He gave up. He was closer to Monastiraki now anyway, he'd get the metro there.

He thought this and felt an easing of the tension in his stomach and, unresisting now, was carried away by whatever tide he'd been caught by, arriving at the next corner and telling himself to turn left. Here. Left. Here.

He turned right and kept going.

He checked his phone, then his father's phone.

It was okay, he decided. Nothing bad would happen, not with his mother and aunt already there. He could be a little late. Whether imagined or not, that's what the woman in the summer jacket had been about: permission.

Eventually he began noticing the relative quiet, even for so early on a Saturday. Only it wasn't even that early anymore – coming up to nine. There should have been more people around, more traffic, more shops about to open. But the people were few, the vehicles fewer, the shuttered, graffitied shopfronts many. Of course quite a number of Athenians would have headed back to wherever their families hailed from in order to vote; patronage and the extra days off from work being a strong disincentive against moving their voting rights elsewhere. Where they actually lived, for example.

Sure, there could be other, less cynical reasons not to do this, to reject the move as either the inauguration or the culmination of some process of detachment, rootlessness; he just didn't want to think of any. It was easier to think in terms of a rudimentary historical analysis. Four hundred years of decentralized Ottoman rule had taught Greeks a lesson whose relevance to their lives no one since had been able to disprove: central government was the enemy, always looking to overtax you, take your land away, take your sons away, fodder for the Sultan's Janissary corps; local government the friend responsible for the compiling of the defter, the friend who could be persuaded to record your tax and tithe obligations in a mutually advantageous manner; who protected your sons from conscription; who could be relied on to turn a blind eye to violations of some of the more minor discriminatory codes determining Christian-Muslim relations.

Fast-forward a couple of hundred years past the revolution, and here you were; the present mess. Though of course the point was you couldn't do that, fast-forward. Nor could you avoid asking the question of how different things had been under Byzantine rule. There was always something more to consider, some earlier iteration of the thing examined.

Not to mention, if you thought about it, wasn't that the problem with the idea of rootlessness itself? It was, just like borders and national histories, a bit of a joke, what with its arbitrary delimitations and beginnings, its 'this far back and no further' obfuscations; a shadow cast backwards from an ordinary present.

These were useful thoughts inasmuch as they gave him something to work with other than himself. The analysis itself he didn't trust all that much. This wasn't his field of expertise.

He checked his phone, then his father's phone.

The sky had turned the hard flat flame-like blue of incipient heat. Not a cloud in sight. A single contrail overhead: a razor cutting across a mattress, the stuffing falling out.

They were useful thoughts, but at the end of them there awaited still those shopfronts that, it was obvious, had not had their shutters lifted in a long while, the shutters, like the walls next to them, covered now in successive layers of decayed and

decaying posters advertising music gigs, grassroots community actions, solidarity initiatives, theatrical performances, political parties no one had ever heard of, whole rows of the same colourful rectangle, four or five or six copies one after the other, overlaid on a similar, different-coloured row, never precisely enough to completely hide their predecessors, whole assemblages of these things in discoloured, peeling layers, the shutters and walls the psoriatic skin where the city's illness broke out, the red-on-yellow and red-on-white strips marking every empty shopfront: 'For Sale.' 'To Rent.'

And then there were the referendum posters.

'NO. For democracy, for dignity.' (The government poster.)

'YES to Greece, YES to the euro,' and 'YES to Greece, YES to Europe'. (The 'Remain in Europe' people. Nonpartisan, at least in theory. Not beholden to any particular ideology, they'd tell you – which, where to even begin.)

'NO to new memorandums, NO to austerity, NO to blackmail.' (The 'Pan-Polytechnic Initiative for NO'. Your guess was as good as his.)

Finally, the inevitable. The Greek Communist Party and its sempiternal, Bartlebian claim to determinate negation: 'NO to the EU-IMF-ECB deal. NO to the government's deal.' Still, bless their hearts, reserving their right to say: No, not this, but also not not-this. Not so much inviting as demanding dismissal by being permanently outraged. By diagnosing every dilemma as a false one. It was comforting to know they were still around. One of these days they might even grow out of their homophobia and maybe get his vote.

He checked his phone, then his father's phone. He glanced at his watch. Called his brother.

'Hey.'

'Hey.'

'Everyone okay?' Tasos said.

'Everyone's fine.'

'Where are you? Are you at the clinic?'

'No, I'm still in the city centre. Had some stuff to take care of first. Where are you?'

'Work,' Tasos sighed.

'What's the emergency?'

'There isn't one, yet. But there's a deadline, the client's a dick, and the code's still halt-and-catch-fire stuff.'

'Mum says you're catching an afternoon flight?'

'Not sure which one. Depends what time I'm done here.'

'You haven't booked a ticket yet?'

'It's Salonica, not Toronto. There's like ten flights a day.'

'Want me to come pick you up?'

'In what?'

'Dad's car. We can drop it off at Katerina's, catch a taxi back home.'

'Sure, if you can.'

'Just let me know what time.'

'Will do. Also, we need to talk.'

'About?'

There was a long pause. Finally, Tasos said, 'I was going to tell you tonight, but – they're overcharging us.'

'...'

'By a lot.'

'I thought—'

'Yeah, a deep discount. "Anything for Mr Xenidis." No, it turns out there's a cap, and they're charging us almost double that.'

'Are you—'

'I checked the Government Gazette. I haven't told Mum yet.'

'Fuck's sake.'

'You sound surprised.'

'Well maybe I shouldn't be, but...'

'You're the one who's always going on about neoliberal this and capitalist that,' Tasos said.

'Yeah, I know.'

' "The proof is staring you in the face. How much more evidence do you need?" '

'Yeah, but—'

'Well, how much more evidence do *you* need?'

'They've known us for what, twenty years? I just thought that counted for something.'

'Man, seriously? We've been *customers* for twenty years. Customers.'

'Yeah, I know.'

'You need to get out of academia more.'

'I said I fucking know.'

'...'

'Sorry. It's not been an easy morning.'

'It's not been an easy month.'

'Anyway, you're right. Though it's not like academia is some kind of communist haven for economic simpletons, let me tell you.'

'I didn't mean it like that.'

'Never mind. What are we going to do?'

'I don't know. That's where "We need to talk" came in.'

'How do they expect to get away with this?'

'First of all,' Tasos said, 'who's going to report them while seated outside the ICU waiting for visiting hours? Secondly, you know for a fact worst case scenario is they'd get hit with a fine they'd probably never have to pay and promise not to do it again, and that's it.'

'They should have their licence revoked.'

'Yeah, sure. This is Greece, man. I know you've been away a long time but come on.'

'I was about to make another transfer to Mum's account. We were supposed to be behind, and they were very *understanding* about it, you know?'

'Yeah, they called me too, yesterday afternoon. That's what reminded me to look into it.'

'Maybe I should make the transfer anyway? I mean, just in case, until we sort this out?'

'How much of a hit would that be for you guys?'

'Honestly?'

'Honestly.'

'It would wipe out our savings.'

'Already? Jesus.'

'Two academics on a combined one-point-five contracts, one child, one mortgage at Southampton property prices? It's not like we were about to retire to Cancun and spend the rest of our lives scuba diving.'

'So maybe hold off on that transfer for now.'

'Can you make a payment if need be?'

'A small one, maybe. I'm not exactly raking it in at the moment.'

'So I'll talk to Rachel anyway. Just in case.'

'I've to get back to work. Talk later.'

'All right.'

'Call me if there's any news.'

'Of course. Let me know which flight.'

'Okay, bye.'

'Bye.'

On the night they'd rushed his father to the public hospital three weeks previously, it had transpired there wasn't a single ICU bed available in the whole of Attica. Budget cuts, it was explained. About one hundred and fifty beds not currently in use. The reason? Take your pick: chronic staff shortages, lack of equipment, the state of some facilities. Mostly staff shortages. They could only put Michalis on the waiting list and see what happened.

All this time Michalis was lying in a pathology ward bed with only a nurse coming round to check on him every half an hour or so. Once he'd been stabilised the registrar on shift had moved on to other patients and Andreas and his mother hadn't seen her again. Every few minutes the machine he was hooked up to would howl in alarm and Andreas and his mother would run down the corridor screaming for help and the nurse would tell them it didn't mean anything, it would sound different if there was actually something wrong.

Andreas was on the phone to Tasos, who'd have to wait another couple of hours for the first flight of the day from Salonica and that was when the idea came up. Get their father to a private ICU, worry about paying later. It might be for a few days, but how expensive could it be? They both had some money put away. Which ICU?

Andreas rang up the clinic where his father had been getting his outsourced dialysis treatments. They were in luck, a bed was about to become available later that morning. It was ideal, considering the circumstances. Michalis had been their patient for almost twenty years; there wasn't anything about his medical history they didn't know; his nephrologist would be right next door at all times. As for the cost, Andreas needn't worry about it. Anything for Mr Xenidis.

Once off the phone, he spent several moments attempting to work up the anger he should have been feeling, but it just wasn't there. He was too exhausted, too terrified. He tried anyway, just to feel something other than what he'd spent the previous three weeks feeling.

Next he tried to act out anger in order to invoke it. He swore out loud, walked up to a nearby blue recycling bin and kicked it once, hard. A dull, echoey thud – the bin was mostly empty. Immediately he felt terrible, though he'd done no damage to the thick polyethylene. He'd barely felt the contact himself through his hiking boots.

He looked around for witnesses. The street was empty. Small as it was, this wasn't much of a surprise. He'd kept walking while he'd been on the phone, paying even less attention to where he was going, and wasn't sure where he'd ended up. The nearest street sign bore a name that meant nothing to him. Some cul-de-sac off Aiolou? He thought about the direction he'd been heading in earlier. It could be. This wasn't a part of the city centre he'd ever been that familiar with, but it felt right.

On the other side of the street a first-storey balcony door was cracked open and a middle-aged woman peered down at him, tucking her long auburn hair behind her ear. He looked back and started to apologize but she clutched her dressing gown at her throat and shivered and the door closed in his face, the curtain was drawn shut.

'Sorry,' he said to no one. 'I'm sorry.'

He glanced around once more, this time trying to decide which direction to take, left or right, and opting for the latter.

He checked his phone, then his father's phone.

[Summary of excised section:

Andreas wanders around the city centre. He calls his mother to let her know he's at the National Library working (he's not – the Library is closed) and will not make morning visiting hours. He's now become convinced, in an exact inversion of his earlier belief, that nothing can go wrong as long as he stays away from the clinic. There are a few flashbacks to earlier moments in his life that suggest his relationship to history, both familial and national, has in recent years become increasingly vexed. He notes the long ATM queues and contemplates the state the country's in, as well as the various opinions he's been exposed to as to who's to blame – opinions that range from the reasonable if contentious to the outright mad, and often seem to be based to various degrees on different readings of the history encountered in part one. Andreas thinks about his great-aunt Aliki, and the reader finds out about the circumstances of the death of her husband and son, and how this relates to her refusal to use her flat's wardrobe (mentioned in the novel's prologue). He talks to Rachel on the phone, and she agrees to Andreas using the last of their savings to pay for the clinic if needed. A flashback to their first meeting reveals Rachel to be a historian and Andreas, at the time of this meeting, to be far more conversant with British rather than Greek history. See appendix, p. 409.]

Later, he found himself on Vasilissis Sofias Avenue, standing outside the building at number six, a six-storey-tall block of flats painted an almost-pink shade of ochre. He looked up, shielding his eyes from the sun. The edge of the roof was lined with thick flowering shrubs. He looked back down; even with sunglasses on, the glare was too much.

He turned to leave but something nagged at him. He stopped and turned back and stared at the building again and eventually recalled its significance. Which flat had been Papandreou's? Which floor? No source he'd consulted so far had provided that particular piece of information.

He pulled his phone out and stood back on the pavement and took a picture. He dragged a finger on the touchscreen, brought up the picture and examined it. Half the edifice was hidden behind an explosion of glare. He deleted the picture, tried again. He crossed to the opposite pavement and moved a little up the street and took another picture from a slight angle. Finally he took one that kind of worked, though on the screen the building came across as flatter, more straightforwardly pink.

He set off downhill, towards Syntagma. Walked past the Benaki Museum, then the Italian Embassy. He looked ahead and saw, maybe fifty metres ahead, his father standing at the next corner, looking up the cross street towards Kolonaki.

It was his father, no question.

He froze and could only stand there and stare at his father staring, then disappearing round the corner.

He didn't even bother calling out, just broke into a run. A few strides later he was already struggling, his chest was heaving, his lungs were seizing up, the heavy air was not enough, could not reach down far enough inside him, pooled at his throat and burned and stifled and he was drowning in it and his boots were barely getting off the ground, and there was that sensation, familiar from nightmares, of immense inhuman effort resulting only in the smallest and slowest of movement, of time seized-up and inescapable – not some kind of eternity because there was, inside it, no space at all, no time inside time, and no way out to the next moment. It didn't matter. He ran.

Years later he reached the cross street, took the turn, saw, up ahead, the man who couldn't be his father. Not far away at all, a big man moving slowly, yet Andreas struggling to reach him and wanting to yell at him to 'Stop, wait,' but too out of breath to do so, the man favouring the wrong leg though, the left, his father slightly favoured his right, a kind of mirror image then, in which case unreachable because Andreas was running in the wrong direction but nevertheless the gap closed and then the man turned and pushed open a door and went through, and that moment was enough for Andreas to see that of course, of course, the man was not his father.

And to only then register that the man's shape was unquestionably similar to his father's, but to his father's twenty years before, at his heaviest, right before the disease had forced him to finally lose some weight.

Still he ran the last few metres to the building's entrance, determined to get another look at the man but once he made it and searched through the glass door the long lobby behind it was dark and empty.

He bent over with his hands on his knees and took a few deep, gasping breaths. He removed his sunglasses and dragged a forearm across his brow. He put his sunglasses back on. He drank the last of his water. Eventually the nausea subsided. He approached the entrance and read all the names on the three columns of doorbells. Didn't recognize any of them.

Just up the street he came across another familiar building. This one he didn't struggle with, having seen just the previous evening a photograph of it dating from the '40s in which it had stood, entirely unchanged, right next door to the photograph's actual subject, a building now long gone, replaced by a behemoth of a cosmetics store, in a recess next to whose entrance stood a bronze relief sculpture of a naked man with his hands tied behind his back, his feet tied at the ankles, some kind of plaque and an iron frame holding up a rusted cell door. He took a few photos from a distance, then approached the memorial. The plaque read, 'Here stood the Gestapo's Hell House 1941-1944'. He took one more photo, then walked away.

He checked his phone, then his father's phone.

He checked his phone, then his father's phone.

He next found himself in another square. A much bigger, familiar specimen this one, with another church standing near its middle, surrounded by shops and several cafés with dozens of outdoor tables, all occupied, tightly packed under large canvas awnings, the clientele mostly in their twenties or late teens. There was no ebb and flow to the noise, only the steady buzz of dozens of conversations, laughter, the clatter of rolled dice, the crack of pieces slammed on backgammon boards, voices raised in merriment or debate, the music blaring from competing sets of outdoor speakers, three or four or five songs that from what he could tell might as well have been the same one, an upbeat lament for a lost lover, or an upbeat tirade aimed at a lost lover, or an upbeat tirade aimed at a current lover, or an upbeat exaltation aimed at a new lover, or an upbeat plea aimed at the one who dared not want you for a lover. The myriad flavours of the Greek pop charts, perpetually untroubled by subject matters other than sex.

What instinct had brought him here he couldn't quite say, as obvious as it might have seemed at first. The fact of the matter was it was a Saturday, and so the publishing house would not be open. The ground-floor bookstore might be, but this didn't present the same kind of danger. Maybe this was what he was after, proximity without the risk of intersection. But what for? Perhaps, despite what he told himself, he was hoping for intersection. After all, hardly a trip to Athens had gone by in the last few years without him finding cause to walk past the place. Never during working hours, but never too far removed from them either.

In any case even the bookstore turned out to be closed. He could walk up to the window, take his time to examine the books on display: French and Scandinavian writers he'd never heard of; most of the titles and covers screamed Euro noir. There were also a couple of relatively recent Prix Goncourt winners, neither of which he'd read. A few popular economics and politics titles.

He turned to leave and rushing his way (no, not his way, her focus was on the bookstore, not him) here was a middle-aged version of Zoe who (she saw him too, her eyes widened and she almost faltered) who was, in fact, Zoe, and only incidentally a variation on her mother.

Seeing her, he realized his mistake. As it turned out, whatever he'd been hoping for, intersection had not been it.

Linen trousers, sleeveless top, sandals, round sunglasses. Not much evidence of a tan. Hair kept long and its natural brown colour. Face pleasantly lined. Slimmer than she'd been at twenty. A reduction into a core, the way some people seemed to grow older via the shedding of the extraneous.

'How are you?' she was saying. 'It's been way too long.'

'Good, good. I'm fine. You?'

'Good. Great. What brings you to our part of the world?'

'I just happened to be passing by and I saw the display. You know me, never could resist the sight of a bookstore.'

'Amen to that. It's living fossils like you that keep us in business. But no, I mean here as in "the country". Holiday? Here to vote?' She paused. 'Don't tell me you moved back home?'

'No, no, nothing like that. Home is still Southampton.'

'Leicester, I thought?'

'No, not in a while. I'm in Southampton now.'

'Like I said – way too long.'

They hadn't spoken in a least a decade. Everything about his Facebook profile with the exception of a photo of him with his face hidden behind a copy of *The Man Without Qualities* was locked to friends-only, of whom they no longer had any in common. Still, even the most cursory online search for his name would come up with his university staff page.

The fact that she'd obviously never looked him up didn't bother him. It wasn't as though he'd tried keeping tabs on her himself. He knew where she worked because she'd made enough of a name for herself in Greek publishing circles that coming across it on a semi-regular basis was more or less inevitable. Which raised the question of whether he really didn't care enough to search her out, or only pretended he didn't, safe in the knowledge that relevant information would find its way to him regardless. As a means of answering this question, he'd never attempted to answer it.

'...still teaching, I imagine?'

'What else?' He pointed to the building over his shoulder. 'You're still at-?'

'I'm managing director now.'

'Congratulations.'

She waved a hand in the air. 'Eight people. That's the whole company. It's not that big a deal.'

'Just big enough that you have to come in on a Saturday.'

'No, it's not like that. I wanted to print off a manuscript or two. Going back home to vote. Thought I'd get some work done while I'm there.'

'Ever heard of e-readers?'

'Sure. Do *you* own one?'

'God no, I hate the fucking things.'

She laughed. 'Didn't think so,' she said. 'So, did you come for the referendum or are you on holiday?'

'No, I came for work. But I might as well vote now that I'm here.'

'As politically engaged as always, I see,' she said.

'Actually—' he thought about saying, but just shrugged instead.

'How are your parents? Your dad? Still—'

'—on dialysis, yes,' he hastened to say, then paused. This wasn't a lie. Not saying anything about the rest of it would be the lie, but this was about as much as she was entitled to, being barely even an acquaintance anymore. 'Same old, you know,' he said. 'My mother's fine.'

'That's good to hear,' she nodded. 'And Tasos?'

'Tasos is doing great.'

'Married?'

'He's in no rush. How about your parents? Your brother?'

'Plodding along, same as always. You know, with the exception of my father's daily freak-out about his pension. Manthos is fine. The garage is doing well. He just got engaged. My parents had just about given up hope. There was talk around the village — you know what those people are like.'

She pulled a flat leather pouch out of her bag. He smelled the tobacco while she was still working the leather lace strap wrapped around a floral design silver concho.

'Still at it, I see,' he said.

'I quit while I was pregnant. Both times. That was long enough.'

'Hey, they're your lungs. Speaking of which, how are Yerasimos and the kids?'

'The kids are good. Yerasimos, I wouldn't know. Okay, last I spoke to him.'

'Oh. I'm sorry to hear that,' Andreas said, surprised to find he actually meant it.

'It was a while back. I'm actually doing great now. I'm almost kicking myself for not doing it sooner, you know?'

'Oh yeah, been there,' he said. 'Still, never too late, right?'

He looked her in the eye, saw nothing there. He resented her for that, just a little. Moving on was one thing, forgiving another, but pretending some shit had never happened was something else entirely. Then again, he was hearing from an ex-girlfriend about the guy she'd been sleeping with behind his back and later dumped him for, while

she was talking to an old acquaintance about her ex-husband. She couldn't have forgotten about the connection, but of course in her mind that had been the prelude, not the main movement. This was as it should be, he concluded: same events, different facts. Different stories. Of course, it was easy to think that now, twenty years down the line, when there was no longer anything he needed from her, not even an apology.

'Listen,' she said, then hesitated. 'Do you have a minute? Let me buy you a quick coffee. If you're not in a hurry.' She saw something in the way he looked at her and added, 'Come on. I haven't seen you in like a decade.'

He made a show of looking at his watch. 'I am kind of late but—'

'Oh, okay, maybe—'

'No, you know what? It's fine. I've got nowhere else to be for the next half hour.'

Why did he agree? Possibly because despite her protestation he sensed that she wanted something from him, and was curious.

Perhaps because, having fallen out of the rhythm of his day, he was finding it more and more difficult to see how he would make his way back to it.

Or it could be that he was considering the improbability of bumping into her on this of all days and deciding there was intent behind the coincidence. (Which crap, no, he wouldn't entertain. It had been bound to happen at some point, as long as he didn't go out of his way to avoid one of the few places he knew she could be found.)

Or maybe he just needed to sit down somewhere for a few minutes, out of the sun, and drink some water and have some more coffee and just breathe and clear his head and forget about running after the man who wasn't his father, and maybe he needed to do all this in the company of someone who would lay claim to his attention without making him talk about what he couldn't bring himself to talk about, and that someone, finally, could be just about anyone. Even Zoe.

He checked his phone, then his father's phone.

They didn't sit at one of the cafés. 'Too much noise,' Zoe said.

'Hadn't realized this was the place to be all of sudden,' he said.

'Couple of years now – if you're twenty. Everyone else opts for somewhere quieter. The coffee's cheap, too, which helps.'

She led him around the back of the church, where a wooden bench stood in its shade. They sat there with their takeaway coffees and small bottles of water.

'So your dad never did get the transplant, did he.'

'Never high enough on the list. Then he got older and at some point he decided even if a kidney was found he'd rather it went to someone else. And he wouldn't hear of any of us donating. In the end he just wore us down.'

'Yeah, that's what they do.'

'"They"?''

'You know. Parents,' she said, head down, rolling another cigarette. He almost asked her for one, but thought better of it. He could picture the look she'd give him.

She licked the edge of the rolling paper and – another twenty years of experience – rolled the cigarette one-handed while flicking it around and bringing it to her mouth. It looked like some kind of magic trick, as though halfway through the motion a substitution had taken place.

'Very impressive.'

She lit up and took a deep drag before answering. 'What's *really* impressive is what happens once you start calculating how much practice you've had at it.'

'That's true of everything though, pretty much.'

'It certainly is.'

He sipped from his coffee. He checked his phone, then his father's phone.

'Speaking of addictions,' she said. 'Two?'

He held both devices up. 'British number, permanent. Greek number, temporary.' Too late it occurred to him she might read this as a kind of invitation.

'Ah,' she said. 'Makes sense.' She didn't ask for either number. Relieved, he put both phones away.

She half-turned to him. Pointed at his t-shirt. 'Don't tell me you still listen to Rotting Christ too?'

'I'd kind of lost track of them for a while, to be honest. But then they took that folk turn—'

'Folk turn?'

'Yeah, they started incorporating folk elements into their stuff. Epirotica mirologia and amanedes; tsampounes; *a lot* of pentatonics. You should check out *Theogonia* and

Aeolo. It's not exactly ground-breaking stuff, I mean you know the deal with black metal and folk, it's just usually we're talking Nordic folk and pretty much *everyone* in that scene is a neo-Nazi – not that this isn't a problem over here too of course – so thanks, but no. It's hard to find stuff to listen to nowadays, at least if you're not into the whole post-metal, blackgaze thing. Which, thankfully, I am.' For a moment everything was okay, they were twenty again and all he had to worry about was ensuring they liked the same stuff. But the moment passed. 'Anyway,' he said, waving off the whole business.

'To be honest, I'm surprised you of all people would give them credit for going down the folk route.' She took a final drag from her cigarette, let it fall to the ground and stomped it out.

'What can I tell you? All I know is it sounds good to my ears.'

'Come on. You always knew more than that. As you kept reminding anyone who'd listen.'

'Also, anyone who wouldn't. God, I was such an asshole.'

'Oh, you weren't that bad. You just had opinions. About everything.'

'Ah, yes. Where would I have been without my opinions?'

'So, opinion time,' she said. 'For old times' sake.'

'Why do I appreciate the introduction into metal of folk elements that I otherwise have always claimed to find literally physically impossible to stomach.'

'Mmm, something like that.'

'The radical redemption of tradition into a non-dead, non-inert thing? The wearying familiarity of certain sounds making them impossible to listen to, or even hear, until they are deployed in a different context? Middle age? Migrant syndrome? Maybe it's my version of Steve Reich's baseball-hat-instead-of-a-yarmulke? My way of squaring the circle? Who can say? I haven't thought about it much.'

He had, of course, thought about it. Much. But he couldn't tell her that, having neither the will nor the energy nor the time to attempt to explain his conclusions.

'Is that it?'

'About it, yes.'

'Who are you and what have you done with the real Andreas?'

'I didn't just take his place, I assimilated him. I was going for world domination but had to settle for marking undergraduate papers.'

If he didn't know any better he would have said she looked sad to have not got more out of him. Not about music, obviously. He thought about what he in turn would have preferred, to discover here, now, a Zoe unknown and unfamiliar, or more or less the same person, untouched by time. Truth was, he would have preferred neither. This was the thing about one's middle years: your frustration at what had changed was only equalled by your frustration at what hadn't. It would be easier to not look back at all, if you could. Perhaps this was why he'd regretted running into her the moment he'd laid eyes on her.

