

IN AND OUT OF GREECE

THREE STORIES

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LEA, PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST

TRIBULATIONS OF LOVE

AN INDIAN STORY

LEA, PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST

PART I : MILITARY SERVICE

It seemed so stupid to Panos this whole business of military service. He had to go through it to become a civil servant. To be allowed to settle permanently in Greece, for that matter, after years of study abroad. He would not be able to take up his post as an instructor at the state polytechnic unless he completed this one-year stint of duty. Did he really have to know how to wield a gun and peel potatoes to teach the abstruse intricacies of mathematical series and infinities?

He was thirty but there was no way around it even at his age. In Greece, it was the inescapable duty of rich and poor, of the clever and the stupid, the educated and the ignorant. He did not mind the exercise and the running. He would have done it on his own in any case but getting up for lookout post duty and the uncomfortable, dreary hours it involved was too much. Moreover, he did not want to think. What else could one do in the chill darkness of midnight to daybreak but think?

The boredom of his activities and mostly of his free time sometimes exasperated him. He felt completely out of place. His only consolation was that the camp was on a hill by the sea and the breeze that constantly caressed it was pure and sea-fragrant. Even when the army trucks moved noisily about spouting thick black fumes it did not last long. The fumes drifted away and the sweetness returned. The subtle scent of the sea almost nourished him. It opened his appetite and the blue, calm Aegean sated his soul.

Right opposite the camp on another rocky promontory, separated by a bay from the camp, was the Castro. A castle built by the Byzantines and later rebuilt and used by the Venetians and Genovese up until the invasion of the Turks. Though only a flock of deer now inhabited the extended ruined fortifications, it dominated the landscape of Myrina, the village-capital of Limnos. Poised high above the village, it stamped it most emphatically with a sense of history.

History was not lacking in that picturesque but not especially beautiful island. The numerous archeological sites and ruins that studded Limnos reached back to the Bronze Age and evidence of Paleolithic Age settlements of hunter-gatherers and fishermen were recently discovered. It made Panos marvel that even a small, relatively infertile, mountainous island could generate tomes of detailed history books researched and written by archeologists and learned native lovers of the island. Places like Moudros with its natural deep-water harbor sheltered the British Navy in the failed Dardanelles Campaign and the Greek Navy in the Balkan Wars. This, however, is modern history. Limnos's history and prehistory though minuscule in the great events of the world was, nevertheless, a molecule of the whole.

Panos loved its beautiful, sandy beaches and crystal-clear waters that had survived pristine the millennia and felt satisfaction that this island provided aquatic resting grounds for migrant birds and tall flamingos. He wondered if the extraordinary natural environment would survive another two decades.

He arrived in Limnos in early spring, near the end of March. The sky was cloudy and the flight turbulent in the small twin-engine plane. As he walked with his

provincial-looking fellow passengers from the aircraft to the small airways terminal, a slight drizzle sprinkled the runway. The weather was cold but the aroma of the wet earth and thyme of the mountains sparked a little hope in him. The scents of spring were already eloquent. He often wondered what life would be like in a village. A village is not an army camp but the army camp was almost part of the village and he would soon find out.

A few taxis were stationed outside the airport terminal but he took the Olympic Airways shuttle bus to Myrina. It weaved along an unexciting narrow road past meadows and farms, a few grazing cows and donkeys and two small villages. Three other recruits were in the bus and they started chatting amongst themselves trying to overcome the sense of disorientation that Panos also felt. They were probably just out of secondary school, not more than eighteen or nineteen. Half an hour later, they reached the capital and the bus snaked into a few narrow streets, entered a square and stopped. The passengers silently filed out into the large oblong square with a small park in the middle.

A neat stone-slatted sidewalk surrounded the park with freshly painted wooden benches for the passengers of local itineraries. In the park were one or two flowerbeds and a few hefty eucalyptus trees with grass all around. The only sizeable road was the one that led into the square. The huge country buses that connected the other villages to the capital came into it, went around the park and out the same way. A few narrow streets exited the square on all sides and a larger one that was obviously the main street traversed the village and led to the port. It had shops and restaurants and the famous Greek *periptera*, or kiosks, where one could find besides newspapers, cigarettes, soft drinks and sweets, the most unexpected and vast array of useful articles that might be needed at a moment's notice. Large vehicles could reach the port by other venues but not directly from this square.

Panos asked the boys whether they were going to the camp and suggested they share a taxi. He did not need to share it but wanted to avoid the arrogance of going off on his own. They piled into a taxi and the driver remarked that his bag must be full of rocks. It was very heavy.

"Just some books," Panos said.

The driver smiled.

"Are you an officer?" he asked.

"No," said Panos.

"Then a gun will be more useful to you than books," he said and laughed. "The Turks are lurking just beyond the horizon."

"The books are heavy," Panos told him, "if the worst comes to the worst, I shall break open their skulls with them." The young boys guffawed.

The camp was barely a two-minute drive beyond the village. The drizzle had stopped and his first impressions were favorable. The camp itself was nondescript with casernes, depots and ugly buildings but also with a luxurious officers' club affording a civilized note. The setting, however, was glorious. From that height, Panos felt the Aegean hugging the island. It was an indifferent benefactor. A provider of fish and fresh air, of clouds and rain for the inhabitants' crops but unable, throughout a long history, to prevent predatory foreign invasions, slavery and the raids of pirates. This fear and uncertainty was transmitted in their genes from one generation to the next and now it was the Turkish threat again. Perhaps it had never abandoned them together with the unrealistic dreams of grandeur, of regaining the Poli, the City, *our* Constantinople. Five centuries on, accomplished native writers bemoaned its loss in detailed and moving historical novels.

The cool air braced him up. He left Athens early in the morning and it was already noon. With his three young companions, he presented his papers to the officer in charge and after the inevitable paperwork went on to a sergeant who assigned them their bunks and issued them uniforms, stockings and army boots. The rest of that first day was free and Panos and the boys arranged their belongings in the dormitory cupboards assigned and then joined the other soldiers for lunch in the mess hall. The food was palatable and the noise lively. High spirits and boisterousness usually amused Panos but he could not get used to the vulgarity of language of the modern Greeks. He supposed it was not a uniquely Greek trait but that did not mitigate his aversion to it. *Re malaka*, you masturbator, was amongst other equally revolting familiarities thrown about with equanimity and friendliness. It had almost acquired the meaning of, hey friend.

Three to five was a rest period and most soldiers lay in their bunks. At five, they all went back to their odd jobs and duties for a couple of hours and Panos requested permission to walk to the village. He did not see, at first sight, any potential friends. The kids had barely started shaving and most of the junior officers and sergeants were younger than he was. The officers of his age group did not give him a second look. He was happy the young trio got along together. It would assuage the initial loneliness. That was more than could be said for him.

He left the camp dressed in fatigues and an impermeable army jacket he had just been issued and was grateful for the army cap he wore because it started drizzling again. In ten minutes, he reached the village and took the main street to the port. The shops were lit but the circulation was sparse. He assumed this emptiness was typical of off-season Myrina in the drizzle and relative chill. A few coffee bars and *souvlaki* joints had soldiers inside, lounging, eating and enjoying the warmth. They provided the principal winter clientele of the fast-food trade, the restaurants and the coffee and pastry shops on the island. In summer with the influx of vacationers things changed radically but in winter it was the army that kept them in business.

The island had a love-hate relationship with the army. The army provided considerable commercial activity and influx of capital and employment of locals. The young soldiers spent their meager allowances supplementing their diets, trying to entertain themselves as best they could and yet the conservative society of the island shunned them. Although the island mores inevitably adjusted to the new ideas and customs that filtered in during the summer months, change was not readily adopted and local girls were discouraged from forming relationships with the soldiers that were there for just a year or so. They would shortly finish their military service and depart. Moreover, they were rarely well off. Usually they were boys from other Greek provinces of less than moderate means and were not acceptable marriage prospects. That did not stop the local authorities from protesting stridently whenever the army announced personnel reductions. The rich summer vacationers also roundly scorned the recruits.

As Limnos was a molecule of the whole in most things, she was also that in the skin trade. With the vanishing iron curtain and Eastern Europe's poverty, enterprising Mafia-like entrepreneurs surreptitiously introduced prostitution into Myrina. It was not obvious. They were mainly rumors that circulated but the blonde, red-cheeked Ukrainian and Russian female faces suddenly proliferated as coffeehouse servers and household helpers, as wives of old, comfortably off widowers now blessed with a new lease of life and, at their age, a little unanticipated sex. Others, unseen, holed up in apartments relieved the young Greek soldiers of their sexual frustrations.

Panos knew all that. His friend Anthony who lived in Athens and had family in Myrina had briefed him. Anthony was a surgeon like Panos's father. They met on several occasions in London while Anthony studied and prepared for a fellowship to the Royal College of Surgeons and Panos looked him up on his return to Greece. He got in touch with him again when the Army Recruitment Center informed him that he would be stationed in Myrina. The two friends had a long and friendly meeting and Anthony provided a detailed picture of life in Limnos. They would meet again in summer. Anthony was a fanatic summer vacationer of the island. So were the vast majority of native sons who lived away from Limnos. Most of them had roots, homes and farms. They were the offspring of an older generation that evaded the hardship of an arid island by seeking their fortunes in not only Athens and the larger Greek cities but also the Middle East, Africa and Australia. They left their farms to sharecroppers and were back every summer to collect their income and to upkeep the family home. Above all, they returned because of a strong attachment and love for their homeland. They appreciated the cool, dry summer climate, the casualness and relaxation that the village life afforded and relished the glorious, less than crowded beaches and crystal-clear, cool waters.

Thoughts were flashing through his mind. Thimitra. He kept chasing them away because they oppressed and choked him. Both of them had been stubborn and foolish. He reached the port. The narrow street opened on a square and a small garden with benches. To the left of it was the small port where the fishing trawlers docked. Small restaurants faced the dock all along its length with closed doors and one or two customers apiece. To the right were the keys of the main port on a large wharf where traditional Greek-island hotels were situated, also facing seaward, with the less than original names: The Wave, The Seagull and The Port. Directly above them towered the Castro. Small coffeehouses wedged in narrow side streets where, on a stormy day, one could almost see Alexis Zorbas drinking his boiled sagebrush broth; eagle-eyed surveying the crowd. On a hill, right across the port, quite isolated, was a small, white church with its belfry. Oh, Thimitra, will you not marry me up there? Bloody hell! Cut it out!

He returned to the small port, entered a tiny, empty fish restaurant and ordered a bottle of local wine. Half way through it, he felt hungry and ordered fried squid with a salad. Filling his belly, he felt his spirits rising. Oh, things will work out, he thought. He always told himself that the cause of his miseries was his lack of problems and, inevitably, something that seemed paired to that, a lack of drive. He had no financial worries. His father, a highly successful surgeon had amassed more money than they needed. His mother, independently wealthy, doted on him. No one ever pushed him to do this or that and when he announced that he decided to become a mathematician, his father just smiled and said,

“That’s all right; you have enough money to afford to waste your time. I just hope you never regret it.”

He could never have imagined how true these words would turn out to be. He traveled to England, lived there for eight years and earned a PhD. He was playing a game. That was how he felt. The more he studied, the more he delved into this arcane and peculiar science, the more useless he felt. His tousle-haired, absentminded professors made him smile when they rushed in the lecture room and announced gleefully,

“I have for you a most fascinating theorem. A true mystery and yet it does have a solution. Let’s see if you can find it.”

Panos felt he was honing his mind for nothing. The utter uselessness of it all was becoming a severe burden. He knew he was not a brilliant mind, not another Einstein likely to discover other relativities. In any case, he was not a physicist, just a silly pure mathematician. If it were not for some of his other interests in literature, art, music and theatre, he felt he would surely end in severe depression or an insane asylum. They did balance things out a bit. The women too, thank God for them. Their prattle and lovemaking was another pill of sanity.

As the days went by, his life at the camp acquired a semblance of, if not normality, at least, of routine. He was soon enough familiar with the boys but did not mix with them. He was too old, too mournful. He was considered dependable by his superiors and given a good measure of authority but was also seen as peculiar and treated warily. He was permitted to deviate slightly from the strict rules of the camp. In the evenings, while the soldiers relaxed he would go to the mess hall and on a corner table set up his books, plug in a small desk lamp he bought from the village and sit down to his problems. Useless or not, his science still fascinated him. Usually when he had lookout post duty, he worked until twelve after which he put on his overcoat and with his rifle headed for the watchtower. He dreaded these twice-weekly stints. All he could do was think. The taxi driver's Turkish invasion was not coming anytime soon and the fresh sea air caused one sigh to follow another. One thought of Thimitra after the other. He must find a woman, he thought. The question was where should he look? He was too embarrassed to ask the young soldiers for directions to the apartments of the Russian and Ukrainian prostitutes. In any case, he had never done it this way before.

Lately, he noticed a woman painter moving about the island. He had not seen her at close quarters. Just spotted her, occasionally, painting away on far away hills and distant beaches with her tripod. She was always alone. She seemed vigorous and young and it intrigued him that an artist was recording all that beauty. Artists fascinated him and he loved painting. He wondered if she was good. He had very definite opinions on talent and quality. Most of it instinctive but he found he was rarely wrong in his estimations when he consulted art books. He believed that if a painting was alive and talked to him, gripped him, it was good. It was art. The rest were either appallingly colored photographs or tasteless colored smudges.

He remembered the Picasso exhibition at the Tate. How they laughed. A smattering of talent but it was mostly colorful gargoyles, meaningless, emotionless, pretentious and empty. That was how he felt. Perhaps he was untutored and ignorant of modern art but he trusted his instinct. He trusted his love of painting. Most definitely, most of the time, Picasso was pulling our legs. She thought so too. She had asked him to go with her to the exhibition. He met her at the University of London Student Union, at the Arab Society's elections. An Arab colleague had invited him. He told him it would be fun. Politics and passions started early in colleges and his colleague's group wanted to prevent a communist takeover of the presidency of the Arab society.

She sat next to Panos at the meeting and they chatted and laughed as interminable quarrels developed between opposing students in atrocious English and even worse accents. Suddenly the meeting broke up in anger and half the students departed. The girl turned to Panos and said, "I must go." She was with the belligerents.

"Hold on a minute," he muttered, pulled out a pen and a scrap of paper and noted his phone number. "Call me," he told her.

She smiled.

"Who do I ask for?"

"Panos. Don't worry. I shall be answering the phone."

She left and he realized he had not asked her name. He realized he had met the girl of his dreams. He realized he was half in love. With what? With a thin English girl of ordinary height, with short fair hair and smiling eyes, a lovely voice, a smile that took his breath away and looked all of eighteen.

She called him ten days later. She was halfway down memory lane on the way out and when he heard her voice, he wondered who she was.

“Panos?” She questioned.

“Yes.”

“This is Ceres.”

“Who?”

“Ceres. The girl from ULU. The Arab society.”

“Oh, my goodness, yes. Hello! I did not know your name.”

“Yes. We left in a bit of a hurry. It was rather funny.”

“I am so happy to hear your voice. I thought I lost you. I sort of fell in love with you, you know.”

She laughed.

“I nearly did, too. I am prone to that sort of thing.”

“I was terribly worried you might not call.”

“Not a chance, unless that scrap of paper with your phone got lost. But I was pretty careful with it.”

“When will I see you?”

“There’s this Picasso exhibition at the Tate. Will you accompany me to it?”

That was their first date, their first kiss and their first lovemaking in his flat.

After the Picasso in the afternoon, they went to a film, they spent most of the film kissing like teenagers; they had a meal in South Kensington and went to his flat and in his bed. The first time was very special, tender and passionate but so was the second and third and fourth that night. They were in delirium. They were in love. They had plunged into an abyss, in a black hole of sensuality. They could not believe their feelings. They were sincere.

“I love you madly,” he told her. “Is it possible? Do you believe me?”

She kissed him passionately.

“Yes, my love, yes. It’s reciprocal.”

She spent the night in his flat. In between love sessions, they spoke about themselves and their families. Her father was a professor of Archaeology at the University of Kent.

“Hence my name,” she said. “Ceres.”

“I have heard it before but only rarely.”

“It is the Roman goddess of Agriculture.”

“Oh! Our Greek equivalent is Thimitra.”

“Yes, Demetra. And Panos?”

“Panos is Panayotis.”

“Good God,” she laughed. “Let’s leave it at Panos.”

“How old are you my love?”

“Twenty five. Nearly an old maid.”

“You hardly look eighteen.”

“It is my lean and hungry look.”

“Boy! Lean, mean and hungry is right. I am twenty eight.”

“Figures. A passionate Greek in his prime.”

“Only with my wild Boadicea. Apart of your indisputable lovemaking talents and dilettante visits to art exhibitions and Arab societies, what are your other occupations?”

“You just called me Boadicea. I am a fighter.”

“Meaning?”

“I studied child psychology and I work at a London Council school for retarded children. I fight passionately to bring them back. As much as I can. Which is not always feasible. And you?”

“I am wasting my life. I am working for a PhD in pure math.”

“And tasting the birds of London.”

“I love you Ceres. You are the last bird of the line.”

“Famous last words.”

“True. Time will tell, my love.”

Time, however, was hardly ever succinct. Time took its time. It had its own infinity. On his lookout post he often cried, “Will you not leave me in peace, you bitch. My Thimitra, my sweet girl.”

This woman, he wanted to get a look at her. From afar, she looked tall, well built and walked in an energetic manly gait. Perhaps she was beautiful. She strapped her tripod stand, canvasses and utensils on her back and climbed the hills like a goat. Often he saw her tiny figure across the bay at the Castro. When the weather was fine, she would stay there all day. Painting with a white fisherman’s sun-hat on her head, resting to eat her lunch and drink from a thermos flask. He wanted to send smoke signals to her like the Red Indians but was afraid to spark off the Turkish invasion. He borrowed a pair of binoculars from an officer but he could still not make her out.

He saw her two months later on a glorious, sunny day in mid-May. He had a day off and went down to the beach, on the bay between the camp and the Castro. The beach was deserted; the water icy-cold and he swam for only a few minutes. He came out shivering and stretched on the sand. He warmed up and sat gazing at the sea wondering if one ever tires of looking at that eternal movement? He saw her coming with a bathrobe and slippers. He could not mistake her walk, her movements, her short hair, her height. They were her landmarks to him. She stood some way off and removed her bathrobe and a beautiful sturdy body in a red, brief, two-piece bikini faced the sun. She had lovely long legs and full breasts; a body that had not borne children. Her face was a man’s face dominated by a prominent nose. Her eyes were small and Chinese but lively and intelligent and her mouth was large. He could not call it a pleasing face, not with all the goodwill in the world. Though not repulsive, it was unattractive and turning fifty. Was she lesbian?

She entered the sea and swam for ten minutes in immaculate style. Coming out she looked at Panos and nodded to him with a half smile. Then, she stretched on her bathrobe and seemed to doze off. Panos wanted to leave but waited. He had longed to meet her and it seemed ridiculous to leave her now despite her unattractiveness and a faint distaste she induced in him. When she awoke and sat facing the sea, he walked to her, excused himself and asked her if she was the painter he saw moving around the hills and beaches of Myrina. He knew, full well, she was. She looked at him and smiled and Panos understood that nature always seems to give even the ugliest person a redeeming feature. The truly ugly are legends recorded in books. The woman’s smile was luminous and pleasant and seemed to alter her face, to erase the ugliness. Those Chinese eyes were brimming with intelligence.

“Yes,” she said. “Where do you spy me from?”

“From the army camp.”

“Are you an officer?”

“No, just a soldier.”

“Aren’t you a little old for that?”

“Yes. I have been the beneficiary of innumerable deferrals but finally could not escape the clutches of the system. I was studying abroad.”

“Why didn’t you stay there?”

“There is always this inexplicable pull of one’s roots. It seduces you even if one regrets it later. Plus other more mundane considerations such as employment and family.”

“Oh dear, another one,” she said.

“You too?”

“Yes. For me it was the pull of one’s roots, a senile mother and a return to my long-abandoned art.”

“May I ask you something? I have not much free time from the army. The Turkish invasion is at hand.”

“Oh?”

“I am only joking. The thing is they keep us busy. The army makes for a peculiar life: a community of men without women. We have to clean, cook, upkeep the camp and equipment, wash and iron our clothes and linen, make our beds in a very specific manner and keep the dormitories tidy. And of course, defend the fatherland. Nevertheless, could I invite you for dinner at one of the better tavernas whenever I can manage it?”

“Even in one of the lesser ones would do. Yes, I would love it. It gets pretty lonely here at this time of the year.”

“Where shall I find you?”

“Call me at the Omiros hotel opposite the airline office to arrange an appointment. I am fixing up my place and I temporarily reside there.”

“Do you plan to stay here?”

“Not permanently. Just a few months every year. I have my painting junk in the house but there are also teams of artisans coming in from Athens who camp in it for the few days they need to finish specific jobs. Not very comfortable but they are happy to save on a hotel. Still, it is nearly finished. I shall be moving in it soon. It is the house on the bay of the *Romeikos Yialos* with the wooden beams curving outwards, supporting and enlarging the second floor.”

“Oh, it’s beautiful,” he said. “I have admired it often.”

“Yes it is. I am in love with it. It was a ruin when I bought it a few years ago and I only started renovating it recently. I have tried, as much as possible, to restore it in its original form with some well hidden modern comforts.”

“Who shall I ask for?”

“Lea Sevdalis.”

“I am Panos Lavrendis.”

He shook her hand. It was a firm handshake from a woman with a man’s face on a thirty-year old mermaid's body. Then she smiled and everything changed.

He called Lea a few days later. Ceres would not ease the Graeco-Roman fighter’s grip on his soul. He had not called her for months. Every telephone call was a small doom. The wall could not be scaled. She was on one side, he on the other. It was just their voices, tears and refusals on both sides. Desperate love and stubbornness created a minor Greek tragedy at the end of a telephone line. Going to Lea, in the evening, he felt a need to talk to her. He went to the main telephone exchange of Myrina and called her flat in London. Her roommate told him she was in Kent with her

parents. He called at their home and Ceres's mother answered. She was friendly and cool as if she had seen him yesterday.

"Oh, hello Panos," she said. "How are you?"

"How are you Mrs. Ploughright? I am quite well thank you. Is Ceres at home?"

"Indeed she is. She is fussing about with Jason. He is a lovely little boy."

"My God," said Panos. "So he arrived? I am overwhelmed."

"My dear boy, did you think Ceres would stay pregnant forever? He is healthy and beautiful. Congratulations. Won't you come and see him? Here, hold on, she wants to talk to you. Good bye from me."

"Panos, my love." It was her voice. The ground started swaying and he leaned on the cabin. "Talk to Iason."

He heard his voice and his gurgling. He did not know what to say. "Iason," he said, "*pethi mou*." (my child)

Then it was her voice again.

"My darling," he said, "my darling Thimitra, are you all right?"

"Fantastic. On top of the world. This skinny body disgorged a beautiful child. I am so dreadfully happy. He looks like you sometimes but he's more English than Greek. Should I say, thank God? I have another two wonderful months still with Iason before I go to work. Mummy will keep him in the mornings and I shall give up the flat. I shall be commuting daily to work from here by railway. It's a hassle but I have to be with Iason. Still, that's some way off. Mother has been quite wonderful."

"I miss you my darling. I think of you. I love you."

"And keeping it to yourself? Why don't you call?"

"Because ever since I came to Greece, our telephone conversations ended in quarrels and threw me into depressions, which have become an almost permanent trait of my moods. Do you believe me, my darling, when I tell you that at least in our love nothing has changed? I love you desperately. I desire you, my Thimitra."

"Yes, my love, nothing has changed, unfortunately. It would have been so much easier if it had. Won't you come to see your son?"

"I cannot just now. I am in the army on an island."

"You see? Constantly tying your life in knots."

"I have to do my military service to get employed. You well know I could get nothing worthwhile in the English universities. Nothing at all in fact. One refusal after another."

"If you loved us enough you would be driving a taxicab to be near me and your son."

"And if you loved me enough you would be here, near me."

"What, in the army camp?"

"Oh come off it, Ceres."

"Panos, better let's turn it off here. But please, my love, please, call me more often. Try it every two weeks instead of every two months. I do love you, unfortunately, and I do miss you terribly. I love you my dearest. I dream of you in my bed. My passion is still alive. Does that mean nothing to you?"

"Oh, my Thimitra, why are you constantly throwing the blame on me? I shall call you every other day. We might work something out though I doubt it. All that tearing apart never did much good. I love you too, my darling. Terribly. You are the light of my life. Too bad it is over the horizon and I am living in darkness. Take care of our son."

She prattled on for a while about Iason and then they said goodbye. Once again, he was depressed but it was not as bad as it usually was. He walked to the Omiros and

found Lea sitting in the small waiting room. She was elegantly dressed in woolen trousers, a white polo-neck pullover and when she saw him, she got up and pulled on a coat. The Chinese eyes missed nothing.

“What’s wrong?” she asked him even before she shook his hand.

“Nothing.” He smiled. “*Kalispera.*” (good evening)

They went out in the chilly, narrow street towards the port. The shops had closed down for the day. Although the day was lengthening, it was already dark outside with the occasional street lamps fashioning little islands of light. Off-season Myrina was desolate, especially at night. Even the Castro was dark. You felt its looming presence somewhere above you. It was lit only in the summer months, suspended midair between the sea and the heavens. The television sets were flickering in the windows along the way. They walked slowly, close to one another. She put her arm around his and into her coat pocket. He was surprised at the familiarity.

He smiled at her.

“The walls of small Greek villages have eyes, you know,” he told her.

“Yes, but they are busy watching insipid Greek serials at the moment.”

They walked on silently for a while.

“How’s the painting?”

“Liberating. It has become my life. It both drains me and fulfills me. I studied art in my youth and then left it for years. I often wonder how that was ever possible. But the maelstrom of life sometimes stupidly distracts you with its trivialities. When I was married, we lived abroad in many countries. We were constantly moving. It was not easy for me to pursue it but I am back at it with a vengeance.”

“Will you show me some of your work?”

“Perhaps. One day. You see, I paint only for myself these days. They say that art’s destiny is the limelight. An artist needs to show his work. He needs to be reassured, to pass on his thoughts, his ecstasies and emotions to others. That is his *raison d’être*. And perhaps even I feel that sometimes. But for the time being, I am working for my soul. I am healing myself from a meaningless existence. Isn’t it strange that art should be such a personal medicine?”

Panos did not want to delve into her life with indiscreet questions. He hardly knew her. He was not sure he wanted to get involved despite the comforting arm around his. He kept quiet. Who are the happy ones in this world finally, he mused, the ignorant ones and the unthinking, the humble and those lacking ambition? Certainly, it was the lucky ones but there seemed to be so pitifully few of them.

They reached a sparsely lit, deserted port and entered a restaurant on the side of the fishing-boat marina. They were the only customers. It was relatively late. The army was in the barracks. After they ordered wine, fish and the island delicacies she smiled at him and without preliminaries said,

“Tell me. I can keep a secret.”

That smile, the fine teeth, the altered face melted his reserve.

“I just heard my son on the phone.”

“Oh? You are you married?”

“No,” he said and she laughed.

“Things are turning interesting. What did he have to say?”

“He gurgled. He said, I was born a month ago and you did not even care to ask.”

“If that is true, you are inexcusable.”

“We both are.”

“Both who?”

“His mother and I.”

“Are you estranged?”

“In a peculiar way. We are at an impasse. We cannot get together. One cannot subjugate his life to the other and no viable compromise seems to exist.”

“Then you do not love each other enough.”

“Perhaps. Though I love her more than my life. She has become an obsession that is tearing me apart. If anyone ever told me that such love exists, I would not have believed him. She loves me too. I know that.”

“So? Shall we start at the beginning?”

“I met Thimitra in London. We were together during my last two years there.”

“Oh, a Greek girl.”

“No, sorry, I should have explained. She’s English. She’s called Ceres. Well, it was the usual story, love at first sight.”