'You should have a listen yourself.'

'Huh? To what? Rotting Christ?'

'Maybe you can let me know why it is I like what they're doing.'

'Yeah, no thanks. I don't listen to metal anymore. I've got enough screaming in my life already.'

'Is such a thing as enough screaming even possible?'

'You'd need to have kids to understand.'

'Well, actually.'

She barely flinched. 'Oh?' she said. Shook her head. 'It doesn't always register, how long it's been, does it. So tell me,' she said.

So he told her. Gave her a kind of condensed history of the previous decade. Or, not quite a history, nor a chronicle; annals, almost. A chronological list of events presented with neither comment nor any attempt at causal relations. Just one thing after another. I lived in a place. Worked in a place. Then another place. I dated someone for a while. (He offered no details. It occurred to him he couldn't begin to guess where she currently stood on such matters.) Then dated someone else. Got married. Have a daughter. The last three items the only ones that came with the indication of a story behind them, though the story itself he would not relate.

She smiled at all the right places and didn't rush to change the subject. Whatever he might have been tempted to think this was – the scene in the novel during which the spurned lover gets the chance to rebuff the spurner's advances, the latter's realization of the mistake made, *Great Expectations*, almost, if Dickens had held his nerve – this wasn't it.

Thank fuck, too. He'd lived through one version of such a scene, with Tom, after months of imagining the pleasures of its cruelty, and it had just proved cruel, and ugly, hurtful as much to him as to Tom, and when he'd got up and walked out of that café, leaving Tom in tears behind him, it had been all he could do not to cry himself. And though going through all that with Zoe wouldn't have been nowhere near as bad, he found himself relieved to realize some kind of second-chance scenario was not what she had in mind.

'So don't tell me you're making your daughter listen to metal too.'

'I don't *make* Nora do anything. She's three – she thinks the cookie-monster vocals are hilarious. Plus it's, you know, her dad's music, of course she loves it now. At some point she won't *because* it's her dad's music. Her version of teenage rebellion will probably be listening to fucking Adele or something.'

'Tell your wife she has my sympathy.'

'She's resigned to her fate. Though she's drawn the line at the metal-t-shirts-for three-year-olds thing. There are some incredibly cute ones available.'

There followed a brief pause in the conversation, which they filled by sipping coffee, sipping water.

He checked his phone, then his father's phone.

'Don't let me hold you up,' she said.

'I'll go in a bit,' he said. He glanced at his watch. Morning visiting hours would have already begun. Thirty minutes, that was all they got. A maximum of two visitors at any one time. As he sat here, his mother and aunt would be going through the outer doors, washing their hands, putting on the blue paper gowns – no surgical masks though, no latex gloves, it was overkill they'd been told, as long as you used the hand sanitizer when you went in, which Andreas didn't quite know what to feel about, overkill would be fine as far as he was concerned – then moving down the short corridor at the end of which stood the bullet bin they would shed the gowns into on their way out, a chrome monster of a bin reflecting a liquid mess of movement from around the corner – the actual ward – so that once the outer doors were opened and you stood just outside them, counting down the minutes until your turn came, you could look nowhere but at that chrome cylinder with the vertical line of dazzle from where the light hit it, blue shapes

moving on its surface in weird planes now horizontal, now vertical, now both, now neither, rising and falling, then falling away, slipping sideways, then vanishing, as though they'd found a crack in the world and stepped through. Uninterpretable, but you tried anyway.

It was too soon, but he checked his phone, then his father's phone.

'Quite an addiction, aren't they,' Zoe said.

'Something like that,' he said, startled. He'd almost forgotten she was there.

'So,' Zoe said. 'Work, huh?'

'Work?'

'You said you're here for work.'

'Oh, yeah. I'm going through an archive at the National Library. The CSHA, too.

Well, I say "archive". More like a couple of boxes of notes, a few annotated books.'

'Whose?'

'Stelios Abatzoglou.'

'Abatzoglou... No – oh wait, the gay science-fiction writer?'

'That's a little reductive, but yes.'

'Nobody reads him anymore.'

'Again, not exactly true, though I'll give you he's mostly been neglected. Unjustly, in my opinion. His memoirs are still being read.'

'Sure, by civil war researchers and absolutely no one else. Did you run out of anglophone writers? Or is that the point? You revive interest in his work and get your own little academic niche to ride into retirement? I can't imagine there'd be that much of an interest.'

'No, probably not. Ever read him though? He really is quite good.'

'I still don't get science fiction.'

'Shame. Still, I think you'd like his early, realist stuff. Anyway, I came across the archive and thought I'd write something. In part also for personal reasons,' he said. 'Let's call it a belated interest in the civil war.'

'The civil war? You? Now that's something I wasn't expecting to hear. You really are missing the motherland over there, aren't you.'

He shrugged. 'It's not that. Not quite. More like I needed a context for some stuff,' he said. Thought about it some more and added, 'Family stuff, mostly.'

'Yeah,' she agreed. 'Parenthood will do that to you every time.'

'Guilty as charged, your honour,' he said. It wasn't entirely untrue. It was just easier than attempting to explain the rest of it.

Later he asked, 'So what are *you* reading nowadays?'

'You've already seen what,' she said, pointing in the direction of the church. It took him a moment to figure out she was referring to the window display at the bookstore.

'What, seriously? All that *néo-polar* stuff is you?'

'Why wouldn't it be?'

'I don't know, I just assumed it was either someone else doing the selecting, or it was purely a commercial decision.'

'Because I wouldn't be caught dead reading this kind of thing? Don't be such a snob.'

'That's not what I meant. In fact, I—'

'Tastes evolve, you know.'

'Of course they do.'

'In any case,' she continued, 'I came to need something, at some point, and that's where I found it.'

'Something?'

'A context for some stuff.'

'I see,' he said.

The church bell rang once. He checked his phone, then his father's phone. 'Excuse me for one minute,' he said, got up and walked off a bit before making the call.

He got his mother's voicemail. He didn't leave a message. It wouldn't be the first time visiting hours had been delayed because of some emergency. He came and sat back down. Zoe was on the phone too.

'I'm almost done, honey. Has your brother packed his bag yet?' She listened for a reply. 'Could you please go make him then?' She listened. 'I know, but you're the responsible one.'

She got off the phone. 'Sorry about that,' she said.

'No problem. Everything okay?'

'Kids.'

'We should get going soon,' he said, picking up his coffee.

'Yes, we should,' she agreed. 'Soon.' She paused. Reached for her tobacco pouch. Head down, she started to roll another cigarette. 'Ah,' Andreas thought, 'here we go.'

'So what are you voting then? Yes or No?'

In retrospect, it wasn't even that surprising. Over the last couple of weeks he'd answered the house phone at least two dozen times to hear from distant relatives or friends or acquaintances who were 'just ringing to catch up' when it was quite clear they'd taken it upon themselves to run some personal campaign for one side or the other, and who, upon hearing his parents were unavailable, almost invariably got around to asking him whether he'd be staying on until the referendum, and if so, which way he was leaning in what was so obviously a toss-up between the correct decision on the one hand and the sounding of the seven trumpets on the other. Their traditional political affiliations didn't seem to matter much. He'd heard from socialists railing against the government, terrified of imminent economic collapse in the event of 'No' ('It'll be the winter of '41 all over again, just you wait and see'); conservatives railing against the opposition, terrified of imminent economic collapse in the event of 'Yes' ('It'll be the winter of '41 all over again, just you wait and see'); he'd heard from those who'd say, 'It's *already* the winter of '41 all over again,' yet find something else to be terrified of that would prove even more disastrous, expulsion from the Eurozone, expulsion from the EU, even the relative protection of the European shield removed, the country fully exposed to globalisation, official bankruptcy, another Turkish invasion – 'They'll take advantage again, just like with Cyprus in '74' – some kind of Latin-American-style left-wing coup, the government finally showing its true colours, full-blown communism, payback for the Civil War, tying themselves to the Russian chariot, the country turned into some kind of colony in all but name; or no, some kind of Latin-American-style right-wing coup, the opposition finally showing its true colours, full-blown dictatorship, the Colonels all over again, payback for the Civil War, tying themselves even more tightly to the German chariot, it was a matter of sovereignty, finally, the country, just like the rest of Southern Europe, was *already*

reduced to a colony in all but name, one memorandum would follow another until there was no economy, no country, left to save, and this here referendum the last chance to stop what was happening, the last chance for a revival, a resurgence of the European Left, a Counterforce to stand up to Them; or no, what was needed was a resurgence of the European Centre, what was needed was some fucking sense, a few adults in the room as opposed to the inmates currently running the asylum. Regardless of side, this final sentiment was not in dispute, of course what was lacking was any kind of agreement on who were the adults, who the inmates; where the room was located, and were the asylum.

Andreas no longer answered the phone if he didn't recognize the number. As for his own friends, the few who knew he was around also knew why, and attempted to shield him from the whole thing by never even mentioning it when they called, which in its own way was just as bad.

In retrospect, then, it wasn't that surprising. For Zoe, the story here wasn't a twenty-year-old love affair that, truth be told, hadn't left much of a mark. What she wanted from Andreas was the same thing all those people ringing his father had wanted: the assurance he would do the right thing. Steer history back in the right direction. Or keep it heading there.

'I don't know,' he said.

'You don't *know*?'

'Haven't decided yet.'

'Leaving it a bit late, aren't you?'

'It's not that easy a decision.'

'It's the easiest decision you'll ever have to make. What's there to think about?'

'I don't know, what does one usually think about? The pros and the cons of either option?'

'You can't be serious.'

'What can I tell you? I'm confused by it all. It doesn't help I don't live here – I'm always wondering if what I think I know about what goes on is what *actually* goes on. And to be honest I haven't given it as much thought as I would have liked, but with my—' He managed to stop himself in time.

'With your what?'

'It's just – I've got a lot of things on my mind right now.'

'Things more important than whether the country falls apart or not.'

'Yes. No. It's not really commensurable.'

'That's too big a word for such a small opinion.'

'What can I say? I'm sorry my life is getting in the way of things. Why don't you tell me *what* you're in favour of and why?'

'Isn't it obvious?'

'Not even remotely.'

'Jesus. I'm in favour of the country *not* committing suicide. I'm in favour of accepting the help we're being offered, and saying "Thank you". I'm in favour of getting rid of the Stalinists in charge and their dreams of resurrecting the USSR or bringing capitalism to its knees or whatever the fuck it is they think they're going to achieve with this idiotic referendum.'

'They don't sound much like Stalinists to me, I must say.'

'Really. Have you heard any of their speeches recently?'

'Yes. And the word "gulag" didn't come up even once. Ergo, not Stalinists.'

'That's not funny.'

'All I'm saying is I don't think that kind of language is helpful.'

'As opposed to "collaborators" and "Quislings" and "tagmatasfalites" and "germanotsoliades".'

'That's not helpful either.'

'That's what you get branded for wanting to make sure half the country's not digging through the trash looking for food next week.'

'Like I said, not helpful. But also, there's a certain percentage of the country that's already having to eat out of the trash, so I'm sure you can appreciate telling them to stick with the current recipe for success is not that enticing a proposition.'

'No one *likes* what's been happening. No one wanted it. But guess what? We were living beyond our means for decades, and now we're paying the price.'

' "We"? Who are "we"? Everyone? The entire country? Most of the country? I mean, I was around for at least a couple of those decades and it didn't look to me like everyone benefited. At least not equally.'

'Of course everyone benefited! The whole *country* was living off handouts. We're *still* living off handouts, only now we're too good for them all of sudden. Now we want the handouts and we want to be thanked for accepting them and we want to never pay anything back.'

'By definition, that's what you *don't* do with handouts.'

'Oh, for God's sake.'

'No, seriously.'

'Is that your *informed opinion* as an economist? Free money?'

She was putting out another cigarette. He reached for his coffee, took a sip of the dregs. Lukewarm and sour. He put the cup down.

'You want an opinion? Fine, here it is. *Handouts* don't come attached with interest; loans do. Just like the loans that got everyone into this mess. Only thing is, you can't borrow your way out of debt. You can't starve yourself out of debt either.'

'Sure you can, actually.'

'If you're the only one doing it, perhaps. If everyone is doing it at the same time, not so much. It's a fallacy of composition.'

'Yes, yes,' she said with a gesture of impatience. 'The paradox of thrift. Magic money-trees. All that Keynesian shit. You're not the only one who's done the reading, you dick. I don't just publish the stuff.' Again she pointed towards the bookstore.

'I find it convincing, rather than "crap", but in any case my point is that in principle—'

'Look, let me make it simple for you. Fuck principles. We can't *afford* principles. "We shouldn't have borrowed the money." "Well they shouldn't have lent it to us." Blah. I don't care. What I care about is I'm raising two kids, on my own, in a country on the brink, and hoping the country will still be around at least until they're old enough to get the hell out of it. Because I want a better life for them than *this*—' the gesture took in everything in one wide sweep of dismissal '— and that's something I can't believe I need to explain to *you* of all people. You're the one who was so desperate to get out. Well, congratulations. You were right, I was wrong. You can have that. Just don't talk to me about principles.'

He thought he heard again something of the operatic scorn with which, twenty years previously, she'd screamed at him, 'I already got out you idiot! I already got *out!*'

Why don't you get that? And what the fuck is so bad about your life here you can't wait to get away?'

He'd never come up with answer. Not because he'd never had to consider the question since – he asked it of himself all the time. He'd just never been able to come up with a set of convincing reasons. All he could point to was a sense of being unable to breathe, of carrying a weight that couldn't be shrugged off or even at least named, identified, other than by the way it was crushing him to the ground. He'd felt pinned down, caught up in hopeless resistance to an entomological definition already given. What he'd decided to do had been to run away from everything, not answer anymore to his binomial name. And of course, of course, it hadn't worked.

Three years previously, about four months before Nora's birth, he'd attended a conference in Lublin to give a talk on 'Epistemologies, Ontologies, and Postmodernism'. He'd spent his penultimate afternoon there on the phone to Rachel who'd been taken to hospital with a suspected placental abruption, and on his laptop, trying to find a seat on the next available flight home. It had turned out to be nothing serious, and Rachel had talked him into attending that evening's conference dinner anyway.

He'd showed up late, starving and in the mood for a drink or two. Or five. A few places down the table had been sitting a German colleague who, at some point during a drunken conversation about, what else, the eurozone and the second Greek bailout had commented loudly – it hadn't been clear to Andreas if the man had been aware of his own presence at the table – that 'Greeks, of course, have historically been both lazy and inefficient.' At which point Andreas had equally loudly said, 'You know, if I were fucking German, I'd think twice before using words like "historically".' He had then sat there, staring at the man, willing him to open his mouth just one more time.

'I don't think it's as simple as right and wrong,' Andreas said. 'There are disadvantages either way.'

'I'll trade you your disadvantages over this madness right now. Just say the word.'

He stretched and sat up straighter. His back hurt. There was a line of shadow slanting high up across the wall of the church. He glanced at his watch, jumped to his feet, pulling out his father's phone. 'Just a minute,' he said, walking away.

He was about to hang up when his mother finally answered.

'We just walked out.'

'What's going on? How's Dad? Is he okay?'

'Nothing, nothing, they just – they didn't let us in till after one. There was an emergency. Someone they brought in this morning. But they did give us an extra ten minutes, to make up for the wait. That was nice of them.'

'Mum, how's Dad?'

'Stable, they said. No surprises.'

'Whom did you speak to?'

'Antoniou.'

'What did he say?'

'Nothing new. Be positive. Chat away. Don't upset him.'

'And? How was he?'

'I was telling him about the get-well card Nora's making for him and his blood pressure spiked. Just for a bit though, they said it was nothing to worry about.'

'What about the MRI?'

'They wouldn't want to risk moving him for the moment.'

'So, what? We do nothing? Just wait?'

'Maybe another CT scan with the portable.'

'Would it show anything the previous didn't?'

'They couldn't say.'

'Couldn't, or wouldn't? Did you ask about bringing in our own specialist?'

'It's completely up to us.'

'Okay, good.'

'It doesn't have to be during visiting hours, but they'd appreciate it if we could let them know in advance. Did you call Dimos?'

'He's waiting to hear from me. I'll ring him now.'

'Where are you?'

'I was on my way and I ran into Zoe. You remember Zoe.'

'Don't be ridiculous, of course I remember her. How is she?'

'Good, Mum. She's good. We're just catching up. I'll leave in a bit.'

'Tell her I said hi.'

'I will.'

He called Dimos next.

'Hey, man, it's me.'

'Dude, any news?'

'What, since the '90s? Yeah, no one says "dude" anymore.'

'So I keep hearing. Clearly not true. Here's proof: dude. Any news?'

'They're thinking they want to wait on the MRI.'

'Hm. Yeah, I'd be hesitant to move him too.'

'Another CT scan is a possibility, apparently.'

'That, I probably wouldn't waste my time with. Maybe. I don't know. I'd have to see him first. See the first scan for myself.'

'They said it's up to us.'

'Alright. Good. Tomorrow morning. What time are visiting hours again?'

'Twelve-thirty to one. They said you can come whenever though.'

'Alright, I'll be there by midday, I can see him right before you guys and we can talk after.'

'You sure it's not too much trouble? Aren't you gone already?'

'Don't be stupid. I'll vote you communist bastards out of office first thing in the morning and then drive back down. It's only a couple of hours.'

'I owe you big.'

'Go fuck yourself.'

'Don't take that literally, you capitalist pig. Looks like I'm broke for the foreseeable future.'

'Of course you're broke, communist scum – why else would you be a communist? See you in the morning.'

He took his seat again. 'Sorry about that,' he said.

Zoe waved him off. 'Everything okay?' she said.

'Yeah, everything's fine. My mother says hi.'

'Tell her I said hi back.'

'Sure.'

'Your father, too.'

'Sure.'

They sat in silence for a moment. Not awkward. Not companionable either. More mutual disregard than anything else.

'Okay, then,' Zoe said. 'In principle.'

'Sorry?'

'What you think about our situation. In principle.' She sipped from her coffee and made a face. Drank some water. Reached for her tobacco pouch again but changed her mind. Drummed her long fingers against her legs.

'I get the impression you won't like it.'

'Try me.'

'How about I tell you a story?'

'Make it a short one,' she said.

'So I was talking to some of my students around the end of term. First-years, so we were sort of summing up their experience of university etc. Anyway, someone said something about tuition fees—'

'Speaking of which,' Zoe said.

'I know, I know,' Andreas said. 'So yeah, I'm talking to the students and fees come up and one of them says "But we're not paying fees. Not really," and of course I ask him to elaborate if he doesn't mind.

'And what he says is more or less they're not paying right now because they've taken student loans and once they get their degree they still won't be paying until they start earning over whatever the threshold will be at the time, and once they start earning more than that they still in a way won't be paying because, get this, the money will be taken out of their salary in advance and it will be just another number on their payslip – they won't ever see it in a bank balance or something. So it will still be as though they're not paying it.'

'Oh, dear God,' Zoe said. 'That is either the stupidest thing I ever heard or sheer genius.'

'That's not quite how I put it in class,' Andreas laughed along, 'but yeah, something like that. But here's my point. Thinking about his reasoning, it occurred to me that what capital does isn't measure time but define it.

'What I mean is, think about loans. There's a double conception of time at play in any loan arrangement. You borrow money to spend now while deferring payment to the

future, because the pervasive capitalist message is why worry, everything's always falling apart anyway – so spend now, the future where you must pay might not even come. And it's a credible message, because yes, Jameson, it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

'But look at it from the lender's point of view. You're happy to agree to the loan, not only because the value of deferred repayment is really also about the power the lender can yield in the *present*, but also because the pervasive capitalist message is why worry, there is no future, as in no *different* future where things operate differently and your arrangement may no longer be recognized. No, the future is just an endlessly, statically extended present, and repayment is always waiting somewhere down the timeline, and it's a credible message, because yes, Jameson, it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.'

'I see,' Zoe said. 'That's some very impressive nonsense right there, but I fail to see how it helps with anything. I mean on a practical level.'

'You did ask me what I thought in principle.'

'And now I'm asking you about its implications. What it means in the real world.'

'Zoe, that *is* the real world. But okay. In the world you and I live in, it means nothing. There are loans, and there's repayment, and there's no alternative. There, happy?'

'Anything but. Does this mean you'll be voting yes?'

'I don't know.'

She almost gave up then. He saw her come to that brink and walk back from it, and saw how unwillingly she did so and gained – as much as he thought she was wrong, through and through wrong, in her beliefs, her assessments, her conclusions – some insight into the extent of her desperation, of how badly she needed to try to convince just one more person to see things her way. But also found the manner in which she'd gone about it sad. Because she hadn't really sought to convince him at all. Just like he'd settled for goading her, nothing more.

'What if I told you there are good, pressing reasons to not want to endanger our position in Europe that have nothing to do with the economy?' she said eventually.

'I'm not sure our position in *Europe* is quite what's being put into question here.'

The line of shadow had crept down the church wall. He paused, glanced at his watch. From around the corner of the church came music that was, he realized, the same song being played, not quite synchronously, by two different pairs of speakers, like some experiment in phase shift that wouldn't quite work since the tempi were identical. All echo; no doubling, no unison.

He watched the people walk by. A man in a rumpled suit, briefcase in hand, his tie loosened, his face blanched. A middle-aged couple with a young boy in tow that for a moment looked almost familiar, all three of them terribly thin, the parents hunched over, the kid looking a little anaemic. A goth in her late teens, raven-haired and narrow-shouldered and dressed head-to-toe in black. He smiled at the sight.

'But okay, sure. A non-economic argument for Yes,' he said.

Zoe took her empty bottle of water in her hands, crinkling the plastic. Seemed to come to a decision. 'How about national survival?'

'Oh, Christ. Please tell me you're not about to bring up Turkey. It's how you know you're an old Greek, you know. Monday you get your pension, Tuesday you're worried about Turkey.'

'Not quite.'

'Thank fuck for that.'

'But Turkey's part of it, yes.'

'Listen—'

'I don't know if you've noticed, but we're dealing with a migrant crisis over here.'

'You mean a *refugee* crisis.'

'I mean a *migrant* crisis.'

'They're not—'

'Whatever. My point is, we can't deal with it on our own. Without European support, we're in the shit. If we're not in the EU we'll be overrun.'

'I don't think—'

'I've got a daughter, Andreas. So do you. It might not seem like a problem to you now but—'

'Oh for—'

'I don't care how different you think things are up where you live, look around you. This is how it starts, understand? I'm not saying there's a plan, but it *is* happening.'

The real country will be gone, soon, there will still be a place here called “Greece”, but the *real country* will be gone. You’ve been walking around the city centre, there’s no way you failed to notice. You go down to Omonoia, not a white face in sight. We’re being *replaced*.’

And that was that. He stood up and said, ‘I’ve got to go. Thanks for the coffee. See you,’ and walked away without giving her a chance to stop him.

He walked.

He checked his phone, then his father’s phone.

Later, he asked himself what had happened to her. Something must have. Clearly. This wasn’t the person he’d known. Right?

He went looking for clues in earlier days, picked up moments and turned them around and looked at them from a slight angle, and here and there thought about something she’d said, or overwrote what she’d said with what he now believed she’d meant, and found waiting for him there something very different to what he expected. The realization that Zoe hadn’t changed at all.

In retrospect what she’d thought hadn’t been that much of mystery even at the time. It had been there for him to see, out in the open; he just hadn’t seen it. In the way she’d sat there, listening to her father’s racist shit, never saying anything. Telling her mother off instead – keeping the peace, Andreas had thought, when really, she’d been defending *him*. In the things she’d said about the war, which Andreas had put down to her anger and frustration and family history, and explained away and disregarded. But even before that there’d been so much more he’d missed, crass little jokes and dirty looks and throwaway little comments and, and, and – he could have seen it in anything, if only he’d looked.

Lost, and needing now to orient himself, he looked up and around him and saw the Parthenon in the near distance, turned to where it told him the nearest metro station should be. He recalled that night in the summer of, what, the night his father fell ill,

so '95, when he'd driven past the monument on his way back home, lit a jaundiced yellow against the black sky, just like the streets he'd driven through, as though the bloody thing stood there, looming, infecting everything with its presence.

He got off the carriage and climbed the stairs up to the street. Outside, the glare poured up from the paving stones like fire, the white heat at the centre of an explosion. It kept the world black for a moment after every blink, the people out there dark spots swimming in his eyes. He reached for his sunglasses, then walked slowly uphill, took a left, then a right. Another left. The sky was blue cardboard that any moment now would go up in flames.

He walked past the clinic's main entrance and around the corner of the building, and entered the cafeteria. A low-ceilinged square of a room brightly lit by two long rows of fluorescent lights. Round, bistro-type chrome tables, chairs with green vinyl seats and chrome tubing arms and legs. Mostly empty, an hour past the end of the post-visiting-hours rush. His mother and aunt were sitting at their usual table near the back wall. They looked up, saw him. 'There you are,' his mother said.

The owner sat at the till with her back turned to the rest of the room, staring at the large flat-screen TV mounted up in the corner of the ceiling behind the counter. Hearing Andreas's mother greet him, she picked up a remote and muted the sound on some kind of news panel where two men in suits were shouting over each other.

'Good afternoon, Mr Andreas,' she said with her usual exaggerated politeness. She couldn't be more than four or five years his senior.

'Good afternoon, Mrs Chrysa,' he said.

'What can we get you?'

'Coffee, please.'

'Greek?'

'Yes, thank you. A double.'

'Remind me?'

'Sketos.'

'Right up. Anything else for you, Mrs Aggeliki?' she asked his mother. 'Mrs Katerina?' They shook their heads; they were still working on their post-visitation coffees.

'Any news?' Andreas asked his mother.

'No, nothing. I was just up there.'

'Did you call your friend?' Aunt Katerina said.

'Yes. He's coming tomorrow around noon.'