“Not so usual, in our fast-sex days.”

“True. But with us, it was love at first sight, and passion and craving and companionship, laughs and happiness and a physical attraction I find hard to explain because she is not exactly what you might call sexy. She is just avid. I had one year left for my doctorate and our affair dragged it out to two. She distracted me so entirely I practically stopped studying. She studied child psychology and worked in a school for retarded children. Well, I was one obsession and her job, to her, was the other. I finally finished my doctorate, pure math by the way, and started looking for a job. Nothing doing. The field is limited and universities are fussy. They had no use for a mediocre Greek. My father who has opened up and butchered half the Greek politicians and has terrific connections wangled me a lecturer’s job at the polytechnic in Athens.”

“What do you mean opened up and butchered?”

“He’s a surgeon.”

Lea laughed.

“Oh, I see, she said.”

“I asked Ceres to marry me and join me in Athens and she said I was mad. There was no way she would ever leave her children at school to lead an idle life in a country where she could not even speak the language. Did I expect her to shut herself in a flat to do my cooking? She told me if I truly loved her, I would find any old job to stay with her. Any old job, what? Become a schoolteacher? A clerk? A sales representative? A taxicab driver as she often rhetorically suggested? The funny thing is I do not need to work. Both my parents are wealthy but can I go through life without working? What kind of a man would I be: an over-educated parasite? The bla-bla did not stop and with each job refusal, it got worse. The lovemaking, on the other hand, was divine. The desperation, the abyss that was facing us seemed to multiply our craze for each other. I, the mathematician, started getting an inkling of the meaning of infinity. Such was my love for this girl. As the time approached for my departure, Ceres fell pregnant. I suggested an abortion but she was adamant. She would keep the child. A product of so much love could not just be killed off. The most awful dead end had been reached.”

Lea was thoughtful.

“At least,” she said.

“At least, what?”

“If the child were not there... Now, it will keep the wound festering longer.”

“Forever.”

“There is no forever in this life, Panos, thankfully.”

The food arrived and they started eating. The scented wine of Limnos had opened up their appetite and eased Panos’s tension. The conversation changed. Good

food is as soothing a delectation for Greeks as sex. Food from the sea is at the apex. When their custard-filled syrupy sweet arrived, Lea, as suddenly as she had opened the subject, said she saw no solution. Something might come up but what? Time was the only sure remedy.

“Meaning forget her?” he asked.

“Yes, my dear. Life is a process of forgetting. Acquiring, losing and forgetting. Knowledge, persons and loves.”

“These are hard words to accept.”

“They are, however, the only certainties of life.”

They left as they came, in the chill wind, her arm around his and into her coat pocket. She was not cloying. He felt her sympathy and having talked to her, was relieved. He saw that Lea did not blame him alone as Ceres tended to do. The situation was intractable. One, finally, could not become a carpet for the other to tread on however great the love involved. He felt a beginning of affection for this strange woman. At the Omiros, she thanked him and kissed him on his cheek. She asked him if on a day off he would be willing to help her lug her equipment to the church of St Thomas, up a nearby mountain where some radar and telecommunication antennas were erected. She had been there and the view was superb. She wanted to do a few paintings.

“Mind you we shall stay all day and afternoon up there,” she said. “It takes over an hour just to reach the top because the unpaved road is so bad taxis refuse to go.”

“With the greatest of pleasure,” he said. “I shall call you.”

He left for the camp. He had his small army privileges such as staying out a little later than the youngsters were allowed. He stretched on his bunk for twenty minutes, then took his rifle and went out for lookout post duty and his never-ending muttering to the heavens and Thimitra.

The day at St Thomas was grim and windy and the clouds were swirling to the tune of urgent, whistling winds.

“I think, however,” Lea told him, “it shall not rain. They are not black enough. My art has made me something of a meteorologist. So let’s risk it.”

The climb was tiring because of the load they carried and the summit was windy but there was the tiny church, some open spaces and odd disused walls standing up here and there and they managed to get Lea’s views sheltered from the wind. Myrina was nestled between her hills, her bays, the port and the Castro; huddled, cowed, it seemed. The normally placid Aegean had thin white lines disjointedly covering its surface. They were the waves that seemed not to be moving from that height. Lea had a strange way of painting. She stared out for minutes and then turned to her canvas and slashed at it with quick, unhesitating lines of color. One could not clearly guess, at the beginning, what she was getting at. It was a day of grays and the feeling of the painting was superb. It was definitely not a photograph but a mixture of definition and haze, of black, gray, indigo and white. Of anger, temper, fear.

“Lea, it is superb.”

“Do you think so?” She smiled. She was flattered. “Does it not disturb your sense of mathematical precision?”

“Mathematical precision has beauty too. In pure mathematics, you sometimes wonder how series and equations come out with such uncanny symmetry. It is almost godlike. But this! This is pure emotion. Not to speak of artistry. You are a great artist. It is a humble opinion, of course.”

“And a very gratifying one. Thank you.”

They lunched on sandwiches and hot coffee from a thermos flask she had brought along and Lea started on another view.

They came up again, a week later, on a sunny day and the same two views were different, colorful and happy. A serene, silent Myrina basking in the sun in a clear blue, June sky, with the greens and browns of the spring and the earth, the white neat houses and the deep blue sea with small freighters, fishing trawlers and passenger ships, coming and going, keeping her alive.

They saw each other more often and made swimming dates. There was no question of romance. Friendship between man and woman is not easy. It can only flourish in restraints. Ceres was standing guard. Iason's gurgling too, on the phone. Panos wondered at Lea's familiarities. Was there nothing more to it? Was it not an invitation? Was her handholding, her kisses on his cheek, her affectionate caressing and ruffling of his hair with a smile that was becoming ever more precious; was it innocent? Was she playing a waiting game? It was the only one that could be played. Thimitra was in the background, implacable. He could not help feeling that were he to make a move it would be reciprocated. However, he could not, though he thought about it.

The assumed romance was noticed and obviously talked about in the camp. A cheeky young soldier saw him with Lea at a restaurant and smiled at him knowingly. In the evening, in the barracks, he asked him with a smirk, "Are you fucking her?" Panos did not answer. He just looked at him, turned, and left. He never spoke to him again. The eyes and ears of the village walls were taking notice. It did not overly disturb them. Lea moved to her restored house. It had become the jewel of the bay. She hung her paintings and invited him for a look. What an utterly strange and fascinating collection that was. Besides the landscapes, seascapes, the sharecroppers and shepherds, wizened old men, women on donkeys, dogs, mules and sheep, there were some strange nudes. Thick men with gorged, semi-erect genitals and rough, unshaven faces stared at the viewer. Women lay down with legs apart in an obvious exhibitionism of precise sexuality. Panos was shocked.

"Why all this?" he asked.

"Why all the rest?" was her answer. It was a question, obviously, an inexplicable one of the human psyche.

July arrived and so did the first holidaymakers. The hotels started filling up with foreign groups. The Castro, the coffeehouses and restaurants on the Romeikos Yialos were lit at night. Myrina was keying up for business. The army would be marginalized for a couple of months. Lea made him buy a bicycle. She had one herself. On his days off, they would cycle to less crowded beaches in nearby villages. Thanos was their favorite spot. The tiny village was high up on a hill and some two kilometers below was an isolated bay of fine, white sand and crystal-clear waters. The road to the beach was atrocious and avoided. It ended at one end of the beach, which formed a mile-long semi-circle. They chained the bicycles on a tree and walked to the other end. They were all alone. Not a soul in sight. From the very first time there, Lea discarded her costume. She swam, walked and sunbathed in the nude and persuaded Panos to do the same.

"It is different," she told him. "It's a marvelous sensation. Oh, take it off, you ninny. I shall not seduce you. I cannot rival your Thimitra even at close proximity. She has devoured your soul."

Panos hesitated.

"Men's are so apparent," he said. "It will shrink in the water and might stretch at the sight of you."

"Nothing will happen. Nudism is asexual. And, anyway, I have seen a good many of them in all states and moods as my paintings attest," she said.

Her body was young, firm and shapely and she often asked him to spread suntan lotion on her back. "I shall spread it on the front," she told him smiling. "Don't worry."

She would do the same to him and one day he had an erection and she brought him off with a slippery hand of suntan oil. No kisses, no other caresses, no words of love, no murmurs of affection. He dozed off and when he awoke, she was next to him asleep, too, on her large beach towel. Later they swam and sunbathed again.

“Thank you, Lea,” he told her. “I needed that.”

“I knew it, my dear.”

It became a ritual of sorts in their swimming forays in Thanos, Zematas and other beautiful deserted spots of Limnos. It was not necessarily solicited nor necessarily every time. It occurred without further sexual play. It was the barest minimum of contact at the appropriate moment. He was grateful and it tied him to her. He wondered if she derived enjoyment from this seemingly emotionless act. However, was it so emotionless? Was it some sort of power play and an attempt on her part to become indispensable and induce a slow supplanting of Ceres?

From mid-July to the end of August, he hardly saw her. Her Athenian and foreign friends had come and she joined the social whirl of the summer season. She stopped painting and Panos would sometimes spy her, elegantly dressed, going from one party to the next or sitting at the now jam-packed fish tavernas of the port with her circle of friends. He was happy for her. He missed her but there was no jealousy or resentment at his exclusion from her circle. He was not of their age. He called Ceres faithfully every other day, heard Iason’s cries and promised to go and see them as soon as his service terminated in a few months.

The island was in full summer swing. Discos were deafening the neighborhoods to the early hours. The young people, a brand new species of nocturnal beings, slept all day, emerged at midnight to prowl for sex, alcohol and frenzied dancing. Cultural events abounded. Music, well-known singers and theatre from Athens, introductions of books by local authors, talks of installing university campuses in Myrina. The poor soldiers wondered at the fatherland they were defending. They were on the sidelines, marginalized, scorned. They could not compete with the male holidaymakers, their clothes, their money and cars, their stylish haircuts and sunglasses, their glib fast-talk and narcissistic body language. The girls avoided them like the plague. The Russian and Ukrainian girls did not lose their winter clients. There was business for all.

In the first week of August, Anthony called at the camp to invite Panos for a dinner he was giving to a small circle of intimate friends. He, too, had renovated his house and wanted to show it off. It was in the heart of the village with a high wall all around. It was old, with massive heavy doors, wooden floorboards and had a lovely courtyard garden inside the wall, which was not obvious from the outside. Anthony painted it inside in the blues and whites of traditional island taste and touched up the old rustic furniture of his family. Portraits of stiff, unattractive, mustachioed ancestors were hanging on the walls.

In the garden with the guests, he saw Lea. They were introduced and they both said they had met at the beach a few times. He sat next to her but they did not talk much. They just smiled when their glances met. He asked about the painting and she said she had no time to paint. She was, at the moment, in the thick of the trivialities of life. She asked about Thimitra and he said he was, at the moment and it seemed for a long time to come, in the thick of his impasse. They laughed. In the flickering candle-lit darkness, in the extreme elegance of her dress and bearing she seemed beautiful. She left early after dinner and Anthony accompanied her to the door. Coming back, he said, what a strange affair that was. Love was inexplicable.

“I met Makis, her husband,” he continued. “He is a very rich, fat, insufferable snob. I have not often disliked a person as much. I would not touch him with a ten-foot

pole. But then, I am not a woman. She is cultured, intelligent and though far from pretty, is, nevertheless, attractive. Did you notice her smile? That fat slob left her for a younger woman and she broke up completely. She was in a mental home in Geneva for a year. I think she has recovered from the shock, finally. She is a painter and spends a few months in Myrina. I have not seen her work, though. She keeps it well hidden. Panos, do you know something we don't?"

"No," said Panos. "We met a few times at the beach and once or twice by chance in the village and had a meal together. She never talked about herself."

After the Annunciation of the Virgin on August 15, the religious festivities, the parading of the Virgin's icon in clerical street processions, seconded by army bands and guards of honor, Myrina starts emptying. A month later, the winter rhythms already reassert themselves. As far as holidaymakers are concerned, only the pensioners and diehards of independent means remain. Lea was sitting at the Terrain, a casino by the sea on the Romeikos outside her house. It was ten in the morning and she waited for the coffee that would materialize unordered. There was a slight chill in the air, which the sun would soon chase away. The sea was calm and friendly after August's *meltemia*, the tiresome winds that sometimes mar the carefree summer days. It was, to her mind, the best part of the year. Stratos, her neighbor, came out of his house and joined her.

Kalimera, he said, and sat down next to her. (*Kalimera*=good morning)

"*Kalimera* Stratouly. How did it go?" (Stratouly, a diminutive of Stratos)

He was a man of perhaps sixty, slim, slightly on the tall side for a Greek, handsome with a close-cropped salt-and-pepper beard and thinning but still ample crop of graying hair.

"Slow," he said with a smile.

"Listen, cut it out. I am getting impatient. Everything about you is slow. Slow to move, slow to think and slow to give an opinion. You are making a frustrated woman of me. Isn't that whimpering, spiritless Panos ever going to fuck me?"

"Why do you talk like a sailor, my Lea? You are at the other end of the scale."

"I talk like all the Greek males talk. If they don't throw in a fuck, or a cunt, or a *malaka*, language does not taste right in their mouths."

"Do I do that?"

She laughed.

"You are an insipid old timer. And you drive me nuts. If Panos doesn't do it, I shall have to have you. Think about it but don't take two years over it. I need to be made love to, passionately. I need sex to mellow. My art is turning arid and callous."

"On the contrary. I think your deprivation is heightening your sensibilities, your poignancy. I see it day by day. And then, Panos is obsessed by Ceres. He loves her too madly to betray her. I still have to think of their reunion. Of course, there is no hope and the outcome will likely be dreary, though I shall try to make it palatable to the reader by a reconciliation at the end of the novel. You see, it is the eternal human tragi-comedy. The clash of egos."

"Oh kill the bitch in an accident. Liberate my Panos. It might liberate you, too, my Stratos."

"And throw away the novel? It is not yet half done and the plot is more or less clearly etched in my mind. All that work for nothing?"

"Seriously, Stratouly, is this your life? You and I, we keep our cards well concealed. A strange situation for a friendship so tender."

"Yes, my dear. There are definitely elements of my life in it. I want this novel to be like your paintings, Lea. Strong definitions and hazes, truths and dreams, fictions and

memories, misty hopes and lost opportunities and the threatening storms of time running out.”

“Yes. Yes. Oh God. You have finally come to it. Time running out. You have told me I advised Panos that only time would heal him. I did not tell him he must not take too long to resolve his heartache, that time is not infinite. He is a mathematician and he might be under the illusion that infinity exists. But not for us humans. Think about it Stratouly. Come to me tonight. Don’t resist me any more.”

“I am terrified of disappointing you, my Lea. Of disheartening myself. For us men, our masculinity is so crucial. I feel that if I fail, I shall lose you completely. I cannot afford that.”

The coffees and toast arrived and broke the train of their conversation. They ate silently smiling, now and then, at each other.

“In a few weeks even this comfort will shut down. The Terrain boys are leaving for Athens,” said Stratos. He looked at the sky. “What a glorious day it promises to be.”

“Let us go to Thanos,” cried Lea excitedly. “It shall be a start. It was, after all, your invention, their interlude on that heavenly beach. There does not have to be sex. Let us get used to each other’s bodies.”

“All in good time.”

“Oh, you kill me.”

“Yes, yes, we shall go. But let us enjoy this peace for a while. The whispering waves. The aroma of the mountains. The need to do nothing in a frantic world. I am not like you. I do not have roots in Limnos. I came and bought this house because I love this island. Thirty years ago I, too, arrived here for my military service like Panos. It was a two-year stint in those days. I was Panos’s age and had left behind a pregnant Ceres-Thimitra who would not follow me. Oh, different names and problems but the same picture. I idealized and softened Panos. I was not as good. Perhaps the love was not as great and circumstances more difficult. Not the same amplitude of money, difficult telecommunications, antagonistic, narrow-minded families, mine and hers, and an army that offered little leeway. I did not see my family for two years. We had quarreled violently about the foreign whore and the little bastard.

“I stayed in Limnos for two whole years until I was discharged. I bought a bicycle and toured the island. We did not even have the poor, unloved, exploited Russian and Ukrainian girls for sexual relief. In a way, Limnos was both better and worse than it is now. It was poorer, much less crowded and frenetic in summer with severe shortages of water but with this new wealth, you get the feeling of impending environmental degradation. The cars, the pollution, the new hotels, tourist villages and housing; the exploitation of pristine shoreline gives the impression the island will be spoiled. The greed for profit, for more and more money and trivial comforts is depressing. But what can one do. Could anyone stop the ancient Greek tragedy? It inexorably worked itself out. Oh, okay, it is not as bad as that.”

“Go on, my love.”

“Lea, darling, it is the first time you call me, my love.”

“You are a silly and blind man. How could you possibly imagine you would ever be a novelist?”

“Who ever said I was? I am a mediocre architect that made a little money and managed to retire a few years earlier than is usual. The urge to put a few thoughts in writing is recent. In those days, I had just finished a graduate architectural course in London and in the process tied my life in a knot. The first of quite a few. Here, with that ramshackle bicycle and a sleeping bag I borrowed from the army depot, I toured the island for two years in the pitifully few days-off we were accorded. I went to the

picturesque village of Kondias with its volcanic scenery and the only pine forest of the island. To the ancient fortified village of Polyochni near the village of Kaminia, where the ores coming from the Black Sea were purified, worked by artisans and traded with the Cyclades and Crete in the years 3000 BC. In an excavation, there, a treasure of golden jewelry was found and is now exhibited in the Athens museum. I went to Iphesteia and Kavirio at the Bay of Tighani which was a place of worship of Iphaistos the God of metals and crafts and protector of Limnos and where ruins of a Roman theater have been found and excavated.”

“Yes, Stratos. Okay, we know Limnos. I have travelled around, too, for my work. Tell me about your life.”

“After I left Limnos I took up a job in an architectural firm in Athens and tried to organize my life and save some money. I found a small flat and a few months later flew to England to see Diana. Yes, that was her name. And Iason. Jason, to them. A lovely blond, typically English boy of nearly three. He was my son. I was his father. Our story was more banal than Panos’s but my love for Iason was the same. The blood called. The instinct was there on both sides. They all lived in a flat with Diana’s boyfriend, a nice enough English fellow and I considered it a gift that despite everything we remained friends with Diana and Iason was able to attach himself to me with her wholehearted encouragement. I started contributing to his expenses and when he grew up a little we spent our summers together in Limnos, a single father and his son. That was long before I bought this house. Oh, he is an architect like me. Travels a lot and we see each other many times a year. He is engaged to Ceres. That’s where I got that name. A lovely girl. Just as I described her. I call her Thimitra and she smiles every time. That’s all.”

“That’s all?”

“Oh, and another thing, Diana married the English fellow. She has two other children by him.”

“Oh, who cares?”

“Well, let’s say, that’s one knot that was neatly undone.”

“Go on you slowcoach. Give us the rest.”

“Let’s go to Thanos.”

“All in good time.”

“Oh you kill me,” he said and laughed. “Yes, let’s go to Thanos. The story of the knots will end up there on that lovely beach. I have a feeling I shall untie the main one.”

“Of the novel?”

“Of our lives, my Lea.”

“I am not dim, you know. You said, I shall untie, whereas you should have said, we shall untie.”

“We shall untie, my love.”

They left the Terrain and prepared a few towels, sun lotions, sandwiches and water, strapped them on their bicycles and cycled slowly towards Thanos. The sun had softened the chill and the hillocks on the way made them sweat. They took off their T-shirts and shorts and rode on in their bathing costumes. Half an hour later, they were Adam and Eve in an earthly paradise. Not a soul in sight. The limpid sea was whispering eternal secrets to the seashore in small capricious licks. The autumn sun was clement and the sand pleasantly warm. They chained their bicycles on a tree and walked slowly, hand in hand, to the other end of the bay. They arranged their things, spread the towels and removed their bathing costumes.

“You have such an unbelievable body, my Lea.”

“Amongst other believable parts. Noses and things.”

“An unbelievable smile. It lights up your face. It really makes you beautiful.”

“So what do I do? Keep smiling?”

“Yes my darling.”

She smiled.

“That’s it,” he said.

“Lie down on the towel, Stratos. Let me spread some oil on you. Then you can apply some on me. Both back and front,” she said with a smile.

They did so and Stratos was aroused. He made to kiss her.

“Take it easy, my boy,” she told him. “We are old enough to be patient, to take our time. I must get in the mood and it’s a little difficult in the sunshine. You men are so funny. First you don’t want, then, you’re in a hurry.”

Stratos laughed. “It’s just that it might go and not come back.”

“Then goodbye. Tomorrow is another day. I refuse to be stressed. We have more than one knot to untie.”

They lay down side by side. She caressed his hair and looked into his eyes.

“Do you know why I love you?” she asked.

“No. I was never certain you loved me in the first place.”

“That’s exactly it. Because you said no. Because you are not pretentious or macho. Because you are polite and compassionate and are satisfied with the small things in life. I admire your writing. I really do. You do have talent.”

She kissed him gently on the mouth.

“Tell me about the knots.”

“Well,” he said, “there isn’t an awful lot to tell. My professional life was a whole series of small knots, which accumulated into one big one, and when I managed to untie that, I found myself with a little money. Not a great deal but enough to make me think that our time is not infinite, as you say, and we should get some joy out of it. The first thing I did was buy this house, here, in Limnos. That was one investment I shall never regret not because of its increasing value but because I love this island. And I was so terribly lucky to find you. We meet much less in Athens but in Myrina, I think of you as my companion. Minus the sex, I am sorry to say. This is our second summer together and I am grateful to you for pretending that we are a couple. They would call me a *malaka* if they knew I never touched you. But I have lost my confidence. After my wife died, I had two or three liaisons but I could not make love. I was impotent and the feeling is dreadful. It is degrading and traumatic and feeds on itself. I know it is psychological because I have urges and I get normal erections when they are not needed, as you have just seen a moment ago, but when it comes to the act, *pphfft*, a flat tire. I should have gone to a psychiatrist but I felt too old and ridiculous for that.”

“Oh my sweet Stratos, it is nothing. Why didn’t you tell me before instead of those obscure insinuations I did not rightly understand?”

“It is a difficult confession.”

“Yes, I know. So difficult to tell. So easy to put right. I shall heal you, my love. It will be doubly easy because we love each other. Do you love me? Do you love this ugly nose, my Stratos? The slit, narrow eyes? I have my little complexes too, you know, but also a few advantages. I have no erections to sustain. I just open my legs.” Lea laughed. “Will you trust me?”

“I love you, how can I not trust you.”

“It is not the same thing. So, listen carefully. Irrevocable rule number one: no intercourse. Sex and love and caresses, yes, but no penetration. Rule number two but not so rigid because it sometimes gets out of control: no ejaculation. Rule number three:

no inhibitions either. I am a painter. I know the body inside out. It is a strange and wonderful apparatus. But the mind rules it.”

She was lying down, sideways, facing him, her head resting on her arm. She opened her legs and Stratos’s heart started pounding.

“You can look at it, kiss it, lick it, caress it but for this little guy it is out of bounds.” She held his penis. “No penetration, my lad.”

“Until when?”

She laughed. “Oh those fragile, lusty little animals called men!” she said. “They make me laugh, sometimes. You want to run before you can walk. Until I say so. Go on with your story. With your knots.”

She moved close to him. Their oily bodies touched. The sensation was smooth and exciting. She kissed him on the mouth passionately. After two years of friendship, it was their first erotic kiss. He was lost in it. He caressed her body and held her breasts. His penis was hard in her hand. She moved away from him.

“Get on with your story,” she said.

He could not think where to start, where he had stopped.

“Oh, my Lea,” he said, “I love you. What are you doing to me?”

“I am trying to get you well. Please get on with the story.”

He got up, plunged in the sea and swam for a few minutes in the frigid waters. When he returned, she seemed asleep. She was sunning her back with her legs slightly apart and a black patch, between them. He looked at her. My God, he thought, what a flesh and blood mermaid he had in his nets and he had made of her a statue. A heroine in a novel. He sat on her towel and his cold caress awoke her. She rolled over.

“I am listening,” she said.

“I got married, of course. An ordinary marriage with love and passion at the start and love and routine to follow. With its ups and downs. With two children. You saw them for a few days, last summer.”

“Yes. Lovely children. They did not seem to like me.”

“It is natural. They have me at their beck and call. They do not want to share their guardian angel. They feel something is going on between us even if we do not see each other too often in Athens. But they are growing up. They shall soon be leaving the nest. Sasa has finished law and is working at a lawyer’s office and most of the time she lives at her boyfriend’s flat. Alexanthros is in his last year in architecture. He has followed the family tradition. Mine, Helen’s and Jason’s. I shall send him abroad for a year or two and then help him establish an architectural firm. I am careful to keep all my professional contacts for his sake. When Helen died three years ago, we had quite an establishment going. Draughtsmen, engineers and so on. She was in the heart of it and without her there, I lost my will to continue. She suffered so much from this murderous illness for one entire agonizing year that I drew my conclusions. What good did all this frenetic business activity do? Provide the best doctors and first class private clinics? The result was the same. The pain was not milder. Her life was not prolonged. I sold the office, made this packet and rushed to Limnos to buy this house next to yours. Little did I know that life still held a promise. I met you, my darling.”

“I was lucky, too, Stratouly. You did a wonderful job with my house. Not a nail was hammered without your approval. A touching devotion to your profession but mainly to me. They call it chemistry nowadays. Our chemistry was rare. Perhaps it had to do with our shattered lives. We clung to one another. But no. It was more than that. Much, much more. Your love and admiration for my work has enslaved me, encouraged me and kept me going. I was doing something I needed to do but you convinced me of

its worth. Of my talent. We are both creators, artists. That does not necessarily make us better people but this gift of God, or nature, has bonded us as nothing else.”

He moved close to her, kissed her and hungrily caressed her luscious, yielding body and they made love within their limits. When they started losing control, Lea pushed him away and rushed to the sea. He followed and they swam for a while.

“You are driving me mad,” he told her.

“That’s the idea. Trust me. I know what I am doing. My husband passed a similar phase but he tried to solve his problem with drugs. Designer drugs, uppers, downers, cocaine, you name it, and it was a disaster. We both became addicted and at some point, I consulted a psychiatrist and learnt of this method. It was, however, too late for us; our marriage was ruined. I had no urge to help him any more. Indifference had set in. Let’s eat I am hungry.”

They ate, slept and later swam again. Early in the afternoon, they cycled back to Myrina. Stratos had loved her for two years and was now in love with her. It was different. This new intimacy of the flesh intoxicated him. He could keep neither his eyes nor his hands off her.

“Take it easy,” she told him with a smile avoiding a kiss. “Full marks for this first lesson. You are not yet ready for the finals. We cannot risk a mid-journey flat tire. It would ruin everything. And thinking about it, I begin to understand that part of the novel where I, I mean Lea, masturbated Panos on the beach. Subconsciously, you did not want sex all the way. There was anxiety in it. A fear of failure. The emotional entanglements of lovemaking with Lea were secondary and it would have taken a few paragraphs to resolve them to the reader’s satisfaction. Men can love one woman madly and make love to another without much of a problem or change of sentiments. You wanted relief without the risks of the flat tire.”

They had dinner at the port at night. The weather was starting to get chilly and Myrina was slowly closing down, preparing for its winter hibernation. They ate and drank their wine behind the closed doors of the taverna instead of on the terrace. In the new emptiness, the army and the soldiers resumed their role, until then overshadowed, as the lifeblood and flickering winter life of the island. Outside her house Stratos told her he was sorry because it must be hard for her too, these interrupted ecstasies.

“No,” she said. “Think of it as a kind of build-up. Intercourse is forbidden. The anxiety to perform is eliminated. So is your responsibility for the prolongation of the act and my orgasms. It is a build-up of desire. Let us see where it will get us. Moreover, my Stratouly, it is a labor of love. Today was very special for me too.”

“I suppose,” he said, “I’d better not ask to come inside.”

“No.” Lea smiled. “You might risk a refusal.”

The next day was glorious. Myrina had everything. Fresh air and sunshine, the sea and the mountains, the chirping of birds and the scents of thyme drifting down from the hills, the emptiness, the peace of a sparse population, where the man who passed by was a friend and you said *Kalimera* to him. Stratos and Lea crossed the street in their bathing costumes, within moments from each other, and jumped in the sea. They met in a dive and kissed underwater. They swam energetically for five minutes but could not remain longer in the icy, early morning water and ran into their houses for a warm shower. Then on to the Terrain for a merry, leisurely breakfast feeling so lucky to be alive, healthy and together, at their age, with the promise of a few more years of happiness, of art and creation and love and perhaps, just perhaps, a partial return of the carnal pleasures of youth. An hour later, they left on their bicycles for the psychiatrist’s couch, which was a large towel on the sand at the far end of the deserted bay of Thanos

where the medicaments were the sun, the warm, clean sand, the pellucid sea, the unguent sun lotions, their naked bodies, their love, their caresses and kisses.

Physical intimacy opens up venues beyond friendship. It opens a probing of each other's souls. It arouses a need to delve into the world and thoughts and the past of the loved one. A blurred snapshot of their youth makes them wonder what they were like twenty, thirty years ago. Makes them wish they had met then, talked and kissed. Not necessarily linked for life. Each might take a different path but tender memories remained together with the hope, perhaps, of meeting again and kissing again. Conversation is a vital nourishment of love.

“Anthony told me your husband was not a very likable man.” Stratos told Lea.

“Oh, people change, you know. Some more than others. Some none at all, like you, Stratouly. Life corrupts and sometimes success is the greatest distorter.

Gherasimos was a fine young man. Tall, reasonably presentable and bright. Our families were friends. Both were wealthy and when I finished my art studies and Makis (diminutive of Gherasimos) graduated from university, they gently pushed us together. We were roughly the same age and Makis had already started his spectacular climb in business. He was involved from the very beginning with the modern technologies of electronics, computers and mobile telephony. He created one company after another and soon he moved his offices to California to be near Silicon Valley, the principal source of this fantastic revolution. We had a home in Los Angeles, an apartment in New York, another in London and a lovely villa in Geneva. I loved that city. It vibrates with life, wealth and a luxuriant nature. And, oh that lake, is it not a dream? I often left him for weeks to live there on my own and try to revive my passion for painting. But he never left me alone long enough. Always called me back after a time. Some of the work I did there is in my apartment in Athens. It is not prolific and has an aura of melancholia and unhappiness. Something about it is warped. I was already using drugs at the time.”

“Will you show it to me?”

“Of course, when we return to Athens. Makis,” she continued, “was on an unstoppable trajectory of success. He had phenomenal luck but it does take a brain, too, to build an empire. He was working like mad. Eating, drinking and smoking like a fool. He grew fat and then huge and he totally ignored my pleading to bring him to reason and my calls for prudence. ‘I have no time for diets,’ he would say. ‘Whom are you killing yourself for?’ I would ask. ‘We do not even have children.’ ‘For no one,’ he would answer. ‘It is a fascinating game I cannot stop.’ With that bulk, he cut a daunting figure. He became arrogant, hard and rude. He thought he could buy everything with money and indeed, he could. He started sleeping around with his secretaries and women business associates. A few years later, his sexual problem surfaced. Soft and fading erections. But unlike you, his problem was organic rather than psychological. He was an early-stage diabetic. He started using drugs and that seemed to help him. The house was stacked with them and inevitably, I started using them too. I was unhappy and our marriage was practically over.

“We quarreled violently and often and that last time he simply grabbed me, dragged me and threw me out of the house. I walked to a hotel nearby and pretended I had shut myself out of the house and the security system had blocked. I had no papers and no money but was well known to them. Next day I collected a few of my things from home, paid the hotel, took a flight to Geneva and filed for divorce. A few months later, after the divorce came out, I entered a drug rehabilitation clinic there. I was broken but not heartbroken as most people assumed. Moreover, I was very lucky. I had avoided, all the while, the very hard drugs that hook you for life and my treatment was successful. So here we are, basking in the sun of warmth and hope.”

“Oh my darling. I am so sorry.”

“Don’t be. I have found myself again. I have found my peace and my art. I have found a friend, a companion and two reluctant lovers. One fictitious and hopeless, the other real and evasive.”

“Not any more.”

“No. Not any more.”

She smiled and caressed his face.

He kissed her and they made love, on and off, inconclusive, non-orgasmic, frustrating but enthralling, passionate and emotional and he pleaded to enter into her life and her soul and her body but she said,

“No. I have waited for so long. It is your turn to wait.”

The next day, it was no.

And the day after.

On the fifth, he was exasperated.

“Cut out this prescription, this curative no,” he cried. “Enough is enough.” He rolled over her.

“No,” she whispered in his ear, biting it. “No, Stratouly. No.” But she opened the way. She knew the tire would hold.

They rested on the towel, in the sunshine, until their perspiration dried, until their breath returned and then plunged in the sea. They made love again.

“Will you marry me, Stratouly?” she asked. “Shall we end our lives together?”

“Oh my God, Lea. Yes. Yes. What a question?”

PART II : HALLUCINATIONS

And so our story continues with our real and fictitious protagonists. If it gets confusing, I beg the reader’s indulgence because, as he must be aware, often we admire fiction for representing reality lucidly and with great insight while reality is sometimes stranger and less credible than fiction. The fact is, nothing is ever exactly what it seems, rarely turns out as it promises and is never as wonderful or as disastrous as we think. Such, thankfully, is the puzzle of life.

“Stratos?”

“Yes?”

“I want you to meet a young soldier I got to know before you came to Limnos. Well, not so young, actually. He’s around thirty.”

“A thirty-year old soldier?”

“Yes, funny isn’t it? He was studying abroad and has just recently returned to Greece. He’s a mathematician and has been appointed lecturer at the university in Athens but has to go through his military service first.”

“Sure, why not? Is it important that I should meet him?”

“No it’s not important. It’s just that I come across him now and then in Myrina and after having spent some time with him, I hardly see him anymore. I think he has noticed that we are together but is too discreet to ask questions. There is just this questioning look on his face. He always seems so happy to see me. He’s very sweet and unhappy and I do like him a lot.”

“Happy and unhappy? Is this a confession?”

Lea smiled.

“Please, don’t ask for confessions. The torrent will drown you.”

Stratos laughed. He looked at her tenderly.

“Far from feeling jealous, I feel so proud that, you, such an intelligent, cultured and experienced person loves me. You do you love me, Lea, don’t you? I mean, really and truly?”

“Oh Stratouly, what a question? Was it not I that proposed?”

“Yes, my love. That’s all that matters. Sometimes, I question my good fortune. I did not believe in fairy godmothers. Or should I say, fairy god mistresses? Enchantresses and priestesses of fornication. And now I have you. Forgive me; I say this in the best possible, most tender sense. With love. With immense gratitude for you have given me back my sexuality, my manhood. How can I not love you dearly?”

Lea laughed.

“Never before have I been given such a grand title. It’s good. I like it. Priestess of fornication.”

It was warm inside the taverna. Warmth radiated from the kitchen; cooking-oil scented warmth. Doors and windows were closed to keep out the evening chill. The moon had the night off. The one or two odd street lamps just barely outlined the row of fishing boats tied to the wharf, their masts swaying gently in the wind. Right opposite, total darkness. In summer, half a kilometer away on a hill at the far end of the harbor, the church of St Nicholas was lit at night and seemed to be floating, white and ghostly, between heaven and earth. To the right, just behind a few side streets and above, on its uneven, rocky plateau, the Castro was brooding. It was there, in the darkness, invisible but oppressive just the same. In summer, it was lit up as well and appeared suspended in midair. It was a quaint, ruined reminder of harsher times, of man’s never-ending quest for power, ambition and domination. Of an uncivilized, beastly nature, which was crueller, more treacherous and ruthless than that of any animal.

It was Lea and Stratos’s last two weeks in Limnos. Nothing was pressing but the weather was turning cold and life constricted and monotonous. They did not mind. It bound them together in the new intimacy of physical love. A knot had been untied. A knot that had not undermined their friendship but whose disentanglement brought passion and physical pleasure to their life. It is strange that even in intimate friendships between the two sexes there is a reticence to discuss problems of a sexual nature. A man prefers to remain aloof and withdrawn rather than admit to a sexual dysfunction; to a fear of his inability to carry out the sexual act. In a bonding as comprehensive and harmonious as that of Lea and Stratos, of mutual admiration and appreciation of each other’s talents and qualities, the reason for the complete absence of physical contact remained masked and undisclosed. Lea, an intense and passionate woman, often and sometimes rather crudely, made her needs known to Stratos and was puzzled by his evasive attitude, by his vague fears and the theoretical risk of Lea’s sexual disappointment and consequent break-up of their friendship. Despite that, their

attachment held, unconsummated, for almost two years. Neither could envisage giving it up.

After the summer bustle, Lea started painting again and occasionally Stratos accompanied her on her hikes to mountaintops and villages, to barns and hovels to paint a shrunken, wrinkled old woman, a dog or a villager urinating on a tree. More often than not, he stayed at home. He continued writing his novel. He wanted to understand his life, was how he put it. It would not be entirely autobiographical.

“But it shall be a kind of reappraisal, nevertheless,” he told her. “What my life was and what it might have been. The funny thing is,” he continued, “after so much unhappiness, I am so incredibly happy. I almost feel guilty to have lost Helen and to be feeling so happy and complete. I am free, I have you, but still there is this need to give an accounting.”

On warmer days, they cycled to nearby beaches to swim and talk and the novel was a constant topic of conversation. It seemed to be a new reality. It brought Panos to their life, and Ceres and baby Iason. By and by, another, the real Iason was discussed and Diana and a parallel past, well in the past, together with a past more recent and individually painful for each of them: the fate that cast them together irrespective of their mutual affinities and easy companionship. They discussed and revealed and rationalized problems they called knots and life seemed to be starting anew but with the wisdom of this past.

“We shall be reeking of cooking oil when we get out of here,” said Stratos.

“Oh Stratouly, enjoy the delicious fish and mezelikia (appetizers). This is the good life. And the wine of Limnos; isn't it unique this fruity, aromatic nectar of Iphaistos? It puts me in the mood.”

Stratos laughed.

“I must admit, it does the same to me.”

“So when we get back home, I shall give you a good scrubbing. Have you smelling like a flower.”

“And then?”

“And then, sweet-smelling lovemaking. Am I too hard on you? Too demanding?”

“So far, so good.”

“Oh yes, my love. So far, quite wonderful.”

“Lea, let's do it before we leave.”

“Do what?”

“Get married, of course. Are ten days enough?”

“Enough for what?”

“To get organized. I want my children here to share my happiness. Aren't you going to invite anyone?”

“No. All those years abroad have alienated me from uncles, aunts and cousins. My father is dead and my mother an invalid. She has the Alzheimer syndrome and is slowly losing her mind. She thinks I am still a schoolchild and keeps asking me if I finished my homework and passed my exams. The other day, I called her on the phone and told her I was getting married and she had a good laugh. She reminded me of you. She said, ‘All in good time, my dear, all in good time.’”

“Okay. So shall we put things in gear?”

“Oh my slow moving Stratos. All of a sudden, you are picking up speed. But yes, yes. Let us get married. This is becoming exciting. You have my green light. Full speed ahead.”

“We need a coumbaros, a best man.”

“Even he is ready. I am sure he will not object.”

“Who?”

“Panos Lavrendis. The soldier. And I wonder if we could get Thimitra to come for a few days. It’s just a thought.”

“Who’s Thimitra?”

“She’s his Roman goddess Ceres. His love, his passion, the devourer of his soul and mother of his child. He is a strange boy, this Panos. So vulnerable and lonely and mournful sometimes. Apart from you, he is the only person I have shown my paintings to. He loves art and has his own instinctive ideas about it. He seemed to be moved by my work. I wonder how he is getting on. They are not together. Ceres lives in England with the baby he has not yet seen. Do you mind if we see him tomorrow?”

Panos thought of Lea constantly. It was inevitable in the bustling but ultimately numbing and lonely life of the army camp. He missed their occasional companionship, her stimulating, unpredictable and unconventional conversation. Their peripatetic painting forays, the swimming, the beauty of her youthful body that so often aroused him and the strange, generous, unemotional sexual relief she provided with a suntan-oil coated palm. Ceres was always dominant in his thoughts and his heartache for her was unrelenting. So was his longing for Iason. However, Lea was there, almost round the corner one might say, and he had hardly seen her for two months. At the height of the holiday season, she was busy with her Athenian friends and social trivialities, as she called them. At a chance meeting in the village, she told Panos that together with her art, that too was part of her healing process. Panos did not understand what she meant and was too tactful to ask.

Now the fanfare was over, the crowds had dispersed and Myrina was readying her winter apparel. The only traffic now seemed to be the army trucks and jeeps moving from the camp to the army H.Q. on the Romeikos Yialos next to Lea’s house. She had not attempted to get in touch with him. When he was in the village, he often saw her in the company of a handsome, bearded, elderly person. He wondered who he was but as usual was discreet and kept away. He met her, sometimes, on her own and on these occasions the pleasure of seeing each other was evident and mutual and Lea always asked about Thimitra and Iason. They parted with a hug and a kiss. A hug and a kiss full of feeling and her lovely smile but without any further plans to meet. But for Ceres, thought Panos, I could have been the lover of this ugly, beautiful and fascinating woman.

Lea and Stratos called at the camp the next day and asked to see Panos. He came to the camp entrance in his army fatigues, boots and army cap. When he saw Lea, his face lit up. He kissed her lightly on the cheek, aware of Stratos.

“What a lovely surprise,” he said.

“I have another,” said Lea with a smile and in her usual direct way. “I want you to meet Stratos Markopoulos, the man I shall marry.”

He felt it like a blow on his chest. He did not know if the expression on his face was that of surprise or dismay. He looked at Stratos and, instantly, the thought crossed his mind: he is too old for her. He managed a smile, shook Stratos’s hand and said,

“Congratulations. You are very lucky. You have an extraordinary woman.”

Lea was smiling.

“Nothing for me?” she asked gently. Panos knew she felt his blow.

“For you, happiness. That’s all. But not so much of it that will destroy your art. You are a great artist. An artist must also suffer and meditate and the eternal mysteries

of life must be constantly gnawing his insides. Oh Lea, please forgive me, I am talking nonsense. I wish you all the happiness in the world."

Lea laughed.

"Stratos and I have two requests," she said. "The simpler one is that you join us for dinner this evening, if you can. The second, we shall ask for it at dinner. Can you join us?"

"I shall be there even if I get shot for desertion."

"The port, then, at nine."

He was there. They sat at the far end of the small fishing-boat port, at the taverna called, O Ghlaros, the seagull. Lea made brief introductions, telling Panos that Stratos was her neighbor and the architect who renovated so wonderfully her house. She told Stratos of her meeting with Panos at the beach and their subsequent companionship while he was away. She told him about Thimitra and Iason.

"It is such a strange coincidence," she told Panos, "Stratos has had an almost identical life story to yours. Oh, before his marriage to Helen and the birth of his two children, Sasa and Alexanthros. When he was your age, he had a child in England and he did not marry the mother. He had similar but, of course, not quite the same problems. And wonder of wonders, this boy is also called Iason. How strange life is sometimes. If it were not for your age difference, I would have thought you were the same person. You two are alike in so many ways."

Panos smiled uneasily. Looking at Stratos, was he looking at himself thirty years from now? And why this dull soreness in his heart? He had Thimitra and his own Iason. What was Lea to him? Why did he feel he was losing her? She was never his. He had never wanted her.

Lea looked at him intently and smiled. Had she a seventh sense? Could she read minds? Panos wondered. She filled his glass with wine.

"Drink it up in one go," she said. "It will cloud your mind. Stratos and I have a request and we cannot risk a refusal."

"What is it, for heaven's sake", he asked after downing the wine in one go.

"We shall be getting married in ten days right there," she said pointing out in the darkness. Panos looked, saw nothing and then remembered that there was a church on the hill. He remembered his longing to marry Ceres, there. "At the church of St Nicholas," she continued, "and we want you to be our coumbaros. It will be a small affair. Stratos's children and one or two friends."

"My goodness. But of course," said Panos. "Could I ever refuse such a request? I feel honored that you chose me."

"Another thing," said Lea. "This is out of the blue. I want Thimitra and Iason at the wedding."

Panos was startled. "This is mad," he said.

"I made my calculations according to what you told me. She still has a couple of weeks before she resumes work. She can spend four or five days with us. Stratos will move in with me and she can stay in his house. Perhaps you can get permission to spend the nights with her, away from the camp, for those few days. Will you let me arrange things? Call her up, give her the general picture and don't take no for an answer."

Panos's heart was pounding. His breath was short. All of a sudden, this wall of separation was cracking. Was it possible he would see Ceres and Iason so soon? A fairy godmother was waving her wand.

"I did not know you were also an angel, Lea, a fairy godmother," he said.

Stratos laughed.

“She is more, much, much more than that.”

“Oh,” said Lea wistfully, “do not be fooled. I have my demons, too.”

The reunion of Ceres and Panos at Limnos airport was emotional and touching. Ceres left London early in the morning; arrived in Athens at noon and boarded the tiny plane for Limnos at two. An hour later, it taxied to a stop about fifty meters from the airport terminal. The passengers descended unseen on the far side of the fuselage and appeared as they came round the tail end of the plane for the short walk to the terminal building. The weather was cool but sunny and the slight breeze fragrant with thyme despite the autumn season. Stratos hired a car for a few days and, with Lea, brought a distracted and barely coherent Panos to the airport.

A slight, thin, foreign-looking girl wearing a red overcoat appeared in the straggly line of passengers walking to the terminal. A baby was hanging strapped on her chest but she had also her arms wrapped around it. She searched with her eyes and an expectant half-smile the bunched crowd of people awaiting the newly arrived. Her girlish face was luminous and beautiful. Panos broke into a run. A police officer tried to stop him but he ignored him and fell into Ceres’s arms. Iason was squashed and frightened and started crying. Panos looked at the baby, fascinated. His eyes were glistening. He could not utter a sound. Lea and Stratos walked up to them and introduced themselves. Two solid English handshakes with smiles all round. Lea asked to hold Iason and helped disengage him from Ceres. Ceres and Panos embraced and they remained enlaced for a long while. The baby started crying again and Lea rocked it gently humming a little tune.

“What’s wrong my little Iason,” she asked it, “don’t you like my big nose? What a beautiful little baby you are. How I wish you were mine. Oh yes, I shall keep you here, little Iason. Tomorrow I shall paint your picture and you shall stay with me as you are, forever.” She smiled at it with her magic smile and the baby stopped crying.

The next few days were busy for Stratos and Lea with the municipal and ecclesiastical bureaucracies. With licenses and clerics and finding a simple white suit and coat for Lea. St Nicholas was served by a single priest solely for the Sunday mass and the wedding would take place directly after it, at nine in the morning.

Ceres settled in comfortably in Stratos’s home and Panos was permitted to spend a few nights away from the camp though he was not relieved of his daily, routine duties. Lea was constantly with Ceres in her free moments and they walked in the village and along the seaside and called on Panos at the camp with little Iason. With Stratos’s car they visited some of the lovelier spots of Limnos. They lunched together and the evening dinner, with Panos and Stratos, was the big and happy gathering of the day. On Friday, Sasa and Alexanthros arrived in the early morning and the English, thirty-year old Iason on the afternoon flight. It was a hectic and happy day with two trips to the airport and the settling in of Stratos’s children at his home. The debonair, self-confident Iason spoke near-perfect English-accented Greek and his affection for his half-brother and sister was dotting and warm. The quorum had been achieved.

Sunday.

A happy little procession formed at eight sharp outside Lea and Stratos’s home. Lea dressed in white, was simply made up, her short hair trendily done in the modern, tousled, wet look seemed the perfect match for Stratos, also dressed in an off-white suit. A shining couple in white was shining with happiness. It was a good half hour’s walk to the church at the top of the hill but they decided to walk instead of using a car. They set

off towards the port. The three children in front, big Iason in the middle, talking, laughing, holding hands like children, now and then. The very sudden decision of their father to marry Lea surprised Sasa and Alexanthros but they realized that at the age of sixty, a man was still young and needed a companion. Lea would not have been their choice of a bride for their father but the choice was not theirs to make. They put a happy face overall and the merry, light-hearted presence of their beloved English brother Iason was crucial in making the event the happy celebration that a marriage should be.

The streets were deserted on a Sunday at eight but when a person appeared, they would hum loudly the wedding march and would cash in smiles and good wishes. Lea and Stratos followed some steps behind and Panos, in his best army uniform, Ceres and baby Iason in his pram formed the rear guard. A rear guard in love; a rear guard with arms around each other's waists, with frequent smiles and whisperings and stops for kisses. A rear guard bubbling with happiness. The procession reached the port and turned left, walked along the Tourkikos Yialos, the so-called Turkish beachfront, passed another portion of the harbor where the massive trucks were usually unloaded from the Ro-Ro ferries and slowly started on the snaking uphill road to the church.

The church of St Nicholas was small and unusually bare of icons and murals of saints. It was also unusually bare of the faithful. Very few people bothered to climb the hill for Sunday mass despite the spirited bell ringing carried out by the priest. When the little procession arrived out of breath, the mass was nearly over. A handful of people were attending, crossing themselves at regular intervals. The priest intoned his psalms in the familiar church singsong but quietly, almost as if he were talking. The small procession went through all the correct motions of the faith. They crossed themselves as they entered the church, lit candles and kissed the few icons on display. The five adults were non-believers, Sasa and Alexanthros vacillating, and baby Iason had not yet expressed his convictions. The marriage in church was for them a simple allegiance to tradition, to their roots and culture, to an institution that kept Hellenism alive through five-hundred years of Turkish slavery and performed a civilizing function in human society in general. The archaism of the ritual was like an ancient, rare painting that should not be lost or forgotten. Moreover, if people believed in it and derived comfort from it, well, so much the better.

The marriage ceremony began directly after mass. The small church and quiet intonation of the priest's psalmody lent a solemn and moving aspect to the ceremony, which was only interrupted by the baby's occasional cries. Panos stood solemnly behind the couple exchanging the wedding wreaths on Lea's and Stratos's heads and, finally, the proceedings ended with Isaiah's Dance, the circling in front of the chancel, of priest, bride, groom and the coumbaros, where rice and flowers are rained on them for good luck.

After church, the wedding party returned home and relaxed with wine, conversation and good humor. With the feeling that they were a single family, where English-accented Greek alternated with Greek-accented English, where the gurgling of baby Iason was answered by the cooing of Lea, where kissing and hugging took place in improbable combinations and loud talk and laughter filled the rooms of the house and the souls of this family of eight. They had an early celebratory lunch at the port and in the evening invited friends at a seaside taverna in the neighboring village of Plati for the traditional ghlendi, or revelry, with live Greek music and folksongs.

Inevitably, whenever Greeks are coupled with their popular folkloric songs, traditional dancing breaks out and continues non-stop until the early hours of the morning. Ceres had no time for Iason who was asleep, well covered in his pram, despite

the deafening music. She did not stop dancing. She marveled at the exuberance of the occasion. It was an aspect of the Greek psyche that was not altogether apparent in her Greek mathematician.

Monday was a day of sweet sorrow: of good-byes and departures. Stratos's three children left with Ceres and baby Iason on the early morning flight. Panos traveled with them to Athens to accompany them and put Ceres safely on her flight to London. He would return to the army camp in the afternoon. Lea and Stratos were once again alone. After so much commotion and emotion, they felt they needed each other more than ever.

Lea and Stratos were married in Athens on the second week of December, two months after their return from Limnos. They announced their plans to Stratos's children and a few of Lea's close relatives. Apart from Iason, no one expressed any particular enthusiasm. Sasa and Alexanthros never showed especial fondness or warmth for Lea but they were civil and respected their father's wishes. The couple decided to live in Lea's apartment in Kolonaki, which was her Athens residence. She had previously lived there with Makis, for a spell, just after they were married and returned to it after her divorce. Ever since they came back to Athens, Lea and Stratos were inseparable. In the mornings, each was occupied with chores and odd jobs, getting the routine marriage arrangements, one by one, out of the way and ironing out small, tiresome, unexpected complications. Otherwise, Stratos would spend a few hours working on his novel and Lea would paint in her studio, a small apartment next door.

Her artistic options were somewhat limited in the city but she was not above taking her tripod and canvases to Omonia Square to paint the man roasting chestnuts on his little open-air stove called *foufou*. Or to paint the elderly shoeshine boy sitting on a small stool behind the wooden chest with the footrest, waiting for the odd client with a few drachmas, the time to spare and a penchant for shiny shoes. Ermou Street was another treasure of themes. The African sidewalk-sellers with their merchandise spread on the pavement, competing with Giorgio Armani and Yves St Laurent in the shops just behind them. The hand-organ player, smiling ingratiatingly left and right while cranking nostalgic tunes of the past. South American Indians with sombreros and wide, colorful scarves on one shoulder trailing to the ground, playing bewitching melodies on their flutes and banjos. The human statues, faces and limbs painted white, unnervingly immobile, waiting for a coin to roll into the little cup at their feet. Other musicians, single and in groups doing their thing; the indefatigable bongo drum player, the American on a three-meter high single-wheel cycle, cracking jokes, spewing fire from his mouth, calling everyone *malaka*. While Lea, busy, very busy, unperturbed by the semi-circle of spectators behind her, hurriedly painting this street circus, trying to seize, not the day but the moment, the second, the essence of a life that was so out of the ordinary.

Their activities filled their lives. Writing removed from Stratos the initial feeling, after his retirement, that his productive life was over and a sense of being redundant. For Lea, painting was life itself. In the evenings, there was always something to do. Athens, that sprawling, congested, chaotic capital that houses half the population of a second-rate European nation is perhaps, if not the first, one of the main cultural centers of Europe. A vibrant city with a zest of life second to none. It has an amazing variety of popular music, singers and composers, hundreds of theatres catering to all tastes, classical music and operas, jazz and worldwide ethnic music, cultural events, exhibitions, and book publications. This vast choice kept them busy, happy and

enriched. They were aware of their good fortune and this sometimes troubled them for they wondered if it would last.

Stratos asked to see the pictures she painted in Geneva at the time of her divorce and Lea pleaded for a little time.

“Whatever for?” he inquired.

“I want to be sure you love me.”

“You really are impossible, sometimes.”

“I know, my darling, I know.”

She showed them to him a few weeks later and for the first time Stratos realized that Lea was not entirely well. She could not have been wholly normal during that period of her life. In any case, she admitted it. She attributed her mental disturbance on her consumption of drugs. It was a bizarre collection. The talent was there, prolific, overflowing in a technically faultless, obsessive madness. There would be an idyllic view of a forest and a lake and, in the foreground, a vulture tearing the flesh of a dead rabbit. A bare room where an urchin was sleeping in a corner and a skeletal ghost just a step away, contemplating it. There were revolting portraits of hags without teeth and men with knife-slashed faces, empty eye sockets and missing noses. An elegant woman, squatting, was defecating on the floor of a living room. There were a number of explicitly pornographic paintings and strange pictures depicting conflict and violence. The Mating, a young muscular man fighting with Pan, half-man-half-goat, both sexually aroused and, just beyond, in the background, a naked ballerina in dancing shoes, in a pose of abandon, right leg outstretched up high, genitals showing. Even her abstract paintings pummeled you with disturbing color schemes. Black vortexes drew you away from the airiness and colors of life to a sense of despair. Incompatible colors that spoke in jarring blacks and grays amid red, yellows and purples that bore the stamp of psychosis. There were also normal, conventional paintings and one of her villa in Geneva. Ordinary in every sense except that on a veranda was an obese giant towering up to the red tiles of the roof.