'Okay,' his mother nodded. 'Are you sure it's not too much trouble?'

'It's no trouble, Mum.'

'Did you thank him for us?'

'It's Dimos, Mum.'

'Still. If it *is* too much trouble...'

'Mum, it's not a problem.'

'Okay then,' she said.

Here's what they hoped: Dimos would come, then they would know. Here's what they feared: Dimos would come, then they would know.

'How's Zoe?' Andrea's mother said.

'Zoe?' Aunt Katerina said. '*The* Zoe?'

'Yes, Aunt. *The* Zoe. She's fine. Okay. You know, all things considered.'

'She's married now, yes? Kids?' his mother said.

'Divorced, actually. Two kids.'

'That's a shame.'

'I never liked that girl much,' Aunt Katerina said.

'Katerina,' Andreas's mother said.

'What? It's not as though he married her. I'm just saying.'

'In all fairness, Aunt Katerina, you never liked anyone I dated.'

'Not true. That South African girl, eh—'

'Lindiwe.'

'—yes, thank you, Lindiwe, I thought she was lovely.'

'That's probably because you met her once. For a couple of hours. And you had no languages in common, so you hardly spoke to each other,' Andreas's mother said.

'I also like Rachel.'

'Sure. For now.'

Once the first twenty-four hours had passed – a period which Andreas and his mother, and soon thereafter Tasos, had spent either in the waiting area outside ICU, or, once it was politely suggested to them they would not be allowed to remain on the second floor overnight, the general waiting area by the lobby on the ground floor – the realization that Michalis would be hospitalized for the immediate future had been accompanied by the problem of his wife's refusal to leave the clinic's grounds for any reason whatsoever until such time as she could bring her husband home.

Her reasoning was simple and, to Andreas at least, awfully familiar: nothing bad could happen to Michalis as long as she was close by. Or at least, if anything bad were to happen to him, it would do so while she was away. Ergo, she would not be away. Ever.

A solution to this impasse had been found in the unlikely person of Aunt Katerina. Widowed Katerina – whose sons had both run far away from their parents' fights as soon as they'd been old enough to do so, and had found no reason to return after the death of their father, and lived one in Xanthi, one in Sweden – had by that point sold the house and moved to a small one-bedroom flat in, as luck would have it, Goudi, just a couple of kilometres away from the clinic. A flat in which you could just about squeeze one more person. Katerina could do with the company, and so could Aggeliki, who had eventually allowed herself to be convinced that two kilometres was an acceptable compromise, and who nevertheless insisted that the clinic be left no earlier than around eleven o'clock every night and returned to no later than six or so every morning. The only snag in the whole plan being the well-documented chronic inability of Andreas's mother and aunt to avoid sniping at each other for longer than a few minutes at a time. But things were too bad for concessions to not be made, for some kind of truce to not be reached (it had lasted for two whole weeks, far longer than Andreas had expected), and the flat was oh so close to the clinic, a five-minute drive at most. (Aunt Katerina, in her early eighties, overweight, the owner of two bad knees and a wooden cane, could not have covered this distance walking even on a good day, and those were, by now, few and far between, so that Andreas had thought it best to let his mother keep the car while he made do with public transport.)

'How was Dad?' Andreas said.

'He was asleep when we went in. Only woke up for the last ten minutes,' his mother said.

'What about the blood-pressure spike?'

'The nurse told us it could just be an emotional thing.'

'Or it could be nothing – a glitch in the machine. It was only for a few seconds,' Aunt Katerina said, eyes still on the screen.

'Just when I was talking to him about his granddaughter? Pretty big coincidence. No, he got worked up.'

'Could be,' Andreas agreed. This wasn't a point he wanted to argue.

Thanasis came over with his coffee and a glass of water. 'Here you go.'

Andreas thanked him, picked up the cup, blew on the steaming hot liquid and sipped. He drank some water and looked around at mostly familiar faces. The quiet couple in their fifties near the door (son, twenty-four, quadriplegic, Duchenne muscular dystrophy, brought in after he'd gone into cardiac arrest), the old man with the unkempt hair reading a newspaper at the table near the restroom (wife, eighty-something, a litany of symptoms that taken all together suggested the obvious), the woman in her thirties at the table nearest the counter, forever turned towards the TV screen (husband, thirties, motorbike crash – a non-ICU regular, the guy was in traction but otherwise okay). There were also two men in their sixties in short-sleeved striped shirts that he'd never seen before. One of them stood up and went outside to smoke. The other remained in his seat, staring straight ahead with a vacant look on his face, a kombolói loosely wrapped around one fist.

Andreas fired up the laptop and connected to the Wi-Fi network. He opened Rachel's email, downloaded and launched the PDF. The paper was entitled 'Consciousness: here, there and everywhere?' He scanned the abstract:

The science of consciousness has made great strides by focusing on the behavioural and neuronal correlates of experience. However, while such correlates are important for progress to occur, they are not enough if we are to understand even basic facts, for example, why the cerebral cortex gives rise to consciousness but the cerebellum does not, though it has even more neurons and appears to be just as complicated. Moreover, correlates are of little help in many instances where we would like to know if consciousness is present: patients with a few remaining islands of functioning cortex, preterm infants, non-mammalian species and machines that are rapidly outperforming

people at driving, recognizing faces and objects, and answering difficult questions. To address these issues, we need not only more data but also a theory of consciousness—

He closed the PDF and moved it to the desktop to read later.

The P.S. to the email read, 'Also, this was written specifically to mess with you,' and was followed by a fragment of copy-pasted text from some kind of email invite that began, 'You are cordially invited to participate in the actualization of our new exhibit...'

'For fuck's sake,' he said. He opened a Facebook tab to copy-paste the fragment into the 'Ad Hominem Lupus' thread. There were a bunch of messages from earlier in the day.

Art Govender So is anyone else watching the game? Larkin's just hit three fastbreak threes in the first five possessions.

Dana Utley I thought we agreed basketball conversations are verboten in this chat until I get over the NBA finals.

Dave Bowles Is that Philip Larkin? Is he like fucking them up? Does he like mean to?

Art Govender Don't act as though you're not familiar with the man's work. Did you forget what he did to your boys last week?

Dana Utley Not to mention, why watch this bodger league in the first place?

Art Govender I can name a bunch of NBA teams who'd kill for a two-guard of Larkin's calibre.

Dave Bowles Facts! The NBA nowadays is for clowns like Mark Strand and W.S. Merwin. Couldn't hit the side of a barn from six feet out.

- Art Govender Though I do remember the golden days of Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens with great fondness.
- Dana Utley The REAL golden days were the one-two punch of Plath and Sexton.
- Dave Bowles Tru dat. Those two were unstoppable. When they didn't have to go through Bishop, that is.
- Dana Utley Bishop was a MONSTER. Anything that got to within five feet of the basket, that woman would block the shit out of. Remember that game 7 in the Garden?

No one had yet made the joke just begging to be made. Andreas typed.

Remember how she trolled them on Twitter afterwards? 'Turns out the art of LOSING is kinda hard to master.'

The air-conditioning buzzed away behind him, and he shifted his chair a bit to get out of the draft. His t-shirt stuck to his chest. He pulled it away from his skin, saw the faint salt line at the midriff.

'Isn't it too hot for black?' his mother said.

'It's really not so bad.'

'And jeans? Have you run out of clothes?'

'It's not a big deal.'

'We have a washing machine. It's just sitting there.'

'I know, Mum. I just didn't get around to it last night.'

'Again.'

'I'll do it tonight.'

'Call me if you're not sure how to work it.'

'I'll figure it out.'

'If you want to bring—'

'Thanks, Aunt Katerina, but there's no need. I'll figure it out.'

He realized he felt faint and ordered a chicken sandwich. He forced it down between sips of coffee and water, then set his plate aside, ordered another coffee and turned back to his laptop. He brought up his email to Miriam, tried to pick up where he'd left off. An Outlook reminder popped up. His opinion piece for the *Guardian* was due in four days. He double-clicked on a Word file named Guard.docx and scrolled down to the bottom of the last page. He read through four lines of notes he'd highlighted in yellow and started typing.

But of course, progressive attempts at rational criticism of the neoliberal project are doomed to failure as long as they don't address the dogma that lies at the core of what passes for its ethical vision: the Hayekian belief that it is only the *market* and its decentralized efficiency that can protect us from 'illegitimate' concentrations of power (mainly on the part of the government) and their 'attendant' limitations on individual freedom. It would not be too difficult to read this as Hayek's response to the Great War even if he hadn't admitted as much himself: he 'served in a battle in which eleven different languages were spoken. It's bound to draw your attention to the problems of political organization.'

A noble cause indeed, even if one feels compelled to point out that Hayek's hostility to socialism stems from a misreading of the German and Italian situations so utterly immune to fact it would be comical if it hadn't proved so harmful. But as is usually the case with totalizing solutions to the world, any demonstration of the fantasy – the utopian impulse, if you like – that lies at the core of the idea is treated as evidence that the problem lies with the world and not the idea itself. (If this formulation sounds familiar it's probably because of its overuse as a critique against attempts to make a distinction between communism as an ideology and the example set by specific communist regimes.) So all evidence that the 'market' has failed to produce any kind of sustainable social order must be interpreted by the faithful – Ptolemaic astronomers out to save the phenomena – as proof of external corruption of the ideal. In our sad case, political corruption. Politicians, drunk on power, engaged in some kind of conspiracy to preserve said power. It is thus that every new catastrophic instance of *laissez-faire* economics in action is taken as proof that, really,

it wasn't *'laissez'* enough; that the problem is not the destabilizing effects of unregulated markets but the destabilizing effects of the state's desire to regulate them, or manipulate them for the enrichment of the political class itself.

So it is that politics *in toto* becomes the Big Bad, and free-market ideologues like Reagan, who can portray themselves as being somehow outsiders to some vaguely defined professional political class, can turn 'draining the swamp' into a rallying call. The grimly amusing thing about this, of course, being that it was not too long ago the very same metaphor was being employed by the Socialist Party of America, only the swamp was a capitalist one, and the mosquitoes answered to the name of 'financial speculators'. We've come a long way baby, indeed.

New message alert. He toggled over to Outlook. Subject heading: 'Good to see you and sor...' In Greek. The sender was zoe@proclus.gr.

His email address was easy to find via the university's staff page.

He deleted the message unread, then emptied the deleted items folder. 'This will be permanently deleted. Continue?' asked the pop-up box. He clicked on 'Yes' before he could think about it.

Thanasis came over with his coffee and a new bottle of water. Andreas's mother ordered another coffee herself. Aunt Katerina asked for a chamomile tea.

One of the two men in the striped shirts waved at the TV and said, 'Turn the sound back on. Here he comes, to tell us how it's not about the money.' His companion made a noise as though he was clearing his throat. They could be brothers, though it was maybe the kind-of-matching shirts that gave Andreas that impression. They were also both balding, and sat there both leaning slightly forward with one elbow on the table and their bellies in their laps and their legs spread a little too wide.

The talking head began explaining how the financial crisis was not truly financial but rather a crisis of values. The country could be handed bailout after bailout but unless the mindset, the set of conditions that had lead here changed, what was the point. This was what the people refused to understand, still. This was what had brought the current government to power: the inability to face facts.

‘What nonsense,’ the first man shouted at the screen. ‘You can talk about values! You know where your next meal’s coming from!’

‘And you don’t?’ asked the second man.

‘You don’t hear me talking about *values*. I know better than—’

‘No. No forays into holier-than-thou class consciousness. Not today.’

‘I’m just saying, it’s easy for him to talk, Mr Fifty-eight-properties-across-the-country.’

‘That we *know of*,’ piped up the woman in her thirties. ‘That he’ll admit to owning.’

‘He’s going to talk to us about values!’

‘Fifty-eight! What I want to know is how did he come by them?’ the woman continued.

‘Inheritance. His grandmother,’ Chrysa said. ‘It was in the papers.’

‘And how did *she* come by them?’ the woman said. ‘Anyone know?’

‘Balzac,’ mumbled Aunt Katerina.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t quite catch that,’ the woman said, turning around in her seat.

Aunt Katerina hesitated then said, ‘Balzac, the French writer?’ The pressure of everyone’s gaze seemed to make her doubt herself. She seldom spoke to anyone but family nowadays. She looked to Andreas for help. ‘It *is* Balzac, right? *Le Père Goriot*?’

‘*Oh, right. Yes,*’ he said. ‘The secret of great fortunes with no apparent cause is a crime forgotten, for it was properly done.’’

‘I beg your pardon, but that’s rubbish and I don’t care who said it,’ said the second man. ‘Criminalizing wealth – just because you can’t figure out how to make money doesn’t mean someone else can’t. Doesn’t mean there’s anything suspect going on. And I’m not defending that idiot—’ he waved at the screen ‘—for all I know maybe there’s something there, but even if there was, you can’t turn that into a rule.’

‘There’s no such thing as a victimless fortune,’ the first man told him. ‘How’s that for a rule?’

‘I don’t see you giving yours away. Or turning yourself in.’

‘I don’t have a *fortune*. Neither do you.’

‘We’re both far better off than most.’

‘That doesn’t make us rich. It makes most everyone else poor.’

‘Of course it does! That’s literally what the word means. There.’ He pointed to the screen, on which a coastguard ship was approaching an inflatable boat full of people in life jackets. ‘Now those poor devils – *they’re* poor. That’s why they’re on that boat. They’re poor and hungry and running away from things that don’t bear much thinking about. The people you’re talking about aren’t *poor*, not compared to that. They only think they are because they’ve got used to living a certain way. And let me tell you, if we *don’t* vote No, they’ll have to get *unused* to it in a hurry.’

‘How do you figure that, Mr Elias?’ said Chrysa. ‘We can hardly get taxed any more than we already are. Can’t squeeze blood from a stone and no new memorandum’s going to change that.’

‘Oh, don’t get him started,’ said the first man. ‘We’ll be here all day.’

‘It’s not about the memorandum, Mrs Chrysa. It’s about them,’ he said, nodding at the screen. ‘I’ve got nothing against them, I sympathize, I do. But – we don’t need them here.’

‘They *are* heathens,’ Chrysa said.

‘I don’t much care, Mrs Chrysa. My point is, we can’t afford them. We’re a poor country—’

‘What?’ said his companion. ‘Are you kidding me?’

‘You know what I mean, Stavros. Greeks might not be poor, but Greece *is*,’ Elias went on. ‘Either way, the bottom line is the same. We can’t help these people.’

‘So we should send them back then?’ Stavros said. ‘Or maybe let them drown? Is that your solution?’ They *were* brothers, Andreas decided. Cousins at most. Definitely related.

‘It’s not even here they’re trying to get to, most of them,’ the woman in her thirties said. It came to Andreas that her name was Mary.

‘No,’ Elias said, ‘but it makes no difference. Here’s the thing. They’re desperate to get to Europe. And let’s not kid ourselves, Europe is desperate to have them.’ He glanced around at everyone in turn. ‘Don’t look at me as though I’m crazy. Europe’s getting old, it’s not just Greece. Too many pensioners, not enough workers. You think all those German factory lines are, what, running themselves? Not yet. Maybe all those offices clean themselves at night? Merkel *knows*. That’s why they’re letting them come over – as though they couldn’t put a stop to it the minute they set their minds to it. But here’s the

thing: not everyone will make their way to Germany or wherever else they're needed. Surplus to requirements. So guess where they get to stay? Right here. All that talk about quotas. Rubbish. How long do you think the northerners are going to play ball? What happens when they don't anymore? We're stuck with being Europe's storeroom, that's what. And that's why I say, vote No.'

'Even if any of that is true, and I'm not saying it is, how does that solve anything?' said Stavros.

'We're either kicked out, in which case we can decide how to deal with migrants ourselves—'

'Let them drown, you mean. Or maybe drown them ourselves?'

'I mean no such thing. But we can decide—'

'And that will magically make them stop coming.'

'Just listen, you fool. They won't stop coming, they'll never stop coming. Just not *here*. We won't be an entry point to anything anymore. Hard borders, understand? The flow won't stop, but it will shift to Italy, wherever else they can get to. It won't be our problem anymore. And even that won't happen, probably.'

'It won't? Then what on earth are you going on—'

'Just listen. You never listen, that's your problem. I'm telling you it won't even come to that. Because the Germans will cave. They'll give in the way they give in to Erdoğan—'

'Not Turkey again.'

'I'm not talking about bloody Turkey!'

'Oh, you mean the *other* Erdoğan.'

'What I *mean* is Turkey's not the problem this time, they're just protecting their own, like we should be doing. If Erdoğan can make demands, so can we. And from a position of power, once we've said no.'

'What power?'

'Of having said no!'

'And having gone bankrupt.'

'We're *already* bankrupt!'

'There you go.'

'It doesn't matter. How many times do I have to explain this to you. There comes a point when you just have to say "No." Otherwise there'll be no end to it.'

'You're not Metaxas, and this isn't World War Two.'

'I'm not Leonidas either, and this isn't Thermopylae. So what? The principle's the same. I pity you if you don't see that.'

'Save your pity for the kids you'll be apologizing to in six months if enough morons agree with you tomorrow.'

'Bah,' Elias said. He stood up and patted his pockets. 'All those doctors telling me to quit? They should try having *you* for a brother first,' he said, heading for the door.

'Sorry about that,' Stavros said.

'You've got nothing to feel sorry for, Mr Stavros.'

'Thank you, Mrs Chrysa, but there's no reason for you to have to be subjected to my brother's ranting.'

'He's got a right to be concerned. He might have a point too. Though if I were him, I'd worry a little more about people's religion,' said Mary.

'And that would be because?' Andreas said.

'Does it need explaining?'

'Yes, actually, I believe it does,' he said.

She shifted her chair around to face him. Looked him up and down for a good few seconds. 'It's easier for some, not caring.'

'"Some"?'

'Men. You don't have as much to lose, now, do you? Might even have something to gain, if you're that type.'

'What type would that be?'

'The scared type.' She looked at her watch and stood up. 'Now excuse me, I need to go check on my *husband*,' she said, putting a spin on the word. Andreas couldn't begin to imagine what point she thought she was making. 'Mrs Chrysa, I'll pay for everything later if you don't mind.'

'Don't worry about it, Mrs Mary. No one's going anywhere.'

'Again, sorry,' Stavros said once Mary had left. 'It's all my fault for getting him started in the first place.'

'It's no one's fault,' Andreas's mother said. 'Though I'll grant you some opinions are more worth hearing than others.'

'I'm just sick of talking politics with him. Actually, I'm just sick of politics.'

'You know what,' Andreas said, 'I'm fairly confident the first man to be sick of politics was tired of arguing about whose turn it was to sleep nearest the mouth of the cave.'

He finished his coffee, thought about ordering another one, decided it could wait. He was long past the point where more caffeine would help.

He brought a Facebook tab back up, scrolled through his feed, not seeing most of what he looked at. Read a post or two, skipped past the comments. At first.

Andreas Xenidis Depends on what you mean by 'science'.
Depends on what you mean by 'religion'.
Sorry you think it's some kind of 'weaselly academic relativistic' thing, Matt, but we need to be clear about terms.

Matthew Pritchard Why don't you save the parental equivocation for your kids. The idea that there's no competition between two such fundamentally incompatible descriptions of what the *same* world is actually like is just laughable.

Andreas Xenidis But that's just the problem, Matt. What does that even mean, 'the world is actually like'? Whatever the intrinsic nature of things, or reality, might be, how can we figure out if it's being accurately represented? I mean, things come to us *already* under description, we don't catch them stepping out of the shower in all their naked glory in order to compare the naked reality with the description. Shouldn't we at least consider the possibility of accepting our beliefs are tools to get stuff done and judging them in terms of their utility?

Andreas Xenidis I guess what I'm trying to say is, here is this strawman argument of postmodernism as some kind of what Aijaz Ahmad would call a 'cult of utter non-determinacy' vs some kind of idea of unitary determination that seems equally impossible in the face of the kind of – Ahmad again – 'multiple interpenetrating determinations' that history throws up.

Matthew Pritchard Thanks for confirming you're a Rortian so I don't have to waste any more of my time debating you. That post-truth populism you're soooo worried about? That's on YOU.

Andreas Xenidis Five senses; an incurably abstract intellect; a haphazardly selective memory; a set of preconceptions and assumptions so numerous that I can never examine more than a minority of them—never become even conscious of them all. How much of total reality can such an apparatus let through?

Matthew Pritchard Yeah, that's it, just keep it up man. Whatever.

Andreas Xenidis That's not me, Matt, it's that well-known cultural marxist, C. S. Lewis. But thanks for playing.

Later:

Linda Coulter A lot of blah is all I'm hearing. When push comes to shove, let's see you talk shit then. There are no atheists in foxholes.

Andreas Xenidis That's funny, I never see any Christians at funerals either.

It was all too easy for him to try to spend his time like this, cleaving to fantasies of argument and correction. He minimized the tab and sat looking at the desktop.

His mother was reading an e-book. Aunt Katerina was squinting hard at the TV. A Greek comedy he didn't recognize. The costumes and colour scheme made it look like something from the 60s. Mary was in her seat watching it, not laughing. Elias and Stavros were still arguing, keeping their voices low. There were a few more tables taken now. More people he didn't recognize. Visitors for one of the other wards, outpatients, or here for a check-up. It was strange, how quickly he'd started treating them as interlopers, unwanted presences. They moved through this space and disturbed something in it. They had no right.

'Anything good?' he asked his mother.

'*The Garden of the Princes,*' she said.

'Bakolas? It's great, isn't it.'

'It's nothing like *The Head*. Working hard at being Faulknerian.'

'But in a good way.'

'In a good way,' she agreed.

He ordered another coffee and woke up the laptop. He let the cursor hover over the folder at the top right of the screen while he hesitated. He rolled his shoulders and neck. He stood up, stretched his back and groaned. Sat back down. Then he double-clicked on the folder labelled 'Nora'.

'No Christmas Eve had ever been less promising of jollification, so far as we in Athens were concerned, than 24th December 1944. During the afternoon duty took me to the Piraeus where there was heavy fighting in bitterly cold weather. Biting winds blew in from the Aegean and heavy clouds over the hills to the north suggested another snowfall. British troops hoped to reach cover by Christmas Day by the capture of a building which was an ELAS stronghold north of the harbour, but when they succeeded, they were colder than before...

'The Grande Bretagne was cold, forbidding, and overcrowded. The Fortress Bar was without beer or spirits. But for some sweet Samos wine, immortalized by Lord Byron, there was nothing to drink. The suggestion has

been made earlier by Mr Arthur Greenwood in the House of Commons that there should be a truce for Christmas Day, but Mr Eden, aware that General Scobie's ultimatum to the ELAS Central Committee was still waiting a satisfactory answer, was not in agreement. "Our object is not to stop for a week," he said, "but to obtain a final solution of this business." ' "

His father's various sources were collected in two subfolders containing all in all just over six gigabytes worth of data: documents scanned to PDFs and blocks of text copied into Word files (history textbooks, memoirs, autobiographies, correspondences, studies, academic journals, state documents, newspaper articles, blogposts, as well as long lists of links that were also bookmarked on both web browsers), recordings, photos, and videos (sourced from books, or photocopied or re-recorded from archives, or found online, or recorded off the radio, or copied from TV programmes originally stored on old VHS tapes). And then there was that third subfolder. A series of scanned documents (some covered in his father's cramped cursive, a few written in hands Andreas hadn't recognized, the rest his grandfather's diary entries and letters dating as far back as 1920, and leading all the way up to a few months before his death in 1963) and that series of videos, recorded it seemed on this very laptop, of his father sitting at the kitchen table, early in the morning or late at night, speaking directly to the camera, addressing his granddaughter, with the first video in the series – as the file's properties revealed – having been recorded at around the time of Andreas's phone call announcing Rachel's pregnancy.

It had not taken long for Andreas to figure what this was: a radically expanded version of the archive that twenty years before had been waiting for him and his brother in the bottom right drawer of that dresser. The dresser being where most of those originals were still to be found. The rest had come, amongst other places, from the extra double bookcase installed in the living room that was by now wholly taken up with books and journals covering a couple of centuries of history in several languages – Andreas had sourced some of them himself, at his father's request, including Byford-Jones's memoir, a copy of which he'd tracked down and sent to his father about a decade previously without first reading a single page of it.

Not out of lack of interest, he'd told himself. He'd just been too busy. He'd always meant to have a look at the things his father would email him from time to time, but hardly ever did, until his father had got the message and stopped; just like he'd meant, when Michalis had first revealed its existence, to go through the archive and figure out what about it had been so important that his father had felt the need to bring it up as he lay there, convinced he was dying. But then Michalis had remained in hospital for a week, then another, and another, and by the fourth week had been released with heart disease and the options of either a kidney transplant or lifelong dialysis to choose from, and the last thing on Andreas's mind, until he'd ran away to Leicester and his MA a year or so later, had been whatever history it was that had brought them all to that point.

And then he'd spent the next eighteen years being busy, until he'd found himself alone one Sunday morning – Rachel having taken Nora to the park – setting aside a novel he'd just finished reading for work and, not quite knowing why, scanning through his father's emails and following link after link.

His mother came back from the restroom and sat down with a loud sigh and Andreas was struck yet again by how much older she looked all of a sudden. She wasn't eating well but still seemed heavier, walked just a little slower, just a little flat-footed. Her hair was thinning, white at the roots. All the things that shocked you because you expected them, and the expected thing would never happen.

He went back to skimming through Byford-Jones's memoir, re-reading some of his father's annotations. He clicked through to the last couple of pages.

'Peace established, I was recalled to GHQ Middle East for another assignment which was to take me to Damascus where there was unrest, and fears of trouble with the French. With the spring sunshine glistening on the wincing blue water in the bay, and crocuses and anemones colouring the fields, I left Athens by aeroplane.

I settled down to sleep when were over the sea, but sleep was denied me. The aeroplane began to behave curiously, and a note came from the pilot

telling us to fasten ourselves in our seats as there was engine trouble. The aeroplane turned and losing height we limped back to Athens.