“Who is that?” asked Stratos.

“Oh, that’s Makis.”

She laughed.

“I painted it,” Lea said, “just before our divorce when I returned to Geneva and I sent it to him. He returned it right away with a note. Do you know what he wrote? He wrote, ‘this is a very sad and unfair statement. I am so sorry. I cannot accept it.’” She looked at Stratos thoughtfully. “I still don’t know what he meant.”

Stratos was silent.

“Well?” she asked. “What do you think?”

“I do not understand all this.”

“Neither do I. I just know that it was something that had to come out.”

“It is puzzling and some of it is horrible. But it is fascinating and wonderfully painted,” said Stratos. “I have never seen anything like it before. Not remotely.”

“Oh, I am sure there are plenty of them, well hidden in attics and basements.”

She smiled at him.

“Do you still love me?”

Stratos pulled her to him and held her tightly.

“More than ever,” he said. “All this is finished. It’s all over.”

Panos visited Stratos and Lea in the first week of April. He had just finished his military service and returned to Athens to take up his lecturer’s post at the university. He was very happy to see them and seemed to be looking forward to his new

appointment despite his insoluble dilemma with Ceres and Iason. He appeared relaxed and was talkative and affectionate with Lea.

“We had some perfect days these last two weeks in Limnos. Spring was in full bloom and the whole island was fragrant with thyme and, when it rained, the smells of the earth, the trees and the countryside were quite intoxicating. One forgets these simple pleasures in Athens. I thought of you frequently,” he told Lea and then turned to Stratos and said, “Please, don’t misunderstand. I love your wife like an elder sister. I did not see much of you both but for a spell you did brighten my life there. Thanks to you, I saw Ceres and my son. Oh, they are both well. Ceres is back at work. Iason is growing.” He laughed. “Ceres tells me he is growing with a daddy who is a voice on the telephone line. I call them daily and she always makes me talk to Iason. I talk to him in Greek and, it seems, as soon as he hears my voice he starts kicking arms and legs. He gets all excited. About my plans? At the moment, all I can say is one thing at a time. One hurdle is over, my military service. Next week I start work at the university and at the first opportunity, I shall fly to England for a few days. Something might work out. Meanwhile, I have rented a lovely flat not far from your house and have moved out of my parents’ home much to my mother’s chagrin. It is further up on the Lycabetus hill. A ten-minute walk from here. When it is ready, I shall invite you for drinks.”

Within a few weeks, Panos had become a permanent part of Statos and Lea’s everyday life. Sometimes an unattached third person becomes a fixture, a necessary element in a couple’s relationship. It is not that the couple eventually gets bored of one another and, in any case, creative persons like Stratos and Lea do not need a crutch to support their marriage. It was Panos’s vulnerability and his problems that touched them. His politeness and tact, his attachment to Lea and the inordinate affection he showed her together with a respectful and friendly attitude to Stratos inspired in them a sense of responsibility and protectiveness. They became an inseparable trio in their outings and their tastes in theatre, music, films and books largely coincided. Lea was the link that held them together. She was their leader, their mentor, their focus, their goddess.

Two months later, Panos left for England and did not contact Stratos and Lea for a month. They expected him to call them on his return. When he did not, Lea called him at home and he answered the telephone. She asked him what happened.

“Exactly nothing,” he answered. “I went to England and stayed a week. I could not drag it longer. I have my work at the university. As you can imagine, the first few days were heavenly then the old problem surfaced, the same unending arguments round and round in circles. I, finally, told Ceres the only solution I could envisage was for me to come and see her and Iason for a few days every month and she said that was not a life neither for her nor Iason. I would either have to find better way of arranging our life or start thinking of a separation. It should not be too difficult, she said, as we are already, more or less, separated. I left with a broken heart. Iason had already started getting used to me.”

“Why didn’t you call us?” Lea asked.

“I was too depressed. I did not want to impose on your kindness.”

“That’s what friends are for,” she said. “Will you come right over?”

Their life as a trio began again, where it left off a month earlier, outings to theaters, concerts and cultural events. A busy, enriching pastime where Ceres and Iason would intrude like a stab in Panos’s heart in the middle of a play, a jazz concert or during dinner for three at a fashionable restaurant, again and again and again. He would wake up in his sleep and brood that with these pleasant evenings he was betraying their love, he was pushing aside the suffering he ought to have felt in the need

to see his son, in denying Iason a father. Panos returned to England several times within the next year and, unfailingly, returned in a state of depression. The frequency of his trips declined and he told Lea that he thought he had lost Ceres. The last time, she had refused to sleep with him. He did not think it was her way of precipitating a final decision. He thought she had probably started seeing another man.

“Where did all that love go?” he asked Lea.

“Oh, you silly, romantic little Panos. Didn’t you know that women are more down to earth than men are? They are realistic and practical. Moreover, when they take a decision, that is it. They rarely change their mind.”

Panos could not imagine how he would have coped without Lea and Stratos. His university career absorbed him but it did not, could not fill his life. He had to adapt to the Greek reality of connections, political and familial, which determine to a large extent a career’s advancement; to become familiar with the Greek terminology in his subjects; to deal with the students’ frequent sit-ins and seizures of the university and the professors’ strikes. Moreover, he did not feel ready to embark on a new emotional attachment despite the opportunities available in the university milieu. He was handsome, young, single and the female population’s interest, inside and out of his department, was more than obvious. His after-hours escape from loneliness was, for the time being, solely the company of Lea and Stratos.

A few months went by. By the middle of June, Lea left for Limnos and two weeks later Stratos followed her. She resumed her painting and Stratos tried to convince her to collect the more conventional paintings for an exhibition on their return to Athens in the fall. She was reluctant to do so. She did not feel she could part with the good ones and felt uncomfortable with the thought of exhibiting what she considered somewhat second-rate.

“There is nothing that is second-rate in your work,” Stratos told her.

“I do not need to sell,” she answered. “I do not need the money.”

“I know that,” Stratos replied, “but an artist cannot hoard. It is almost unethical. He cannot be a miser. He must share his creations. And then, I honestly believe you are there, at the very top of Greek painters. Better than most of the fashionable moderns. A woman, too. There is not a single one amongst them.”

“Oh, we shall see,” she answered. “At the moment what is important for me is to paint.”

Until the end of July, she painted and then she took a break. The holiday season went into high gear with friends and parties, cultural activities and interminable dinners at the port, with sorties to recommended tavernas in neighboring villages and the new luxury hotels that sprouted on the island and sported music and dancing. Once again, after the celebrations of the Annunciation of the Virgin on August 15, Myrina started emptying. Panos was invited to spend the last ten days of August in Myrina in the company of his friends. He had sorely missed them when they left Athens and his life seemed desolate in their absence. Even before the university recessed in August, he left for England to see Iason. He settled in a hotel in Kent near Ceres’s home and assumed the duties of a nanny.

Panos’s meeting with Ceres was strange. He was diffident. He did not really know where he stood with her. His feelings were largely unchanged. He loved her, respected her, admired her many qualities, found her physically attractive and yet her detached attitude, her present private life unknown to him and her obscure intentions cooled the mad passion he once felt for her. He loved her but the pain, the anxiety and

constant thought of her were gone. He had lost her and his resignation and equanimity surprised him. The question he had asked Lea about Ceres also applied to him. Where did all that love go? His love, this mad passion for his beloved Thimitra. She, on her part, was both affectionate and not too familiar with him. She was a woman who had taken her decisions and had no lingering doubts. Mrs. Ploughright and the Professor were best of all. Apart from little Iason, that is. Friendly, neutral and civil, they put Panos perfectly at ease. He felt he was not an altogether disastrous episode in their life. He fathered a delightful English-looking grandson with their daughter, who was now coming into his own, brightening their life and their only reservation was that Iason had not his father near him.

In the month that Panos spent in Kent, Mrs. Ploughright would prepare little Iason and round about ten Panos collected him in his pram to spend the day with him. They strolled to nearby parks where Iason left his pram and played in the sand clearing of the children's playground or on the grass or with his father on the various swings and slides. He was already nearly a year and a half old and could walk and run precariously and charge with excited little cries on all the dogs, big or small, that came his way. Panos spoke to him in Greek and Iason was a little puzzled at first. He seemed to understand that this was a different language. After a few days, he took it in his stride and started recognizing phrases and words. A little before noon, Panos administered his bottle of milk and an hour or so later gave him his Gerber meal and fruit compost, changed him if he was wet and put him in the pram for a nap while he pushed him leisurely along the pleasant little university town. When Iason woke up, there would be a second visit to the playground before he delivered him to Mrs. Ploughright at five in the afternoon. She received him with a smile and a blessing to Panos for the little holiday he provided her with. If the Professor was in, Panos was usually invited to share a glass of port and they would talk of Greek mythology and the philosophers, the pros and cons of returning the Elgin marbles, the genius of Pythagoras and the Greek temples in Sicily. He rarely saw Ceres on weekdays. He returned to his hotel to rest and, later, went out to a pub for drink and a meal before turning in. It was the month for his son. He left him with tears in his eyes and a taut heart. Ceres and Iason accompanied him to the railway station. It was an emotional parting. He embraced and kissed them for a long while and could not bring himself to board the train.

"Good bye, my Thimitra," he told her. He knew he would not be using that name again. "Whatever paths our lives may take, I want you to know that you were the woman of my life."

"I love you, too, Panos, but I shall never forgive you for this," she answered.

Slow and subtle changes were taking place in Lea and Stratos's marriage. Their age difference, though not great, was at that critical point where it mattered. It would, perhaps, not have been so significant at the end of a long life together but they had just barely completed a year as a couple. Their emotional congruence was unchanged. They loved, respected and hugely admired one another. Their emotional interdependence was total. The question of physiology, of the natural processes of aging, however, started intruding in an almost ideal relationship. Some post-menopausal women often seem to have a second sexual blooming, a heightened need for physical sexual activity.

Lea had just crossed the threshold of fifty. Stratos, on the other hand, in his early sixties, was experiencing a waning of his sexual drive. He felt it and it worried him. He was aware that Lea often wanted him and he was unable to respond. It was not the original problem of impotence. He was virile but the time he needed to recuperate

from one sexual contact to the next, to feel his desire for intercourse build up again, kept on lengthening as time passed. Despite her passionate nature, Lea was never sexually aggressive and rarely tried to initiate their lovemaking. She used discreet and insinuating ways to arouse him. A brief, suggestive nightie with no underclothes, sleeping in the nude or a dab of perfume would signal her mood, her need. It was up to Stratos to respond, or not. Sometimes he would wake up at night to find her gently stroking her genitals. It usually aroused him and lovemaking would follow. At others, he would watch her and caress her and when she finished would kiss her and tell her,

“I’m sorry, my dear. I’m especially sorry because I love you so much.”

“Do not worry, Stratouly,” she would reply, “I just felt a little tense. I have become adept at relieving myself in this way.”

Panos arrived in Limnos on August 20. He had just spent a few depressing days in Athens after his return from Kent, visiting his parents, sitting aimlessly at the cafés in Kolonaki and mainly thinking of Iason. He missed his son terribly. He missed the happy little English boy that had not a whit of resemblance to his father. Ceres was slowly fading from his consciousness and Iason was replacing her in his tortured thoughts. This trip to Limnos, all of a sudden, seemed like temporary salvation. His excitement mounted as the plane approached the island in the early morning flight. Lea and Stratos met him at the airport and Panos was so emotionally stressed that tears rolled down his eyes as he embraced Lea. They had cleaned and prepared a room for him at Stratos’s house next door and told him to go and rest for a while.

Panos could not possibly stay indoors. He washed, arranged his few belongings in the room and walked to the port, his heart pounding with happiness. He had breakfast at the Aeolos and watched the commotion of passengers disembarking from a ship that had just arrived. Then, he walked to the army camp and visited his former officers who had treated him with special consideration during his military service. A few of the younger officers he knew were still there and they came to shake his hand. When he left the camp, it was only ten and he felt restless and energetic. He started walking up the mount to the church of St Thomas.

He reached the top in less than an hour and he sat and looked at the glorious scenery. A fresh, sweet-scented wind was blowing. Myrina sprawled far below him, in the sun, soundlessly, was like a deserted ghost village. Only the odd ship coming and going, the smoke emerging from the smokestack of the electricity generating plant just outside the village and a tiny cockroach car snaking its way towards the nearby village of Kaspakas indicated that life was in full swing. Panos felt his depression lifting. A sense of euphoria flooded his being. He had not realized he loved this island so much and that this love and nostalgia was due to Lea. He closed his eyes and saw her standing there, furiously slashing at her canvas, as if her life, her very breath, depended on it. Next year he would spend summer in Limnos. He would have Iason with him. That was a sure thing.

By the time, he returned to the Romeikos Yialos it was well past noon and he found Lea and Stratos sitting at the Terrain.

“Where have you been, you crazy boy?” asked Lea.

“Oh, walking about. I could not stay at home.”

“You look much better.”

“I am. I am, indeed. It is so nice to be back in Limnos. So wonderful to see you both.”

“Sit down. Tell us about your stay in London. The way you looked at the airport, it could not have been so good.”

“Kent. I spent the whole month in Kent with Iason.”

“And Thimitra?”

“There is no Thimitra any more. Just Ceres. I hardly saw her. It is all over, Lea.”

“Of course, my dear. I could have told you. I should have warned you.”

Panos told them of his stay in Kent. His extraordinary attachment to Iason. The transfer of the vast love he had for Ceres to Iason. The happiness he felt with his son. His unbounded love for this English little boy. His heartbreak on his departure.

Stratos stared at Panos in wonder.

“Unbelievable,” he mused. “It is my life all over again. I wonder, Panos, will this duplication continue?”

“I hope not,” said Lea. “It must be terrible to know your future in advance. I do not understand all this human silliness of resorting to mediums and fortune-tellers to find it out.”

“I keep on thinking about it,” said Stratos. “You know, Lea, the urge is coming stronger than ever. Do you think I should start?”

“Writing? Of course, Stratouly. Have I not been goading you on?”

“This parallel life gives me an idea for a plot. I have wanted to put some thoughts down in writing all my life and I never had the time. Now a plot is germinating and, perhaps, I shall pepper it with my philosophy of life. Oh, nothing profound, of course, just simple, practical ideas that I have gathered from my experiences, hard work, disappointments, pain, but also happy moments in my life, all along our inescapable march to the big sleep, our grave.”

They talked and talked. Lea was enthusiastic and happy with her two men. Stratos, a little lost in his plot and Panos, unusually talkative. Myrina had overshadowed Kent, at least for the moment. A couple of hours later they went for a swim at the bay next to the camp.

“Remember?” said Panos to Lea.

“Yes,” she answered.

“Remember, what?” asked Stratos.

“This is where we met,” Lea explained. “The bay was deserted and we came for a swim. Just the two of us. Separately. Then Panos came and introduced himself. A mournful, strange, thirty-year-old soldier.” She laughed. “A mathematician, no less.”

The ten days passed like a dream. Stratos started writing that same afternoon and Panos went for a long walk with Lea. They all dined at the port in the evening. It was nice and quiet. Most holidaymakers had left but the diehards like Lea and Stratos were still around and the drift of people was reduced but not overly sparse. Myrina was still lit up, the Castro still hovering in mid-air, luminous and dominant, and the Terrain and the other seaside cafés on the Romeikos had their handful of customers to keep their waiters busy. The next few days occupied the trio with pleasant conversation, swimming, writing for Stratos, painting for Lea, long, leisurely walks, in company or separately, merry lunches and dinners with the fine wines of Limnos and all too soon Panos had to depart for Athens to prepare his courses for the coming university session.

He waited for his friends. He seemed to have lost the ability to relate to other people. He missed Lea. Stratos too but Stratos, to him, was peripheral; a sort of father figure. Something akin to his own, maddeningly busy father whom he hardly ever saw, however frequently he went to his parents' home. He was at either out-of-town conferences or receptions or, forever, in the operating theatre at the hospital. As a

result, his mother had become a biribomaniac. Panos wondered how serious or interesting a card game called biriba could be. Apparently it was. As serious and subtle and complicated as bridge. Or so she claimed. At least, she would be home at certain predictable hours and he could go and see her.

Lea was another thing. She was a mother, a sister, a friend, intelligent and caring, and an attractive woman. She was ripe, experienced and uninhibited. How strange that his initial, elusive revulsion of her had changed to a need. It was the need to see her, to be with her, to bask in her sharp views and intellectual conversation. He wondered if he was falling in love with her. Drop by inexorable drop, the cup was about to overflow. He no longer saw a man's face. He craved for the smile that dazzled him. The thought of her youthful naked body on the beach of Thanos constantly tortured and aroused him. His sexual continence was no help at all. He waited for her.

They arrived in Athens a month later, at the beginning of October and the trio's routine resumed but not intact. Stratos had plunged into his novel. It absorbed him and fascinated him. He often stayed at home in the evenings to write afraid that an outing might disperse his ideas and insights. He urged Lea to go with Panos to the jazz club or the film they had planned to go all together. His age was weighing on him more and more and the solace of his writing, his thoughts, his memories and creativity formed a parallel life that was very seductive. It was so very much alive and real. He was slowly entering the age when memories usurp reality, the here and now, and even the future. Perhaps not quite for an average person but certainly for a writer.

Panos and Lea found themselves increasingly on their own. Even when Panos visited them at their home in the evenings, Stratos would be in his study writing away and the two friends would have a drink and talk. They would arrange next evening's program and ask Stratos if he would be joining them. He often did, especially if it was to go out for dinner but he tended to avoid events that kept him up late. Lea neither encouraged nor discouraged this tendency. She let things take their natural course. She was happy that Stratos had found something that absorbed him as much as painting absorbed her. She liked his writing, the way he expressed himself, his sober evaluations intertwined with passionate beliefs. She liked the altruism of a compassionate human being that was conveyed in his writing. It was of the man she had grown to love.

In Panos, on the other hand, she had the young and energetic companion who brightened up her evenings and accompanied her to the cultural events that had become an integral part of her life. They became attached. His disposition, his humor, his personality seemed to have changed. He lost his mournfulness. He was gay and talkative. He had, finally, wrested himself free of Ceres. Iason was, of course, ever present in his thoughts but even his little English son had entered into a context of normality with the trips to Kent that Panos took every couple of months to see him for a few days.

Lea, often but half-heartedly, told Panos that it was not normal. He had to find a woman. How did he manage? He was too embarrassed to tell her. He would just smile and say,

“But I do have a woman.”

They would look at each other for a moment and change the subject that was troubling them both. Late one evening, returning from the cinema, outside her apartment building, as she kissed him goodnight, he held her and kissed her passionately on the mouth. She responded with a passion and energy that surprised them both. It was not the safest of places for lovemaking but they could not draw apart. They stopped when they heard footsteps approaching and walked away. No words were exchanged as they enlaced each other and walked hurriedly to his flat. There was just

the thirst and hunger of desire. It was a pent-up craving of sexual deprivation on both sides, reinforced by friendship and love and raw physical attraction. They made passionate, violent, noisy love repeatedly without a break quenching a thirst and sating a hunger they had suppressed for too long. Then, they dressed and Panos accompanied Lea back to her house. It was almost two. They walked slowly, her arm around his and into her coat pocket like that first day in Myrina. They looked at each other every few steps and smiled tenderly. They had renewed themselves and crossed a barrier. Panos did not know where to, or in what direction. They had no time to talk.

"I feel terrible," he told her as they were walking.

"I know. You truly are a ninny. I feel glorious."

"I am in love with you."

"Is that why you feel so terrible?"

He turned to her and smiled at her taunt.

"No, of course not," he said. "It's because of Stratos."

"Oh, for Heaven's sake! Nothing has changed."

"Don't you love me?"

"Of course I do."

"And nothing has changed?"

"No, nothing."

He was quiet for a while trying to figure out her way of thinking, her logic.

"In a way, that's a relief," he finally said.

"Life is too short for regrets. Too short to forego such ecstasies."

"You do make me wonder sometimes."

"You do, too. You're such a conventional little lamb."

They kissed at the entrance of the building. Tenderness and wild passion do not always pair together but when they do, one truly understands the meaning of bliss. Such was the sweetness of their kiss.

Stratos was reading in bed when she entered the flat.

"Good evening love," he told her. "Why were you so late? I was starting to worry."

"We went for a drink after the movie. How did it go with you?"

"Oh, okay. The usual. It's coming along."

Lea undressed and went in for a shower, which surprised Stratos because she usually showered first thing in the morning. He heard her drying her hair with the dryer and a while later she came out smiling, hair dried and brushed, gloriously naked and slipped into bed next to him. What a beautiful woman, he thought, but it was late and he was tired. He shut the light, heard her regular breath and muffled snore.

Panos walked back to his house deeply troubled. He did not regret what had occurred with Lea. He would have done it again. He was in love with her but could not suppress the feeling that he had committed an unethical act. Yes, he was a conventional little lamb and perhaps that was why Lea never stopped astounding him. The folk wisdom, the learned psychological treatises and even the assertions of women themselves claim man to be polygamous but the woman strictly monogamous. A woman cannot love two men at the same time and yet, Panos thought, here we have our Lea in love with two men. If their love affair continued, an intelligent man like Stratos was bound, eventually, to become aware of it. Not only that, how would one bear the thought that Lea was also sleeping with the other? Who, finally, was the more complacent, Panos or Stratos?

The life of the trio, on the face of it, did not change. The three of them regularly went out to dinner together though much less frequently to cultural events. Stratos was

more likely to stay away than go to a concert or a play he was not particularly keen to see. When they found themselves alone, Lea and Panos were more inclined to gravitate to Panos's flat and make love for a few hours than go to the scheduled event of the day. The riddle that lodged in Stratos's mind was not caused by her coming back late at night. She was now home on time. It was a myriad of small pointers. Vague answers to his questions about the play or the film; about a singer or an actor; about the jazz combo. It was the peaceful exhaustion on her face, the air of repose and happiness, the blue hue beneath her eyes. The shower she took before going to bed on these occasions and the instant sleep that engulfed her. The soft snoring that was normally absent but almost routine after their own lovemaking.

Stratos wondered, with a constricted heart, if Lea and Panos were lovers. Did the affair go back to Limnos or was it something recent? He was not sure. She was so good and loving with him. She never refused his lovemaking. Was always warm and tender and called him Stratouly. He made love to her, to try her out, after her evening showers and she was willing, yielding and passionate and enjoyed his lovemaking. He was at a loss. He did not want to bring the subject up while he was not absolutely sure about it. Moreover, even if he were, he was not sure he would or should do anything about it. Just yesterday, he was reading a wonderful, philosophical novel, which seemed to be talking to him, to elder people in his predicament. It asked,

What is fidelity, what do we expect of a woman we love? Is the idea of fidelity not an appalling egoism and also as vain as most other human concerns? When we demand fidelity, are we wishing for the other person's happiness? And if that person cannot be happy in the subtle prison of fidelity, do we really prove our love by demanding fidelity nonetheless? And if we do not love that person in a way that makes her happy, do we have the right to expect fidelity or any other sacrifice?.....Embers, Sandor Marai.

A thousand questions crowded his mind. A thousand answers, too. Did he not love her in a way that made her happy? Was his diminishing sexual prowess the reason? Did she still love him or was the love and rapport that fulfilled them so totally, wearing out? Would she eventually leave him? Finally, and what perhaps hurt most, was the betrayal of his trust, because they did trust one another completely and now she was being dishonest and deceitful. He realized that even that had any number of possible answers. Perhaps, she still loved him and did not want to hurt him. Perhaps, she was afraid he might leave her. That he would not be able to bear the thought of sharing her with another man, even if the relationship with Panos was purely carnal. How would he react if she came straight out and told him? How? Would he have accepted it? Would he leave her? What was the right thing to do? He did not think of Panos. Panos was irrelevant. He was like a character in a novel. If it were not him, it would be someone else. Lea was the person that mattered, the woman that asked him to end their lives together. Stratos knew that our life problems and dilemmas rarely had clear-cut and satisfying solutions. This was, in any case, the essence of his novel. Mostly, we had to make do with uneasy, barely acceptable and often painful compromises.

It is possible that Stratos was anticipating difficulties in his life with Lea when he created her fictitious affair with Panos in the novel and introduced himself in it in the role of the betrayed husband. He was probably alarmed at his declining sexual drive and obviously could not mistake her passionate nature and continuing need for sex. More so, when he saw her Geneva paintings and realized that she was not entirely normal. He

must have hoped and prayed that their life together would continue as idyllic and happy as it had been so far. For a year after their marriage, their days were perfect. In summer, after a three-week holiday by car in Europe, they returned to Limnos and resumed their creative activities and, in August, the pleasant social relaxation with their friends.

They returned to Athens in early October and a couple of months later, Lea received a telegram informing her that Gherasimos Menandros, her former husband, had suddenly died of a heart attack. His body would arrive in Athens for the funeral within the next two days. Lea broke down completely. She screamed and wept with heart-rending sobs when the telegram arrived and was devastated and inconsolable. She would not talk to Stratos and would not accept his comforting gestures. At the funeral she cried continuously muttering, "Oh, the fool! The bloody fool. He did it, finally. He killed himself." Stratos could not figure out the situation. He was under the impression that Lea hated Makis. He could not understand this grief and the depression that would not abate. The daily visits to his grave to lay some flowers on it. Her occasional bursts of demented laughter, saying, "The monster is dead. The mammoth is dead. King Kong is dead." He tried to be patient. What else was there to do? He was like a shadow in the house, taking care of everything, anticipating her slightest need.

A month after Makis died, Lea was informed that two lawyers from the international law firm that managed his legal affairs would be arriving from New York for the opening of his will in the presence of his family and Lea. She attended the meeting with Stratos in a conference room of a luxury hotel. The Menandros family was there. The atmosphere was frigid. There were no greetings between the family and Lea. Once again, Stratos was puzzled. There were so many things in her life he did not know. They did not matter until then. However, things were taking a peculiar turn. The will was long and detailed. A quarter of his fortune went to his family and a precise catalogue of names, amounts and property was written out and read by the lawyers. To Lea, he bequeathed the villa in Geneva, the two cars in the garage and a large amount of money for its upkeep. The rest of his fortune would be used to set up the Menandros Foundation for philanthropic purposes but mainly to finance studies of Greek students in the sciences of computers and electronics. Lea was to have a permanent seat in the council of directors of the foundation. As they were leaving, Lea started crying.

"Money, money, money," she told Stratos. "Who cares about money? I have more than I need. Happiness is what counts. And now he is gone."

Stratos looked at her. It was slow in coming but he, finally, understood.

"You did love him very much, after all," he told her.

"Yes."

"That was not what you made me believe."

"It is very complicated," she said. "Sometimes, I do not know how I feel."

As time passed, a measure of normality returned to their life. Stratos urged her to start painting again. It seemed to be her only medicine.

"Yes, yes, Stratouly," she would answer. "Just as soon as I can."

He tried to jerk her out of her melancholia by discussing his novel in detail with her and soliciting her opinion. She was often lost in it and seemed to be living in its setting, in its narrative. She often called him Panos. He imagined it was a temporary lapse, an escape from her pain, a temporary hallucination. He suggested they go to Geneva for a while. The change might be beneficial. After all, she did tell him she loved the place. She was reluctant. She was afraid it might throw her back to her former psychological malaise. In the end, he prevailed. "I shall be with you," he told her. "I shall never leave you."

They arrived in Geneva in the last months of spring. They took a taxi to the villa, which was outside the city, in Coligny, in a park of trees not far from the lake. The caretaker was expecting them and everything was in order. The house was almost exactly as the painting he had seen. It was a not particularly large, two-storey stone house with a well-kept garden and garage. It had large windows and large, wrought iron balconies on the second floor and was a coquettish building pleasant to the eye. A small, circular driveway led the way from the garden entrance to the main door of the house, which was of elaborate ironwork and glass. On the ground floor were the reception areas and on the first floor, three bedrooms with individual bathrooms and a salon.

As soon as they entered the house, Lea started crying.

“Oh, Stratouly,” she said, “What a mistake we did! We should never have come here. This place is packed with memories of Makis. Yes, it is a place of happy moments but also of misery and excruciating pain. It is all coming back.”

Stratos was startled and dismayed. He felt dreadful. He had unwittingly insisted on this change. He hardly knew all the details of her life and, in retrospect, he realized that much of what she told him was simply not true. Perhaps she was not lying. Perhaps it was the way she saw things. He comforted her and promised her that together they would overcome her nightmares and her pain.

The interior of the house was furnished with taste and luxury; with carpets, *abat-jours*, bibelots and some fine paintings by Lea but Stratos felt it in its ambiance that for years no one had lived in it. They climbed to the second floor and as Lea was moving into the main bedroom Stratos asked her whether he should move in with her or use another bedroom. She smiled at him.

“Are you going to abandon me when I need you most?” she asked.

They arranged their clothes and toilet articles in the spacious master bedroom, and after a shower, they made love. Lea approached him. She seemed increasingly in need of his caresses and petting, of his reassuring love words. Whereas formerly she left the initiative of lovemaking to Stratos and allowed him to find his own pace, she now pressured him and made it evident she needed him. It worried him because he could not always respond. His sexual needs and drive were waning and, it seemed to him, Lea’s, far from remaining constant, were indeed increasing. It had not yet become a problem and Lea usually, in a light-hearted tone, told him not to worry but a predicament was approaching, and he was contemplating a visit to a specialist to find out about the new sex-enhancement drugs that were now being developed and advertised with such fanfare. In the evening, they drove to the city for dinner. In the garage, Lea started crying again, when she saw the cars, her bright red Maserati and Makis’s silver-gray Porsche. Stratos was troubled with guilt again but he thought that in a few days the memories, inevitably, would fade and their life would return to normal.

The next few weeks were almost that. The weather was fine and the couple spent leisurely days in town, shopping in the morning, enjoying a coffee on a sidewalk café and strolling along the lake. They enjoyed the vitality of the city and went regularly to cultural events and concerts in the evening. Lea replenished the large airy studio she kept on the ground floor with the materials she needed for her work and she and Stratos would take off for trips to spots where she could paint. Switzerland was not lacking a spectacular nature.

She would drive her red Maserati with the skill and speed of a female Fangio and they would traverse vast distances in France and Italy to find a special church, a castle buried in a forest, a statue of a general or a poet spattered with bird droppings and a pigeon on its head that she wanted to paint. She had an eye for the unusual, for the

irony, for both the farce and the pathos of human existence. Her paintings never ceased to thrill him. The talent was overflowing. The colors were perfect, neither glaring nor too subdued. A natural emotion and tension imbued them, as did the paintings of Van Gogh. He felt he was the guardian not only of the woman he loved but also of something infinitely more important: the guardian of a great artist.

She had her depressions, too. Days when she would not leave her bed and weep and there was little Stratos could do to comfort her. She was taciturn and spurned his attempts to reach her and find out what was troubling her. At such moments, he felt helpless. He moved around the house like a ghost, silent, unable to function, to think, to get on with his novel, which was in its last stages. Her black moods and depressions paralyzed him. He had never been so dependent on another person's mental well-being nor had he felt such congruence and self-identification with anyone else. He was amazed at how Makis's death had overwhelmed their blissful marriage and had shaken its foundations. Surely, there were things he did not know. Things, perhaps, he should find out. However, this did not seem pressing for in those first few months the depressions were short and far between.

As the summer months rolled in, Stratos suggested they go to Limnos for a while. Lea refused. She felt close to Makis in this house. She was still in mourning. She did not feel she could go for a holiday and enjoy herself so soon. Small intimations of guilt began slipping from her tongue. She told Stratos she was terribly confused about her last years with Makis. Perhaps, she had wronged him. The thought haunted her. His obesity was like the red capote to a raging bull. She was an artist with a very definite appraisal of beauty and she could not abide fat people. To her, fat people were a special brand of weak personalities that were unable control a voracious appetite, unable to make a sacrifice for beauty, for aesthetics, for good taste. Makis, for all his iron will, his intelligence and the warnings of his doctors could not stop eating like a wolf. She mused that perhaps his appearance caused in her a revulsion, which turned to an aggressiveness that was unfair and contributed considerably to the deterioration of their relationship. She often brooded and tried to analyze past quarrels deep and fading in her memory and this introversion far from helping her, threw her deeper in depression.

Autumn muscled its way in Geneva with rain and wind and Lea started going to her painting trips unaccompanied. She told Stratos she loved him and adored him but that his constant presence oppressed her and she would rather be alone when working. He was, in a way, pleased with her request. It would enable him to write again. His novel had stalled just as he was about to finish it off. He believed he had written a fine, compassionate story, not without interest because he had touched in it, in the context of the narrative, most of the issues and dilemmas of modern life. Much of this was from first-hand experience, which seeped into the novel.

His sexual inadequacy vis-à-vis Lea's needs had reached an impasse. She had given him the gift of sex. She was now taking it back, castrating him with her inordinate demands and his inability to cope. He was troubled and wondered where it would end. He was becoming an increasingly sexless companion; a father figure to her. However, despite her increasing self-containment, she still undoubtedly needed him, depended on him and for this, he was grateful for he could not envisage life without her. The loneliness, the forlornness of her absence would have killed him.

Some nights she stayed away from home. He had no doubt she had affairs and one-night stands. She never disclosed anything and always said that because of the late hour she spent the night at a hotel but she was relaxed and peaceful and it was obvious there was more to it than that.

"You are not angry with me Stratouly?" she would ask with a smile.

“No, my darling,” he would answer. “My love for you has passed far beyond the signposts of angers and jealousies.”

Indeed, he preferred these absences to the awful moods that gripped her more and more frequently. Not just depressions any more but delusions that Stratos no longer loved her, that the caretaker and his wife who cooked and cleaned the house were calumniating her, that Panos was alive and had abandoned her, that Stratos kept him away from her, that she was Ceres and often asked for her baby Iason. She would turn aggressive and shout at Stratos that he had changed, that he had aged, that he kept her prisoner and that she wanted her freedom. Then, just as abruptly, she would return to normality and go out to her painting. Stratos could not understand what triggered off these hallucinations. He suspected she had started using drugs. He searched the house thoroughly and found a locked cabinet in the study downstairs. He searched and found the key in one of her drawers. The cabinet was packed with powders and pills in different little boxes. He locked it again and kept the key to see if she would miss it and ask for it. She never did and a few weeks later, he threw the whole lot away.

In a drawer of a bookcase, he found a file from a private medical institution called the Berenger Research Institute for Mental Diseases. In it, he found reports and medical prescriptions for Lea Menandros. They dated from the time of her divorce. He did not understand the medical language. What he finally grasped was that Lea had been and perhaps still was quite seriously ill. That what she was going through was not simply a depression due to Makis’s death and guilt feelings for her past behavior that she could no longer rectify but was suffering from a mental dysfunction that was impairing her life. He was at a complete loss as to how to proceed. Should he tell her? Would that possibly make things worse? In the end, he decided to wait a little longer though he knew illnesses rarely improved unaided. What gave him hope were the periods of normality, sometimes short and sometimes long, that she traversed and the fact that when she was well she had no recollection of her hallucinations. He tried to convince her that they should return to Athens. He felt sure her symptoms, there, would disappear and she would be restored but something in her ailing mind kept her adamantly refusing to move. He cursed himself for bringing her to Geneva.

In her studio, she had a batch of unfinished paintings from the past. He noticed that whenever she decided to pick up and finish one of those perplexing paintings, a switch seemed to be activated and her mind would go awry. She would work non-stop, morning and afternoon, sullen and uncommunicative and in the evenings take the car and leave without a word to Stratos. She might or might not return at night. The next day, she usually returned early and headed straight for the studio and the pattern was repeated until the painting or two or three she was working on were finished.

In her lucid moments, Stratos tried to convince her to leave the completion of these paintings for a later time because they seemed to affect her mood. She answered that something very strong was pulling her to them. They were from the time when she was divorcing Makis and was heavily dependent on drugs. She was trying to unravel a knot, she told Stratos, smiling.

“You do see, my dear, my knots are much more numerous than yours and infinitely more complex. I feel those paintings, even unfinished as they are, contain a secret, an answer perhaps, to the inexplicable revulsion I had for a man I really loved. I am trying to find my way out of an obscure and incomprehensible labyrinth. Oh, my Stratos do not look at me like that. I love you too. You are the only person I have in this world. You are my only pillar. Perhaps, understanding what I did to Makis will prevent an eventual repetition of something similar with you. And then, I shall truly be lost.”

Except for short holidays in Europe by car during summer, Lea and Stratos did not leave Geneva for the next four years. An odd, unconventional pattern of life was established by Lea and accepted by Stratos. A human being adapts to the most unusual and bizarre circumstances. This happens almost automatically when the person who adapts loves deeply and feels responsible for the person who imposes them. In any case, Lea was not a free agent. A mental illness of some kind was blighting her life. Stratos was patient hoping for an improvement of her state but the illness seemed to be intensifying relentlessly. His life, nevertheless, was rolling along pleasantly enough. Apart from Lea's unpredictable moods and behavior, which never ceased to affect him intimately, he was now seriously involved in his new passion of writing. He finished his novel and it had been accepted and published in Greece to encouraging criticism and moderate sales. Not having a new, grand idea for another novel he launched into the writing of short stories, which interested his editor and a selection was being considered for a second book. He kept in close touch with his children. Iason visited him often in Geneva and got on particularly well with Lea.

Sometime during the second year Iason married his sweetheart Ceres and both Stratos and Lea went to London for the wedding. There, he met Diana, Iason's mother and her family, after thirty-five years. They both looked and looked at one another, no doubt wondering what their life would have been like had they remained together. Memories and traces of affection and familiarity were exchanged in those glances of the two middle-aged people. Past love affairs retain vestiges of magic and nostalgia.

Sasa and Alexanthros visited their father on several occasions in Geneva but they never got over their aversion to Lea and they urged their father to leave her. They could not understand his attachment to this strange, disturbed woman. They were too young to grasp the sentiments of their elderly father and lived in an age of instant gratifications and shallow emotions. They could never envisage that his separation from Lea would be heartbreaking; a withering of his life, perhaps an early melancholy death.

Lea seemed to be losing her battle with sanity. She was turning moodier and wilder. It showed in her painting. She appeared to be aware of it and started locking her studio and would not allow the most fervent and supportive admirer of her work, Stratos, to see it. She did not talk with him for days and then she would be normal, sweet and loving. Her absences from home lengthened and Stratos never knew where she had been. Not for a moment did he consider having her followed. He just hoped she would take care of herself and be safe. One day she told him she had set up a studio in Montreux. She looked very happy. She had been away for five days and he was extremely worried.

"Don't worry about me, Stratouly," she said. "I can take care of myself."

"A woman driving a flashy red Maserati is bound to be noticed by unsavory characters."

"I like being noticed. I like flirting with danger. A tame life is not for me. Not at this stage of my life."

"Why Montreux?"

"It is a lovely romantic place and I need this sense of freedom."

"Do I cramp your style? Am I overbearing?"

"Oh, my sweet Stratouly, no. Of course not. I love you. I am so lucky to have you. You are my strength in the background. Sometimes, I feel so guilty the way I treat you. At the way things turned out. Please, bear me out. Things will get better."

"Can I visit you at Montreux?"

"No, my dear. Not just now."

"Are you painting?"

“Yes.”

“Then, you will be away from home quite a lot.”

“Yes. You must not worry. You must get on with your writing.”

“Can I, at least, ask what you are painting?”

She smiled.

“I have found a truly beautiful man and, at the moment, I am painting a series of studies of him.”

“Oh? Provocative studies?”

She smiled again.

“Both provocative and conventional.”

“Is he a professional model?”

“No. I picked him up at a park. I was sitting one day on a bench in the sun and a little way further down, on another bench, I noticed a shabbily dressed young man with the most beautiful male face I have ever seen. I went and talked to him immediately. He turned out to be a Rumanian immigrant. He had recently arrived in Switzerland and was keeping himself with odd jobs like washing dishes and cleaning toilets in restaurants. The trouble is he does not speak French and hardly any English and he could not find permanent employment. I asked him if he was willing to pose for me as a salaried professional model and he is now in my employ on a full-time monthly basis. You see, I could not very well bring him here.”

For the first time, Stratos broached the subject of Lea’s probable infidelities.

“Is he your lover?”

She took it in her stride and it relieved him. He would have hated pretensions of shocked innocence.

“No. He is married to a beautiful young girl and seems very much in love with her. They are both young, in their middle twenties and despite the, well, weird nude poses I sometimes demand he is quite cool about the whole thing. Of course, I pay him well. Ceres often comes to the studio and sits in a corner while I paint.”

“Ceres?”

“Yes. I call them Panos and Ceres. His name is Vladislav and she is Tatiana but they remind me of our famous couple. I asked her to pose for me, too, but she is shy. Still, the money I offer is tempting them and I expect she will accept soon enough.”

God, thought Stratos. In and out of fiction, will this Panos hound me forever?

For a few months, Lea seemed happy. She spent most of her days in Montreux but when she came home to Stratos, she seemed normal and told him that she was doing good work. Ceres was now posing for her. Apparently, she had lost her shyness and Lea besides the portraits and nudes was doing some erotic studies of her and Panos. Stratos always worried when Lea’s painting diverged too much from the normal. It usually meant the onset of moodiness and mental disturbance. The sexual affairs she was undoubtedly having seemed to soothe her and restore her to a state of well-being but this obsession with sex in her painting was hardly a premonition of good tidings.

She had absented herself from home for more than a week and she called Stratos on the telephone to tell him she was not well and would he come and pick her up. For the first time she gave him the address of her studio and Stratos immediately took the train to Montreux in order that they would return in her car. A few hours later, when she opened the door, he found her pale, hungry and weeping. Her eyes were puffed; her short hair had not been washed for days and was clammy, sticking to her head. She fell into his arms. The smell of her unwashed body reached his nostrils and he could tell from her breath that she had not had a bite for days.

“They left me, Stratouly,” she cried. “They just disappeared.”

He hugged her, pulled her to a couch and caressed her while she wept her heart out. When she calmed down, he went out and bought some food. Coming back with his packages, he noticed that the building was new and luxurious. He looked around the studio. The apartment door opened to a large hall, comfortably furnished in a modern style, with two doors opposite the entrance. A bedroom was situated to the right and the much larger room to the left was stacked with paintings, empty canvases, a couple of tripods, a table with bottles of diluents and paints as well as used glasses and empty bottles of wine and champagne. A bed was plunked in the middle of the room. On the right was the bathroom and to the left a very large kitchen with a dining table and chairs. He set the table and the food and they ate lunch. He made her drink wine so she would relax. They did not talk much and Stratos asked no questions.

After making some coffee, which they drank sitting in the hall, he filled the bathtub with warm water. He undressed to his underwear and took Lea to the bathroom, removed her clothes and bathed her. He shampooed her hair, washed her face and body and massaged her shoulders and neck. He had not touched her for months and her nakedness aroused him. Yet he was uncertain whether he should show his hunger, make his feelings clear. Perhaps, she was not ready, was still under shock. He wrapped her in a towel, took her to the bedroom and dried her hair and body. She was heavy and slack with the wine and the hot bath and Stratos rubbed her down with a perfumed lotion he found in the bathroom. What a sensual person she was. He could feel vibrations radiating from her skin to the tips of his fingers. From her firm flesh a surge of palpable sensuality emanated, choked his throat and made his heart pound. It was obvious she loved the massage and well-being she felt. More than that, she loved him for his deep commitment and unbounded devotion to her person. The gloom and dejection of the couple's disappearance faded in his presence. She was comforted, relaxed and smiled at him for the first time. The luminous smile he had almost forgotten.

"I do love you, my husband," she told him. "It is a miracle you still care for me."

"It's you who is the miracle, my dear," he answered caressing her hair. "You are twenty women wrapped up in one and I still don't know which one is the real Lea. I am in love with the Lea I met in Limnos. She often fades away but I know that even in the most difficult of the other Leas, the woman I love is buried somewhere within her. With her intelligence and kindness, her common sense, her huge talent and social poise. With her love for her aging Stratos to whom she gave a new lease of life."

"I warned you I had my demons. I thought I had vanquished them but they still have a hold on me."

"Demons or not, I shall always be near you."

She smiled.

"You're near but, just now, not near enough."

He was of the same mind, he kissed her mouth, her perfumed breasts and genitals and they made love as passionately as that first day on the beach of Thanos. They woke up late in the afternoon and decided to stay the night at Montreux. The weather was cool but dry and they walked by the lake and then to dinner at a downtown restaurant. Lea seemed to have recovered from her depression. There was no doubt, that next to her painting, lovemaking was her most effective medicine.

Later, in bed, she cuddled up to him naked and played little games with her tongue on his face and body. He was startled and alarmed. He did not know if he could manage a second time.

"How did your paintings come along?" he asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. I shall show them to you in the morning, in the daylight, so you can judge the colors. Perhaps they are good. I put my heart and soul in them.”

“I am sure they must be as superb as they always are.”

“I hope they will not shock you. Some of them are very strange.”

“And erotic?”

“Oh yes. I was in love with both of them.”

“Do you want to tell?”

“Do you want to hear?”

“I am not sure. But I am curious. Curiosity killed the cat. Do you think I shall survive?”

She laughed.

“If you have survived this far, I think you have a good chance. I just hope you will not think any the less of me.”

“Some things are, by definition, impossible.”

“Oh Stratouly! I cannot imagine a sweeter human being.”

“My darling Lea, sentiments are not born in a vacuum.”

“Thank you, my dear. In moments when my self-esteem is at its lowest ebb, it is good to have you by my side.”

She kissed him tenderly and her tongue slipped into his mouth.

“The story, please. The story,” insisted Stratos pulling away.

“But I want you,” said Lea in a childish, complaining voice.

“All in good time.”

She laughed again.

“Okay. Well, as I told you a few weeks ago, I met Panos, I mean this fellow Vlado, at the park. The French say, *les goûts et les couleurs ne se discutent pas*, taste cannot be imposed and it is just so. Discernment of beauty cannot be absolute and, perhaps, if you saw Panos you might not have agreed but to me he was the most beautiful man I had ever seen. Not handsome in a manly sense but just simply beautiful like a woman is beautiful. Not effeminate either. He was of normal height and swarthy with jet-black hair. He was Rumanian and gave the impression of having gypsy blood in his veins in the sense that he conveyed an earthiness quite the opposite of the aristocratic and artificial. In any case, he was hardly educated and just spoke some broken English and hardly any French. He had a pair of light green eyes such as I have never seen before and his features were perfect.

“The human face is such a mystery. Perfect features can leave you cold and beauty can be aloof. He radiated warmth and his smile and perfect teeth had a captivating sweetness. I simply went up to him and started a conversation. He was guarded and shy and clearly was not interested in being picked up, which he must have presumed was my intention. Gradually, he loosened up and talked about himself and I found out that he had only recently arrived in Switzerland in search of work, that he had no fixed job; that he was newly married and was obviously in need of money. I told him I was a painter and asked him to pose for me. I made it clear there was no more to it than that and I offered him more money per month than he would make in a year of scrubbing toilets. We shook hands and I invited him and his wife to dinner that same evening.

“They came to my hotel where I had reserved a table but when I saw them I immediately cancelled the reservation and we went to a less swanky place nearby. His wife was almost as tall and beautiful as he was. She was a brunette with a flawless body, shoulder-length, naturally curly hair, with large, liquid eyes, utterly devoid of sophistication, a little anxious, and a mouth just a hint too large for that face. I tell you,

Stratos, the human face is the ultimate achievement of nature. It is the mirror of the soul. Does it take an artist to see this? That mouth spoiled what would have been the absolute faultless beauty. It gave that face a trace of vulgarity. You shall see the pictures I painted of her but then, how can a mere human reproduce the work of nature; I am almost tempted to say, of God? And Tatiana, whom I renamed Ceres, lacked the inner sparkle that such loveliness required to become truly Godlike. Oh, these qualities can be acquired under the right circumstances but my beautiful couple, that day, was dressed in the finery of a poor Rumanian village and looked so sad and out of place in a luxury hotel. Finally, it seems, the frock makes the clergyman. Clothes are our social identification.

“Well, that evening we were acquainted though it was difficult to get a conversation going due to their language difficulties. However, I gave them some money and a measure of trust was established. The next day I started looking for a studio and found this place. It is a furnished flat, by the way, and far too expensive but it was available and I did not waste time. I was in it within two days. I bought all my painting utensils and started painting Panos. First portraits and conventional poses and then, little by little, I undressed him. I removed first his shirt, then his flannel, then his trousers and, finally, his inhibitions. Can you believe it that he was shy at the beginning? But one gets used to everything. Soon enough he was walking about naked in his rest periods. He had a lovely, lean body and I loved to see him move about.

“Ceres came almost daily to our sessions. She really enjoyed seeing me paint. I started telling her to get ready because her turn would come and she would shake her head. She, too, was initially shocked at the nudity and the poses I made Panos take. I went out of my way to shock her even more. When I tried to shape him in a specific manner, I used to smack his backside in mock annoyance and even hold his penis in the position I wanted. I told her to think of me as a doctor. Not interested in sex but in a kind of healing of our psyche. A need that is as ancient as the cave drawings of prehistoric man attest. A healing achieved by means of the representation of the human body in a picture, which contained the essence and the feeling of the real thing and stirred one like the real thing and, more than that, contained that elusive element called art. Art, I told her, is elusive but we know it is there when it arouses emotion, feeling, magnetism and fascination from this smudge of colors. I don't know how much of my meandering monologues she understood but she listened with a wide-eyed, half-smile.

“I went about taming her in the same way as Panos. I started with portraits of her face and progressed in small steps to the nudes you shall see tomorrow and, finally, to the erotic stuff. Of course, I offered them money, and very generously at that, but the familiarity and intimacy of our daily work together helped. I also started bringing wine and champagne to loosen them up. Quite a debaucher, I am.

“Now, as I am telling you all this, I am wondering if it was ethical. Well, it could not have been ethical but was it blatantly unethical? Was it justified in the name of art? Was it, finally, art? In the last analysis, I think it was. It is. You shall be able to judge tomorrow. The only excuse for me is that it was an overwhelming need to do these drawings. I don't know why this representation of coition and overt sexuality holds such fascination for me. But it does. It is, at times, almost an obsession. However, I draw comfort from the malleability of human morality. Man adapts his morals for the smooth functioning of society, the propagation of the species and the needs of wars and conquests. You smile at my little lecture in sociology and my attempts to exonerate my guilt feelings. However, we do have polygamy in the Moslem religion, polyandry in some regions of Tibet; the Eskimos share their wives with their guests and so on and so forth. Did I, finally, corrupt Panos and Ceres because I managed to have them make

love in my presence so that I could paint them in the act? Was that so terrible when one reads about the untold horrors of our modern world? Was it so terrible that I fell in love with them both? Man and woman?

“I love you, Stratouly, and the last thing in the world is the intention to hurt you. But you have started me off and I must conclude my catharsis, I must tell you what happened a few days ago. I had already painted a number of canvases of Panos and Ceres making love in different postures. That day, was another such session. I had brought a bed in the studio. The heating as usual was set at full blast, the couple had drank a little to loosen them up and prolong the act and they made love as slowly as they could manage while I was drawing furiously to get as much detail as possible before they reached their orgasm and collapsed. Well, they did, eventually, and they dropped off to sleep.

“I stood there watching them. They were both so beautiful. Panos was lying on his back and Ceres was half on him, her face on his chest and her left arm across his body. Her curly hair, her back, her behind, those lovely long legs with the tapering calves and dainty ankles gave me some strange emotions. I was not so much aroused sexually as I felt an immense love for this beautiful but simple girl who was initially so shy and had at my urging and maneuvering revealed the intimacies of her body and soul.

“I undressed, sat next to her, caressed her and kissed the back of her body and neck. In retrospect, I find it so strange because I never had lesbian tendencies and was never attracted sexually to women. I think she realized what was happening but did not move. Panos woke up and did not react. He watched for a while and was aroused both by what I was doing to Ceres and by my nakedness. He pulled me on the bed and we made love. After he reached his orgasm, I turned to Ceres, kissed her on her mouth and fondled her body. She was completely passive but she did not push me away. She had that half-smile of hers on her face. I told her I loved her. She did not utter a word. She just looked and looked at me. Not with disgust. No. A little perplexed perhaps, trying to understand what was happening. Trying to figure out the implications. Did she enjoy my lovemaking? I do not know.

“We got up a little later and dressed. Believe me there was very little awkwardness between us as they prepared to leave. We said, quite simply, good-bye as if we would be seeing each other the next day and they left. That was the last time I saw them. I went to their house when they failed to reappear or answer the telephone the next two days. Their neighbors told me that they suddenly vacated their tiny flat the day before without a word to anyone. No need to tell you, I was broken up. I was in love with them and had this devastating need to see them. For over three months, they constituted my life, my thoughts and my work. I felt so completely betrayed. Was my love for them so revolting?”

Lea stopped talking and looked at Stratos for an explanation. For what she felt was a betrayal that devastated her. He thought for a while before answering.

“I do not think your love revolted them, my dear. For them, it was destructive. You were intruding in the very profound love of the couple. When you showed your feelings by participating in their lovemaking, you started chiselling at their unity. They realized it and chose to sacrifice the money to save their love. I am surprised at their maturity because they were so young and so poor. They felt threatened and not revolted. I believe that perhaps they felt threatened precisely because they were not revolted. But, Lea, is that what really happened?”

“I don't know.”

He was shocked at her answer.

“Did it or did it not happen?” he insisted.

“I really don’t know, Stratouly. I am not well. I realize that much. I have these hallucinations and I often wonder if certain things happened or not. They are so real. I mean, there is no doubt I painted erotic pictures of them. The canvases are there, stacked next door. But did they actually pose for them? Did they make love in front of me? Did we, all three of us, actually make love that last day or is it a hallucination of my fevered imagination and longing? I cannot answer with certainty. All I know is that I had this beautiful couple I fell in love with and since they left, these last few days were nightmarish. I drank bottles and bottles of liquor and champagne and swallowed dozens of sleeping pills and cried my heart out. I even tried painting to exorcise my pain. Yes, pretty strange stuff too. Then, I called you, my love, and things are normal again. But for how long?”

Sometimes you go to the bathroom to take your pill, thought Stratos, and something distracts you for a moment and when you return a minute later, for the life of you, you cannot remember whether you took the pill or not. Lea’s memory failure was neither as innocuous nor as trivial as the swallowing of a pill but it might be similar. Only a psychiatrist could unravel the mystery. He had let this affair drag too long.

Lea cuddled up to him, kissed him and tried to arouse him but his mind was churning over what he had heard. She was in the mood for love but all he could do was caress her hair. She got out of bed, went to the bathroom and took a sleeping pill.

“I’m sorry my dear,” he said when she returned.

“Don’t worry, Stratouly,” she said and smiled. “The worry is mine. Do you still love me?”

“Don’t ever ask this question again,” he answered.

The next morning he woke up early. Lea was sleeping peacefully. He got out of bed silently and went into the studio. The amount of painting was enormous. Canvases were stacked all around the walls of the room. She must have been working feverishly these last few months in a frenzy of creativity, Stratos thought. The bed was in the middle of the room and he wondered if that was a piece of evidence. It could be, but not necessarily. He started examining Lea’s work methodically, lifting each picture up on a tripod and looking at it until it filled his mind and his soul and then replaced it and picked up the next. He wondered, was talent an aberration of the normal? Would Lea have painted these pictures had she been a completely normal person? Was she a little mad? Would she lose this godsend gift if he managed to cure her obsessions? He was full of wonder and pride.