It was not long before we were transferred to another aeroplane and we were soon on our way. You could not look down on the lovely city, dominated by the gracious Parthenon on the Acropolis, and Lycabettus, and surrounded by hills, those of the Muses, of the Nymphs and of the Pnyx among them, without thinking of that golden age of Pericles—'

'Give it a fucking rest already,' Andreas said, closing the document.

He re-read Churchill's telegram to Wilson, Leeper's to the Foreign Office. The more of this kind of thing he'd come across over the previous year, the more he'd understood, then justified, then shared, then judged and found wanting, his father's anger – if anything, he'd decided, the man wasn't nearly angry *enough* – but also, the more aware he'd become of his own complete lack of surprise. It all sounded to him, if he were to be honest, like exactly the same kind of shit the English had spent centuries inflicting on the rest of the world. And that, in the end, was what had shamed and angered him the most. His own complete lack of fucking surprise.

He was reminded of Abatzoglou's *Balancing Act*, his penultimate novel, long out of print, a second-hand copy of which he'd tracked down as a birthday gift for his father. Had he had time to read it? He hadn't mentioned it, and Andreas kept forgetting to ask. The book's previous owner hadn't been much of an annotator, had in fact underlined a single sentence over one hundred and thirty pages: 'Those were satisfactory conclusions, until he noticed they were no help at all when it came to changing his life.'

The cafeteria was crowded now, almost every table taken. The air-conditioning was struggling to cope with all these bodies. There was an odour to the space like the musk of pencil shavings. He glanced at the clock on the wall, the three hands landed in that moment on four, five, and six and not moving, one of those long, frozen moments when your gaze fell on a clock face and no hand moved and you thought the clock must be stopped until with a kind of laboured jerk the second hand fell forward then, almost

immediately it seemed, fell forward again and you were left with no doubt that you'd caught time with its guard down, standing still, had seen something of what was really going on – chronostasis, it came to him, that's what the illusion was called – and in that long moment, waiting for the hand to fall forward, he registered the sequence and had time, plenty of time, to consider whether it was four-five-six or six-five-four, countup or countdown, until he realized he'd been waiting for too long and actually the clock was stopped.

He glanced at his watch. A couple of hours to go yet.

He opened the Stelios Abatzoglou folder and looked again at the chronology he had put together. Joined the Democratic Army of Greece in 1947 – he'd just turned fifteen. Fought in the civil war, was sentenced to death by an Extraordinary Military Tribunal in 1949, escaped to Hungary where he lived until 1952, then settled in Romania. Did not return to Greece until 1975, a year to the day after the fall of the junta. Died in 1989 of pancreatic cancer. A summary that could with minimal shifting of dates and places apply to who knew how many communists of the time.

He brought up a scanned copy of a typewritten note that he'd come across in the Contemporary Social History Archives.

Ruling

11.4.52

The Committee, having examined the case of Stelios Abatzoglou, has found the following:

a. That he violated anti-conspiratorial rules by forming an association outside the house without reporting this to the Committee. That the nature of this association remains a concern.

b. That upon being warned of the consequences of his actions he attempted to deceive the Committee.

c. That he has repeatedly presented with ideological confusion and vacillations.

The Committee:

a. Finds that, for the above reasons, S. Abatzoglou is severely reprimanded and warned of his potential expulsion from the Party.

b. Deems necessary the ideological and moral improvement of members, as well as the improvement of levels and mechanisms of vigilance.

c. Reprimands comrades Labros and Chronis for demonstrating insufficient care in the enforcement of rules regarding fraternization.

Andreas read through a page of typewritten minutes from a 1954 meeting of the Committee of Enlightenment's Literary Circle, where the matter under discussion appeared to be the interlinked stories that were to comprise *Two Times for Stavros Yeorgiou*.

M. Porfyrogenis: There are a number of weak moments and political errors to be brought to his attention and corrected.

P. Roussos: The application of the Marxist method to our history is neither correct nor creatively appropriate.

M. Porfyrogenis: It must be said that Comrade Abatzoglou's methods are outdated. Ethnologically, he follows Fallmerayer; philologically, Krumbacher. Linguistically, he has failed to keep up with the evolution of Marxist linguistics, while philosophically he has misapplied the dialectic.

A. Spilios: The weakness of the works is again most evident in their endings. It is his habitual weakness in the portrayal of the new, the heroic. In his depiction of the hopeless, the old world, the world in retreat, he is successful, but when it comes to the contemporary, the new, the *hopeful* – it is almost as though he is rushing to give us this ending because he does not truly believe in it.

Poor Stelios, Andreas thought. His reward for all he'd been through: having to deal with those idiots. Submit to correction. All of them educated, cultured, perceptive, and, to a man, idiots. You had to be a communist despite their example, not because of it. At least they'd finally done Stelios the favour of making good on their threat, freeing him to write whatever the hell he felt like writing.

RITUALS

A ritual does not have to be old. It will take a story and have its way with it.

A ritual will interrogate and sentence. It will evoke and beseech. Attempt to transmute and worship. It will at most manage to destroy and punish. We would like it

to effect change, though perhaps we suspect that it cannot. If it succeeds, it may not be for the best.

A ritual begins life as an account from within, in the hope that it will transform itself into one from without. This hope is rarely realized. Or even justified.

If this is taken to mean that you will not be able to extract anything useful out of these pages – you may be on to something.

A ritual is a system. It is made of devices. The devices are not original. Second-hand, they have seen much use in their day. One is always looking to replace them with newer ones but new devices are hard to come by. It would perhaps be right to say then that a ritual is *part* of a system. The system is of questionable value, mainly to those who practice it. They worry this is only because everyone else long ago came to the conclusion that the system has no true function, other than as a shibboleth for practitioners, or as symbolic gratification of their emotional or spiritual needs, an operation of pure thought squaring its circles, an empty gesture that allays or prevents certain anxieties. The actions performed are stylized and not chosen arbitrarily. Numerous vectors of force impinge. Causality is a concern, whether adhered to or not, in ways that may suggest there are severe limitations to what a ritual can represent, and how.

I'm not sure what you're expecting here, but you're not going to get it. I believe I know what I'm expecting, though I probably won't get it either.

In a wider sense, any systematic, repetitive behaviour targeted at the prevention or alleviation of anxiety can be referred to as a ritual. So a ritual is also a method of control. This presupposes at least a half-belief in supernatural causality, and it is therefore inevitable that ritual is intimately related to superstition.

Of interest here is the latter's derivation from the Latin *superstitio*. The verb *superstō* is literally translated as 'stand over or upon', 'survive'. *Superstitio* was used pejoratively from the 1st century BC in opposition to *religio*, to indicate either 'unreasonable' religious belief or excessive fear of the gods. A ritual can therefore be (somewhat tortuously) related to fear. Standing over, or surviving, in fear. Now we're getting somewhere.

Andreas rubbed the bridge of his nose. The low battery alert popped up on his screen. He dug the charger out of his bag, plugged into the outlet on the wall behind him. His mother put her tablet down.

‘Okay?’ he said.

‘Fine. My eyes are tired.’

For a while they talked, Andreas asking questions, his mother answering them, while he kept notes.

He checked his phone, then his father’s phone.

The volume on the TV was turned up but the sound of nearby conversations drowned out whatever it was the talking heads were arguing about. Andreas sat back and closed his eyes.

‘... do you even know how many?’

‘Do *you*?’

‘No, but I heard a large number and the real one’s probably even larger.’

‘No, you don’t bother. Forget what the recipe says. Forget what *every* recipe says. No onion in the world ever caramelized in under forty minutes.’

‘There’s twenty-four hours to the day.’

‘Last time I checked.’

‘But there’s also twenty-four letters to the alphabet. You think that’s a coincidence?’

‘Which alphabet? Or just ours?’

‘What do you mean, which? All the alphabets.’

‘There aren’t twenty-four letters in all the alphabets, I don’t think.’

‘Doesn’t matter – ours is the only real one. All the other ones were made up.’

‘–so the night I met him,’ Andreas’s mother was saying, ‘your father had just lost himself a job that was supposed to be his. He wasn’t in a mood to party, as you can

imagine. This was right after your grandfather passed away. Your father was just entering his second year at university but he had to give that up.'

This story had been told many times before.

'This guy whose house your grandmother used to clean took pity on us and sent your father to see this lawyer he knew who was looking to branch out in the Balkans and was searching for a translator. Maritime law. Two-language minimum, preferably English and French. Your father was also teaching himself Italian by that point, and he came highly recommended, so it was understood the job was his to lose, to a point.

'So he went and lost it – really, found out he'd never had a chance at it – and he was in no mood. But he had this new friend, Pavlos, they'd known each other a few weeks and Pavlos really, really wanted to introduce him to his little sister who was visiting from Arta and would be going back home the next day. Well, little according to Pavlos. I was twenty-two. And your father was adamant. He didn't feel like going. Then at the last minute he did. And that's how we met.'

'Your father told me he knew it wasn't going to happen the moment he walked into that office. Couldn't say exactly why, but the man looked him up and down and it was done, he'd rejected him even before he invited him to take a seat.

'He was sitting behind this big walnut pedestal desk and he didn't stand up to shake your father's hand. At his back there was this wide double bookcase full of thick tomes. Leather-bound, with gilded spines. Your father's dream, you know? Being able to afford his own books. Your father sat down. On the wall behind him there was a portrait of a man in a grey suit that was almost, he felt, placed there deliberately, so as to cultivate the idea in anyone sitting across from the lawyer that there was someone behind them staring daggers at the back of their head.

'So anyway the man didn't offer him anything, just launched into his questions and then after a while he called in his secretary – she'd let your father in the office in the first place, she was your father's age or so, much younger than the lawyer, who must have been in his mid-forties or so, and married. There was on his desk, a photograph in a gold frame of a woman and young child slumped on this rattan peacock chair in a garden somewhere, smiling up at the camera. There was also, off to your father's left, a framed medal on the wall. Later on, the man, who keep in mind knew – he *knew* – about your

father's family, your grandfather, he'd see your father staring at the medal and he'd look him straight in the eye and smile and say, "That's for killing communists."

'But so the man called in his secretary and asked that she order him a coffee and asked your father if he wanted anything. Your father asked for a glass of water. The man sent his secretary off, and that's when your father figured it out. There was something going on with the lawyer and the secretary, or at least something the lawyer wanted to be going on, and he wasn't about to let another man, especially one much closer to her in age, work in that office, not if he could help it.'

'So Michalis sat there and the man asked him his questions, and threw in the odd bit of terminology in what passed for English – he had no French – to trip your father up and there was this one thing that did trip him up, "inherent vice", he'd never come across the term before and the man just said, 'I see' and sat back with this satisfied look on his face as though he'd just exposed some kind of attempt at deceit. It was about then he said the thing about the medal. And your father almost got up and walked out. "I almost did," he told me, "because for a moment it was either that or vaulting over that desk and strangling that bastard with my bare hands".'

'That doesn't sound like Dad at all.' This was what Andreas always said at this point of the story, but the repetition didn't make it any less true.

'No. No, it didn't.'

'And but then you need to understand,' Aunt Katerina said, 'Michalis really needed that job. I was teaching at the school by that point but wasn't making nearly enough once your grandmother fell ill – she went to bed when our father died and stayed there for six months, she woke up the morning after the funeral and had no feeling in her legs, couldn't move at all, 'hysterical conversion' the doctors called it, until one morning six months later she awoke and stood up as though nothing had happened – she was unsteady on her feet for a while, but that was about it – and went back to scrubbing floors sixteen hours a day. So your father needed that job. So he said nothing. He sat there and said nothing, even though he knew it was hopeless. Just in case. He would be turned away, probably, but he wouldn't be made to leave, not like that.'

'And but so,' Andreas mother went on, 'that miserable excuse for a man finally gave your father this short text to translate into English, a formal letter of some kind and

your father asked for pencil and paper, which the secretary brought over – she gave him a hint of a smile of encouragement, which made things even worse, naturally, the lawyer made her wait while your father translated and then took the translation and glanced at it and said “What is *this*? ‘To adequately assess’? You call this English, young man?” And he dropped the page on his desk and said, “No, I’m afraid this simply will not do.”

‘And your father nearly cried, you know. Not over the job. Not over the humiliation either. For being made to feel complicit in it. And he stood up, slowly, and buttoned up his borrowed jacket and he said to the man, “Thank you for your time, Mr Petrou,” and walked out. And that was the worst thing, you know. Even then, he couldn’t let it reach the ears of the man who’d recommended him that he’d been rude.’

‘And that was that. Your father got out of there in a hurry and only paused to collect himself at the next corner, just stopped for a moment to catch his breath, he was still fighting back tears, and then he was looking back towards that office and a window opened and that lawyer stuck his head out to look up and down the street and he looked in the wrong direction first and your father rushed around the corner before the man could see him.’

‘What was that arsehole’s name again? Yorgos Petrou, right? His son’s the MP?’

‘Yes, that’s the one. His office was somewhere near Syntagma. He’d taken over from his father-in-law or something like that.’

‘Sort of,’ Andreas said. ‘He wasn’t his father-in-law yet when he died. This was during the Dekemvriana.’

‘Oh?’ Aunt Katerina said.

‘Dad’s been looking into it, it turns out. It’s an interesting story, if you want to hear it.’

In late December of ’44, with the battle of Athens entering its final phase, the Brits had solved the conundrum of telling the difference between non-uniformed enemy fighters and non-combatants in recaptured areas of Athens by no longer attempting to solve it. They simply arrested everyone they weren’t sure about. The majority of those captured – about 13,000 people in all – had been sent to prison camps in Goudi and the airport in Chassani, and from there to Egypt via boat, to a camp in El-Daba, where they’d remained until the end of the war. Meanwhile ELAS were taking hostages of their own.

There were, already, long lists of collaborators, as well as political enemies, and they would grab as many of them as they could. Their families too. Mere suspicion was often enough; many a personal score was settled. Mostly those targeted were prosperous, 'reactionaries', 'enemies of the people'. In particular those of a certain standing in political or financial circles.

A group of hostages captured in Kifisia – who would be taken on a trek through Bogiati, Oropos, Thiva and Livadeia to Arachova, where, on January 10th, a number of them were led away from the main group and executed – included, among others, former minister Trikoupis, Generals Papadimas and Bakos, Admiral Oikonomou, a well-known lawyer named Stavropoulos, and a not-as-well-known but well-respected colleague of his by the name of Voreas, who was captured by ELAS at his home, in the company of a woman taken for his wife. This event was, according to Yorgos Petrou's memoir, witnessed by a young law student, a classmate of Yorgos and, as it would transpire much to his shock and dismay, a member of EAM, called Victoria who was, apparently, the person responsible for the presence of Voreas's name on an ELAS list. On the subject of specific charges the memoir is silent. It does however allow that, yes, it was true that Mr Voreas had during the Occupation been moderately successful in the practice of his profession, and would obviously have attracted not a little jealousy and resentment along the way.

At the time of his capture, Mr Voreas had sent his wife and children off to safety (they were en route to Cairo, where they would remain for the next six months); he'd meant to follow them as soon as he'd completed some final piece of business. The woman captured alongside him, whom the memoir names as the author's mother, was Mr Voreas's client and wholly, indisputably innocent as a target of even the jealousy and resentment that Voreas might have inspired. She was guilty only being in the wrong place at the wrong time, attempting to also secure her family's safety by concluding the transfer of certain family assets that would enable them to make similar arrangements to escape. (Why this business was contacted at Mr Voreas's house rather than his office, the memoir does not divulge. As for the matter of escape, the memoir makes it clear that it was the prospect of communist rule the family wished to escape, not any kind of punishment for any supposed crime.)

In any case, Victoria was present for the capture of Mr Voreas and Mrs Petrou and while already acquainted with Mrs Petrou, had failed to alert her comrades to their mistake. It was possible, the memoir implied, this was no mistake. It was possible that Victoria, smitten with Yorgos and unable to accept being passed over in favour of Vassiliki Vorea – the ‘single love of the author’s life’ – had smeared the Voreas family with whatever calumny would have, in addition to their social standing, ensured their being targeted by ELAS; and that upon witnessing the disaster unfold had stayed silent rather than save Yorgos’s mother by confessing. It was also possible, considering the ruthlessness and paranoia of the communists, that she simply would not have admitted to previous acquaintance with the likes of the Petrous lest she be found ideologically suspect and be made to share her victims’ fate, as would later happen to her own family, two members of which were found executed in their home in late 1946. Assassinated by right-wing elements, the story went, though clearly they had been victims of an intra-Party purge.

Mr Voreas, the memoir added, had attempted to secure Mrs Petrou’s release by revealing the mistake to their captors. They had not believed him, and it wouldn’t have mattered to them anyway, even if Mrs Petrou hadn’t assured them that he was lying, that of course she was his wife, and would share whatever fate awaited him.

‘Here,’ Andreas said. He double-clicked, scrolled, and read aloud. ‘ “On the cold, windy morning of January 10, on a steep mountain path near Arachova, local peasant women reported coming across a grim procession of ELAS guerrillas guarding about a dozen prisoners being led to their place of execution, some of them barefoot, their legs black and swollen from torture, one or two too abused to even stand up, dumped onto mules likes so much firewood. There were two women amongst the prisoners, too flimsily dressed for mountain weather; one of them, according to the witnesses – who crossed themselves at the sight, suspecting that so fiery a colour could only be the Devil’s work – the owner of the thickest auburn head of hair the women had ever seen, in a torn and filthy dress, limping along on swollen ankles. She was accompanied by, or in any case stayed close to, a thick-set man in a brown suit, and was seen in one instance, when the witnesses paused to let the group pass them by on the narrow path, leaning against him for support while he whispered encouragements in her ear and received a blow with the butt of a rifle for his trouble. The prisoners stumbled along with stares hollow and fixed to the ground, neither hurrying nor dallying, neither resigned to their fate nor rebelling

against it. Already gone, the women said, as though what was witnessed were not the people themselves, their dead and dying bodies, but their souls set loose and lost and roaming the mountain paths looking for the peace denied them, and those who guarded them were not men at all but psychopomps come to take them away.

The group passed them by, and the women continued their descent. Only a boy who had stopped to bring to his lips a small handful of snow had watched the prisoners continue their climb up the mountainside and disappear. Then came the burst of rifle fire. The scattered firing of a pistol.

Later that day, when the women were climbing up the same path, they came across the guerrillas coming down, alone. The bodies had been dropped in a ravine and imperfectly covered with rocks, and the women sent the boy off for the village priest to come read over them.” ’

Andreas came back from the restroom. He checked his phone, then his father’s phone. He unplugged the laptop and put the charger away. Looked at his watch. Not too long to go now. He leaned back and closed his eyes.

‘It was about a month after he passed, see. The children were cleaning out the cellar and there was this iron box hidden away in the corner. He’d sold all his drachmas for rubles when we’d entered the war in ’16. *Imperial* rubles. Then October ’17 came along. The kids were in fits. I mean, hysterical. They burned the money to keep warm. This was the winter of ’42. There weren’t even any weeds left in the cracks between the paving. They’d eaten those too.’

‘Would you look at that. Bunch of kids proving they don’t believe in materialism by breaking somebody else’s stuff.’

‘What on earth are they thinking?’

‘Maybe they’ve been reading Balzac,’ Andreas’s mother said.

He clicked on the document named ‘Dad, Prison/Makronisos’.

'July 15th. The camp was built atop an old cemetery. Everywhere you dig more than three feet you bring up old bones. Mounds and mounds of them. Turkish prisoners, some, from the wars of '12 and '13 And refugees, from '22, they'd lodge them here for decontamination, they called it. Dead of typhoid, all of them, wrapped in sacks and buried in quicklime in great long pits. Maybe one day it'll be us someone else digs up like that.'

'August 22nd. Clouds of dust, the sky and ground red, one perpetual red haze that sticks to the skin and never leaves it, the sun this big wound low overhead that spills out heat. The clouds of fat lazy flies on every surface, iridescent, like pieces of shrapnel. Dust, everywhere, dust in your mouth when you eat, your lungs when you breathe, dust in your eyes when you look and your nostrils when you sniff, and no water anywhere, except the water that is the final wall of our island prison. Nothing to get in the way of the wind that lashes your face with gravel.

'Every morning the water detail sets off for Lavrio, carrying oil barrels to collect the water in. Command will not have them cleaned. The brackish water stinks of oil. And what's worse, there's not enough of it. Our water tank is set high up the hill over the port. Rationed out at night, in the deadtime – work must go uninterrupted. In the dark, we push and shove and fight one another for half a canteen of water.'

'November 17th. I didn't sleep. My tent is set up towards the back of the company's camp, halfway up the hillside. A little further up is the tent housing the Office of Moral Instruction. Too many nights I have lain awake, hearing the moans and the pleas and the screams. But nothing like last night – I wondered if I wouldn't have gone insane by morning. And in-between the screaming and the pleading, familiar voices. Georgiadis and Chajimichalis, working to rip a "Yes" out of someone's mouth. It wouldn't come. "No," was all the man could yell, and you couldn't tell what it was he was refusing. Then more screams. He fell silent just before dawn.

In the morning, during roll call, Georgiadis announced that Manolakos had killed himself out of guilt for his many crimes.'

'December 7th. They came for me in the night, took me from my tent. Chajimichalis, Chnaras, and Dachau. Dachau's real name is Chordakis. A Cretan. He repented and was kept on as a torturer. He'd been sent to Dachau during the Occupation and Chajimichalis had taken to calling him that while beating him and it had stuck. They took me and two more men. One I didn't know, the other one was Paspalakis. They took us downhill, threw us in the sea. When they pulled us out they beat us again and again.

This went on for a long time. The man I didn't know they put in a gunny sack and dumped him in the sea again. They left him there awhile, then pulled him out. Then again. Then they came for me.

'I heard one of them say, "Jesus fuck, watch if my arms don't fall off. Five days straight beating them. One of these cunts better confess already." Dachau, I think.

'They dragged us in front of the Commandant. The three of us, a few men from another company. Paspalakis was shivering, fighting to stay upright. I stood behind him and let him lean on me a bit. Someone shoved me forward. There were two unit clerks seated at their desks before the Commandant, typing away.

'The Commandant smirked at us. "What are we going to do with you lot? Why do you persist?" None of us spoke.

' "So many thousands have already repented. There's so few of you left. The Motherland is offering forgiveness. Why persist?"

'None of us spoke.

' "It's all in vain, you know. One way or the other, in the end there will be none of you left."

'He turned to one of the clerks. "*Répété*," he told him.

'We were pushed and shoved back to our tents. I needed to know what that word meant. "Repeat," someone who spoke French told me.

'Late that night they came for us again. After, they took us back to the Commandant's office. From there back down to the beach. I can't remember whether it was midnight or nearing dawn. I don't know. The dark is all I remember.

The next morning Paspalakis's body was found on the beach, this red cord wrapped so tight around his throat it had cut through the flesh. The other man, the one whose name I didn't know, had slit his wrists. They took him over to the Hospital. Once he recovered, they brought him back. Only I was unhurt.'

This phrase was one of the most inexplicable things Andreas had ever read. He scanned down the list of files until he found what he was looking for.

'Discharged by virtue of No. 53/1446/49 of Order No. 2/3/55, Ministry of Public Order. Upon release, was found to present with:

1. Mild traumatic brain injury – unclear at this time whether this is at route of what the family describe as 'behavioural changes'. 2. Pulmonary oedemas, affecting his ability

to speak. Patient can whisper for brief periods. 3. Regular haemoptysis. 4. Haematoma, right eye. 5. Two fractures, left tibia, one incompletely healed. 6. Multiple metatarsal fractures, right foot. 7. Cigarette burns on lips, behind the ears, between fingers and toes. Multiple abscesses, femoral and gluteal regions, requiring bloodletting. 8. Multiple abscesses, dorsal and lumbar regions. 9. Numerous cuts, bruises and skin abrasions.'

He was interrupted by an IM from Rachel. She was off to take Nora and her mother to dinner. Was there any news? 'No news,' he typed back. He'd call later.

'...and then your grandfather stumbled in,' Katerina said. 'I was startled awake when he crashed against the door trying to open it. I went to the bedroom door, pushed it open a crack. He came in and all the lamps were already lit and your grandmother and great-grandmother were sitting there. There was the window near the door with the shutter open but he must have been too drunk to realize the lights were on, because he walked in as though he were trying to be quiet and was surprised to see them sitting there, waiting for him. His face was flushed, his uniform was a mess. I couldn't understand what had happened to him. I'd never seen him like that before. He didn't drink. A couple of glasses of retsina with his dinner maybe, no more. I remember the rowels of his spurs clinking with every step like pocketfuls of loose change. He'd forgotten to take them off once he got close to the house.

'My mother was as confused as I was. She hadn't known what to think. He'd been an hour late, then two, then three. He hadn't sent word with anyone. It just wasn't like him. Now I think she'd been fearing the worst and the moment the worst was disproved all that terror had turned into rage. She was pulsing with it, you could see. She'd jumped up from the chair and had her arms wrapped around her waist as though she were trying to hold herself back. Grandma Katerina, she just sat there and stared with this stricken look on her face, as though she already knew.

'She might have guessed something was up.' Andreas said, 'I mean, if Grandad never drank...'

'Could be,' Aunt Katerina shrugged. 'She had this air about her, like she knew all sorts of things without needing to be told. Mother too, I remember she was shouting at him at first, where had he been and what kind of a state did he call this to be coming

home in but then pretty soon she could tell something was wrong, terribly wrong and all she could do was ask “What’s happened? What’s happened?” ’

‘He’d taken off his cap and was just holding it as though he hadn’t seen it before and didn’t know what to do with. He left it on the stand next to the door and took off his belt – the pistol, the sword – and hung it from the stand too and took a couple of steps and pulled a chair out from under the table and collapsed onto it and just sat there, slumped over. He started working on getting his boots off. This was something Mum would help him with, usually, but not that night. We had this metal rod leaning against the wall by the door, to scrape the mud off your shoes when you came in but he hadn’t used it. These clumps of mud fell to the floor but he didn’t pay them any mind.

‘He patted his pockets and found his cigarettes and tried to light one and it took a while, his hands were shaking so bad. Then he leaned forward and sat with his elbows on his knees and wouldn’t look up. I’d been slowly pushing the door until it was wide open. It still would have made some noise, every door in that place the wood was old and creaked if you as much as looked at it, but no one took any notice of me.

‘He sat there and a couple of times shook his head yes then no as though he was debating something with himself and I think that’s when he decided. I mean, they talked it over for a day or so afterwards, him and your grandmother, once he’d sobered up and she could bring herself to look at him, but really, I think he’d already decided he didn’t have a choice.’

‘Do you think he did?’ Andreas asked.

‘Do you think he *didn’t*?’

‘I don’t know, Aunt. I wasn’t disagreeing with you, it was an actual question.’

‘And that’s when he told us,’ Aunt Katerina went on, as though she hadn’t heard him.

‘There’d been, a couple of days previously – I don’t know, some act of sabotage, near Lamia. A big enough thing that you knew something would be done about it. The whole town was holding its breath, waiting. Your grandfather most of all. It was his command, his responsibility. He knew they’d come to him eventually – the Italians, he was hoping, but it was the Germans that came. The Wehrmacht. This major came to his office on the second morning, brought an interpreter along, and laid everything out. The

interpreter stood behind him the whole time, and the major never turned to look his way once, he had his gaze trained on your grandfather the whole time.

‘Did your grandfather know who the saboteurs were? No, your grandfather told them, he didn’t. It was almost true – I mean, he had his suspicions. It was those same men he approached after he’d made his decision. He’d glance from the major to the interpreter while he spoke, looking to see whether they believed him. Wondering about the distance between what was being said and what the interpreter did with it. But anyway, he knew nothing, he assured the major. He didn’t think the locals knew anything either. He was certain none of them had been involved.

‘The major’s coffee arrived, and he drank it slowly, asking all sorts of innocuous questions and all the time your grandfather was thinking, “They know I know. He’s waiting for me to confess, give someone up.” Wondering what would happen once the major got tired of waiting.

‘Then the major got to his point. There would be, he said, reprisals. Of course. Hostages would be taken. Some would be executed immediately, the rest in the event of further acts of sabotage in the area. Who they would be was immaterial to the major’s superiors, but he was going to offer your grandfather the opportunity to mitigate the town’s suffering. He was prepared to take only communists, as long as your grandfather was prepared to point them out. Or at the very least sympathizers. Surely he had to know who they were. Better them than anyone else, no? They were after all the common enemy, were they not.

‘And your grandfather told him that no, he knew of no communists in the town. No sympathizers. He couldn’t help him. And the major pretended to think or maybe thought about this for a while and eventually said something like, “Very well, but still, hostages will be taken. You would do well to give us names.”

‘Do you know,’ Aunt Katerina asked, ‘the thing that baffles me the most? Almost the most? Your grandfather took no time answering, he said. There wasn’t any need, he said. He looked the man in the eye and told him he couldn’t give him any names. But he had a wife, and a child, and himself to offer, and if hostages had to be taken, the major was welcome to take us.’

There was always the same long pause when Aunt Katerina arrived at this point of her story, when she would sit there in silence and look at you with the same kind of

panicked incomprehension in her eyes, waiting for you to answer the question she hadn't yet asked.

'Can you imagine? What was he thinking? Just tell me that. What was he *thinking*? What went through his head, offering us up to be murdered? How could he? "No need to take his time answering." No need! Can you imagine?'

Andreas thought about it. He thought about Nora and Rachel. He thought about Aunt Katerina, and his grandmother, and his father. Then tried, really tried, to *actually* think about it. Like every other time, the moment defeated him. 'I don't know, Aunt. Honestly, no, I can't. I can't imagine it at all.'

(It was at this point of his grandfather's narration that Andreas's grandmother had let loose a scream and had launched herself at him and struck him again and again, shouting things that Katerina couldn't and didn't want to understand, and Katerina was crying and screaming and had ran into the living room to get between them but it was no good and her father was just standing there allowing his wife to hit him again and again until – was it something she'd said, or had he just had enough – he'd raised one arm and slapped her back, hard, and had then stood and looked at all of them in turn, had appeared to only then see Katerina, and had shouted to his wife, 'What would you have had me do?' and his mother, Andreas's great-grandmother, had walked up to him and slapped him just as hard and said, 'You don't ever hit her again.' She'd pointed at Katerina who was, though she was still sobbing, attempting to look determined, protective, even if she wasn't at all sure whom she was meant to protect, and said, 'There's your daughter, Andreas. You want to get her killed, go ahead. But you don't ever raise a hand to your wife again.' And Katerina had watched her father take this in and fall back onto his chair and break into long, racking sobs that went on and on and she went and threw her arms around him but no matter what she tried he wouldn't stop.)

The major stared at Andreas for a long time without saying anything. Andreas waited without a thought in his head. It was done. There was a strange kind of concussed relief in the thought that it was now out of his hands. He'd refused; they would live, or they would die. There was nothing else to decide.

Then the major stood up, and waited for Andreas to get to his feet – how, how had he managed – and very precisely, very deliberately, saluted and without saying another word turned and left.

It is possible that the terror didn't begin until a few hours later when, just as he was thinking about maybe attempting to talk himself into believing they'd been spared, a messenger arrived to invite Andreas to a local taverna, where a number of German officers, including the major, had gathered for the evening.

The short walk over there took a very long time. The Germans greeted him like a long-lost friend and plied him with drink and spent the evening giving him looks and addressing him in their own language and laughing. The interpreter was again present, but no one would employ his services. They got progressively drunker, and more boisterous, and until late in the evening would take turns draping an arm over Andreas's shoulders and delivering long and, it was clear from their tone, sentimental monologues about God knew what. The only words he understood were '*Deutschland*', '*Griechenland*', '*Führer*', and '*Reich*' – nothing that could explain what was going on.

It is possible it did not take him long to get drunk, nor to become convinced this was mere sadism, cruelty for its own sake. A last meal before his execution. It was possible he did, in a moment of clarifying madness, consider reaching for his gun and ending things himself, in the hope this would suffice for his family to be allowed to go unharmed. His family being the only reason he wouldn't consider turning his gun on the Germans first.

These things are possible.

The Germans came to the end of their last song and one by one stood up and buttoned up their tunics and adjusted their belts before heading in mutual drunken support for the door. Andreas made to stand but was held back by a hand on his arm. The major called the interpreter back and through him made his announcement: hostages had been taken earlier that evening. A small number of them would be shot the following morning, the rest held onto for future use. The investigation into the explosion would continue, but where Commander Xenidis was concerned, the matter was considered resolved, his assistance no longer required. This time.

Andreas nodded and said, 'I understand,' and waited for the major to take his leave before attempting to get to his feet and make his way home.

'We got out of Lamia the next night. Grandma Katerina had left for Pougakia earlier that day. I never saw her again. My father came back for those couple of months after liberation, then left again in December, and next time I saw him it was 1948 and we were visiting him in prison, in Piraeus, right before he was sent to Makronisos. Then we didn't see him again until he was released in '58. And then it seems like in no time at all he was ill, then he was gone.

'And I never thought about that night much for decades after that. I mean – no, that's not true – I mean, I thought about it but also didn't: I was back behind that door, hearing him come in, and would get up and open it a crack and get a glimpse of that room and slam the door shut. I couldn't get any closer. Then one day I did, I pushed the door open and walked through. And I've been in that room ever since, waiting for someone to show me the way out. An escape route. Waiting maybe for my father to wake me up in the middle of the night and carry me out of that house. But instead of leaving me behind, sitting me down in that grove, on that pile of oak leaves, with the gap in the canopy overhead, and telling me why he did it. How he could offer us up like that. I'm not even angry anymore. I just need him to tell me why.'

'I know, Aunt,' Andreas said. 'I know.'

There was, in the family subfolder, one copy of an old photo that Andreas kept coming back to. In this photo, the Parthenon stands on its three-stepped stylobate on its high hill, overlooking the miraculously restored Propylaia. The temple itself is just being completed by the three giants that are putting the finishing touches on its entablature. They tower over the landscape in their army uniforms, so titanically tall one them is comfortably leaned over the edifice with one foot at the bottom of the hill and the other near its summit. Behind them extends a flat and featureless grey indistinguishable from the dirt at their feet. They are looking down at their work with a focused but pleased expression, their caps worn a little crooked on their heads. There can be seen, just about, on the face of the middle titan the beginning of a smile, the creator's hesitant thrill of pride at what his hands have wrought.

The photograph was first displayed during the 1949 grand 'Makronisos Photographic Exhibition' at the Zappeio, as part of a series of posters showing the prisoners constructing their own replicas of national monuments. The aim of the exercise was 'rehabilitation'; the demonstration that 'there exists a radical antinomy between the Greek racial psychology, essentially individualistic, and communism, essentially gregarious; this idea has as its corollary that every Greek communist is a self-exile from the spirit of the Greek race.' The soldiers could thus with their own hands recreate the past and, in doing so, find their way back home.

The prisoners built the damned things; they weren't given a choice. Inwardly they mocked the process and its aims, and would attempt to subvert its meanings at every chance. Given a chance to stage a play, they chose *Philoctetes*: 'No sailor of his own will stops here...' One group had built an open-air theatre, but instead of the stones that commanded their daily existence they'd used mud bricks to build an exact replica of Epidaurus.

Yet the fact remained that the things were built. There was an entry about the play in Andreas's grandfather's diaries that read, simply, 'We staged it. They watched, but didn't understand.' And that was, finally, Andreas's objection.

The polite, academic way to phrase it would have been something along the lines of: these attempts at subversion, covert resistance, appropriated the dominant rhetoric but did not undermine it. 'The moral authority of the past was never in doubt,' as one fellow academic had put it.

The way Andreas had put it to Rachel, when he'd come across all this in a paper he'd tracked down for his father about a year earlier, had been, 'Fuck appropriation. Fuck *subversion*. Just tear it all the fuck down.'

The way he'd reacted to that photograph, upon seeing it for the first time, had been to decide that what was needed was for someone to take a sledgehammer to the fucking Parthenon, grind every last broken bit of marble to fucking dust and dump it in the sea. Then go around destroying every last fucking replica, every last tacky souvenir, deleting and erasing and corrupting and shredding every last video and photograph and sketch and print, burning every single last copy of every single last text that even

mentioned the damned thing, until there wasn't a single fact left in the entire fucking world to remind people it had ever even existed.

Then, eventually, he'd thought how right Graham Greene was, about the oddity of the fury to deface, about how no act of defacement could ever be enough, and had determined that the only thing to do with the Parthenon, if it were possible, would have been to ignore it. Avert his eyes, refuse to ever again acknowledge its existence.

Then he'd thought back to that poet, Makris, back in 1944, composing the manifesto for the 'Association of Aesthetic Saboteurs of Antiquities': 'As our first act of destruction we hereby announce the blowing up and utter demolition of the Parthenon, which is quite literally suffocating the life out of us.'

Makris he'd come across, where else, in an academic paper entitled 'Unbuilding the Acropolis in Greek Literature', where he'd also come across Nicholas Calas's savage 'Acropolis' ('Nothing but cylinders to be seen round here / straight fallen columns / of marble or others / of roll-film, Agfa, Kodak / of coins—change / from negotiated dollar and sterling').

But there was also Psycharis, in *My Journey*, telling Aristophanes to 'take a good look at the Acropolis. It looms over Athens as though about to fall on it and crush it.'

And Seferis: 'It was time we stopped acting like limpets on these stones. We had reached a dead end.'

And Hakkas: 'Grey Acropolis, ashen Parthenon, Propylaia the colour of cement,' Hakkas telling himself to 'Quit with your whining already. The ground is always there under your feet. Why don't you stop pretending you're uprooted.'

And

And

And

He'd laughed at Makris, and at himself, and their hopeless desire for amnesia. Even their yearning to destroy the edifice was part of its history. There was no escape.

By six o'clock they were getting ready. Packing things away in bags, settling their bills. Taking turns to visit the restroom.

Andreas and his mother and Katerina; the old man with the dying wife; the couple with the quadriplegic son. There would be more visitors arriving directly upstairs. Elias and Stavros had left; they'd only come in for their annual check-up. God only knew why they'd stuck around as long as they had.

By quarter-past six they were starting to make their way to the exit, then across the lobby to take the lift or the stairs up to the second floor. There by nineteen-past. On rare occasions, the ICU door opened a few minutes early.

Not today.

They took their seats along the narrow corridor. One row of twelve seats up against the wall. Some of them would have to stand. There wasn't enough room. People kept inadvertently blocking the lift door. Andreas went and stood on the staircase.

They waited.

Andreas would take the first fifteen minutes. Aggeliki and Katerina would go in next.

'You could come in with me too,' he told his mother.

'I'll wait with Katerina. You didn't see him this morning. I'm sure you've got things to tell him.'

'Yeah, okay,' Andreas said. He left his bag by his mother's feet. Handed over his phone, and his father's phone.

She knows, he thought. I haven't told her anything, but still, she knows.

They waited.

Conversations were conducted in whispers, then died out as the time drew near. The time came and went and the doors remained closed. There were slight shifts of unease, the comparing of the displays of timepieces and mobile phones, remarks making light of the delay. Quick prayers were mumbled. People crossed themselves.

Hospital walls would teach you about the passing of time, sure, but it wasn't a lesson that ever stuck. So the walls taught you again.

The door opened. 'Everything all right, nurse?' someone asked. 'Yes,' Natalia said. People began to stand up. 'You can come in now.'

Andreas pumped some hand sanitizer out of the dispenser and scrubbed his hands clean, then put on the blue gown. Scrubbed his hands with sanitizer. Walked to the far end of the corridor.

He paused for a second just inside the door, felt a shiver run through him in the overbright cold light. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath and held it and heard that ICU steady industrial whirr, the pulleys and gears propping up the façade that was the world, so thin in this place, near the border of everything, it would give at the slightest pressure. Heard also the measured hiss of ventilators, the steady beeping of heart monitors. Pings, some with the ringing depth of piano keys at fortissimo, some with the thin children's-toy quality of the ding announcing a lift's arrival. Calls for attention, all, overlaid and overlapping into something too chaotic to make sense of even if you spoke the language. Eight beds, eight different worlds.

He blinked his eyes clear and looked across the room, to that massive machine of a bed next to the window, the fat pressure-relieving mattress, the head of the bed slightly raised, the tubes and wires and lines – nasogastric tube through the nose, endotracheal tube through the mouth, central venous catheter through the subclavian vein, blood pressure cuff on the arm, pulse oximeter clipped to the thumb, syringe driver on one side of the bed, bedside monitor station to the other – converging on his father's body. His father lying there, this big man still, whom the bed, the rails, made now look so very small and child-like, partially covered in a light blanket, his eyes closed in sleep.

He walked past the nurses' station and returned Natalia and Roula's greeting without taking his eyes off the monitor screen until he could make out: heart rate 89, blood pressure 128/72, oxygen saturation 96, respiratory rate 16, temperature 36.9, okay, good, good, nice regular lines, green red yellow white.

He stood on the right side of the bed with his back to the window. Pumped hand sanitizer out of the dispenser and scrubbed his hands clean. Leaned in and whispered, 'Hey, Dad,' and kissed his father's forehead. This was okay, he had been assured. He stroked his father's thick tangle of hair, even at his age a deep black only now starting to grey at the temples. This had to mean something.

He leaned in again and said, 'Hey, Dad, it's me,' and waited for a sign he'd been heard.

He stood up and looked around to the nurses' station and caught Natalia's eye. 'Sleeping,' she mouthed. Andreas nodded. She gestured, it was okay to try to wake him. Andreas gestured back, in a second.

He took his father's hand in his own, turned it over and examined it. The swelling had gone down a bit. The skin dry, papery, a little cold to the touch. The nails needed clipping. He lifted the sleeve of the hospital gown. Halfway up his father's right bicep, the wide bruise caused by the blood pressure cuff was turning deep yellow. Four measurements an hour during the day, two an hour overnight. The damage added up. The nurses switched the cuff to the other arm every few days.

His father made a gagging sound and stuck his tongue out of the side of his mouth. The tube, Papageorgiou had told Andreas. Trying to push it out.

He leaned in again and said, a little louder this time, 'Time to wake up, Dad.' Checked the monitor: 91, 131/73, 96, 16, 36.9. Okay.

He looked up. Papageorgiou had started his round on this side of the ward. He watched him address the parents of the Duchenne kid, the kid's mother holding his hand throughout, his arm skeletal and fixed in position, a bird's folded wing, his spine twisted and curved, the face too long and thin and temples hollow on a swan-like neck. You couldn't look, and couldn't not look. The kid had been comatose for a month now and his Glasgow Scale score was 3 – no eye response, no verbal response, no motor response. He wasn't expected to recover. He, too, was on the waiting list for a public hospital ICU. Higher than his father, was Andreas's impression, due to the kid's age.

Andreas didn't spend much time contemplating this, worried about what he might catch himself thinking. The possibility, approached obliquely, as that which he wouldn't want to think, was awful enough; and was also – this was the trick you played on yourself – a disclaimer that provided dispensation. That sanctioned. You could think it by thinking about not thinking it. Think it as that which you were too good a person to think. This was how the world broke down, crumbled in from the edges: by dividing into coeval, zero-sum facts. After that, a lot of things were permissible.

He glanced at his father's monitor just as
lines flattened and
a number plummeted and

a two-tone alarm howled
and Andreas called out to Natalia
and she just—
standing there behind the nurse's station
looking on
what was she doing
the alarm
the alarm stopped.

Green red yellow white lines traced vital functions across the screen. 90, 130/74,
95, 16, 36.9.

Papageorgiou was still talking to the kid's parents. Natalia came over and punched
a couple of buttons next to the screen that seemed to have no effect on the display.

'Everything's fine,' she told Andreas. She saw the look on his face and added,
'Really, Mr Andreas, we've been through this before. If you don't see me running, there's
nothing to worry about, is there.'

'The alarm—' he managed to say.

'These machines are oversensitive. Which you want them to be, right? Better than
not sensitive enough.'

'What—'

'Transient dip in oxygen saturation. Happens to everyone when we sleep. Or
maybe just an artefact. Alarms go off all the time in here, as you might have noticed.
Ninety-five percent of the time, it's nothing.'

'But the five percent—'

'—is when I'll come running. So unless I do, you've got nothing to worry about.'

'All right. Thank you.'

'I'll leave you to it. Dr Papageorgiou will be with you soon.'

Still, it was nigh impossible not to concern yourself with the possibility that this
had been, not the punishment itself, but an augury of the punishment that would follow
the kind of thoughts you'd just been not-having, were you to go ahead and have them.
What most made this plausible was how the punishment would be visited upon the
wrong person. Though, if you thought about it, that's how the most effective forms of

punishment usually worked. They were meted out the same way a gun was aimed at a moving target. A little to the side, out ahead of where the target actually was.

'I'm sorry, Dad,' he said.

He scrubbed his hands with sanitizer. Checked the monitor. He stroked his father's forearm. 'How about you wake up now, Dad?' he said. 'There's some things we need to talk about.'

His father opened his eyes.

'There you are,' Andreas said.

His father's gaze stayed locked up and to the left, looking away from Andreas. Not seeing anything, it was believed. Even after he'd started responding to sounds by turning his head in their direction, his gaze almost never shifted. 'Conjugate eye deviation,' the doctors called it. It was a clear indication of the area of the brain that had suffered the worst damage.

They came in every day, in the morning, again in the afternoon. Andreas and his mother, Tasos when he came down from Salonica, Katerina, his father's friends, a few other relatives at first, cousins and nephews and nieces. They came in and held his hand and stroked his hair and spoke to him and told him their news and stories and little jokes and reminisced about this and that and asked for his opinion and urged him to wake up or squeeze a hand or move an arm or leg or at least look, at least blink at them. Waited for a trace, a ghost of a response.

What they saw, the doctors told them, politely but insistently, was what they needed to see. The things they saw, they told them – it wasn't that they weren't there. They just didn't mean what they needed them to mean.

Palmar grasp reflex: Non-volitional. Weak, inconsistent.

Withdrawal reflex: Slow, dystonic.

Response to painful stimuli: Abnormal flexion.

No evidence of sustained, reproducible, purposeful, or voluntary behavioural responses to visual, auditory, tactile, or noxious stimuli.

'Good afternoon, Mr Xenidis.'

'Good afternoon.'

'How are we doing today?'

'You tell me, Doctor.'

'Your mother?'

'Outside. Coming in next.'

Papageorgiou stood there with his hands deep in the pockets of his white coat and a slight hunch to the shoulders. It made it look as though he was forever bracing himself to deliver bad news. He had this very slow way of speaking that Andreas had at first taken for a minor speech impediment but later decided was only haughtiness. He seemed to think that his patients' relatives were without exception, not exactly idiots, but certainly unable to keep up with him unless accommodations were made. He also repeated a lot of information on an almost daily basis, which encouraged this impression, but was probably only meant to let the facts of the case sink in. Or perhaps he only did so because here they came every day, waiting for him to tell them something. Anything. Yes, even the same thing.

Andreas watched him weigh the numbers on the monitor, shine a penlight in his father's eyes. Next, he took his father's hand, pinched the skin at the base of the left thumb, looking for a response. He didn't scrub with sanitizer first. He lifted the blanket and ran the handle end of a reflex hammer across a sole to examine the plantar reflex. The hallux dorsiflexed, the toes fanned out. 'Babinski sign', this was called. Indication of CNS damage. Andreas knew this, and Papageorgiou knew he knew it and pursed his lips and gave him a 'See?' look but said nothing. Andreas wondered whether he ever performed these little tests outside visiting hours, or whether they were only for the visitors' benefit.

His father's toenails also needed clipping. His ankles were still swollen. There were areas of redness on both heels. Stage one bedsores. There were more on his back, they'd been told. They would eventually become a problem. But not just yet.

Papageorgiou pulled the blanket back in place. Stood there with his head slightly tilted, running an index finger along one side of his jaw.

'Your father was resuscitated after what was it – seven or eight minutes, right?'

‘Something like that,’ Andreas said. Seven or eight centuries, he didn’t say. Seven or eight millennia.

‘Even so, that doesn’t tell us anything for certain. What was his oxygen saturation before cardiac arrest? When you got him to hospital, had he already been hypoxic for a while? How long? There’s no way to tell. Now, the CT showed midbrain damage, there’s no getting around that. Diffuse, rather than focal, which is what we expect in such cases. But I can’t tell you how significant that will prove. Each case – each brain – is unique. I’ve seen patients with much worse CTs than your father’s wake up and walk out of here a couple of weeks later, with maybe a little hesitation in speech, minor balance issues. Or no sign at all anything had happened. Though that’s rare, most demonstrate at least some behavioural changes. You should expect something like that if he recovers. But I’ve also seen patients with much *better* CTs never recover and no doctor I know could tell you what the difference was. The brain – we just don’t know as much as we’d like.’

The uncertainty pitch. Not offering hope, exactly, but not denying it either. It shouldn’t work – Andreas knew the odds, and they weren’t good – but it did.

‘Anything else we could be trying?’ he asked.

‘Keep doing what you’re doing. Talk to him. Keep it light. Upbeat. Good news, future plans, happy memories. Don’t overdo it with the memories. Don’t upset him. Don’t upset yourself so you don’t upset him. We just don’t know how much he might be taking in.’

‘What about the MRI?’ Andreas said.

‘I don’t think he can be moved safely. Not yet. You have to understand, whatever it tells us is not going to make any kind of difference in terms of treatment. There *is* no treatment. What we’re focused on is supportive care – giving him time. Hoping for the best. You’re welcome to bring in a specialist if you want, but they won’t tell you anything different.’

‘About that.’ Andreas explained about Dimos.

‘Yes, of course, that’s fine,’ Papageorgiou said. ‘Tomorrow, then,’ he concluded, moving on to the next patient.

Andreas looked at his watch. Barely over five minutes since he’d come in. He’d failed to notice which, if any, surfaces he’d touched after a point. He scrubbed his hands with sanitizer, felt again its sting in his sinuses. The smell of it was everywhere in the

ward. As sterile as everything looked, everywhere around him he thought he also detected underlying odours. Sweat and urine and faeces. Intertrigo. Blood. Like ghosts of smells that couldn't be driven away, a summation of the basics of existence and how it ended.

He held his father's hand. Leaned in and said, 'Squeeze my hand, Dad.' He waited. He tried to catch his father's unseeing gaze. He did, and tried to tell himself he saw a mind behind the eyes.

His father lay there with his head tilted back, his jaw hanging slack, the endotracheal tube pulling at the side of his face like a hook in the mouth of a fish. He swallowed. His tongue pushed at the tube. The ventilator clicked and wheezed and clicked. Clicked and wheezed and clicked.

'Come on, Dad. Squeeze my hand.'

He had to keep reminding himself to keep instructions simple. Repeat at regular intervals, without shifting between different instructions. No 'Squeeze my hand, look at me, blink twice if you can hear me'. Too confusing.

'Squeeze my hand, Dad.'

'Squeeze my hand, Dad.'

'Squeeze my hand, Dad.'

His father squeezed his hand.

The first few times they'd cried out and called the shift doctor over and attempted to demonstrate. It hadn't always worked. Not a sustained, reproducible, purposeful, or voluntary response. A coincidence.

'Squeeze my hand, Dad.'

'Squeeze my hand, Dad.'

'Squeeze my hand, Dad.'

Of course, you couldn't be sure. If it never happened, well, that was one thing. If it happened every time. But sometimes? What to make of that? You just couldn't be sure.

'Blink twice if you can hear me, Dad.'