He left the studio for a moment and went to the bedroom. He needed to look at her. Stratos never doubted her intelligence and her gifts but, he reckoned, sometimes something clicks in your mind and you realize that what you have, what you own, something in your everyday life is so much more precious and priceless than you estimated. She was asleep, gloriously naked, ugly and beautiful at the same time. This woman, Stratos thought, is not for me, not just for me. At the height of her mental disturbance, her art is blooming. Though alien and revolting sometimes, she has so much to give to the world. The great dilemma was should he start tinkering with her soul? Should he drag her to psychiatrists to diagnose and cure her depressions and obsessions, her physical needs and hallucinations or should he leave her just as she was, sick, disturbed and superbly creative?

He went back to the studio and continued his exploration. It was almost too much to absorb, to grasp and understand. There were the conventional paintings of Montreux; foggy, Turner-like views of snow-capped mountains and the lake. There were pictures of the older part of the town with its narrow streets and traditional houses.

There were dozens of portraits of Panos and Ceres, sitting, standing, leaning on a windowsill, looking back at the beholder, lying asleep on the bed. The colors and technique were outstanding, the emotions on the faces never the same. Anger, peace, thought, happiness, all was portrayed. The beauty of the couple reaching out to you, touching you just as it must have touched Lea. It was not the beauty of a statue but of a living person about to open his mouth to talk to you.

Some of the nudes were conventional, others in very strange postures focusing on the genitals both with Panos and Ceres. Strange but not vulgar, perhaps because of the good looks of the models and an air of innocence they communicated. Paintings that asked why the human being constantly suppressed his sexuality. There were the erotic entanglements of Panos and Ceres; explicit and uninhibited: their faces showing their passion with expressions of pain and agony. He could almost hear their moans and cries for this is how this supreme tension of love is articulated before the explosion of release. There were the weird and wonderful pictures such as a close-up of Ceres's face with part of Panos's torso and his penis half way into her mouth. Her closed eyes and expression of blissfulness betrayed the pleasure she derived from the act. Her left hand on his buttock spoke of her tenderness. Another was of Panos's face, resting on his open palm, staring at the meeting point of Ceres's open legs. Was Lea affirming that this was the ultimate site of delight for the sight of the male?

Then, he came to the paintings that shocked him. Apart from a sexually aroused Panos leaning on a wall and some super-contorted nude poses of Ceres, he saw two self-portraits of Lea that revolted him and made him wonder what they meant. One was of her face grotesquely disfigured, the nose and Chinese eyes accentuated, the hair short and flat, the mouth lascivious, looking like a man or a lesbian butch. The other an almost exact replica of the photograph by Ray Man of a coloured male smartly dressed in suit and tie with his oversize penis hanging out of his fly, except that the face was that of Lea and the penis white. Stratos wondered if it was a confession of what happened with Ceres or her dread that she might have homosexual tendencies. However, what stunned him most was a painting of Panos lying nude on the bed. On his shoulders was a huge, thick, erect penis with its testicles hanging like the wattle of a cock or a turkey and his smiling face between his open legs. A variation of this picture and decidedly more grotesque was one of Ceres. Stratos was appalled and wondered what these two pictures could possibly mean and in what state of mind Lea was in when she painted them.

He left the studio in a state of mental exhaustion, went into the bedroom and lay on his side of the bed. Lea rolled over and embraced him.

"Good morning my sneaky little Stratouly," she said. "What did you think of them?"

He kissed her.

"Absolutely stunning."

She climbed playfully and lay on top of him. She squeezed his neck with her hands threateningly as if to choke him.

"Good or bad? Good or bad?" she asked tightening her grip. "Careful how you answer."

"Good, wonderful, unbelievable."

She released her grip. "That's better," she said. Then she wondered, "Really, Stratouly? You mean it?"

"Absolutely marvellous. Breathtaking."

"Even the porn?"

“Where there is art and feeling and emotion there is no porn. My goodness, Lea, sometimes I feel it is a crime to be squirreling away and hoarding your art in empty rooms. One day we shall exhibit everything. We shall shock and astound the world. You are the D.H.Lawrence, the John Cleland of art. Another *avant-gardist*. Lyrical, erudite and erotic. Pornography is rampant in our days. I think the time of vital and profound erotic art is dawning.”

“So there was nothing bad? Nothing you did not like?”

“Even the bad are good. But there was nothing bad. Just a half dozen strange pieces which need explaining.”

Lea smiled.

“I was hoping you would provide the explanations.”

“Oh, okay. We shall put our minds together to figure them out.”

She licked his lips with her tongue and then his ears and his nipples. She looked at him and smiled.

“In the meantime,” she said continuing the conversation, “shall we put our bodies together? I am happy again with my husband next to me and terribly in the mood.”

They made love and later had lunch and left for Geneva in Lea’s car.

A few days passed peacefully. They both took a break from their work and spent time together shopping in the city, taking in a movie, walking along the lake or driving in the countryside to lunch in small *auberges* well known for their culinary specialties. However, Lea soon grew restless and left for Montreux and destinations unknown. She told Stratos she was bored and had to start painting. The next day Stratos called at the Berenger Institute for Mental Diseases. From the Director’s office he was referred to a Dr Menke who treated Lea Menandros when she was at the institute. A secretary led him to a small lounge and in about ten minutes, the doctor arrived, shook his hand and they entered his office. He was a tall, pleasant looking man in his late fifties with graying hair, a pair of intelligent blue eyes and an air of infinite patience. Stratos smiled inwardly. Indeed, patience, he thought, must be a prime prerequisite for this job together with a capacity for human sympathy. He had that streak in him too. Perhaps, he had missed his calling but now he was being severely tested. He had his hands full with Lea.

Stratos introduced himself to Dr Menke and related in some detail his meeting with Lea, their two-year, intermittent courtship in Limnos and Athens and subsequent marriage. He described the peaceful and happy first year when she was painting and he was writing his first novel. He stressed her interest in it, the endless conversations they had about the plot and his impression that she was mentally immersed in it. He said he regretted that perhaps stupidly but ingenuously named the main character Lea. She seemed to identify with her to a surprising degree. Fiction and reality blurred into each other. How she sometimes called him Panos, the novel’s male character who became Lea’s lover. He told Dr Menke that in a way he was working out his own life in that first semi-autobiographical novel and included himself in it as Lea’s husband. He wanted to clarify his muddled thoughts and feelings by writing them out. He realized that by introducing this affair between Lea and Panos, he was perhaps anticipating sexual difficulties on his part and infidelities on hers. He was frank because he thought that it was important and told the doctor of his increasing inability to satisfy her sexual appetites. He was aging and Lea seemed as passionate and in need of sex as ever.

“The real trouble started with the death of Lea’s former husband,” said Stratos.

“I knew Mr. Menandros well,” the doctor said. “I was pained at the news. He was a remarkable man.”

“She broke down completely. She did not stop crying for days and was depressed for many months. It is only lately that she seems to be getting over it. But the derangement that his death brought about continues.”

“In a sense, that is good news. It is an indication that she is returning to reality.”

“What is reality?”

“I suppose,” said the doctor thoughtfully, “you could not possibly know. Please go on. I shall explain.”

“I thought a change of scene, a change of surroundings would distract her and alleviate her pain and on my insistence, we came here to Geneva. In retrospect, a particularly inapt decision because it was a place of very happy but also very painful memories for her. And of course, not only the painful but also the happy memories cause grief when the person with which they are associated and whom one loved is dead. Unforgivable, too, because I had come to realize she loved her late husband though for two years she had me believe she hated him.”

“Oh, sometimes,” said Dr Menke and smiled, “love and hate are one and the same.”

“In any case, here in Geneva, I lost completely control of her. Not that I ever tried to rule her life. She was far too intelligent, independent and rich for that. No. I lost my influence over her. The chemistry that held us together was suddenly not there. She stopped considering me though she knows she needs and is dependent on me. However, she also knows that I shall never abandon her. My sexual inadequacy obviously played its part in this loosening of our ties. But here in Geneva, her abnormality became much more apparent and her depressions more frequent. Hallucinations and irrationality manifested themselves and they frightened me. One feels so utterly helpless when confronted by such symptoms. That, of course, is the main reason why I am in your office. I need your advice. I just cannot cope any more and I am concerned for her. I do love her. She is an extraordinary woman. More than that, she is a very gifted artist, not the insipid amateur. She is a talent of exceptional brilliance. She has the technique and the ability to put her soul into her work. Are you aware of that?”

“Of course I am, Mr. Markopoulos. In fact, I advised her to paint as much as possible. I think it is the perfect way to relieve her tensions and externalize her emotions. It is an ideal supplement to therapy even if it is not always adequate on its own. It is more of a palliative and a preventive of relapses. Has she been painting regularly?”

“She has not stopped.”

“Has the painting, in your estimation, been normal?”

“When she is in depression it becomes very strange indeed. One feels that the person who has painted the picture is not mentally sound.”

“I see. Well, it is to be expected.”

“Another thing Dr Menke that, perhaps, you should know. Lea is obsessed by sex. At my age, I would be hard put to keep up with a normal woman ten years younger than I am but Lea’s needs are way beyond the normal. She has been sleeping around. Of that, I am practically certain and it is a constant worry to me. I am worried that the casual encounters she indulges in might bring her to harm. Personally, I am past feelings of jealousy and betrayal. The ridiculous concept of cuckoldry, at my age and in this particular situation, has very little meaning. I see myself as the protector and guardian of a very special human being, a person who is mentally disturbed but has so much to offer. An artist of her caliber is a treasure that must be preserved.”

“I must commend you on your attitude. Mrs. Menandros is very lucky to have you. Before my medical advice, perhaps, I should give you some facts about her past. I have a feeling you know very little of it and the little you know is incorrect. I first met Mr. Menandros when he came a few years back, just like you, to ask for my advice on his wife’s condition. Had you ever met him?”

“No.”

“He was a formidable presence. Tall, corpulent, extremely intelligent with the self-assurance of the very successful businessman. He was brash, impatient, authoritative and tough. A person one cannot easily like. Admired, feared, yes, but not someone you would choose to meet socially over a drink and seek his company. He could not abide stupidity and procrastination and would not hesitate to speak his mind. Yet, despite his forbidding exterior, he was human and compassionate. It was the only conclusion one could reach given the concern and anxiety he showed over his wife’s condition. He seemed to love her dearly. He blamed himself and the lifestyle he imposed in their marriage for her troubles. The constant movement from city to city, from one country to another, the long hours he spent working and finally his neglect of her needs. It was, however, not the only cause of her derangement. Her mother suffered from schizophrenia for many years and her father was a rather indifferent and callous person. He was a womanizer and in the last years of his life took no interest in his wife.”

“Lea told me her mother suffered from the Alzheimer Syndrome.”

“That may or may not be true. I never examined the lady. The cause of schizophrenia has not yet been identified but we know it is an organic brain disorder similar to Alzheimer and there is a genetic link. If one parent suffers from it, the chances of the offspring contracting it are roughly 13 percent. Unfortunately, Mrs. Menandros, at some point, slid into that group. It may have been due, as her husband suspected, to the fast, unsettled, ever-changing lifestyle of their married life. She was constantly complaining that she had not time for her painting, that she had no friends, that just as she was getting comfortable in one place they would rush off to another to set up a household anew. In addition, as you have pointed out, Mrs. Menandros was a sensual woman. I suspect most artists usually are. The fact that she hardly saw her husband and their married life consisted of a half dozen daily telephone calls and a few cocktail parties must have weighed heavily on her. With no money problems, no occupation, with time on her hands but not enough to let her live normally and get on with her painting, life must have been intolerable.

“She started having delusions. What we in our terminology call overt or psychotic symptoms. She believed her husband no longer loved her; that he was having affairs; that the people she met knew about these affairs, ridiculed her behind her back and were plotting to separate them. She probably identified him with her father for whom she had very little affection. Aesthetically, she hated the weight he put on. He could no longer drive a car. Of course, he did not need to. He was whisked around in stretch limousines. She told me that in the end she could not bear to look at him. And on, and on, and on. She suffered from the classic symptoms of schizophrenia. An inability to sort out and interpret incoming sensations, and an inability therefore to respond appropriately. Their relationship deteriorated and quarrels became the order of the day. Mainly over the telephone, I should add.”

“The fact remains that Lea did love him. That was crystal clear by the way she grieved at his death.”

“Oh yes. The marriage held for years despite everything. Despite the quarrels and the infidelities that followed, on both sides. I do not think either one wanted to

sever the ties that held them together. According to Mr. Menandros, his wife started having casual extra-marital liaisons and eventually he followed suit. It could not have been very difficult for him to do so because even with his obesity and his abrasive manner he must have seemed very handsome, charming and seductive to the vast majority of women given his great wealth and power. It is, of course, the one thing, for it is a unity, which women find irresistible. The reason for their subsequent divorce appears to be their involvement with drugs. Mr. Menandros became diabetic and as you probably know this incurable condition reduces sexual potency in a man. He must have already been using cocaine socially, which is the drug of the rich and is casually and widely in use in the circles he moved in. He then moved on to harder stuff to shore up his sexual drives and Mrs. Menandros at some point started using them as well. This complicated her schizophrenia and she alternated between the overt and the so-called negative symptoms of the illness. Negative symptoms include depressions, emotional flatness and a lack of pleasure or interest in life.

“Three or four years ago, I cannot pinpoint the exact date just now; she left him, returned to Geneva and filed for divorce. She also came to us for help though she had previously refused to do so. She must have realized how serious her condition was becoming. I was entrusted with her case and I am happy to say, we managed to rehabilitate her almost totally. I say, almost totally, because we have no cure for schizophrenia since we do not know its cause. Recent research suggests that it is linked to abnormalities of brain chemistry and brain structure. It is however, a highly treatable disorder and there are drugs that help people avoid or reduce frequent relapses. She was hospitalized with us for about six months and then she left for Greece. No need to tell you, she was one of my more interesting and fascinating patients.”

“And Mr. Menandros?”

“I was coming to that. Throughout that period when their lawyers were working out the divorce and while Mrs. Menandros was in our hospital, her husband showed a concern and a distress that was remarkable and very touching. He was in constant telephone contact with us and never failed to visit our institute whenever he was in Europe. He repeatedly asked to see her but she always refused to meet him. She used to get frantic and called him, the monster, the mammoth. Regardless of her attitude, he continued to take a very close interest in her recovery. I have no doubt he loved her and I am sure he felt guilt and believed he had contributed considerably to her condition.”

“Your story certainly provides a new perspective and answers some questions that puzzled me,” said Stratos. “The question is: do you see a way out?”

“A complete cure, as I told you before, is not feasible. Nevertheless, we can suppress the more distressing symptoms. One thing I need to know. Has she been using drugs?”

“I do not think so. When we arrived in Geneva and after her condition deteriorated, I searched the house and found a cache of drugs. But she did not touch them for a long while and eventually I got rid of them.”

“Good. I shall prescribe the same two drugs that seemed to help her best in the past. Many new drugs have come out in recent years but since she will not be under my constant care, we shall stick to what we know. Another thing: I suggest you go back to Athens. Associations with her sad and troubled past will be much less at hand in Greece.”

“I suggested it to her repeatedly, Dr Menke, and she has always refused.”

“You must find a way. It will be a great help. The way I see it is this. Mrs. Menandros has definitely made a detour to reality. It is a major step in the right direction. The grieving of her husband shows she finally realized he was not the

monster of her hallucinations. He was not the devil trying to exterminate her. He was a man who loved her and she was by no means an innocent party to the breakup of her marriage. Illness or not, it takes two to quarrel and the blame is hardly ever on one side alone. I think she realizes now that he cared for her and that was evident to the very last moment. Even during the process of divorcing. She realizes she was completely unfair in assigning blame for the failure of their marriage exclusively on him and unjust in the subsequent loathing and revulsion she felt and, now, there is no way to make it up or to apologize. Leaving Geneva will, in a sense, be going away from the scene of the crime. Away from the concrete setting of these memories. Moreover, we do have a great ally. Time. Time the great healer. Eventually, this torment will fade away and one major reason for her depressions will disappear.”

Dr Menke pulled out a pad and wrote down the prescription. He handed it to Stratos.

“Hopefully,” he said, “with these two drugs you shall soon see an improvement. However, she must use them systematically. If you go to Greece and have any problems, do not hesitate to call me on the phone. I shall always be more than happy to help Mrs. Menandros.”

“Will the medicine and an eventual return to normality affect Lea’s talent, Dr Menke? Or at least her desire to paint?”

“I doubt it. She did paint during the time you met her, when she was well, did she not? Moreover, even if it did affect her art, would you have left her helpless for the sake of art? Which, finally, is more important, the art that is produced or the person that produces it?”

Stratos considered the question for a moment silently.

“Another puzzle of life,” he said.

“I see you have a philosophical bend. What do you do in life Mr Markopoulos?”

“I am a retired architect turned amateur writer. Over and above everything else, however, I am the keeper of Lea Sevdalis, ex-Menandros.”

The doctor smiled and got up. He offered his hand to Stratos.

“I am very happy we met,” he said. “I am at your service.”

Lea refused to return to Athens but she did agree to take the medicine.

“You are a little sneak,” she told Stratos with a smile. “Going behind my back to see Dr Menke. How is he? He is a nice man. I made his life impossible in those days but he was always patient and understanding with me. What little sanity I have I owe it to him.”

“Don’t talk nonsense,” said Stratos.

Lea did improve. She did not change her lifestyle but her black moods were fewer though they did not disappear. She did not stop painting and did not stop vanishing for days now and then. She kept her studio in Montreux and Stratos visited her there every few months to see her work. The extreme psychosis and kinkiness of the past was not apparent but much of her work continued to have a sexual content. There were new models, men and women, and Stratos wondered if they were sexual partners as well. He did not doubt she had affairs and was thankful they did not last long. She always returned to him. He was her protector and shelter, her adviser and father figure. Also her occasional sexual partner. It was a strange situation but he had come to accept it. Her welfare, whatever it involved, was his mission in life.

Almost five years had gone by since their arrival in Geneva when Lea's mother died and they returned to Athens for the funeral. Lea mourned her and felt guilty she had neglected her for so long but her mother's condition had deteriorated to the point where she could neither recognize Lea on the telephone nor talk coherently and Lea talked only to the nurses taking care of her. After the funeral, they stayed on in Athens and partly resumed their previous activities. Partly, that is, because Lea, even if to a lesser extent, stuck to the independent way of life she had followed in Geneva. The circle in a sense had been completed.

Normality and peace became the norm of their lives. Stratos continued with his writing; published some short stories and a second novel and the literary press often cited his work. Lea continued with her painting but as the years went by, slowed down considerably from her original, frenetic pace. Slowed down, too, from her immoderate need for sexual gratification and as a result, the couple drew closer together. They resumed their summers in Limnos and spent a few months every year in Geneva but Athens was henceforth their base, their favorite city, their home.

They quarreled often. Long ago, Panos thought this was something that occurred in other marriages only. Even though he saw it all around him, somehow he believed they would be exempt. There was so much love between him and Helen, so much passion, that he could not envisage the unsettling intrusion of small annoyances and petty bickering in their married life. He could not envisage days of mutual brooding and sulking that resulted from trifling misunderstandings and raised voices. Lately however, it had almost become a habit and if it were not for the continuing physical attraction between them, they would have separated long ago despite their two children. Sometimes, they did not talk for days and Helen went in and out of the house without a word.

He often wondered if she was faithful to him and it depressed him to think that his marriage had reached the point where such questions troubled him. He habitually put such thoughts aside for he could not imagine what a sexually satisfied woman would look for outside marriage. A soul brother? An emotional balance her husband could no longer provide? The fact was that after nearly twenty years of marriage the only thing that held them together, apart from Anna and Maria, was their complete sexual compatibility. The passion that was still alive and the joy they derived from lovemaking. Their breathless, breathtaking orgasms brought respite and temporary tenderness. The bed remained their last arena of intimacy. On it, they not only quenched their longing but also managed to talk intimately like the first days of their love. It seemed to him a miracle that after so many years, at their age, in an otherwise troubled relationship, they still yearned for each other's body. That even after a quarrel, in bed their bodies drew each other like magnets. He wondered how much longer this would last. Their alienation was becoming sclerotic; a permanent feature of their married life. Had they reached the point of no return?

"Oh, snap out of it, Panos."

He was sitting comfortably on an armchair reading a book. He looked up at Helen.

"What now?" he asked.

"How long will it last?"

"What are you talking about?"

"That sad and sorrowful look you have been carrying around for weeks."

He looked at her for a moment, expressionless, and turned to his book.

“Oh, how I hate it when you ignore me. Listen, she is gone that ugly bitch and all the mournful looks in the world will not bring her back. But there is a mystery in this I cannot understand. It cannot be just this immense admiration you had for an artist; there must be more to it than that.”

He looked up again with a tight smile.

“Can’t you ever be civil? Do you have to be nasty about a person I loved and respected? She was like a mother and a sister to me.”

“Is that all?”

He went back to his book.

“The truth is,” Helen went on, “she was ugly and unpleasant. I cannot imagine anyone wanting to make love to her. I despise myself for feeling jealous of an old hag. But you seemed to care more for her than you did for me.”

The ping-pong game was starting.

“She was over seventy, for heaven’s sake,” he said.

“Twenty years ago she was fifty. Ten years ago she was sixty and I must admit, she kept pretty well for her age.”

“Do we have to delve into ancient history in search of a quarrel?”

“When ancient history has a way of intruding into the present do you expect me to be happy?”

“I shall try to smile more often.”

“Oh cut out the irony.”

“Am I supposed to ask permission to feel sad or happy? Must I toe the line of your likes and dislikes?”

“No, but this exaggeration of yours is very irritating. How much longer will this long face of yours last? A couple of years?”

“Perhaps. In any case, nothing I ever do seems to please you.”

“Don’t kill yourself trying.”

“Speaking of irony!”

“My dear Panos, where do you see the irony? Your coldness and indifference towards me is disheartening.”

“Need I say it is mutual?”

“That may be so, but who started it off?”

“That is the million dollar question.”

They made love and fell asleep in each other’s arms. He woke up and saw her lovely smile; her lovely face and disheveled blond hair. He kissed her tenderly. He remembered that after he had made love to Lea, an eternity ago, he felt the guilt of betrayal towards Stratos. She told him, nothing had changed, meaning that the basic emotional equation of their lives was unchanged. He, now, felt exactly the same way. Nothing had changed. The love he thought was lost was simply buried, suppressed temporarily in God knows what recesses of the mind. For two and a half decades with love affairs and marriages in between, a mutual grudge kept them avoiding each other despite their son’s pleas that they meet. Iason’s minor operation brought them face to face in the hospital.

The mutual discomposure and upheaval lasted a few minutes. They had not seen each other for so long they could not take their eyes off each other. Iason was all but forgotten. Twenty-five years and nothing had changed. The little weight they had put on suited them. Ceres in her early fifties was blooming. She was no longer a girl but a mature, desirable woman and Panos, with graying hair was handsome and debonair.

Their love was intact, resurrected, destined to flare up at first sight again, after twenty-five years.

They left together. It was late afternoon. They had not talked much at the hospital. They just looked at each other and smiled and now, on the street, with shackled hearts, a thousand memories retrieved, a reinstated love weighing on their souls they felt diffident and unsure of their path; of each other. He suggested they go to a movie. She smiled. Was history repeating itself? Was it a new beginning? He led her to the last row of seats where people would not see two middle-aged people kiss. They dined at the Chanterelle on Old Brompton Road and slowly walked, arm in arm, across Kensington Gardens to her flat in Notting Hill.

She kissed him back and caressed him. She stretched and squeezed her body on his. She loved the warmth of his nakedness. She had slept with many men in her life and had never felt as comfortable and lascivious with anyone else. His lovemaking combined adventure and innovation with delicacy; passion with gentleness and a surprising lack of inhibitions for so shy a person.

She kissed him again and again. Her energetic tongue searched his mouth, stretched for his throat. Her body was in thrall to his, to his masculinity, her movements inviting his love, inviting their union the penetration of body and soul.

"I love you, Panos," she told him. "I never did get over you. Every time I knew you were in England I dreamed about you at night and my loneliness and longing made me want to cry and scream, I love you Panos, I need you. But in the morning, that pretentious human failing called pride kept me from seeing you. It was not easy to forgive you for abandoning me."

"Oh, Ceres, don't blame it all on me. The refusal to compromise was reciprocal and what a terrible gap that created in our lives. All of a sudden, I realize our folly. I never stopped loving you, too. Isn't it strange the way life and circumstances shape our lives? Finally, we are not masters of our destiny. We are like bits of paper blown left and right by the wind. How can one not become fatalistic?"

"But it was us that made our choices. We took the decisions."

"To circumstances we could not alter. They shaped our decisions and our lives. And is it not fate that I have you now, so unexpectedly, in my arms? I think it is. Let's not waste this second chance."

"Oh Panos, please don't put ideas in my head. I am very lonely and terribly susceptible to dreams of a better, a happier life."

"So am I, my love, but I think we are at a crossroads. After wasting twenty-five years, we do not have much time left. The past, undoubtedly, had its happy moments. With you, too, I am sure. I have two lovely girls to show for it. But we must put it behind us."

"Did you settle the girls?"

"Yes. We found and rented a cozy little flat in Knightsbridge. The girls are terribly excited about living on their own. I know Iason will take good care of them. The bonding of an elder half-brother is sometimes stronger than that of a brother. They are practically in love with our handsome Iason. Did you know that they visit him every day?"

"Of course. They are discovering each other. Iason keeps talking about them."

"Yes. Well, at least, their path has been mapped out for the next few years. Anna, the eldest is going to Queen's College to study mathematics like her old man. Like her mother, too. Helen is a mathematician. She was my colleague at the faculty before I left it. Maria is eighteen, a year younger than Anna, and was accepted at the Royal College of Art. She has talent and I am particularly thrilled that she has chosen

to be an artist. I do not expect that she will be another Lea but she will be doing something she loves and fulfills her. It is our life that has to be settled."

"What about Helen?"

"When the glass cracks it cannot be glued together again. I loved Helen just as you must have loved your husband at one time. However, there is no comparison. We are neither better nor worse than they are. We were simply made for each other. Our physical and psychic needs match like the bits of a jigsaw puzzle. What do you say? Shall we try it once more? Will you be my Thimitra again?"

"Yes, my darling. Oh, yes."

They kissed and slid into a long, passionate love session to quench a longing wedged firmly and painfully in their subconscious for many long years. At least, where their love was concerned, nothing had changed. Except for the new sense of hope, optimism and a determination that nothing, but nothing, was ever going to separate them again.

Ceres was silent.

"Second thoughts?" asked Panos.

"No. It's just that I feel I am stealing you from Helen."

"How unlike a woman to have such misgivings. Where stealing a man is concerned, they are usually quite ruthless. No, our marriage is definitely over."

"Helen... Wasn't Stratos's first wife called Helen?"

"Yes. Another strange coincidence. Sometimes, I get the feeling that my life follows certain inevitable patterns," said Panos. "There are so many uncanny similarities in my life to that of Stratos. The woman he married after his love affair in England was Helen. The son he fathered in England was of course Iason and you met him in Limnos. Iason's wife was called Ceres. He was a lovely boy, this Iason and unfortunately, I have lost track of him after his father's death. He kept in touch with Lea sporadically but I never thought to take down his address or phone number. And, of course, we were in love with the same woman."

"You were in love with Lea?"

"Yes, after you eased me out of your life."

"I can't believe it!"

"I remember that when we made love that first time, after the Picasso exhibition, we hardly knew each other. We started being acquainted in bed. In each other's arms. Just as we are, now. Oh, Thimitra, we did have our quarrels and sad moments but the happiness and love and passion of our relationship were quite extraordinary. How did we throw all that away?"

"We said we shall not dwell on the past."

"Absolutely. No recriminations. I was going to tell you that we are in a similar situation. We have just made love and want to build a new life and we hardly know anything about each other's past."

"Yes. I'm dying to hear about Lea."

"And not about Helen?"

"Yes. That too, but by comparison it must be a conventional sort of story. And then, don't forget, I knew Lea and Stratos."