'Blink twice if you can hear me, Dad.'

'Blink twice if you can hear me, Dad.'

His father blinked twice.

'Blink twice if you can hear me, Dad.'

'Blink twice if you can hear me, Dad.'

'Blink twice if you can hear me, Dad.'

There were things Andreas knew.

He knew that the experience of seeing patterns or connections in random or meaningless data was called apophenia.

He knew that the particular type of apophenia that related to the perception of vague or obscure stimuli as distinct and recognizable, most commonly in the case of seeing human faces in inanimate objects, or hearing voices in the wind, was called pareidolia.

He knew that these were theorized to be the results of a simple evolutionary trade-off. Survival was more likely when you saw danger where there was none, rather than when you failed to see danger that was actually there.

He also knew that the tendency to make new evidence fit your existing beliefs and theories was called confirmation bias. Proportionality bias was the tendency to think that big events had to be attributable to big causes.

He also knew there were, give or take, eighty-six billion neurons in a human brain. He was learning about neural correlates; about qualia; about transcranial magnetic stimulation; about gamma range oscillations and the P3b event-related potential; the hard problem of consciousness.

He also knew there were studies that appeared to demonstrate that consciousness wasn't confined to any one region of the brain; that appeared to show its persistence where its persistence, you would have been told, was impossible.

What he didn't know was, of those eighty-six billion, how many could you afford to lose before you were no longer you? How much could be lost without loss? What kind of damage was acceptable? What kind of damage could be survived?

What he knew was, once every few attempts, his father blinked twice, and this had to mean something.

He scrubbed his hands with sanitizer. Looked out the window, to the small park opposite the clinic, where an Aleppo pine shed a cloud of black snow that rather than fall took to the air, turned into a quarrel of sparrows that pulsed and rippled and swayed and fell sideways up and was gone. He glanced at his watch. There was still time.

'Squeeze my hand, Dad.'

'Squeeze my hand, Dad.'

'Squeeze my hand, Dad.'

The two-tone alarm howled and a

line flattened and a

number plummeting to

zero

what

look

whatwaszerowhat

and he turned to

call out

the alarm wouldn't stop

it wouldn't stop

wouldn't stop

it wouldn't—

The alarm stopped.

'You mind not doing that again, Dad?'

His father blinked. Tongued at the tube.

There was the matter of being here. Being here as protective measure. As apotropaic. If he could only be here, all the time, his father would not die. But he could not be here all the time. It was therefore possible his father would die. Which confirmed his fear he wouldn't be here when his father died. Which assuaged his fear he would be here when his father died.

'Tasos is flying in tonight. He'll come see you in the morning. Also, Rachel says hi. She still needs to beat you at Scrabble at some point. She says next time Old English is *in* – give her a fighting chance.'

His father closed his eyes.

Andreas stared at the monitor and said, 'Nora says big kiss to Grandpa.' He watched his father's blood pressure spike from 128/71 to 184/97. Then, over the next minute or so, come back down.

Andreas, still staring at the monitor, said, 'Nora wants to visit soon.'

It didn't always work. But it worked sometimes.

There was the matter of looking away. For a moment. Looking away as respite. Looking away as self-preservation. As the breaking of the water's surface for one gasp of air.

His gaze scanned the ward, stopped where the old man was standing next to his wife's bed with his hand on her arm. Their gazes met and Andreas looked away. This wasn't done.

He scrubbed his hands with sanitizer. Examined the skin of his palms, red and dry and desquamated. He held his father's hand.

'Hey, Dad, come on. It's time to wake up, Dad.'

'You need to wake up, Dad.'

'You need to wake up, Dad.'

'You need to wake up, Dad.'

His father's features shifted into an approximation of something like annoyance, discomfort, indignation. 'What is it, Dad? What's wrong?'

Then the odour hit him, his brain briefly interpreting it as that of horse droppings and wet hay. He lifted the blanket and sheet discreetly, and tugged at his father's diaper just enough to confirm what he knew. He lowered the sheet and caught Natalia's eye. He made some gesture that she somehow understood. 'Take care of it after,' she mouthed, or something like that. He lowered the blanket and sheet back in place. Scrubbed his hands with sanitizer.

There was the matter of pity. Of being looked at with it, sometimes. Of catching a glimmer of it in others' eyes. There was the matter of not being able to stand it. Of your father not deserving anyone's pity. Of your father not deserving *this*. There was the matter of Natalia having no business cleaning up after your father. Changing his diaper. There was the matter of these being things you should be doing yourself.

There was the matter that annoyance, discomfort, indignation, all suggested awareness.

'It's okay, Dad.'

'It's okay, Dad.'

'It's okay, Dad.'

84, 122/72, 95, 16, 36.8, okay, green red yellow white lines, okay, okay, okay, okay.

'So check this out, Dad. The Abatzoglou archive, you know how I told you there was some unpublished work in there? Fragments, mostly, but also a couple of what look like complete second or third drafts. Also notes towards some kind of novella or short novel, I don't know, he never got to write. There's a working title: *Rituals*. Two or three pages from some kind of prologue. It's first-person. No indication who's supposed to be speaking. I'll print them off and bring them along next time.'

His father opened his eyes. Blinked. His gaze trained to the right. To where Andreas stood talking to him.

‘That’s it, Dad. Here I am. Here I am.’

The eyes moved, dragged to the left.

‘Here, Dad. Over here,’ a little louder, straight into his right ear, then quickly pulling up, into his field of vision, searching for a response.

The eyes seemed to start come back. Something in their movement like effort. Like struggle. Swivelling up and to the left.

‘It’s okay, Dad. It’s hard, I know. You did well. Try to visualize it – turning my way. If it’s confusing, if you’re not sure how to do it, try to see yourself doing it. See yourself turning my way.’

There was the matter of being lost. Lost inside your own mind. Cut off from yourself, cut loose inside, and lost, as though trapped in a home turned into maze, as in a nightmare, running past rooms through whose windows you can only make out half-imagined shapes in the dark. Hearing voices calling you outside and, unable to find a way out, or be heard when you respond, beating your fists against the walls, and the windows’ thick cold glass, which reflects back at you only yourself, a grey, ghostly duplication, staring you down from a world behind the glass but not beyond it.

The alarm
howled and
zero
whatzerowhatoxygensaturationzeroand
bloodpressure190110and
why
and he turned
for
help
the alarm wouldn’t stop
it wouldn’t stop
wouldn’t stop
it wouldn’t–

The alarm stopped.

'—everything okay?'

'...'

'Mr Xenidis? Is everything okay?'

'Oh. Ye— well, no, not really.'

Natalia punched a couple of buttons next to the screen that seemed to have no effect on the display. 'Anything we can do?'

'No. But thank you.'

The window flared orange. He looked up and saw nothing but yellow-green pines under a glaucous grey sky. Then the black cloud skimmed down and swayed and broke up and settled on a tree and after a moment was only visible as a kind of disquiet in the pine needles.

Click and wheeze. Click and wheeze. Beeping and beeping and beeping. The ringing of a phone at the nurses' station. Roula, on the other phone, 'Doctor Antoniou wanted me to check on those results—' The shizzle of the fluorescents overhead. Always, that whirring sound, low, monotone, a single persistent note; the vibration of underlying fields. He opened his eyes.

93, 124/71, 97, 16, 36.8, okay, green red yellow white lines, okay, okay, okay, okay. Andreas checked his watch.

There was, finally, the matter of time. As in, running out of.

'Dad? So listen, Dad, I've been using your laptop, long story, but anyway I came across those videos? The ones you've been making for Nora?'

Nothing.

'I clicked through a few just to get an idea of what you've been up to.'

What he wouldn't say was, 'I couldn't bear to watch for long.'

‘But I’ve been going through your notes and sources and stuff. I can’t believe how much work you put into it. You’ve been working on some version of this for decades now, I know, but still. But what’s the plan? You haven’t even said anything about yourself yet, as far as I can tell. It’s all a bit Tristram Shandy-ish, no?’

‘So, here’s the thing, Dad. You need to wake up and finish this thing, right? Because I can’t do it for you. Mum, maybe, some of it. But then there’s so many things even she wouldn’t know. Aunt Katerina doesn’t do too much talking nowadays, you have to push her. Except for the thing with Grandpa Andreas.’

His father’s blood pressure spiked to 180 over 110.

‘So there’s no one else, Dad. You have to wake up and finish this thing yourself.’

His father blinked. Blinked. Closed his eyes. Opened them. Pushed at the tube with his tongue. Made a gagging sound. Turned his head. Doctors be damned, this meant something. There was a way these events, taken in sequence, could be made to mean.

‘But Dad—’ He hesitated. ‘About Nora—’

Was that the slightest, weakest, almost imperceptible squeeze of the hand? Yes, it was.

‘It’s great, what you’re doing for her, it is. But what’s the plan? What’s she supposed to do with all of it? I don’t mean the videos, I mean what’s in them, what’s she supposed to do with any of it?’

His father blinked. Blinked. Closed his eyes. Opened them wide.

‘I know, Dad. But then what? You’re stuck with all this, and I’m stuck with it, and sometimes I catch myself thinking I was maybe better off before. Like, okay, much good it did me. And I don’t know if I want that for her. I don’t know, Dad. You need to tell me what to do with it. I need you to tell me what to do. So you need to wake up, Dad. Come on. You need to wake up.’

His father closed his eyes. Breathed. Head tilted back, eyes looking up and to the left. Made a noise somewhere in the back of his throat. A sigh. Let’s call it a sigh.

‘Yeah, Dad. But how fair is that? “Here, now you can decide for yourself.” ’

Blink. Blink, blink. Click and wheeze, click and wheeze. Cough.

‘But you need to finish it first, Dad. Come on, Dad. You need to wake up and finish the thing.’

Andreas leaned in close, took in the alcohol sting of sanitizer and the ozone smell of the mattress and bedclothes and his father’s oily hair and the familiar smells of his

sweat and shit and thought he detected again that out-of-place smell of wet hay and he whispered in his father's ear, 'Dad, please. You can't die in here, Dad. Hear me? You can't die in here. Please.'

'Blink twice if you can hear me, Dad.'

'Blink twice if you can hear me, Dad.'

'Blink twice if you can hear me, Dad.'

He looked at his watch. 'I've got to go in a minute, Dad. Mum and Aunt Katerina are waiting their turn.' He glanced across the room, saw his mother just outside the door, putting on her gown, looking in. 'Coming,' he mouthed. She nodded and turned away. Checking on Aunt Katerina, he guessed. Out of time.

'I'm sorry, Dad. It's my fault. I should have called. When I left Zoe's. I should have called. But we'd just fought and I was twenty-one and I really thought it was the end of the world you know and I forgot I forgot to call and then when I remembered the phone there was no phone the phone was busted and then the fucking Parthenon and then I just wanted to get home Dad and I knew you'd be worried but let them worry I thought it's fine let them worry it wasn't even you guys I was angry at but I should have called Dad I should have called I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry—'

The alarm
howled and
blood pressure 195/115
and
zero
what zero what heart rate zero
and he turned
to look
for
help
the alarm wouldn't stop

Victorious Dust

called out
it wouldn't stop
wouldn't stop
it wouldn't

Appendix: Three sections excised from the novel

From part one:

1. Mr Petrou's diary entries – the Petrous meet their son's girlfriend

Of Mr Petrou's diaries for the period spanning from 1936 to 1944, only two entries survive in their entirety. The exact date of composition of the first is unknown though its contents place it sometime in early spring of 1943. These pages, it seems, had at some point been ripped out of the notebook he was using at the time, and were discovered sometime in the '90s in a folder of EAM-related documents at the Contemporary Social History Archives, the route they followed from the second drawer of Mr Petrou's desk to the CSHA repository being by now impossible to trace. The entry reads:

'Invited, yesterday, to accompany Hauptsturmführer Lautenbach to dinner with General Geloso, the Supreme Commander of the Italian Forces in Greece. And not in some restaurant, but at the General's residence, Prince Paul's former Royal Mansion in Psychiko! Ourania was beside herself with joy.

In attendance: The General, and Signora Geloso; Lautenbach; ourselves; rather surprisingly, Mr and Mrs Voreas; Signor Pellegrino Ghigi, Italian Minister Plenipotentiary in Athens, accompanied by Signora Pelegrini; Signor Guelfo Zamboni, Consul General for Italy in Salonica. Also from Salonica, Hauptsturmführer Dieter Wisliceny of the SS, Herr Doktor Max Merten of the Wehrmacht, the Governor-General for Macedonia, Vasileios Simonidis, accompanied by Mrs Simonidis, and Elias Douros of the National Mortgage Bank, just recently appointed Director of the Agency for the Custody of Jewish Property. Finally, two exceedingly polite but rather tight-lipped German gentlemen in their forties, introduced as 'Herren Voigt und Kempf'.

Were waited on by ten white-gloved waiters in black tailcoats, supervised into brisk, un-Italian efficiency by the General's major-domo, Capitano Strada, who Signora Geloso informed us is a former Parisian hotelier of impeccable taste and discernment. This was rather self-evident, said Herr Doktor Merten, pointing at the champagne and foie gras, brought over from France, the – excellent – Hungarian wine, the Serbian pršut, the Polish chamber orchestra. Herr Hauptmann Strada was to be commended.

Once a week, the General cut in, a special charter flight with Strada as its sole passenger, paid for by the Greek government in acknowledgment of the General's

service, would visit such places in turn, and fly back laden with the best that Europe had to offer. And while the discernment was Capitano Strada's, the machinery that made its exercise possible was not. Nor would such discernment have been noted in the first place, were it not employed by one capable of appreciating it. Herr Doktor Merten rushed to agree with a very wide, very cold smile, and superficially the matter looked settled, but it was obvious that at its core was to be found some pre-existing difficulty between the two men that would not be as easily resolved.

The meal was indeed magnificent, though I did not touch the foie gras, whose taste I never could abide, and must take Ourania's word for its quality. I do wish that we would be served something a little more Greek now and again during such dinners, and I said as much to Ourania yesterday once we returned home. To my suggestion that I would happily had done with a bowl of steaming patsas thickened with egg-lemon sauce, she replied, 'You would have the General serve his guests *tripe*?' As though she never...

Later it transpired that at least one reason for the tension between the General Geloso and Herr Doktor Merten is their differing evaluations of the danger represented by the brigands of ELAS, as well as the best way of dealing with them. Leaving the ladies behind to be entertained by the chamber orchestra, we had retired to the smoking room, a cavernous, gloomy space of velvet curtains, low-burning green-shaded lamps strategically placed on corner tables and distant mantelpieces, and a burgundy Kirman carpet whose pale green central rondel was filled with scrollwork and surrounded by a field of floral palmettes, medallions and flowering stems. The General's most recent acquisition, at a cost of 720,000 drachmas. We sat and smoked and, in response to a comment by Herr Wisliceny, the General declared that the combination of operations conducted by his own troops, and the 'energetic and constant' presence of the Greek Gendarmerie throughout the countryside, has repressed the problem of brigandage, containing it within limits both much lower than would be expected, and not notably higher than what one could consider normal. To which Herr Doktor Merten replied that precisely this outlook is to be found at the core of the failure to achieve in the Italian occupation zone what is being achieved in the German one. The population has not been made sufficiently aware of how subnormal brigandage is, and how little it will be tolerated. The Italian occupying authorities should be prepared to make this clear to the Greeks, or yield their position to those who would.

A hush fell over the room. The General sat staring at Herr Doktor Merten, dazed with astonishment. I myself must have looked at Friedrich in much the same fashion. The silence stretched itself out and I retreated behind my brandy. I took a slow sip, enjoying the heaviness of the Nachtmann crystal snifter, its reassuring heft. It made the liquor feel more substantial – viscous, rather than liquid.

Behind the cover of the snifter, I stole looks around the room. Herr Kempf and Herr Voigt were vaguely pleased, though naturally they were doing their best to hide it, unlike Herr Wisliceny. Mr Douros and Mr Simonidis seemed very uncomfortable, Signor Ghigi and Signor Zamboni were indignant, Mr Voreas as perturbed as I was.

‘Hostages,’ the General said. ‘Reprisals against civilians. This is what you are referring to, no?’

Herr Doktor Merten did not respond.

‘Hostages,’ the General repeated, not bothering to conceal his disgust. ‘Taken at random, even from among those who have never shown any signs of hostility. We do not take hostages, gentlemen,’ he continued, looking around the room, addressing the Germans en masse. ‘This system does not enter into our law of war. It is an odious procedure that sullies all those involved.’ He paused, looking pensive. ‘The army, gentlemen, is made for war; and war is a very serious thing. *La guerra è una cosa seria – capite?*’

It was a splendid performance, I must say, if a little naïve about the necessary evils of government. It did however put a damper on the remainder of the evening. The first guests began making their excuses and departing not long afterwards. I had just enough time before Friedrich let me know with a subtle nod we should be on our way to solve the mystery of Mr Voreas’ presence at the dinner, overhearing Mr Douros confirm that the Agency was now also active in Athens, where Mr Voreas was acting as chief custodian for a number of Jewish businesses until more permanent arrangements could be made.’

As for the second entry:

The dinner at General Geloso’s, and Mr Petrou’s record of it, are it would seem what, eighteen or so months later, that clear November Monday of 1944, came to so casually decide the fate of both Mr Voreas’s family and his own. The unseasonably warm morning found the Petrous in a celebratory mood, deciding on a walk to the Reservoir

followed by coffee at Yannis' kafeneio. The cause for celebration was the new drachma, which had come into circulation only a couple of days earlier, less than a week after the debacle of the worthless hundred billion drachma note. The exchange rate of the new currency had been fixed at six hundred to the pound – or fifty billion old drachmas to a new one. Which meant it was possible once more to go about one's business with money in one's wallet or pocket. Now, it was still the case that one could not find much to purchase with this money; nor, having been found, were most things affordable. Not for the many at any rate. But still, was this not a sign of a rapid return to normality? Was this not worth celebrating by making use of the new currency in the very first instance it became possible to do so?

Reaching the Reservoir, they climbed the narrow steps to the square, enclosed now, unlike the old days, by wrought-iron railings atop a stone wall. The Lombardy poplars, tall and thin, still threw their cadaverous shade all about the place, but there seemed to be fewer of them than the Petrous remembered. The drinking fountain still stood in the middle of the space that opened up in front of them, but no water flowed from it.

The kafeneio was a low stone building with a sloping shingle roof. It used to be little more than a wooden shack, with considerable gaps between the slats that made up its walls; the wind rushed through them in the winter, making the tables situated near the middle of the room or the stone fireplace highly sought after. The Petrous entered and took a table near the window. They looked around for familiar faces, found none. The fireplace had not changed; the new kafeneio had been built around it. When their coffee came, it turned out to be roasted chicory.

Next to the fireplace there used to be a large iron table covered with books, with barely enough space between them to set down a demitasse or a glass of water. Poets' Corner, the Petrous had christened it, derisively, and with more than a hint of resentment; they did not enjoy feeling cold indoors.

Poet's Corner was still in the exact same spot, but the books were gone. The Petrous looked to the extinguished fireplace and wondered. Upon closer inspection, they realized that the lone figure sitting in the chair closest to the fireplace, bent over a small notebook, pencil in hand, reading with an expression of dreadful seriousness what was presumably his own work, once in a while setting the pencil on the table and picking up an eraser to rub over a word or series of words until he was satisfied no trace of them had

survived, then scribbling something in their place, moving on then turning back again, erasing and replacing, choosing and refusing alternatives, pausing, with pencil poised over paper, to stare blankly to the side – this figure was a somewhat familiar one. The man closed his notebook and set his pencil aside and sat back, with his right elbow on the chair's arm, his chin propped up on a palm that cupped his head all the way to his ear, making it seem as if he had trouble hearing, the head tilted pensively sideways, the man's overall aspect too similar to what the Petrous imagined was the manner adopted by artists in public – to let you know they were not idling the time away but *creating* – for the couple not to exchange a glance and a snigger. They leaned closer together and whispered.

'Is he not that communist—'

'Poet, yes,' Mrs Petrou said.

'V-something?'

Mrs Petrou hesitated. 'Varnalis?' she asked.

'Varnalis, yes,' Mr Petrou said.

They took another surreptitious glance, as though this would somehow verify the poet's identity. From her purse, Mrs Petrou produced a cigarette that she waited for Mr Petrou to light. The poet glanced absently in her direction, then away, as though he had not really seen her.

With the compositional process lacking sufficient outward drama to hold the Petrous' interest for too long, they turned instead to their current subject of most import: the immediate and medium-term prospects of the economy, and whether those who, let us say, had managed to navigate the occupation with some small measure of success, and had come into possession of a modest number of properties, let us say forty-two, and who now found themselves, due to a certain degree of bad fortune (according to Mr Petrou), or carelessness and miscalculation (according to his wife), with a most cumbersome ratio of illiquid to liquid assets – whether these unfortunates could hope that soon enough they would be able to drive this ratio downwards under more favourable conditions than presently encountered by sellers of property.

This was a conversation conducted *sotto voce*, with care taken to introduce the necessary pauses when either customer or waiter appeared to drift within hearing distance, and often enough interrupted by surreptitious surveys of the kafeneio's

clientele. One could never be too careful. The poet – well, he was a communist, everyone knew that, which would disqualify him as a spy. But the two young men sitting together near the window; the man with the disfigured face sitting catty-corner to the Petrous; the older man accompanied by a significantly younger woman who was clearly not his daughter – any one of them could be a communist informer.

It was during one of those lulls in conversation that Mr Petrou's latest attempt at surveillance was interrupted by the opening of the door and the arrival of a young woman who caught his attention and in the same instant came to occupy its centre, in a fashion he might have worried about his wife becoming aware of if the woman had left any room in his thoughts to be taken up by his wife. The (now that he had got a better look at her) girl was in her late teens or early twenties. Her dark hair fell straight over her narrow shoulders, her eyes were a touch too far apart either side of a slim, upturned nose, her mouth was curved into a wide smile. She wore a long-sleeved V-neck grey sweater over an ankle-length skirt, and if her clothes did not completely hide how undernourished she was, Mr Petrou saw something supremely attractive in her thinness, her wan complexion, an intimation of tenacity, of reduction as a concentration of essence, the exposure of an unyielding core, as though she were...

As though she were what? Mr Petrou did not know. The girl's appearance had overwhelmed him. There was a sheen to her, a muted radiance that drew the eye and kept it drawn. Or at least this was what Mr Petrou decided once it had transpired that the girl's companion, the tall, black-haired young man who had held open the door for her and had entered a couple of paces behind her, and had stopped, and was now staring at the Petrous with a look of astonished irritation, was their son; and once it occurred to him that the girl had continued to affect him to such a degree that it was only after Yorgos had led her, at the stately pace of a condemned man approaching the firing squad, to the Petrous' table, had greeted his parents and introduced his friend as 'Victoria Linardatou', had grudgingly accepted his mother's invitation to join them, had pulled a seat for Victoria across the table from Mr Petrou and had himself taken a seat to his father's right and had sat, ashen-faced and silent, anticipating the strained conversation to come, that Mr Petrou became aware of his wife's non-reaction to the coincidence that had brought the two couples together. And it was only a few moments later it dawned on him that it was no coincidence, that his wife had not selected the Reservoir at random. How could she have known? And yet somehow she had.

Once coffees had been ordered, it did not take long for Yorgos to succumb, and to volunteer the information that the Linardatos family hailed from Kefalonia, that Victoria's father practiced criminal law, and that while Victoria was following in her father's law-school footsteps, and doing so most excellently if her grades were anything to judge by, she was not expected, nor was interested in taking over her father's practice. She would instead focus on commercial law. Until she were married, at least.

'A much more suitable environment for a young lady than a courtroom full of criminal elements,' concurred Mrs Petrou.

'The home is of course the most suitable environment of all...' Mr Petrou started saying, but seeing the flicker of irritation on Victoria's face he hastened to add, '...though perhaps not, if that would mean allowing such obvious gifts to go to waste...' He knew at once he had gone too far and, judging by the dismayed glances cast his way by his wife and son – Victoria would not meet his eye – so did everyone else at the table.

Eventually the conversation picked up, then stalled again within minutes. They discussed the weather, of course; the unseasonable heat. The chance of some much-needed rain. The new drachma. The likelihood of one day soon drinking coffee made from coffee beans, reasonably priced. Victoria would not be drawn out, though she remained the very picture of civility. From Yorgos too the Petrous met with a peculiar resistance that, if it did not go beyond what his mother had come to expect, was nevertheless maintained under the guise of an unimpeachable politeness his parents were ill-prepared for, and which they proved unable to penetrate. Such was the circumspection he exhibited that Mrs Petrou soon came to feel more proud than frustrated at how little he managed to say and at what great length he said it. Whoever this girl was, she could prove to be a good influence in exactly those areas of her son's personality that Mrs Petrou feared she herself had failed to cultivate sufficiently. (Mr Petrou was not qualified to provide this kind of education. Though he spoke too much and said too little, this was never by intent.)

Was there, in all this, a specific moment when Mrs Petrou knew the girl to be a communist? It might have been this one:

'Isn't that Varnalis?' Yorgos said, making a subtle gesture towards the poet, who had put away his notebook and pencil inside a black briefcase that he clicked shut to

reveal it was missing its handle and that, as a result, making his way to the exit, he held to his chest as though it were a shield.

‘Yes, yes it is,’ Victoria said, watching Varnalis leave with a glow in her eyes that aroused Mrs Petrou’s concern.

‘Do you like his poetry? Or poetry in general?’ Mr Petrou asked.

‘Oh, very much so,’ Victoria said. ‘Both, I mean,’ she added after a pause.

‘Ah, wonderful,’ Mr Petrou said, then fell silent.

‘And what of his prose?’ Mrs Petrou said. ‘Do you care for it?’

‘His prose?’ Victoria said, innocently enough.

‘He is a prolific chronographer, is he not? Writes for one of the communists newspapers – let me see... is it...’ Mrs Petrou said.