"Was your marriage a conventional sort of story, too? It could not have been. It only lasted two years."

"On the contrary. The fact that it only lasted two years implies that it was. My after-Panos life was not terribly exciting. Oh, I had quite a few affairs but as it usually happens, the most interesting men were usually very poor marriage prospects. I was certainly not desperate to get married but at the back of a woman's mind, the desire to

settle down always lurks. In the final analysis, a peaceful family life and the need for security, both financial and emotional, is a woman's basic need. Unfortunately, I must tell you, at the risk of over-inflating your ego that I found no man comparable to my Greek lover.

"For about three years, I played the field sliding in and out of affairs. And strangely, because we are supposed to be an advanced, sexually liberated society, the fact that I had an illegitimate son was an obstacle on many occasions when marriage was in the works. Even with Edward, my husband, our son was a problem. Edward was my immediate superior at the Ministry and I was in constant contact with him due to our work. You see, after nearly three years as a teacher, I was promoted to the post of assistant inspector of the London Council schools for retarded children. It's not as impressive a post as it sounds. There are only about half a dozen public schools of this type. Anyway, Edward was a PhD in Sociology and a very cultured person with interests in music and literature. Not much to look at, he was tall, a little gaunt and looked at least ten years older than me though we were roughly the same age. He was of low profile and intelligent with a dry, English sense of humor that amused me and we started going out steadily together.

"After a year and a half, he asked me to marry him. He did not want Iason, however, to live with us. He told me that for a year or so we should live alone and if the marriage went well, we would bring the child to live with us. That was a very peculiar condition but I reluctantly accepted it. We married and I moved in with Edward in his London flat. Iason stayed with mother in Kent and I used to spend the weekends, there, with him. Another funny sort of arrangement but I would not settle for anything less. Even so, the child missed me terribly.

"What does a woman look for in marriage? I don't know. I suppose different women look for different things. I ask this question because my life with Edward was strangely unsatisfying. He offered me a life of cultural movement and variety with frequent evenings of theatre, ballet, concerts as well as outings with his intellectual friends and their learned conversations. What was lacking in our marriage was passion. I was not in love with Edward when we married. We were fond of each other. Fond, is a terribly ambivalent word and a terrible reason for which to get married, by the way. There was the strong tie of companionship but, in the end, that was not enough.

"The marriage of convenience did not suit me. Can I help it if sex is so important in my life? I was born that way and I do give the lie to the so-called frigid Englishwoman. I suppose, Edward was normal sexually speaking or, perhaps, a little undersexed. He was thin and a vegetarian. A frugal eater and frugal in his sexual appetites. Very often, we would return from a theatre or a concert that moved me and I had a mad desire to follow up this elation in bed. I would cuddle up to him and he would stop me dead in my tracks saying, 'Horny again, my dear?' My advice to lusty maidens: beware of tall, thin vegetarians. Find yourself a portly Greek."

She laughed merrily at this impractical advice to hot-blooded English maidens and continued.

"Well, eventually, I realized my marriage had become, more than anything else, a marriage of inconvenience what with the added chores of keeping house for a man that left me cold and was turning me frigid and going away every weekend to see Iason. One weekend I packed my bags and left for Kent, for good.

"What next? Nothing really. It is sad to wake up, every now and then, and realize that a decade has slipped by and you are engulfed by a humdrum routine with no prospect of change. As you know, I stayed with my parents in Kent until Iason

started school and then we moved in this flat in Notting Hill. By that time, you had just married Helen and the few times I saw you when you were visiting Iason I hated your guts. That was why I was so curt and businesslike. Later, I would cry my heart out and I would think, why am I crying if I hate him so much? Is it because he is happy and I am lonely? Because lonely I was, despite my continuing on-and-off relationships with men. It was mainly for sex and as I grew older, even that became more problematic and awkward as the field of action contracted. I sometimes had affairs with married men and hated both myself and my double-crossing partner playing the Don Juan with a wife at home. Just my work kept me going. It never ceased to absorb me. I see very little of my dear, unfortunate children ever since I was embroiled in the bureaucracy but from my post I continue the fight to make their lives as pleasant and meaningful as possible. My devotion to them, after all, is part of the reason we are not together.

“Do you think we would be as happy or as much in love had we been married? Oh, don’t answer that. Empty speculations are of no consequence and missed opportunities are gone forever. Except that sometimes there is, something left over. Like our love. Like a few years more before we fall into decrepitude. Like the tail end of the missed opportunity still lingering, giving us a last chance. Oh Panos, reassure me, you are not a Don Juan with a wife at home, are you?”

Panos laughed.

“You know I have a wife at home, my love.”

“That’s not what I mean. Will you be returning to her? Am I just a fling?”

“Yes you are a fling. A fling with which I fathered a son. A fling that flung me long ago in the deepest depression. Can a fling, which becomes an obsession still be called a fling? Coming to think of it, perhaps, it is I that was your fling. For it was you that flung me away.”

It was her turn to laugh.

“I see you have a facility with words as well as numbers.”

“Didn’t Iason tell you I have started writing?”

“My God! Stratos must be smiling in his grave. How weird. Perhaps, on top of everything, another Lea is lurking on some Greek island like Calypso to enchant her Ulysses, her Panos. Perhaps, I should reconsider the offer of my love, my unconditional surrender. Rein in my passion. Perhaps, I have no prospects with you.”

They laughed and kissed.

“What about you,” she asked. “What’s your story? I feel bad about Helen. I’d hate to feel I was the reason for your separation.”

“Rest easy about that. Our marriage has been moribund for years. Even the girls urged us to divorce. Nothing seemed to go right these last few years. We were constantly quarreling. For a myriad of reasons. Our big stumbling block, however, was Lea. I was tied to her by a friendship I was not prepared to give up and I would not bow to Helen’s bitchiness. The funny thing is that Helen never had a problem with my mother. Her surrogate mother-in-law was Lea, though I never told her we were lovers at one time.”

“Oh do tell.”

“When you showed me to the door...”

“What a horrible way to start off your story.”

“To tell you the truth, I have never understood where you found the strength to break up our relationship. Perhaps, you did not love me all that much.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“The fact remains that I was disconsolate. I was very lucky I had Stratos and Lea and I attached myself to them. Literally stuck to them. They were very sweet and

understanding and seemed to enjoy having me share their life and outings. Especially Lea. There was a bond between us I find difficult to define. I was like a younger brother to her with sexual undertones, which were kept in check by Stratos's presence. Helen kept on calling her an ugly bitch but in that period of my life, she was the only woman that interested me. I think she felt it. She had that extraordinary sensitivity and insight that seemed to penetrate my thoughts. Largely, it was Lea that helped me get over you. Oh yes, I admired her hugely. I was addicted to her smile, her intelligence, her conversation, her gay disposition and was in awe of her talent. Stratos was writing his novel in those first two years and this seemed to absorb more and more of his diminishing energy. He stayed at home often and encouraged us to go out on our own. Didn't he realize he was throwing us together? By that time I was fully in love with Lea and one evening I kissed her and we went to my flat and made love."

"How could you, Panos? How could Lea do such a thing?"

"There was a strange amorality in her. Is that a characteristic of an artist? I don't know. Her loyalty did not entail sexual fidelity. Some of her paintings hinted at an extraordinary sensuality and sexual obsession and she certainly was experienced and devoid of prudishness. Morality is a construction, an invention of society. It is a dynamic, developing and constantly changing concept. There is nothing absolute about it and consequently one must be cautious about condemning what seems to be immoral behaviour."

"Didn't Stratos ever find out?"

"He never even hinted that he knew though I find it hard to believe he was unaware of our love affair. Isn't that also deviant behaviour? Some moralists would condemn his tolerance as anti-social and disgraceful. A cuckold in our society is contemptible and a figure of ridicule. The more one thinks about it, the more confusing it gets. The fact remains that for one wonderful year I was Lea's lover. It is one of a handful of things that have marked my life."

"As a matter of interest, do I figure anywhere in that wonderful spectrum of events that have marked your life?"

Panos laughed.

"You, my Ceres, are the jewel of the crown."

"Thank you. I accept your homage with a less than dazzling smile. Some things I cannot match."

She smiled in an obvious imitation of Lea.

"I know you are fishing for compliments. I cannot imagine your query stemming from a sense of insecurity. May I go on?"

"Please do. I am dying to know how Helen appropriated you from Lea."

"She never did. When I was with Lea, I had eyes for no one else. Plenty of pretty little girls were running after me at university."

"And?"

"Lea filled my life completely. I needed nothing else."

"You were sharing her with another man, for heaven's sake."

"That, usually, is more a problem for the woman than the man. After all, I was the intruder in her marriage and she seemed to have found a sense of balance in her sentiments."

"It seems to me, she was more unbalanced than anything else."

"She loved Stratos."

"But that's it. If she did not care for him, the situation would have been more or less normal. A classic case of infidelity. But she loved him and had sex with him, did she not?"

“Yes, she did.”

“Sorry, the whole situation is beyond my comprehension.”

“For me, it was enough she told me she loved me.”

*“I once saw a play at the West End called *The Complaisant Lover*. The title fits you well.”*

“Will you stop teasing me and let me finish?”

“Yes, by all means.”

“Our affair came to an abrupt end when Makis, Lea’s ex-husband died suddenly of a heart attack. She had never talked much to me about him but I was under the impression she hated him. From mutual friends who had known him I heard that he was a self-made multi-millionaire, was an insufferable snob and a very unpleasant person. He was rude and pretentious and on top of that was obese. Apparently, he left Lea for another woman and Lea underwent psychiatric treatment to overcome the separation. So it was quite a shock for me but much more of a shock for Stratos that Lea broke down completely at the news of his death. I did not see her for some years after that. I called Stratos every few days to ask about her and the situation was unchanged. She was inconsolable and cried often and her depression dragged on for months. She closeted herself at home and refused to see anyone. I asked if I could visit them but she refused to see me. A few months later, they left for Geneva and did not return to Greece for some years.

“For many months I missed her terribly. I felt disoriented without her but she had managed one thing: to cure me of my obsession for you. I had become a normal person and though I lost, once again, a person I loved, I was not overcome by the sick despair I experienced with you. Little by little, I picked up the threads of my life and started dating young women and having an ordinary social existence. My work at the university was not all I had hoped it would be but what else could I do? My professional domain was strictly limited. I was never actually accepted by the rest of the faculty. Because I studied abroad, I remained an outsider. Furthermore, my character and circumstances did not help. I was aloof and did not participate in the politics, intrigues and the sucking up to my superiors that would advance my status. Consequently, the directorate of the faculty assigned me the barest minimum of teaching and never invited me to participate in what little research and outside projects came to the teaching staff.

“About a year after Lea left, Helen joined the faculty. She was a brilliant mathematician. Mathematics is not a field women excel in and the male staff was scornful and dismissive towards her at the beginning. The self-important major and minor geniuses in the department tend, in any case, to be unfriendly and suspicious of any newcomer and Helen, for a while, was as isolated as I had been since the beginning. I was the only person who approached her with any semblance of civility. This created a bond between us from the start though her isolation, unlike mine, did not last long. She adopted the perfect attitude needed to prosper in an administrative structure, for the faculty, though not large, has all the characteristics of a bureaucracy. She was very sociable and friendly and ignored the cold shoulders she encountered. On top of that, she had an impressive physical presence. She was tall, well built and while not particularly pretty, was attractive by dint of her personality and intelligence. What I had not managed to do in three years, she achieved in a few months. She was soon the darling of the department.

“They say opposites attract and I suppose there is a measure of truth in that though I cannot say this held true for you and me, my love.”

Ceres laughed.

“Especially where stubbornness was concerned we were almost identical twins,” she said.

“Yes. However, it did provide the initial spark of interest between Helen and me. Well, we started going out together and then we became lovers. After a few months of going steady, she moved in my flat and a year or so later, she fell pregnant. We decided to keep the child and get married. We got along pretty well in those first years despite the fact that she progressed in the department much better than I did. I was never antagonistic or envious of her success. If anyone was to blame, it was the system of cronies and political alliances of the people that operated it. I was a loner and remained isolated. Poor Helen did her best to integrate me in the mainstream with very little success. Still, I could not disregard the fact that I, too, got my position through my father’s political influence. That is how things work in Greece.

“Every few months, I called Stratos in Geneva to see how Lea was getting along. I never managed to talk to Lea and Stratos was never particularly outgoing in the conversations we had. He gave me the impression, however, that Lea’s psychological problems continued and that he was having a difficult time. I asked if I could visit them and he consistently replied that my visit might affect her adversely. That he would tell me when the time was ripe. I simply did not understand how Makis’s death could wreak such devastating impairment on her mental well-being. Surely, there were things I did not know. On the other hand, I wondered if the distressing news was Stratos’s way of keeping us apart. I was nowhere as intimate with him as I was with Lea and could not ask him how she took the news of my marriage to Helen. Overall, it was a confusing situation. One thing that reassured me somewhat was the fact that Lea was painting.

“When they returned some years later, Lea called me up. I rushed, of course, to see her. She seemed well, if a little subdued, which was probably due to the medication she was taking. Her former sparkle and gaiety were not there. We had all aged and it is inevitable that with the passage of time, some of our exuberance and high spirits abandon us but because I had not seen her for over five years it was particularly evident and it saddened me. Stratos was in an even worse state. At the dawn of seventy, he was an old man. Yet, the couple seemed as attached to one another as ever. Lea asked about Helen and the children. She wanted to meet them. I wondered if she was being polite and conventional.

“Our life had changed. We could not resume where we had left off but the bond that tied us together could not be severed. A deliciously tender secret inhabited our glances and our smiles; glances that lingered a second too long, that asked a thousand questions never to be voiced. Our friendship did not stop being warm and affectionate. At one time, it was gloriously erotic and passionate. Now it comprised of tacit and loving memories. A page in our life had turned. Only an epilogue remained to be lived. I asked about her painting. She said she did a tremendous amount of work in Geneva. It was as if her mental disequilibrium spurred her on and provided the energy. ‘Oh, only a small part of it is mad,’ she told me with a smile. ‘Now my stamina and my desire to paint seem to be waning. The torrent has reduced to a trickle. By the way, I want to paint your portrait sometime, Panos. Dressed.’ she added with a twinkle in her eye.

“I invited Lea and Stratos home to meet Helen and the girls. Anna was three at the time and Maria a year younger. For some odd reason Lea and Helen did not hit it off. They disliked each other from the start. Lea said not a word about her feelings though they were obvious and Helen did not stop expressing them. It seems incredible but this dislike between the two women was an issue of contention between Helen and me ever since and contributed largely to the deterioration of our marital life. There was

very little contact between us as couples, in those first few years after their return from Geneva. It was I that kept in touch by phone with Lea and visited them every week or so.

“The disintegration of my marriage started in earnest with Stratos’s death. He died of a brain hemorrhage six years after their return to Athens. Lea seemed completely lost at the funeral. She did not cry. It was as if the shock drained all emotion from her. As if she was contemplating the new emptiness in her life. Iason was by her side but would be with her for just a few days. Sasa and Alexanthros were formal and withdrawn. I was her only friend, the only person that could provide a measure of companionship and comfort. It is so sad but, usually, the last few years of one’s life are rarely happy. They are likely to be beset by health problems, the deaths of your loved ones, by loneliness and the feeling of uselessness. Nothing much more is expected other than the increasing weakness and fragility of old age.

“By that time, Lea had stopped painting. She hardly left the house, sunk into depressions and often refused to see me. I visited her every day and though usually we would sit and talk normally, sometimes she did not communicate. We would sit speechless, looking at each other and my attempts at conversation were met by silence. When she was better, I sometimes persuaded her to accompany me to a play or a film.

“As you can imagine, this whole situation put a tremendous strain on my relations with Helen. I do not really blame her for her constant complaints. On the other hand, I could not abandon Lea. I tried to time my visits when Helen was out of the house. Often I went to Lea in the mornings during my free periods in university. Still, this inordinate concern for a person she could not abide annoyed Helen very much. She started organizing her life, her outings and parties without me. In a way, it suited me. I had grown heavy and our constant social activity had become distasteful and a burden for me. Helen kept saying she felt as if she did not have a husband and that most of her acquaintances believed we had separated. That many men were making passes at her and that she would not be blamed if she found herself a lover.”

“Quite frankly,” said Ceres, “I would not have tolerated your behavior either. Sex or no sex.”

“I understand and I plead guilty,” said Panos. “But Lea was a very special person. I could not desert her. She was not well. She told me she suffered from schizophrenia and though was much better the illness recurred every now and then in a milder form than previously. We talked a lot together. We opened our hearts to one another. We had reached the intimacy of an intense and sincere friendship. She told me things about her life that I would not repeat even to you. I would feel I was betraying her confidence. I told her I was fed up with my job at the university and that I, too, had an urge to try my hand at writing. She persuaded me to resign my post and to give writing a try. In any case, I did not need the money. No need to tell you, my resignation was the cause of endless arguments with Helen but she did agree that my career was stagnating. A new routine was thus established. I would visit Lea in the mornings and would write in the evenings. This did not improve much my relations with Helen. We were in a headlong dash to the point of no return.

“Nearly a decade went by. Despite the almost total indifference between us, habit and our children kept us together. It is unbelievable but true. We lived separate lives under the same roof. The girls grew in this strange ambiance at home. Luckily, they were not emotionally traumatized. They drew strength from one another. And when our quarrels became too frequent they told us that it would be best for everyone if we divorced. I think they were very happy when I decided to bring them here for their university studies.

“So we enter the realm of the epilogue. I am again madly in love with you, my Thimitra. Incredible that this happened in one afternoon. Well, not really. It has happened before. This time our Iason who was our link all those years has brought us together once again. You are as beautiful and as desirable as ever. I am now a portly, gray-haired gentleman. A little heavy and a little tired and more than a little surprised at my renewed passion and sexual drive. Stratos often told me Lea gave him a new lease on life. I think you shall do the same with me.

“I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth and I feel I did not achieve anything worthwhile in my life. But sometimes I think that if one is not exceptional, the best he can do is try to be happy. That, too, is a Stratos formula. Well, I tried. I suppose everyone does and I did have my happy and passionate moments amidst the wear and tear of life. My soul-consuming love affair with you. The wonderful time I spent with our son. My friendship and love affair with Lea. The good years I had with Helen. The joy Anna and Maria gave me and continue giving me. I am now dabbling in writing. I don't even know if it is good. It does not really matter because it makes me happy. Am I selfish to want to prolong and ensure my happiness? We don't know how our life will end. But end, it will. Wouldn't it be sad to reach our deathbed with regrets?

“Lea committed suicide last year. Her physical weakness and inability to paint made her miserable and unhappy. Her depressions came on more frequently and lasted longer as time went by. She started hallucinating again and often when I was with her she addressed long monologues to Makis and Stratos as if they were sitting right there with us. She often begged their forgiveness and wept to break your heart. One day she asked me to bring her two boxes of sleeping pills that were dispensed solely on prescription. I had a hunch what she wanted them for but I could not refuse her request. I just told her I hoped she would not do anything stupid and she answered that she had done so many stupid things in her life that one more would not matter.

“A few days later, the woman that took care of her found her dead on her bed. Next to her were the two empty packs of sleeping pills and a note. It just said, ‘Do not feel guilty my dear friend. Thank you.’ There were no names, just that. I presume it was for me. There was no one else. Her lawyer drew up her will a few days before her death. She had it all planned. In it, she bequeathed a respectable sum of money to Iason, Stratos's son, and twenty paintings to me. The rest of her fortune, which was considerable, and her houses in Athens and Geneva as well as the totality of her paintings were to go to the Menandros Foundation. She left not a penny to Sasa and Alexanthros. Their indifference to her was reciprocated. Helen did not want her paintings in the house. They are resting in a bank vault. To me they are priceless because they confirmed her love. But they are also truly wonderful.”

Panos looked at Ceres. He was too happy to curse his fate for depriving her from him for twenty-five years. Life is unpredictable and sometimes relents on its harshness. She materializes your dreams when it is almost too late.

Almost.

“The epilogue is not over,” he said.

“Oh? Is there more?”

“No.”

“What, then?”

“Shall we finish it together?”

She smiled.

“Yes, my darling,” she said.

Lea's illness never abandoned her completely. Bouts of depression and mild hallucinations made their appearance occasionally but Stratos was always at her side. He remained true to his mission, to his devotion, to his promise to take care of her until the end. He remembered that she had proposed their marriage and had told him, "Let us end our lives together." She often told him that she hoped she would die first because she would not be able to live without him. Because who would take care of her when her illness struck? Stratos would smile and reply that if he saw his end approaching before hers, he would kill her.

She would smile, too, and tell him,

"Yes, that is as it should be. You, after all, my Stratouly, were truly my fairy Godfather."

Athens 20 / 1/ 2003

TRIBULATIONS OF LOVE

George remembers :

One comes out of the metro, turns left on a wide avenue, Dionysou Areopagitou, now a pedestrian zone, with well preserved two and three-storey buildings on the left side, neo-classical, classy and obviously inordinately expensive, and on the right a steeply upward-sloping stretch of trees and wild bushes leads the eye to the rocky plateau of the Acropolis. There are few sights as gripping and soul wrenching as the heroically time-defying remains of the Parthenon which dominates the Acropolis. At night, as one strolls towards the Herodus Atticus theatre or leaves it in a hurry to catch the last metro, again, the sight of the illuminated Parthenon suspended in midair unsettles you with its beauty, its delicate, massive but well-proportioned majesty and for a moment reality fades, your acquired skepticism wilts, and you feel pride for this country. No history or society is without blemish; even the builders of the Parthenon, the politicians, philosophers and tragedians of that golden age. The architects and sculptors, the unknown soldiers who routed the Persian hordes, they cannot have been different from us, today. An inspired few created glorious history; the masses were our ancient twin brothers.

By the time I reached the theatre a crowd was already milling at the entrance, noisy and effusive. The staff of the Japanese embassy was greeting their more important guests with smiles and courteous little eastern bows. I showed my ticket at the door and moved along the marble steps into the amphitheatre. It is another of the many jewels of our country. Built in the shadow of the Acropolis in 161 AD, the “Irothio” is relatively small, able to accommodate about five thousand people and remarkably well preserved. The marble seating rises steeply in a semi-circle, tightly and not overly comfortable despite the little pillow allotted to each spectator. But that is overlooked. The atmosphere is overwhelming.

I am not a lover of ancient Greek tragedy. I have never been taught it and perhaps I miss its finer points. It might be a matter of temperament. I tend to be cool and collected and violent emotions rarely bubble out of my possibly repressed and apathetic psyche. I would not have gone to see Oedipus Rex on any occasion despite my interest in incest because in this tragedy it is accidental and not perversely intended. Its revelation brings forth turmoil and despair verging on the comical. Much less a play performed by Japanese actors in their language. I cannot imagine they had much success in their country. An indication of this was the fact that, in the end, as they were roundly applauded by their enthusiastic Greek audience, they kept on returning for more applause, again and again, until it became quite tiresome. Their exultant smiles told us they had experienced nothing like it in their country.

I had been offered this invitation by a friend employed in the Japanese embassy and was embarrassed both to refuse it and fail to attend. As I was climbing the steep steps to my seat I was thinking of the message I had just seen painted on the wall outside the metro station. It said “malaka Ellina, xypna. Exo oi xeni” (you masturbating Greek idiot, wake up. Out with the foreigners). I was shocked and annoyed. Lately, I seemed to notice repeatedly traits of my compatriots that

disappointed me. I thought of the ancient Greek maxim “pas mi Ellin, varvaros” (whoever is not a Greek, is a barbarian). Was modern Greek xenophobia an ancient legacy after all? Perhaps. Though I surmised, the ancients developed it out of a sense of their superior culture and civilization while my contemporaries out of a sense of superiority that is superficial and false, ungenerous and timorous.

I found my seat. On my left, a swarthy Asian woman in a sari, perhaps, in her late forties, on my right, a well-known TV comedian with a group of friends. The theatre kept steadily filling up well past starting time. Greeks, both spectators and organizers, are casual about punctuality and few events start on schedule.

Above the stage, a rudimentary translation, in both Greek and English, of the grandiloquent dialogues of the tragedy was screened in a long, luminous band. It left me as indifferent as the acting, the costumes, as the configurations, movement and antics of the strangely clad chorus, as the occasional monotonous, supposedly ancient music. It left me praying for the end and the interminable applause was the last straw. I turned with a smile, concealing my annoyance, to the lady on my left who did not stop clapping. I spoke to her in English.

“So you liked it,” I half asked, half affirmed.

“It was a good try,” she said in a characteristic Indian lilt. “It seems you were not impressed. You are not applauding.”

“I did. I gave them their due. One must be civil but this is too much. A Kabuki might have been more interesting.”

She smiled pleasantly at me. She might have been slimmer and prettier fifteen, twenty years ago. Black hair in a neat bun at the back of her neck, she had a sweet smile and good teeth. Her nose was a slightly prominent and her eyes large and alert. Small and buxom, she was not unattractive when you bothered to examine her, which one was loath to do offhand.

“Still, if I were Greek, I would consider it an honor that the Japanese chose to play a Greek tragedy.”

“That’s why the audience is clapping so hard. They are applauding themselves. They are grateful to the Japanese for honoring their heritage, for caressing their self-esteem.”

She smiled again.

“I assume you, too, are Greek,” she said.

“Yes. Another of that proud race. And you?”

“I’m from Sri Lanka.”

“Of the Tamil Tigers?”

She laughed.

“It’s sad that the Tigers come to mind when one mentions Sri Lanka. Ceylon is a beautiful country. It has fertile plains, mountains and jungles and of course real tigers on the way to extinction. Needless to say they are less savage than the human tigers. They only kill to eat. I’m a Tamil, in fact, but a peaceful one. Hardly a tigress.”

She looked at me with an uncertain smile as if hesitating to express her views to a difficult, opinionated person. But she went on.

“You see, I dislike politics and politicians. They don’t allow people to coexist peacefully. They incite fanaticism and intolerance amongst different races and religions for their own selfish ends. They are indifferent to the suffering they might cause, the deaths of thousands. We have had periods of terrible violence in our country. Massacres and killing on both sides, that is, between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Things are much, much better these days.”

“We have the politicians we deserve, Madam. We should not complain. They are callous, loquacious windbags most of them and their major concern is themselves, their pockets and power. We choose them and tolerate them. They are the mirror image of us; they reflect the values of our society.”

“Yes, yes. We are oversimplifying, of course, but there is much truth in what you say.”

The lights of the Irothio were finally switched on.

“Well, well,” I said. “The actors have definitively retired! Hurrah! Enough is enough.”

“Don’t be harsh. Didn’t you see their faces glowing with happiness? The applause of their repressed compatriots in Japan must have been dull, almost inaudible. The acclamation they received tonight was beyond their wildest dreams.”

A slow shuffle down the steep marble steps heading towards the exit started row by row from the ground floor up. I said good-bye to my neighbor. She was sweet and sociable and seemed intelligent. I would have risked asking for her telephone number but I saw a wedding ring on her right hand so I told her I enjoyed our chat and left her to enter the huddle towards the exit. On the street I headed at a rapid pace for the metro station. As rapid a pace as my portly figure would allow me. I was out of breath half way there. I must go on a diet again, I thought.

It was almost midnight. Closing time of the station was approaching and I did not want to use a taxi. The streets were unusually quiet, almost empty. The European football final was being contested in Portugal and Greece, having played exceptionally well thus far was fighting for the title. Almost the whole of Greece was stuck to the TV screens. Thousands traveled to Lisbon for the match but many supporters did not manage to enter the stadium because of the huge crowds and had to rely on television screens set up outside the stadium.

The Acropolis metro station was almost deserted when I entered it but a trickle of people from the Irothio followed my hurried and anxious arrival. Not so the train. It took its time coming. I saw my lady neighbor of the Irothio come in and I moved further along the platform. I had grown too fat and my big belly and chubby face had demolished my confidence in my sex appeal. I could not imagine a woman being attracted to me. My wife had not slept with me in three years and had finally left me to return to her family in her native provincial town. She is very beautiful and I never managed to get over my love for her despite the humiliations she heaped on me, despite the physical aversion to my person she made no effort to conceal.