‘Rizospastis,’ Mr Petrou volunteered.

‘Yes, dear, thank you. That is the one,’ she said.

‘Oh, no. I do not care for that kind of writing,’ Victoria said. She paused, giving the matter some more thought. ‘It is too fleeting, I guess. It does not aim for permanence. It focuses too much on how things are – not on how they could be.’

‘You are not referring to the fantastical nature of poetry, I gather,’ Mrs Petrou said.

Victoria looked at her silently for a moment. ‘I do not know that I would call poetry “fantastical”,’ she said. ‘I would rather call it – speculative, let us say.’ She smiled, pleased with herself. ‘Yes, that will do. It seems to me that chronographers are not often called upon to speculate as to the world in which we could live – they merely describe the world in which we do.’

‘But it is this world that the great poets describe so wonderfully,’ objected Yorgos. His mother was heartened to see he could resist the girl when necessary.

‘Yes, it is,’ Victoria said, reaching – without asking, noted Mr Petrou – for the pack of cigarettes Yorgos had set next to his demitasse. ‘But in describing the world, poets also transform it. They wade right through the thick of things, show us how everything we claim to understand is no more than hazarded. They open up the world to reformulation. Next to that kind of total vision, what chronographers do amounts to little more than carping from the sidelines,’ she concluded, waving a lit cigarette around.

Dear God, Mrs Petrou thought, was I ever this young? Not at the girl's age, surely. She had worried without cease about the mysterious being who might have led her son astray, and he turned out to have been ensnared by a child.

'Yet there is always a danger to a total vision of individual provenance, isn't there?' Yorgos said, something in his manner suggesting this was a reference to a longstanding disagreement. 'Politically, at least.' He reached over to take back his cigarettes.

'Not all visions are created equal,' Victoria conceded. 'Only a few poets are worth reading.'

'And even fewer are worth listening to,' said Mrs Petrou. She ran a hand over her thigh, smoothing her skirt.

'I am not sure I follow, Mother,' Yorgos said. There was in his voice a note of frustration, contained in one direction, but threatening to spill over in another as a result.

'Poetry may be perfectible, but the world is not,' Mrs Petrou said. 'Therefore poets should stay out of politics. It is no field for their intuitions.'

'Poets should stay out of poetry,' came Mr Petrou's rejoinder. He was not sure what he had meant by that, but it had sounded good. In any event, he was tiring of feeling superfluous.

Victoria let out a small, surprised laugh. 'You may be on to something there, Mr Petrou,' she said, turning to him.

Yorgos attempted to catch her eye, his gaze asking, 'Really?'

'It could be, perhaps,' Victoria went on, 'the solution to the problem of individual provenance.'

'Stopping poets from writing?' Mrs Petrou asked, face creased into a perplexed frown.

'Oh, no, not at all!' Victoria said with another small laugh. 'No, what I mean is –' She paused, waved her cigarette again. 'If poets would keep themselves out of their poetry, if their aim was not the expression of the personal.'

'But what would poetry be for, if it were not the personal expression of universal principles?' Mr Petrou said.

‘The expression of the reality of experience,’ Victoria said. ‘But the reality experienced by the many, addressed to the many. The poet could – no, should be a vessel for the conscience of the people.’

And so there it was, the inescapable fact. The girl was a communist. Things were much worse than Mrs Petrou had feared. All this time, Yorgos had been in love *and* involved in a leftist conspiracy. Mrs Petrou felt faint. It were as though she had been slammed underwater by a wave and could see the surface but knew she would not reach it in time. It took all her will to stay upright in her seat, try to give away nothing. She had been right all along. Yorgos was involved in something. What had her son done? What might he yet do?

But at least she knew now, she soon told herself. No longer would she be kept in the dark, poring through his notebooks, confronted with mysterious Vs and cryptic series of numbers; she had a name. She knew just the man to take that name to. The thought of consequences could not stop her this time; evidently, the situation was already dangerous enough. Grim relief overtook her, a kind of numb resolve spreading outward from the pit of her stomach.

‘And what if the people have no single conscience to be expressed?’ she said, in a tone that made it supremely clear whether she held this predicament to be hypothetical.

Victoria did not hesitate. ‘Then it would be the poet’s responsibility to forge it.’

‘A lovely thought,’ Mrs Petrou said. ‘So lovely one hates to object, but – and please correct me if I am wrong, my knowledge of all things literary is limited, but it seems to me that a poet could either – how did you put it? – forge the conscience of his people, or be a vessel for it. One cannot do both, surely? Am I mistaken in detecting a contradiction here?’ she asked, beaming at Victoria.

‘Well – no, you are not mistaken,’ the girl said after a short silence. ‘At least not at first glance.’ She busied herself putting out her cigarette.

‘I am not convinced there is a contradiction, actually,’ Yorgos said. ‘Better yet, it would depend on whether one believes the people’s conscience to be innate, in which case the artist would serve as its conduit regardless of intention. Or acquired historically, in which case it would perhaps be possible for an artist to adopt a willed position, in whatever direction he saw fit – either forging, or embracing anew.’

‘An individual position,’ his mother pointed out.

‘Yes,’ Yorgos said with a gesture of capitulation. ‘I am not claiming this would be desirable. But it is a possibility.’

There followed a lengthy silence, during which the foursome finished their coffees and picked up and put down their water glasses and rediscovered their interest in the kafeneio’s décor and did their best to look thoughtful rather than discomfited – Mr Petrou to a lesser extent than then others, seeing as he had not, after a certain point, followed the discussion all too closely. For a time, while the conversation shifted, not effortlessly, to more innocuous topics (they settled on film, having been all four during better days avid cinemagoers), Mr Petrou gave himself over to a renewed examination of their surroundings. The young men that had been sitting near the window were gone, replaced by two older men bent over a card game. The young woman and the man who was not her father were also gone. The disfigured man was still at his table, staring straight at Mr Petrou, a vacant expression on his face, as though there were no mind behind the eyes. It made Mr Petrou think of a tree felled in a storm, lying on the ground with all its leaves green as though it were still alive. He shivered and looked away.

Turning his attention back to his companions, he found them discussing a film whose title they were struggling to determine, about some clubfooted artist of sorts (a painter, possibly, though one who did no painting during the film and was a doctor by the end credits), who becomes involved with an awful, cruel woman (a waitress) played by – here they hesitated before deciding it was Bette Davis. What they could not agree on was whether the man’s clubfoot had been surgically corrected by the end of the film (Mrs Petrou and Victoria) or not (Yorgos). They were also struggling with the lead actor’s name.

With this, at least, Mr Petrou could help. ‘Leslie Howard,’ he said. ‘*Of Human Bondage*.’

‘Ah, yes, indeed. Leslie Howard. Thank you, dear,’ his wife said.

‘He was wonderful in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*,’ Mr Petrou added. ‘A proper English aristocrat. One was almost convinced he was the real thing.’

‘He was a Jew, dear,’ Mrs Petrou said.

‘Was he?’

‘Hungarian Jew, I believe. Did you really not know?’

‘I had no idea,’ Mr Petrou said, crestfallen.

‘I am certain I had mentioned this before.’

‘Not in my presence, surely. It is not the kind of thing one tends to forget.’

‘I had an entire conversation about Jews in Hollywood with Mr and Mrs Ioannou during dinner at Mr Voreas’ last week. You were seated next to Mrs Ioannou at the time, were you not?’

‘Ah! It seems I managed to miss any mentions of the name.’

‘I assure you there were several.’

‘Well I missed them in any case,’ Mr Petrou said. And there this exchange could have ended without further consequence if only he had not, after a moment, added something along the lines of, ‘I suppose we will be getting our own Jews back soon,’ before proceeding to reveal what he knew of Mr Voreas’ work with the Agency for the Custody of Jewish Property.

What exactly he might have said is not clear. Even more opaque are his reasons for saying anything in the first place. Did he not realize what kind of picture he would be painting, and its potential consequences? Is it possible he was only making conversation? He must have known exactly what he was doing. In light of subsequent events, one cannot help but wonder what he might have known, and when.

What I’m getting at is that, as dull-witted as Mr Petrou was made out to be, I find it hard to believe he could have been this dull-witted. And yet the fact remains that what little evidence there is points to early November of 1944 as the moment that EAM first becomes aware of Voreas as a collaborator and begins gathering information on his activities, and to Mr Petrou as the man who, wittingly or not, brought him to their attention.

Mr Petrou might not have noticed the looks exchanged between Yorgos and Victoria. It seems Mrs Petrou did, which is why she hurried to extol Mr Voreas’ ability to remain in good standing with the Germans while ‘only appearing to do their bidding’. She also noted their sudden impatience to be on their way, which they attributed to their desire to be on time for an afternoon lecture. They made their goodbyes and hurried off.

Mrs Petrou sat there, saying nothing. Mr Petrou might have supposed she was busy collating everything she had gleaned about the girl and would speak to him in her own good time. She did so, eventually, but only to suggest that they had better make their way home.

On their way out they walked past the disfigured man. Mrs Petrou registered the man's existence with a sharp intake of breath and his terrible face swivelled in their direction, though the gaze remained empty and unseeing. He muttered something under his breath – Mrs Petrou caught the word 'hear' but the rest was unintelligible.

Not until they had left the square behind them did she address her husband again, to berate him in a low urgent voice for his indiscretion. Misjudging the nature of Ourania's complaint, he attempted to explain away his behaviour, only to have Mrs Petrou stop in her tracks and glare at him as though she could think of no single thing wrong with the world for which she did not hold him responsible. She did not speak to him again until they were home, at which point, having hardly gone stepped through the threshold, she announced they were in need of olive oil and walked back out, slamming the door in his face. (Text continues on p. 117.)

2. Byford-Jones is summoned to General Scobie's office

Byford-Jones was about to leave for the Averoff prison when he was summoned to General Scobie's office, this being the office he occasionally made use of at the Grande Bretagne – the one from which he would soon be directing the fight against ELAS – rather than the one located at British Army HQ, which was just around the corner, hidden away between Panepistimiou and Stadiou Streets. The corporal who relayed the summons made it seem as though it were a matter of great urgency, which was why Byford-Jones, who would be coming on duty at Averoff an hour hence, and who descended from his room on the third floor of the Grande Bretagne and rushed to the General's antechamber on the ground floor only to be kept waiting for over twenty minutes, and assumed an even more important meeting had to be taking place, was quite taken aback when upon being granted access to the inner chamber he found the General alone, seated behind his desk with a frown of his face, his attention given over to several documents spread out on the blotter in front of him, and whose perusal he interrupted only to acknowledge Byford-Jones' salute and to bid him take a seat. A red plush chair with carved wooden armrests had been placed across the desk from Scobie. Byford-Jones took it. Impressive though it looked, it did not prove very comfortable – the angle of the back was all wrong, the armrests too wide apart.

The General then kept Byford-Jones waiting a little longer before setting the documents aside, looking up with a tight smile and saying, 'Wilfred, how are you holding up?' for all the world as though they had just happened to run into each other having tea at the Officers' Club.

'Well, sir, quite well. And you, sir?'

'Oh, you know,' Scobie said, pointing at all the paperwork. He filled his pipe and lit it, blew smoke towards the high white ceiling, watched it rise. His desk was small, the wood dark, the scrollwork gold leaf, ornate floral designs sprouting hair-like from round, impassive faces near the rim of the tabletop and running in tressed curls halfway down the curved legs. The burgundy velvet curtains that hung over the window at the General's back were also ornamented with gold floral designs, but it was their misfortune that the main motif resembled nothing so much as a large six-legged creature crouched, insectoidally still, among autumnal foliage. Once more Byford-Jones wondered at the General's having ordered his desk be placed in front of the window but then seeming to keep the curtains drawn all day long. Even with the overhead light and torchère in the corner both burning, the room was always just gloomy enough to strain the eyes.

(This small mystery, which Byford-Jones never did solve, is in fact answered by Dmitri Kessel's notes, which confirm that the window at the General's back faced northeast, and that this, in combination with a complicated set of reflections and scatterings from the windows of the headquarters of the Greek City Police housed in Papoudof House, located diagonally across the street on the corner of Vasilissis Sofias Avenue and Panepistimiou Street, resulted in Scobie's interlocutors being blinded by the sun during most mornings and the General considerably deciding to address a problem that he had himself created in order to accommodate his eyesight which, though he did not care to admit it, was not quite what it used to be. This same light that blinded his guests fell on laid-out paperwork in a manner that was helpful to the General's habitually tired eyes.

You can see all this in Kessel's *Life* photograph of Scobie at his desk, sitting up straight, his hair shining as though varnished, his dark, thick moustache tapered evenly to sharp points over the corners of his mouth, his uniform pristine, his tie tightly knotted, pretending to be reading from a sheet of paper that, even pretending, he cannot help but hold at arm's length. The curtains at his back are drawn across the window to eliminate the glare and there, behind him, half-hidden by the polished black walnut desk, with only

its back visible, is the chair that has been pushed up against the wall to hold the left edge of the curtain in place long enough for the picture to be taken.)

‘I wanted your opinion on something, Wilfred,’ Scobie said.

‘I would be glad to help with whatever it is, sir. But I should mention I am supposed to report to the Averoff prison shortly to relieve Lieutenant Harding.’

‘Ah, yes, that. I will not keep you long, but Lieutenant Harding is to remain at his post until you arrive or is ordered otherwise. You may make use of my car if necessary.’

‘I see, sir,’ Byford-Jones said, though he did not. ‘Thank you, sir.’

‘Now,’ Scobie said. He put his pipe to his lips and picked up a few sheets of paper from his desk and offered them to Byford-Jones. ‘I will be making a speech to ELAS forces after the conference tomorrow, confirming our position before the official order is given. I would very much like to hear your opinion.’

‘I would be honoured, sir.’ He read.

‘Your national government gave me, some time ago, command of all Greek forces in the country. While assuming command, I made it very clear that your politics were no concern of mine. As I stressed at the Caserta conference, I expected the united cooperation against the enemy of all Greek forces under my command regardless of party interests or political affiliations. This has proved to be the case. Indeed, everyone has acquitted themselves honourably.

‘Your government has promised that the services of all guerrillas will not be forgotten during the reformation of the National Army. But until then: Greece, I think we would all agree, has had more than enough of war. Our main task now, in those areas already liberated, has to be the offer of assistance to the civil administration. Roads, railways, telegraphs – all means of communication must be restored if relief supplies are to be distributed and the provinces are once again able to trade. The freedom for which you Greeks have fought so long and so bravely has at last come to you. It has come to you through the sacrifices of all Allied Nations, whose combined success is now driving the Germans back, to withdraw to their homeland. But this does not mean the fight is over. Everyone must return to his home and work for the return of prosperity and happiness to all, and the quick restoration of the country. When the time comes to reform the National Army, there will be scope for those who wish to be soldiers again.’

The next page or so went into more detail about the kind of efforts restoration would require. Byford-Jones quickly scanned through it all, seeing nothing surprising, or indeed objectionable, to get to the General's closing remarks.

'The day is fast approaching of conclusion of your heroic and successful struggle against the German invader, when the responsibility for the maintenance of law and order throughout the country will be taken over by the new National Guard. You will be at liberty to return with honour to your homes.

'I therefore reiterate that. in accordance with the above, all irregular groups are ordered to surrender their weaponry and disband by December 10th at the latest. I also stress that until that moment, the carrying of arms without permission of the Military Administration in those areas of Athens where the police keep public order is forbidden. If the police cannot enforce this order, they will be supported by armed mechanized detachments. Patrols supported by British troops have been instructed to prevent armed groups of any stripe from entering the capital.' That it was it, more or less.

'What do you think, Wilfred?' Scobie said.

What Byford-Jones thought was that he had heard this speech before, when the General had delivered it at the Corinth conference barely a month earlier.

What he thought was that this new version represented no significant alteration of the General's position – which Byford-Jones had not expected in any case, the General's nature being, in his view, unbending and not especially suited for politics – and would be greeted by the communists with the same mixture of frustration, anger and suspicion.

What he thought was that the message underlying the message was, 'Surrender your guns. Trust your army even if, as you keep pointing out to us, it has a long history of political intervention, coups d'état and dictatorships. Trust that this time the past will not repeat itself.'

What he thought was, 'The communists will never go for it. Even if the naysayers are mistaken, even if they are not planning a revolution, they will not go for it. We have not given them sufficient reason to.'

What he thought was, 'These things are so obvious we should not need to have them explained to us. They were obvious while we were still in Alexandria, obvious since Caserta, and we are still behaving as though we need to have them explained to us.'

What he thought was, 'What a mess.'

What he said was, 'It is a fine speech, sir.' He paused and deliberated whether to speak his mind, for all the good it would do. 'It is just that –' he said.

'Yes, Wilfred?' the General said. He waited. 'Speak up, man!' He waited a second longer, then his expression changed and he adopted what Byford-Jones knew he believed to be his avuncular style. 'Wilfred, you would not be here if I did not have the utmost trust in you.' He upended his pipe and tapped the bowl empty into the square glass ashtray on his desk, then busied himself scraping out the leftover tobacco with a small brass scoop. 'I would like your candid opinion on the matter,' he said.

'With all due respect, sir, you've already had my candid opinion on the matter,' Byford-Jones did not say. What he did say was, 'I still believe appeasement is our best option, sir.'

'To what end, Wilfred?'

'They do not trust the army, sir. Asking them to disarm just as the Mountain Brigade arrives in Athens—'

'We are not asking, Lieutenant-Colonel. We are ordering. And not solely the communists – the order applies to all guerrillas. I care not a jot what their politics are, as long as they are no longer armed. The other groups have accepted the order with alacrity. I for one find it telling that it is only the communists who are reacting to it so,' the General said.

'There is no question that this should concern us, sir. There is also no point in denying that they have the most to worry about in the unlikely event that the army should decide to step in once the coast was clear.'

'So what are you suggesting, Wilfred? That we should give in? Let them keep their guns, to turn against their enemies whenever they decide to? To turn against us, even?'

'No, sir. I am just saying—' Byford-Jones paused. What was he saying that he had not said before? What was the use in saying it again? He would anyway. 'The communists cannot be dealt with violently. Not right now, not without paying too high a price. We need to placate them, convince them no one is planning to move against them. Only then will we stand a chance to talk them into disarming. After that, it would be a matter of allowing democracy itself to defeat them at the ballot box, as it is bound to do. In a free, peaceful Greece they will be nothing but a fringe element.'

'Assuming they have any intention of allowing the country to proceed to a free election. Which, as you say, they must know they will lose,' said Scobie, waving his pipe in the air.

'It is not completely out of the question, sir. It seems to me that if a coup was what they intended, they would have seized the opportunity and taken Athens before we arrived.'

'They were awaiting their orders from Stalin. That much is clear.'

'In which case—'

'In which case,' Scobie said, 'it is hard to say whether we should be less or more concerned. And even if Moscow never gives the order to revolt, there are no guarantees they will continue to obey – not if they decide it is no longer to their advantage. 'No,' he went on, 'the communists have been placated enough. It is about time they demonstrated good will, and proved they are not a threat to democracy.'

'Let us hope that they do, sir.'

There followed a sombre silence during which Scobie appeared to be brooding over something while Byford-Jones waited to be dismissed. Forced once again to stare at the curtains, he noted that the main motif could also be said to resemble a dissected frog, the animal splayed open, surrounded by a neat arrangement of organs to be labelled. He looked at his watch. 'Well, if that will be all, sir...' he said, making to rise from his seat.

'Just one more thing, Wilfred,' Scobie said.

Byford-Jones sat back down. 'Yes, sir?' he said.

'I gather you have not been to the Averoff before.'

'No, I was up north for the liberation of Salonica when we took over at the prison.'

'You have not had an opportunity to meet its distinguished guests yet.'

'I was intending to visit with these gentlemen today.'

'I was hoping you would take some time to speak to them, get a sense of what kind of men they are.'

'Sir?'

Scobie did not reply immediately. A slight nervousness crept over Byford-Jones. To give his hands something to do, he produced a pack of cigarettes from a breast pocket. *NORDLAND* and *Schwarze Zigaretten*, proclaimed the canary yellow pack. Two black stars were printed on either side of an oval frame inside which a sailboat – it looked like a windjammer – rode three undulating lines. He pulled a short black cigarette from the

pack and lit it. It tasted vaguely of sawdust, in a manner which reminded him of the pungent Springboks Lieutenant Gladwin had learned to be partial to back in Alexandria.

‘They did not all seem like villains to me,’ Scobie said. ‘Misguided in their belief they could work alongside but not with the Nazis, I would say. Led to terrible decisions by their patriotism. But *all* of them villains? No – that is not the sense I gained. Unfortunately, circumstances forced me to keep my visit short. And considering the current climate, it would not do for me to be seen visiting again.’

Byford-Jones, who should have been pleasantly surprised by the level of political awareness this statement evidenced, could only nod his head in stunned agreement.

‘I would, therefore,’ the General continued, ‘be interested to hear whether you agree with my assessment. You will have the opportunity to come into regular contact with these gentlemen in the coming weeks, so I trust you will form a more reliable impression. Not so much in terms of their specific personalities, perhaps – the book on them is closed, one would think – as of the political outlook they represent.’ He riffled through some papers on his desk, moved the ashtray to the side, then back to its original position.

Before Byford-Jones had time to figure out how to respond, a din rose from outside, that sounded at first like the howl of wind rushing through a narrow gorge but soon grew to a basso rumble that left no doubt as to the true source of the noise. Scobie glanced at his watch. ‘Right on time, as unlike them as that is,’ he said. ‘Come have a look, Wilfred,’ he said. They stepped to the window and the General pulled the curtains apart. The curtain rings scraped and cluttered across the rail; a few dust motes flew, lit up by the cold sunlight.

And there they were, bleached at first of all their colours, colours that returned as Byford-Jones’s vision became accustomed to the light, which turned out to be more meagre than it had seemed at the moment it was finding its way into the ill-lit room: a huge column, thirty or maybe forty abreast, descending Vasilissis Sofias Avenue in the direction of the hotel, nearing the junction with Panepistimiou Street to their right and Vasilissis Amalias Avenue to their left. It would be onto the latter they would turn, no doubt, to flood Syntagma Square and shout their say northwards, at the hotel (selected to represent Allied HQ); eastwards, at Parliament; and, finally, with the rhythm and timbre of their cries shifting so that one would not need to speak their language to be aware of

the change in their intention, southwards, towards Othonos Street where, in a seven-storey monolith capped by the three giant iron letters mounted on its rooftop – KKE – were to be found the offices of the Greek Communist Party. As an arrangement, this was very conducive to demonstrations, and made the square feel as though it were less a place than an illustration of a system of oppositions.

On came the procession, shouting their slogans and waving their banners. Scobie and Byford-Jones watched. They were not alone in doing so, Byford-Jones noticed. It seemed as though every window at Police HQ across the street was open, with one or two men leant against the ledge, smoking cigarettes, observing the protesters pass with some interest but no great aura of urgency.

‘I saw Mr Siantos and Mr Zevgos of the KKE this morning,’ the General said. ‘Gave them a thorough towelling up – let them know how disgusted we are with the continuous demonstrations. “We find them both rude and dull,” I told them. “We have been fighting for nearly five years. We have come to help Greece and do not deserve such treatment.” After certain beating about the bush, they both promised the fullest cooperation. Mr Siantos assured me there would be no procession today.’

As the crowd neared, the content of their cries became more discernible. Byford-Jones thought he recognized the words ‘fasismos’ and ‘Glücksburg’. ‘What do you think they are shouting about now, Wilfred?’ Scobie asked.

‘The usual, sir, from what I can tell. “Down with fascism. Down with the King.”’ But they were also, now, shouting other things, not as familiar, with a raging, mournful air that put him in mind of a dirge, so he was not surprised when he saw at the head of the procession those he would that same evening describe to Eric Grey and a new acquaintance, Mr Richard Capell of the *Daily Telegraph* (who would report his comments, almost verbatim, without attribution) as several women in black dresses and kerchiefs, brandishing clenched fists and shrieking in a frenzy of grief, marching backwards, facing the front of the procession, where three grey-faced corpses wrapped in white sheets up to their necks were carried on three biers pushed by the crowd. Watching them he felt as though he were witnessing some kind of rite, the celebration of Orphic mysteries. The women seemed less like mourners than priestesses possessed by the God. A living frieze, extraordinary and suggestive. (‘Is that O-r-p-h-i-c?’ Capell would ask. In his notebook, ‘frieze’ is misspelt as ‘freeze’, then crossed out and corrected with a different-coloured

pen. His only other emendation is the substitution of 'extraordinarily ugly' for 'extraordinary'.)

'There have been reports they have corpses stored in wells to produce for such exhibitions,' Scobie said. (Later that evening Byford-Jones would hear this again from Capell, who would also inform him that the communists were claiming their comrades had been killed by 'monarchofasistes' and were demanding the government take appropriate action.)

Byford-Jones did not respond. The crowd turned onto Amalias Avenue. Once the last few stragglers had gone past the window, the General returned to his desk. He picked up his pipe, chomped on it, but did not light it. Byford-Jones looked across the street to Police HQ. The figures at the windows had not moved. From their vantage point, he knew, they could see across the square all the way to Othonos and the KKE building. He came round the desk, extinguished his cigarette, but did not retake his seat.

'So, Wilfred?' the General said.

'Sir?'

'The gentlemen at Averoff. Your opinion of them.'

'You shall have it by and by.'

'Time is of the essence, Wilfred. But so is certitude. Our position is a difficult one.'

'I understand, sir.'

'I know you do, Wilfred. Better than most, it seems to me, which is why it is you I am asking.'

'Thank you, sir.' Despite its obviousness, Byford-Jones felt buoyed up by the flattery. It was difficult to resist appreciation, he thought, even when it came from those whose judgment we did not value. Especially then, perhaps, when it could be taken as a sign they were not entirely beyond hope.

The General had paused and seemed to be thinking something over. 'Here,' he said suddenly. He moved his speech out of the way and picked up the folder underneath it, extracted a single sheet of paper from it and presented it to Byford-Jones. 'A few days ago, the PM telegraphed General Wilson to request that he consider reinforcing our presence in Athens. He also sent this note to the Foreign Secretary. It will clarify the delicacy and seriousness of your task.'

The note read:

'In my opinion, having paid the price we have to Russia for freedom of action in Greece, we should not hesitate to use British troops to support the Royal Hellenic Government under M. Papandreou.

This implies that British troops should certainly intervene to check acts of lawlessness. Surely M. Papandreou can close down EAM newspapers if they call a newspaper strike.

I hope that the Greek Brigade will arrive soon, and will not hesitate to shoot when necessary. Why is only one Indian brigade of the Indian Division being sent in? We need another eight or ten thousand foot-soldiers to hold the capital and Salonica for the present Government. I fully expect a clash with EAM and we must not shrink from it, provided the ground is well-chosen.'

Byford-Jones read the note, then read it a second time. 'I see, sir,' he said. This time he did.

Trooper McAuley guided the General's jeep through a series of narrow streets that skirted Lycabettus Hill. A slender, long-limbed youth with a cheerful face that had scrunched in exaggerated concentration once he'd sat behind the wheel, McAuley wrestled the jeep around corners in a manner that created the impression of speed, if not always its results. He had assured Byford-Jones that this, rather than the straight shot up Vasilissis Sofias Avenue followed by the left turn onto Alexandras Avenue, would prove the fastest route to the prison; there was another march coming down Vasilissis Sofias. Byford-Jones had been too preoccupied to argue with him. 'That will be fine, trooper,' had been the last thing he'd said to McAuley for several minutes.

They pushed up Lycabettus Street, to the bottom of the steep flight of stone steps just past the corner with Skoufa Street. Up ahead loomed Lycabettus, the pine-covered lower hillside like a green ruff around the steeper eruption of naked limestone, blue-grey and streaked with burnt orange, covered here and there with low green-grey shrubs, and, at the very summit, the chapel of St George, a white sugar cube of an edifice, alighted there atop the irregular earth with all the serene abruptness of divine fact.

McAuley yanked the jeep right onto Skoufa, then left. They raced on, past the strollers and rovers and street urchins, the stallholders with their hand scales and small, neat piles of vegetables, the chestnut sellers with their wide portable braziers and roasted chestnuts tucked into paper cornets, the stalls and carts and ubiquitous shoppers

with their net bags, standing under awnings haggling with the owners of shops whose whole front was open to the street, and Byford-Jones thought, 'This could fool one, if one did not look too closely. But it isn't real.'

He had been fooled, at first, he had to admit, by the two weeks that had followed liberation, with their constant parades and celebrations, the wreath-laying ceremonies and church services; the endless processions that, having fooled him, had refused to come to an end, had instead turned bellicose, accusatory, somehow gone from marches behind flags to marches behind corpses. Everywhere he looked now, those corpses were all he could see, laid out under those white sheets, their exposed faces so pale, as though the sheets were leaching their whiteness into them; all he could sense was the agitation, suspicion, unrest and uneasiness that had always lain behind the flag-waving and joyous noise.

Before he'd left for Salonica, he'd taken a fleeting glance at the few Athenian shops that had not closed when the old drachma had reached its most fantastic depths. He had not been surprised to find that the goods for sale had been few and of poor quality. Workers had found themselves earning seven trillion drachmas for five days' work. The cost of the daily ration of bread, fixed, supposedly, at three billion, had within days climbed to eighty. Loose cigarettes were being sold at a billion each – the monthly allowance to the families of war victims and prisoners.

The drachma had fallen heavily, then had continued to fall.

Upon his return to Athens, he had seen instead innumerable luxury goods for sale: gold and silver watches, diamond rings, silver pencils, Leica cameras, fountain pens, Dunhill lighters, three-piece suits, smart ladies' shoes, silk stockings. But these were being sold only for valuta, gold sovereigns and dollars being the most sought-after currencies.

Along the street kerbs, meanwhile, Greeks were selling bars of chocolate; tinned fish, milk and meat; soap and bread; almost all derived from Red Cross rations and all sold at prices over twenty times what the same items would cost in Egypt. Prices had already doubled within twenty-four hours of the arrival of the British, and because it was thought that their presence would affect food supplies, all service personnel had been issued with strict orders to eat nothing but what they had brought in as rations.

The drachma had fallen heavily, then continued to fall.

Outside the closed Stock Exchange ran the unofficial 'stock market', where the price of the sovereign had caused a riot at the end of October: worth 700 billion drachmas at the close of business one day, it had shot up to 1.3 trillion the following morning. Attacked with bottles and chair legs, the brokers had fled. Notes representing hundreds of billions of drachmas could be seen swirling in the wind like autumn leaves across the sidewalks of Athens, so worthless no one would pick them up.

Eventually, the government had given up and introduced the new drachma. For a few days this step had seemed to meet with some limited success. Inflation had slowed. Shops had re-opened. But really, not much had changed.

'A return to normality,' Capell had cheered in the presence of a gloomy Byford-Jones.

'Certainly,' the latter had said, about to make the same points also contained in the General's speech. 'All that remains for the government to do is fix prices in the free market. Then fix prices of Military Liaison and Red Cross rations at a level the population can perhaps actually afford. Also find some way to create internal loans to encourage rebuilding and agricultural work. Maybe apply taxes that can be paid and, what is more, find a way of collecting them. You may not have heard, but the guerrillas made it a point of destroying tax rolls where they could once the Germans started levying their "occupation costs". And there are also the small issues of disarmament and the constitution of the new Greek Army to resolve, and a civil war to avert. But other than that, normality's the word.'

Having had his say, he'd got up and left with nothing more than a curt 'Goodnight, gentlemen,' leaving Capell to wonder aloud what had got into him. Byford-Jones had developed an intense dislike for the man, and put up with him only because, inexplicably, Grey got on with him and invited him along everywhere.

So here they were, Byford-Jones thought, about to be witnesses to some approaching storm that remained, for now, unseen, below the line of the horizon, but whose coming could be felt in the electric air, in the agitation that blew through the city like a warning wind, having its way with the streets, a deep bass hum that they all, British and Greek alike, were reacting to as though holding on to their hats while they went about their business when they should have been rushing about securing doors and windows. As though convinced the storm would pass them by; or that they'd see the flaw on the horizon that would announce its arrival in time for them to think about perhaps

protecting themselves from it. In the meantime there was more singing and oratory than thinking and planning, more recriminations than reconstruction, more Mausers and Lugers to be seen than shovels, picks and drills; and the only real positive steps taken, as far as he could see, had been the imprisonment of Tsolakoglou and Rallis and three hundred or so alleged collaborators, and the disarming of the Security Battalions. The gentlemen at Averoff. (Text continues on p. 129.)

From part three:

3. Andreas in Athens city centre

He kept walking, taking turns at random, then turning away from any landmark that looked familiar. This happened less often than you'd think. It took a lot of effort, but soon he could honestly say he had no idea where he was.

Somewhere in the city centre, sure, in yet another one of those pocket side streets that sprung up all over the place when you went looking, lined with a shuttered shopfront or two and blocks of flats that looked but probably weren't closed-up and overflowing rubbish bins – the one sign of the street's persistent life that was impossible to hide – and layers of grime and graffiti on the walls and the smell of rotting rubbish and a faint whiff of ammonia to everything and somewhere along the street the arched entrance to a mosaic-floored arcade at the end of which awaited the one place of business still in operation, a tiny and dark café whose interior could accommodate no more than two or three tables, maybe seven or eight customers, at a time, and which spread out to colonize the last third of the arcade with outdoor tables at one of which – the one right next to the café's narrow door (the door was always narrow) – would be seated a young man or woman who would sip from a glass of cold coffee and add one more cigarette butt to an ashtray about to overflow and would stand up and come over and would turn out to be your waiter, and also, often, the café's owner – the kind of place that turned into a bar in the early evening, and which had to be both small and difficult to find, otherwise what was the point.

The person seated by the door was in this instance the only person visible. A guy in his twenties in a Clutch t-shirt (*From Beale Street to Oblivion*) and a chest-length beard who took in the older man and first raised an eyebrow then nodded approvingly at his Gojira t-shirt (*The Link*), which approval Andreas acknowledged with a shrug and a tilt of

the head before turning his back on the arcade. The kid had a gorgeous smile. Light green, long-lashed eyes that had opened a fraction too wide, issuing an invitation Andreas had been maybe his age before he'd even began to recognize.

It occurred to him that the café was open uncharacteristically early but once he checked his watch he realized that almost an hour had passed since he'd last consulted it.

'It's me, Mum.'

'Where are you?'

'I'm still in the city centre. Any news?'

'Nothing. Are you okay?'

'I'm fine, Mum.'

'You don't sound fine.'

'I'm okay. Really. Still can't get used to the heat, that's all.'

'Where are you?'

'At the National Library. I still needed to go through some things in the archive.'

'Oh, all right.'

'I might not make morning visiting hours.'

'That's okay.'

'Yeah, I figured you and Katerina can see him for longer in the morning, and then I'd see him in the afternoon, so...'

'It's fine. Aren't you picking up Tasos though?'

'He'll let me know what time he's getting in, but that's going to be quite late by the sound of things. I have to head back in. Call me if there's any news.'

'Yes.'

'And tell Dad I said hi.'

'I will.'

Was the National Library even open on Saturdays? He couldn't recall. Very much doubted it, at least as far as Special Collections were concerned. Wouldn't the day before a vote be a closure day for public services anyway? Possibly. As long as it didn't occur to his mother to wonder, it didn't matter.

The library was closed. The Vallianeio stood there, halfway down Panepistimiou Street, with its six-columned Doric portico staring down at him, its triangular pediment and unrelieved tympanum a smooth brow, unlined by time, untroubled by the history it sheltered.

Increasingly, and for reasons too obvious to belabour, these days his response to neoclassical architecture was a kind of visceral disgust. The scale, the grandeur, all that oppressive, tyrannical shit. Sometimes he daydreamed of digging up Johann fucking Winckelmann and bringing him back to life so he could beat him to death with his own thighbone.

The year before, he'd been the keynote speaker at a conference in Rome. He'd taken half a day to do the tourist thing – he'd never been to Italy before – and had immediately grown tired of every building in sight and had given up and had gone looking for a bookstore to hide in despite not speaking the language. During that night's video call Rachel had asked him how he found the city. Stupendously filthy, he'd told her; even worse than Paris. Rubbish everywhere. Every single monstrous edifice the tourists flocked to see screaming its rejection of everything human and small and fragile. Every single one looked like Mussolini's chin.

'Also,' he'd said, 'You know all the stone pines they have planted everywhere? They're all of them so very precisely pruned.'

'I'm pretty sure that's like a fire prevention measure.'

'There's whole rows of them. Identical, like crew-cut soldiers on parade.'

'Okay,' she'd laughed. 'Your point being?'

'My point is, even their trees look bloody fascist.'

He checked his phone, then his father's phone.

He turned left onto Akadimias Street and headed back down towards Exarcheia, stopping at a kiosk to buy a bottle of water. He drank half of it on the spot, transferred the other half to his own water bottle, reached into his bag for the other empty, crossed the street and threw both empties into a recycling bin.

His eyes teared in the glare. When he wiped them clear there was that slight haziness to things that came with the heat bouncing off the asphalt, the world sublimating away. He dug around in his bag again, came up with a pair of sunglasses. New rule: he could go on delaying a little longer only if he didn't do so in any kind of comfort. He kept walking, avoiding the shade where he could.

He checked his phone, then his father's phone.

He wandered through Exarcheia up to Alexandras Avenue, turned towards Pedion Areos then doubled back towards Omonoia and Monastiraki. The traffic was building now, and pedestrians clogged up the sidewalks. Motorbike engines revved and horns blared, and drivers were screamed and gestured at as they ignored traffic lights or cut each other off or turned without indicating, and pedestrians were honked and gestured at when they ignored traffic lights and crossed the street where they felt like doing so. Scenes not at all uncommon for Athens, sure, typical even. Everyone bouncing around a little heat-crazed, rubbed raw, anticipatorily frayed, from one near-disaster to the next, a ballet of avoidance and close calls and the odd moment of unintentional grace.

But not today. Today, more than the white-out flickers of light on glass and concrete, what gave the streets their overheated energy seemed to be anger and fear and impatience and the frustrations of human proximity. The engines revved higher and the horns blared longer, and the drivers drove more erratically, and the buses rumbled violently past, trailing clouds of black exhaust and the smell of axle grease and diesel, chassis creaking and hydraulic brakes venting their sighs, and the motorbikes and vespas rushing past with their chainsaw engines at a high whine, and pedestrians shouldered past each other and threw themselves at any hint of an opening in traffic, faces grim and hands knotted, or one hand to their ear, holding a phone into which they screamed, trying to be heard, and ignored the homeless begging for change, and the street hawkers selling lighters and tissues, pens and battery cells and small remote-controlled toys and extendable mops with collapsible buckets, sunglasses and sunglasses and sunglasses, shoes, knockoff bags, the wares spread out on the sidewalk on bed sheets that would be turned into a bundle to toss over the shoulder and run once police were spotted, the peddlers being mostly Africans with no paperwork, and there were more near misses that pedestrians reacted to with more fury; and there was a sense in the air – acrid, hard to

breathe – of emotions pushed just out of shape, of some general effort to hold it together and not tell all these people to get the hell out of your way.

Or maybe it was all just normal; maybe it was just him. Maybe he was just not that used to the place anymore. But then there were the queues at every ATM. Thirty-, forty-, fifty-long. Here things were somewhat different. It wasn't just the manner in which those waiting in line kept glancing ahead more with worry than impatience; it wasn't even the way they would stop every last person to walk away from the machine to ask, 'Is there still money?' It was the way they spent the long wait doing the one thing you'd never expect them to be doing: engaging in conversation with strangers. Not exactly friendly conversation. Not chatting just to pass the time. Nor arguing though there was, inevitably, some of that. No, here the inconvenience that was the existence of others was set aside in favour of the comfort of commiseration offered, complaint echoed, and analysis shared:

How bad the capital controls were. (A disaster. An outrage. A crime.)

How long they were likely to last. (Weeks. Months. Years, some would say, and would be jeered. The idea wasn't ludicrous, it was unthinkable.)

How long before the daily limits were changed, how long before the government realized it was impossible that you needed to wait in line every single day to withdraw sixty – sixty! – euros, then do it all over again the next day, and the next, and the next. (Hours. Weeks. Months, some would say, and would be jeered.)

Who was to blame. (The big one. A list of guilty parties variously including but not limited to:

The government. A bunch of economically illiterate communists. Rich communists, most of them, who wanted only to take the country out of the EU, no matter the cost. Who wanted nothing less than the end of the EU. The delayed fulfilment of their Soviet masters' plan. Doing Putin's bidding, plain and simple. The cost didn't matter to them because they would not be the ones paying it.

The previous governments. A bunch of corrupt tax evaders and incompetents who'd spent decades feasting on European structural funds that produced no structures and investment funds that weren't invested, and borrowing cheap money that would prove impossible to repay to buy votes and line their friends' pockets.

Every single Greek alive – yes, that was right, okay, yes, with the exception of very young children, sure – who knew that said politicians were crooks and voted for them anyway or, worse, didn't bother voting for any of them and thus handed over his share of power to those who did. Who'd been, boat-like, lifted by the rising tide and only now knew to regret not ever learning how to swim.

The EU. A bunch of neoliberal extortionists, bailing out failed private banks with taxpayer money, then having the gall to blame the crisis on people who until then had not spent a day – not a day -- of their lives in debt.

The Germans. A bunch of Nazis in business suits, out once again to – what else – conquer Europe and, having had their arses kicked during the previous two attempts, this time waging financial war on the very people they still owed reparations to for their previous round of crimes.

The IMF. Fanatics, worshippers of discredited dogmas; or imperialist tool of the American government; or both.

Everyone. All of the above, bearing equal responsibility. The position that most drove Andreas crazy, an abdication of opinion that aimed to pass for opinion.

Also, the IMF, imperialist tool of the American government. Imperialist tool of the New World Order. Of the Zionist Occupation Government. The International Jewish Conspiracy.

Also, the International Anti-Greek Conspiracy, which as everyone knew was more or less the prelude to the established of the New World Order, it being a well-known fact that Greeks' triple-stranded DNA made them insusceptible to the wool being pulled over their eyes regarding Jewish plans for world domination, and the only credible threat to said plans. Which was why They were also dosing the drinking water – see, also, fluoride. Chemtrails. Also, the Judeo-Christian war on the true Gods. The Twelve. [This last opinion advanced, accompanied by a maniacally detailed elaboration of the 'Christian Lie', in an email received by Andreas in his work account, inviting him to join something called the 'Supreme Synod of Greek Autochthons', and providing links to accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, as well as the website address www.ssga.wordpress.org.]

Also, the Enemy Outside.

Also, the Enemy Within.

Also, the Turks.

Also, Satan.)

Finally: the referendum. What the result would be, and whether, and how, it would resolve the impasse. It would be 'Yes', the government would have to step down, little children sent to their rooms while the grown-ups cleaned up their mess for them – some kind of government of national unity to sign the deal offered, provided it was still on the table, and there'd be more years of austerity/'structural reforms' ahead.

Or, it would be 'Yes', the government would sign the deal, then call for an early election and get annihilated at the polls, their ridiculous promises of 'resistance' being the only appeal they'd held for voters.

It would be 'No', the PM would march to Brussels and throw their shitty deal in the Germans' faces and get offered a better one for fear the Union would otherwise implode.

Or, it would be 'No', the PM would march to Brussels and throw their shitty deal in the Germans' faces and get the country kicked out of both the euro and the EU for his trouble, and the new drachma – the drachma you just knew they were minting at the Mint even now, in every gathering there was always someone who knew someone who knew someone who worked at the Mint, or lived next to the Mint, and heard every night its beastly presses come to life – anyway the new drachma wouldn't be worth shit, it'd cost you a billion of them to get a loaf of bread, if you could even get bread, there'd be dead bodies in the streets, it'd be the Occupation all over again, just you wait and see.

Andreas traipsed past the ATM queues, hearing fragments of these conversations that he'd already heard – that everyone, including the people having them, had already heard – too many times. Conversations no one sought and no one wanted, it was agreed, even if the effect of agreement was only to draw out how little choice was involved in the matter.

He marched on through tangles of bodies, weaved through idling vehicles stopped on pedestrian crossings, walked past empty shopfronts, and open shops with hardly a person in them and large banners plastered on their windows advertising discounts and closing down sales, and open shops that were packed full of customers and made him wonder, then made him wondering about what it was exactly that he was wondering about.

He was out of breath, the sweat was trickling into his eyes, and his feet were on fire. But he knew the area, and it took a long while to get himself lost again.

He checked his phone, then his father's phone.

He checked his phone, then his father's phone.

He checked his phone, then his father's phone.

He found himself outside a church in a small square hemmed in by tall blocks of flats. Banks of windows, most of them closed. Clotheslines outside some of them, sheets and towels hanging in space; socks, underwear, t-shirts and shirts. Banks of condenser units, the whir of fans hidden behind rattling shrouds. Loud sounds of nearby traffic. He stared at the church a long time and all he could think about was great-Aunt Aliko, whose husband and son had been picked up in a Nazi roundup along with twenty or so other men and boys and executed by firing squad. The kid had been nine years old. The bodies had been taken away and buried in a mass grave and the only thing left behind had been their clothes, which had been hung, bloodstained and torn apart, in two long lines outside the local church for their families to come and identify.

His phone rang. He sat down on a bench and answered.

'Good morning.'

'Hey, honey,' Rachel said. 'Any news? How's your dad?'

'No, nothing. The same.' He glanced at his watch. 'Did you just get up? Nora?'

'Your daughter, I'll have you know, woke me up at six a.m. today. By jumping on my head. She then proceeded to scream "Playtime, Mommy," right in my ear until I got out of bed.'

'Where is she now? I detect a conspicuous lack of ungodly noise in the background.'

'Off to the Common with Grandma, so Mommy can maybe catch up with some work.'

'Tell your mother we're in her debt.'

'It's not like she needs reminding. But really, she loves it. Where are you? Aren't you at the clinic? What's with all the traffic?'

'No, I'm in the city centre actually. The Abatzoglou archive.'

'Huh. The library was open on a Saturday?'

'Eh, as it turns out, no. Not today. Everything's shut. I forgot about tomorrow's vote.'

'Oops.'

'It wasn't a complete waste of time. I thought I'd visit some of the spots mentioned in his memoir, maybe take some pictures to compare with the ones from the '40s.' It hadn't occurred to him before he said it, but it was a good idea. 'I'll head to the clinic soon though.'

'Did you get any sleep last night?' (It didn't seem as though she'd picked up on anything being wrong. In addition to the obvious, that was.)

'Some. Not much.'

'You don't sound too great.' (Okay then, maybe she had.)

'How am I supposed to sound?'

'You know what I mean. What's up?'

'Okay, look,' he said, and related the conversation he'd had with his brother.

'What absolute bastards. What are you going to do?'

'Nothing, for the moment. I'm going to wait for Tasos to get here, and we'll sit down and try to work something out. In the meantime, if they ask again about making a payment, I'll stall. They won't push it, at least for a bit.'

'And after that? They wouldn't just kick you out, would they?'

'I don't think they'd want to draw attention to what they're up to. At least I hope so.'

'I'm sorry, honey.'

'It's okay. We'll figure it out. Thing is—' He found he couldn't go on.

'Yeah?'

'...'

'Ah, I know this one. John Cage, right?' she said.

'Sorry. A man just walked past looking like an extra from *300*. You know, Gerard Butler beard, plastic sword, big shield, red cape. I think he's meant to be a Spartan. Helmet looked Corinthian though.'

'Does he at least have Gerard Butler abs?'

'Does anyone?' He had actually seen such a man, riding the metro some days previously, but had forgot to tell her.

'On second thought, it's probably for the best. Wouldn't want you tempted. And where's he off to, then?'

'Some rally, I would imagine. And you know that's not my type.'

'What, handsome and beefy? Which side, do you think?'

'He looks like a No person.'

'Aren't you a No person?'

'Maybe? On most days I'm still a "No idea" person.'

'My suggestion would be, vote for the opposite of whatever that guy's voting for.'

'Sure, but if that guy's a No, that would mean voting with the guy who showed up at the Yes rally with a portable wine set.'

'Ouch. So, you were saying?'

'Huh? When?'

'Before you got distracted by the hunk that apparently looked nothing like either of your ex-boyfriends but might have looked like one of mine. Yum.'

'What, Paul? The Historia Normannis guy?'

'In my defence, I could never resist a man in a cuirass. It's the only reason I became a historian, didn't you know? But you were saying.'

Andreas tried to work out what to say but then decided to just come out with it. Money was running short. If they had to make another payment, his brother couldn't cover it. Neither could his parents.

'So the savings account,' Rachel said.

'Yes.'

'How much?'

'All of it, pretty much.'

'Okay.'

'Okay?'

'What, you expected me to refuse?'

'Well, no, but maybe think about it for more than a second.'

'What for?'

'Thanks.'

'We'll be okay. Worst case scenario, if anything comes up we can see if we can borrow some money from my mother.'

'I don't know about that. Last time—'

'Oh, shush. It wouldn't be anything like my father's loan.'

'I would hope not.'

'You think you could maybe get past this at some point? It's been almost a decade.'

'Rae, he offered you a "competitive interest rate".'

'What can I say? Some of us had to run away from people who *weren't* trying to help us.'

'...'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean that.'

'No, you're right. It's just—'

'Really bad timing.'

'It's not that. Your mother's been great, and no doubt she'd be more than happy to help us out, and she shouldn't have to, and I'm just being a dick, I know. I'm sorry.'

'Just stuck with the flipping Normans.'

'Thanks.'

'Before I forget, I came across a neuroscience paper you should check out.'

' "Came across" ?'

'It's possible I might have gone looking. Anyway, I emailed you a PDF.'

'I'll check it out when I get to the clinic. Thank you.'

'They got the Wi-Fi fixed?'

'I think so.'

'Video-call me later?'

'Will do.'

'Okay, bye.'

They'd met in the pub where she was celebrating passing her viva. A colleague had dragged him along that afternoon for a drink or two. She'd been standing at the bar with her friends complaining about some community outreach programme she'd got herself involved with. She was supposed to be lecturing sixth-formers on the Protectorate (the subject of her thesis) but for reasons unknown she'd been alerted at the last minute that she'd be talking about the Norman conquest instead.

Waving her drink around, she'd said, 'Here I was, ready to dazzle them on the Parliament of Saints and now I'm stuck with the flipping Normans,' at which point Andreas, still not over Tom and not at all looking to flirt but unable to resist, had leaned in to say, 'Wasn't that what the Anglo-Saxons said at Hastings?'

The phrase had eventually found its way to becoming a kind of spousal shorthand for moments when they feared they were being tested and found wanting. It was another way of saying, 'I'm letting the side down,' as well as, 'It's all right, you're doing your best with what you have.'

He put his phone away, then checked his father's phone. His calves tingled and twitched, the muscles burning with exhaustion. Even in the shade, everything radiated heat: a whole world giving up the ghost all at once.

He sipped some water and stood up. He wavered. Waited for the dizziness to pass. Picked a direction at random.

The other phrase from that evening still in regular use a dozen years later – as shorthand for 'How could you not know this?' as well as, somewhat incongruously, 'What on earth were you thinking?' – was, 'It's all Greek to *you*, then,' which had been Rachel's comment when, in response to what she considered a series of fairly basic questions regarding twentieth-century Greek history, Andreas had only been able to produce variations on the answer, 'You know, I'm not really sure.'

He checked his phone, then his father's phone. (Text continues on p. 306)

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¹⁴³ Never has the phrase been more hilariously misapplied.