On top of everything, I had health problems, which left her completely uninvolved, completely indifferent. Sometimes I had the feeling she would be quite happy if I died. The sooner the better. She would inherit my property which though not very great is, nevertheless, not insignificant. That is why she did not ask for a divorce. And then, I suppose, another reason was that she did not meet another man willing to marry her. At her age, any love affairs she may have had were probably ephemeral, probably with married men. A divorce from me would have left her financially insecure. She had been through that once before. That’s what threw her in my life, in my arms, in my grateful embrace. When she left me she asked me to vacate the flat we lived in, which belonged to her. I rented another in Kifisia.

The train finally arrived and I was thinking that it was touch and go whether I would manage to get on the last connection to Kifisia. I got off at the Attiki station for the change to the Kifisia line. The station was once again deserted and hardly any noise came from the street. I sat on a bench to wait. I figured the last train would be coming soon otherwise they would have announced that the station was closing down. The Sri

Lankan lady lingered further down the platform. A quaint, exotic presence in her sari and colorful scarf. She turned and saw me and slowly ambled towards me.

“May I sit next to you?” she asked.

“Of course. Please do.”

She sat on the bench next to me with a friendly smile. There was an awkward silence for a moment. I felt she wanted to chat. She looked to the left and to the right in mock amazement and with a sweeping gesture indicated the platform.

“It is quite eerie, isn’t it?” she remarked.

“You mean the quiet, the emptiness? It’s because of the football match.”

“I know.” she said with her sweet smile. “The world is becoming civilized,”

“Civilized?”

“Sure. Football is the modern world’s sublimation for war. Of course there are still armed conflicts festering here and there but they are frowned upon by the so-called civilized nations. If you study world history as a whole, in summary, and not in specific periods of time where details interfere with the overall picture, you will be stunned by the fact that the history of mankind has been an incessant murderous and merciless aggression and domination of one country, one race, one tribe by another, to plunder and steal each other’s wealth and displace them from their land. This has been going on till our very days. No need to cite examples for they are only too obvious. In my own country, the original inhabitants were a people called the Vedda. At around 500 BC, the Sinhalese moving from the north of India to the more fertile south drove the Vedda to the jungles and later the Tamils, from the south of India overflowed into Ceylon. They were, of course, unwelcome and even though a minority, the conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils has been going on ever since.”

“Hence the Tamil Tigers.”

“Indeed!”

“I think one solution to the problem is to teach them football.”

“You’re making fun of me.”

“No, no. It was just a silly joke. What you imply is very interesting. If I understand correctly what you are saying is that since wars of domination between countries are now unthinkable, football has become the new mode of combat that pits one country against another.”

“Don’t you think I’m correct? Why else the game’s almost universal appeal? The irrational fanaticism; the senseless violence in the sports arenas; the decadence of the sportsman to a high priced gladiator; the spectator, the sports lover to a hooligan?”

“Yes. You are probably right to an extent. It might, furthermore, function as a safety valve, a letting off steam for the considerable stresses of our contemporary daily existence.”

“Such as waiting for a train that may or may not come,” she said and smiled.

“Or having endured three hours of insipid Japanese moaning.”

She laughed.

“Come on! It wasn’t that bad.”

“Where are you going?”

“To the Kifisia terminal. From there I shall take a taxi to Nea Erythrea where I live.”

“I’m going to Kifisia as well.”

“Might we share a cab?”

At that moment a sparsely occupied train rolled in the station and with relief we boarded it and sat together at an empty double seat. As the train entered the Kato Patissia station we heard triumphant cheers and yelling. One could not mistake their

message. Our fellow passengers, equally quick on the uptake, jumped up. "We won, we won," they cried. In a matter of minutes the stations on the way started flooding with distraught, hysterical humanity vociferously expressing their elation. Greece was the European champion. The unexpected, the unbelievable, the miracle had happened. I had never seen nor imagined the possibility of such an outburst of emotion and enthusiasm. Thankfully, I noted that the crowds were massing on the opposite platform, leading to the city centre. Very few people entered our train.

"Congratulations," the Sri Lankan lady told me with a smile.

"Thank you," I replied. "I had very little to do with it."

She looked uneasy at my snappish reply.

"I meant to congratulate you as a Greek. You surely must be glad."

"I am certainly gratified but these excesses of rapture for a game of football are beyond me."

"And yet, one must not scorn the game even if it leaves him indifferent. A friend of mine and obviously a lover of football described the football pitch as a huge chess board, by which he meant that there are, beyond the obvious physical attributes needed, a great deal of mental calculation, talent, art, skill and vocation."

"I do not scorn the game, dear lady."

"Please call me Andchana. I prefer if to, dear lady."

"Okay. Mine is George. Not as beautiful a name as yours but I did not have a say at my christening."

A smile.

"Names are not important. It is the person that counts."

"Yes, of course. As I was telling you, Andchana, I do not scorn the game. You can see from my shape, I am not much of a sportsman. Apart from short walks now and then and a little swimming in summer I have never done any sports. I am in terrible shape, overweight, flat footed, and uric acid makes walking painful much of the time. It is, perhaps, understandable that I should lack the enthusiasm of a healthy person. But above all else I strongly disapprove of something you yourself pointed out: the fanaticism that has come to be identified with the game. The bad manners and the hooliganism. Somehow it brings out the worst in people."

"Yes, it has stopped being a game for the playing fields of Eton, isn't it? The creeping civilization, the softening and refinement of mankind has made it a substitute for war and war is a nasty affair. But I think, perhaps, we are being too harsh. Let's just say, it has its good and bad points."

"Like most things in life. In any case, it is rather naïve to generalize."

"Oh, we are only chatting idly. We are not expounding principles."

"No. But looking at this revelry I truly think your opinions are quite apt."

"Another interesting point is that it is exclusively a man's game. Unlike tennis, swimming, skating and athletics, women do not participate and are totally indifferent to it."

"Which means?"

"Well, women hardly ever take part in wars and though, in history, they were rarely in a position to initiate warfare, I think that even had they been in such a position, they would have never done so. Any substitute for it does not interest them either. They laugh and scorn at their ridiculous men folk who yell and gesticulate at their TV sets, get elated and depressed according to the game's result."

"I must have an excess of female genes in my genome."

"Good for you," she said.

As the train was approaching Iraklio, an announcement came through the intercom saying that this was the last train and it would go as far as Irini, which was the station after Iraklio.

“Oh God! This is the last straw. First, an insipid Japanese Oedipus Rex and now this.”

“What’s the matter?” asked Andchana.

I explained the situation and suggested we get out at Iraklio to try and find a taxi because the station at Irini is in the middle of nowhere. It is at the rear of the Olympic stadium, utterly isolated, with no possibility of finding a cab. We got off at Iraklio into a swirling mob of exuberant, festive, cheering people of all ages and of both sexes. I pushed my way to the exit of the station, into the street. Crowds were converging towards the station. The streets were packed and no cars were circulating, let alone taxi cabs. Andchana followed me and when the jam was too thick held my arm so as not to lose me, which was not so unlikely a proposition. There was a twinkle in her eye. She seemed to be amused by this hullabaloo, as if it confirmed her theory of football being the civilized substitute for war.

I smiled at her when I felt her grip on my arm and she smiled back.

“War is always hard on the non-combatants,” I said.

“Do you think we shall survive, George?” she asked mischievously.

“Hopefully, but perhaps not intact.”

“Oh dear. Might we lose an arm or a leg?”

“Not quite. More likely a good night’s sleep and our good humor. It is already quarter to one.”

I tried to concentrate in the swirling mob, to size up the situation. Taxis were definitely out. It, obviously, was not a life and death situation, it was not a cause for panic, simply concern for the extreme discomfort and loss of time we would be subjected to, inadvertently, unluckily, for we were not celebrating. That Greece was the European champion in football meant so little when untold, pitiful defects and shortcomings plagued the country and its citizens’ moral values. I thought the most logical option would be to return to the city center where finding a taxi seemed a less remote prospect. I told this to Andchana and we hurried back to the metro station and pushed our way inside. Miracle of miracles, an empty train, against all logic at that late hour, rolled in the station. In typically Greek style I grabbed Andchana’s arm and charged like a bull to an empty seat. We sat hurriedly while an avalanche of people surged through the door as if propelled in under extreme pressure. The compartment filled to the point of suffocation. Andchana patted my leg.

“That was extremely adroit of you,” she said laughing. “A little rough but I don’t think you injured anyone.”

“Yes, now and then I resort to practices I ordinarily abhor.”

“It’s hardly the time to be a gentleman.”

“Especially since I am accompanying a lady.”

The noise around us was deafening. The shouting, the laughter, the happiness. They were literally jumping for joy. Up and down, up and down. I wondered if the coach could withstand the strain. Excess jubilation was turning to mass hysteria. Groups of friends yelling at other groups of friends. They were all one, for once. The wise old saying that if you put five Greeks together you had five different opinions, five different political parties did not hold this evening. And the Greek vulgarity ever present. Never a trait to tarry when Greeks get together. One group shouted, “What did we do to them?” and the reply, universal and deafening, “We fucked them.”

Andchana looked at me and smiled.

“Despite my meager Greek, I understood that. But what is that other chant? It goes on and on.”

“*Varia, varia, t’arkhithia tou tsolias?*”

“Yes.”

“I’d rather not say.”

“Come on George, I’m fifty-two. I can take it.”

“I’m fifty-two as well and it shocks me, nevertheless.”

“Please.”

“Well, *varia* means heavy. *Arkithia* are a man’s testicles and *tsolias* is the traditional Greek *evzone*. You know, soldiers wearing the traditional white kilts, sleeveless colored jackets, red caps and red leather *tsaroukhia*, shoes with an upturned tip and a round tuft. If you pass by *Syntagma* you’ll see them guarding the tomb of the Unknown Soldier.”

“So what does that mean?”

“Oh Andchana, use your imagination. The Portuguese nannies could not resist the Greek *tsolias* and his heavy testicles.”

“I would have thought the heavy testicles would hinder the players’ movement.”

“How? Make them lose their balance? Really, Andchana! Big testicles mean virility, aggression, a surfeit of sperm. How else could we have fucked them? The pretension of those little hooligans is sickening. This thoughtless and naïve chauvinism drives me mad. Let alone their manners. I hate to think these young people shall be tomorrow’s citizens, businessmen and politicians.”

Andchana was silent. I thought, perhaps, she was reluctant to express an opinion which might have been offensive. She was being polite.

To break the silence, I asked, “Are your compatriots as crazy about football?”

“Our national game is volley ball but by far the most popular sport in Sri Lanka is cricket, a legacy from our late English masters.”

“A gentleman’s game. I never quite understood it. A game where a match can stretch for several days is beyond me. I suppose a gentleman’s game requires gentlemen’s manners.”

“Oh, they are quite fanatic about it but I believe nothing like this has ever taken place.”

The train continued its journey slowly. It seemed to be creaking with the overload. At every station on the way more people tried to squeeze in and the automatic doors would not close except after many, repeated, exasperating trials. The station loudspeakers urged the people to let the train depart. Another would be following behind. We were very lucky to be seated. We could barely carry on a conversation. One or two sentences exchanged and then the absorption at the unbelievable happening.

“There are girls in their midst hollering with the best of them. How do you explain that?” I asked Andchana.

“They’re out for the fun of it, aping their puerile boyfriends.”

“They’re not fanatics?”

“Never. The female sex is down to earth. Sensible. Practical.”

We reached Omonia station in this slow, tedious pace. The racket, the slogans and furious movement did not abate throughout the journey. At Omonia we let the hordes pour out of the coach and when the pressure eased, followed them to the exit with the stragglers. We emerged on the square by the escalators to find it almost packed and noisy with people continuously pouring in from all the streets leading to it. No cars were circulating in the vicinity and one or two celebratory bonfires were lit. The high spirits and cheering, the loud jeering and taunts for the defeated arch enemy continued

as if instructions had been given by a Greek High Priest of Jingoism. The union of hearts and minds was total. I looked at Andchana, a friendly face in this wild, aggressive exhilaration all around us. She kept close to me and held my arm now and then. She was as lost as I was but more vulnerable.

“Do you see any taxis?” I asked her.

She laughed.

“Don’t blame me. I did not suggest we come here.”

“In any case, perhaps it was worth coming after all. We are witnessing an unusual phenomenon. Mass paranoia. That’s what Kristallnacht in Nazi Germany must have been like.”

She laughed again.

“Oh hardly,” she said. “It is certainly not as sinister. It is not a product of hate and is not sanctioned by the government.”

“No, not hate. But what is the psychological motivation?”

“A sense of insecurity? Of inferiority? The fact that Greece has accomplished something they never imagined possible? The trouncing of all those superior Europeans who are way above Greece socially, politically and above all economically?”

“The funny thing is that we Greeks have a very high sense of self-esteem. We really believe we are the finest, most intelligent race on earth.”

“Don’t be too critical on this. It is the common pretension of all races and countries.”

“You mean to tell me that Sri Lankans are better than Greeks?”

“Without the slightest doubt. We are the best.”

I laughed.

“So perhaps you can tell me how we can get out of our predicament.”

“You got us into this; you get us out of it.”

“Well, no sense in hanging around here. Let’s walk towards Alexandra Avenue,” I suggested, “We might find cars and taxis circulating there.”

“My shoes are starting to pinch. They are new and not yet broken in.”

“My legs are starting to ache, too. They are old and considerably overloaded, don’t you think?”

“Next time, before you go to a Greek tragedy go on a diet.”

“And you’d better wear a comfortable pair of shoes.”

We started on a slow trudge down Patission Street moving against an incoming tide of people on their way to Omonia. It seemed like a setting of a science fiction movie where the landing of a spaceship brought thousands of people out in the streets. I had seen it once before after a major earthquake in Athens, which immobilized public transport and brought car circulation to a standstill. People flooded the streets walking aimlessly, anxiously, wondering how to get home. This time it was a celebration for a football match victory and the masses were happy. Families with children moved with smiling, shining faces towards Omonia to participate in a national delirium of triumph. Next day was a working day but that did not seem to concern anyone. I was worried, Andchana was worried, but we were a minority of two.

We walked silently for a while dodging people who eventually thinned out as we drew further away from Omonia and finally reached Alexandra Avenue where we had not yet sighted a single vehicle. Andchana told me she was getting tired and her feet were hurting. I said that further down there was a bus stop and we could sit and rest on the bench that was there. When we reached it we sat with the infinite relief of a way worn traveler. I looked at my watch.

“One thirty,” I told Andchana.

“The night is still young,” she said and smiled.

She seemed to be taking the experience in her stride. The spring weather was mild and in her silk sari she seemed not uncomfortable. I complimented her on the color scheme of her sari, her earrings, her red necklace and she smiled. She smiled a lot in any case and her swarthy face indicated a patient, pleasant disposition. She was as attractive as the wear and tear of her age and emerging wrinkles allowed. Usually one can tell that a woman must have been beautiful in her youth.

“Is anyone waiting for you at home?” I asked.

“No. I live alone. And you?”

“I live alone, too. What about your husband?”

“I am divorced.”

“And the wedding ring?”

“I wear it for protection. To discourage erotic overtures.”

“Why?” I asked. “Have you given up sex? The optimists say that life begins at forty.”

“The optimists must be of the male sex. It is slightly different for women.”

“Women will be soon ruling the world. They shall be the hunters, not the prey. Most of them already are. You don’t need a wedding ring for protection.”

“It gives me an opportunity to pick and choose and also to refuse proposals with less discomfiture.”

“Well, it did a good job. I thought of asking for your phone number back there at the Irothio but then I noticed it and stopped dead in my tracks.”

“Really George? How sweet. But I would not have given it to you seeing you’re wearing a wedding ring yourself, which I am sure is not there for protection.”

“No. For protection I have my big belly. That puts most women off. As for the ring, I am separated but not divorced.”

“Any children?”

“My wife’s daughter from her previous marriage.”

She was silent for a moment, thinking.

“Let me see,” she said. “You could have answered, No. No children. But you obviously love your step daughter. Is that why you are not divorced?”

“Not only that. I am still in love with my wife. She is a very beautiful woman even now, at our age, and I can’t get over her despite her aversion towards me. But I do not blame her, the way I have become. I have not asked her for a divorce and neither has she. We just live apart. And you are very perceptive. Yes, I do love my step daughter. I have nurtured her since she was a baby. Sent her to private schools and paid her college expenses when she had to live in another town. I take care of her as her natural father never did. She considers me her real father. She has said so many a time.”

“Doesn’t she see her father?”

“I don’t think so. The father has not given signs of life since he left them. They don’t know where he is.”

“That’s very strange. Is the girl beautiful like her mother?”

“No. Not as beautiful but sweet and charming. Her mother has a harshness in her face that her beauty can barely conceal. She is also very unsociable. She never wanted to meet and socialize with my friends. The few times we went out together they were bowled over by her beauty. ‘Where have you been hiding her?’ they told me”

“Which obviously flattered you.”

“Well, yes. I always felt very proud to accompany her.”

“Does your wife work?”

“No.”

“Does she have any money of her own?”

“No.”

She was silent again for a moment and then she got up.

“My goodness,” she said. “Not a car yet in sight. It seems to me we shall have to march on.”

“Why are you changing the subject?” I asked.

“Because I tend to become too inquisitive and I must stop this habit. It’s a defect.”

“But I am interested in your opinion. Tell me what were you getting at with your questions?”

She hesitated and looked at me with her large, expressive eyes, unsure if she ought to express her opinion.

“You are a nice fellow, George. You obviously pay all their expenses. You believe the girl loves you and perhaps she does. She ought to, in any case, and the mother has not asked for a divorce. You are still married to a beautiful woman and it seems to me this is important for you. Everybody’s happy so to speak. Well, I hope, at least that you are because you seem to be giving a lot with very little return.”

“So you don’t think the girl loves me? How would you know?”

“I don’t. Except that blood ties are far stronger than gratitude. And gratitude entails sensitivity and refined sentiments. I am sure if she saw her father again she would fall in his arms despite everything. I have seen it happen again and again. Moreover, living with her mother she is bound to be influenced by her feelings towards you. Sorry to be so blunt. It’s just a point of view and I know so little of the dynamics of your relationship. Don’t take it to heart.”

I stood up as well, upset and annoyed at her peremptory conclusion. We started walking towards Ambelokipi where Alexandra meets Kifisias Avenue, the main artery to Kifisia. People were still moving towards Omonia and a few were walking in our direction. Andchana had started a slight limp. I felt sorry for her but my feet were not in much better shape. I was feeling a dull pain which was bound to get worse. By the time we reached the next bus stop Andchana was limping noticeably and my legs were hurting. But cars were circulating once again and one or two taxis went by packed with customers. We sat on the bus stop bench to rest. It was twenty past two.

I looked at Andchana. She seemed despondent.

“Something good always transpires out of something bad,” I told her.

She looked at me unsure of what I meant.

“Meeting you was well worth all this hassle.”

She smiled.

“You’re very sweet, George,” she said. “I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“I haven’t saved you yet.”

“No matter. It was not for lack of trying. I feel safe in your hands.”

We sat for a while in silence. Taxis passed by more frequently by now but they were always engaged. I kept on jumping up with waving arms whenever I saw a yellow car only to sit down again disappointed. Andchana smiled and told me to relax. She took off her shoes and wiggled her toes.

“Sorry,” she said with a smile, “under the circumstances we can forego the etiquette. Wow, that’s much better. I won’t take another step until we bag a cab.”

Those wiggling toes seemed to tell me something. That Andchana was not straight-laced. Not altogether. There was something daring, something of an adventuress despite the wedding ring to supposedly thwart erotic overtures. The

evidence, however, being ten wiggling toes was admittedly rather flimsy. I looked at her. Eyes eye-lined, lips a little fleshy and sensual like a Khajuraho temple statue and the mouth large with a voluptuousness I missed formerly. It was the smile that led you astray because it was merry and unconstrained and constantly effaced the underlying hint of an experienced and passionate nature. It was strange that after such a long while together, it was her wiggling toes that would spark a physical interest in her that was previously absent.

Her shoes were high heeled and expensive. Without them, I surmised, she would be even more petite. I looked at her feet. They were small and trim and the nails painted a dark red. She was elegant to the tip of her toes. I wondered about her.

“What is an elegant, beautiful Sri Lankan woman doing in Greece?”

She gave me a mischievous and coquettish glance.

“Beautiful?” she said.

“Yes, indeed.”

“Oh, your story.”

“I mean it.”

“Have a heart. At my age?”

“For your age, if you wish. If that makes it more credible.”

A smile that could not conceal a reticent pleasure formed on her lips.

“Okay, I can perhaps accept that. Thank you.”

“Well?”

“I work at our embassy.”

“You must be the ambassador.”

She laughed.

“Hardly. I would not be waiting for a taxi on a sidewalk, barefoot with aching legs, if I were. I work at the embassy’s press office which has been upgraded and includes cultural affairs due to the upcoming Athens Olympics.”

“Hence Oedipus.”

“Yes. I usually cover as many cultural events as I can, which is a very satisfying part of my job. I also have to write a short report on each which is filed and stuffed in a filing cabinet and remains unread forever.”

“I’ll give you my address and you can send copies to me.”

“Fine,” she said and laughed. “And what do you do for a living?”

“I work in a newspaper.”

“Aha, that explains a lot.”

“Such as?”

“Well, it is a stressful job. Irregular hours, disorderly feeding habits, tense overeating with fast foods and inordinate absenteeism at home. A classic case of a broken household.”

“You hit the nail on the head.”

“And now you are overweight, in bad health, miserable and lonely. What are you doing about it?”

I did not answer. I had no answer. I looked away. Would a taxi never come? This two-bit psychoanalysis was getting on my nerves, mainly because it was true.

“Sorry,” she said. “I have a tart tongue. I told you it is one of my bad habits.”

“Anyway, forget about it. It’s a very complicated problem.”

“Why?”

“Have you heard of the paralysis of love?”

“No.”

“Neither have I but I am sure if you search the annals of psychiatry you will find it is a psychic illness that surely exists.”

She laughed.

“Oh George, it’s all in the mind!”

“Undoubtedly.” I knocked my head with my knuckles. “It’s in there. How to get it out?”

“Find another woman.”

“At my age? With this huge belly, with my diabetes and uric acid, with my levels of cholesterol and my enlarged heart?”

“Yes, yes, yes. If you have the will you can do it.”

“The point is I don’t have the will.”

“I shall help you. I am not offering to be the surrogate woman but I am willing to help.”

“You see? Altruistic sentiments but with a clarification - ‘keep your distance, baby!’”

“Well, you obviously won’t find a woman as you are. You have to shape up.”

“Hey! Let’s change the subject, Andchana. It’s getting me down. Let’s solve some of your problems. Okay? Don’t you have any problems?”

“Do you know anyone without problems? Even your wife has a problem - you. But she’s tough and knows how to handle it.”

I knew Andchana was trying to shake me but I do not take kindly to criticism of my wife. I was greatly vexed and about to tell her to mind her own business when a taxi stopped at my desperate, exaggerated hand waving. The driver looked out of the window across a passenger sitting on the front seat. “Kifisia,” I told him and he gave me the curt, taciturn nod of Greek taxi drivers. Had he not liked our destination he would have driven off without a word. Mollified, I opened the door. “Get in Andy,” I told her. She picked up her shoes and entered barefoot, giving me a wide smile. Another passenger was already sitting at the back seat.

Athens is one of those cities that never sleep; ordinarily it has traffic jams at two in the morning. The football match kept it in thrall throughout that night and the traffic at three was almost impenetrable. We had to take the two gentlemen to their destinations which, mercifully, were not much out of our way, before undertaking the trek home. Andchana laid her head on my shoulder. She was almost purring like a cat.

“Are you sleepy Andy?” I asked her.

“A little. I hope my feet are not smelly,” she said with a laugh. “They are hurting terribly. I can feel the blisters.”

“You smell nice. Hauntingly oriental.”

“We have at least an hour to go, at this pace.”

“Take a nap.”

“No. I must show you the way to my house.”

“You’re staying at my place tonight, for heaven’s sake.”

She turned to me with a smile.

“You won’t take advantage of me?”

“Don’t I have to shape up before I become a viable seducer?”

She laughed, wrapped her right arm around my left and gradually dropped off to sleep, her head on my shoulder.

The traffic at Marousi came to a standstill but our driver veered into the suburb and through a labyrinth of back streets managed to beat the jam. It was almost four when I woke up Andchana and we tottered into our building and into my flat.

“What a nice flat,” she cried as soon as we entered.

“Is it really?”

“Well, for a bachelor it’s unexpectedly cozy and neat. And that couch is absolutely perfect. That’s where I’ll sleep.”

She dropped her shoes and her bag on a chair, removed the silk shawl she was wearing and stretched on the couch. The undersides of her feet were grayish with street dirt.

“Perfect,” she said again, “just my size.” She put one of the couch pillows under her head, stretched her arms above her head for a moment to exorcise her weariness and sighed. “Oooh, that feels good. Good night, George. Shut the light when you finish. Oh, and please tell me where the toilet is.”

“Just a moment,” I said.

I went to the kitchen and partially filled a plastic washbowl with scorching hot water in which I dissolved a good quantity of rough salt crystals used in washing machines. It was a quackery my mother employed to relieve the extreme fatigue from my father’s feet, which seemed to work. I carried it to the hall, next to the couch and told Andchana to soak her feet in it. While she was soaking, I rummaged in my drawers, retrieved a clean pair of pajamas and brought a pair of slippers as well.

When she saw the pajamas, she let out a peal of laughter.

“If they’re too tight,” I said, “never mind, you’ll be all the more sexy.”

“I’ll be sexy all right with the trousers slipping down around my feet.”

I fetched my dressing gown belt to stabilize the pajama trousers and with a bar of soap washed and firmly massaged her feet and sexy wiggling toes in the hot brine, accompanied by stifled giggles.

“This is too much,” she kept saying, “this is just too much.”

I dried them with a towel and told her to go to the toilet to wash and put on her pajamas. She came out after a while carrying her sari which she laid carefully on a chair. Part of her glamour was gone with the removal of her makeup and her exotic clothing but she was totally endearing in the oversize pajamas with sleeves and trousers rolled up. She was extravagantly appreciative for my ministrations and told me the footbath had done her a world of good. All weariness and pain were gone.

She wondered why a wife would leave a man like me and as an afterthought said it was probably both our faults. She did not know the mistakes that came from my wife’s side but certainly neglecting one’s home in favor of one’s work and letting oneself deteriorate to the state I was in was not only self-destructive but also totally selfish because it neglected both her person and her sensibilities. Seeing her once good-looking husband become a walking barrel must have been painful and distasteful. Did I not realize that I had pretty much reached a dead end when she no longer wanted to have sex with me? Did I take the slightest trouble to ameliorate the situation?

Andchana was getting on my nerves once again and I got up to get us a drink and a sandwich because I was hungry.

“Listen,” she said, “Okay for the drink but no sandwiches. We start a new regime now, tonight, and you must get used to being a little hungry. At least at the beginning, because soon enough you will get used to eating less. I really want to help you to become the personable person I know is enclosed in this swathe of fat. Furthermore, I am sure your health will improve.”

“I am quite happy as I am,” I said stubbornly. “If I did not go on a diet for my wife, I certainly won’t do it for you. And when I am hungry I like to eat. It is the only sensual pleasure I have left in my life.”

I went to the kitchen red-faced with the blood pumping in my ears. I was embarrassed I had reacted like an ill-bred child. Taking my time to cool down, I brought

two glasses, soda water, ice cubes from the fridge and a bottle of whisky and set them on the small table in front of the couch and sat next to her.

“Where are the sandwiches?” she said smiling. “I am famished.”

“Sorry,” I told her. “We are on a diet as of now. By the way, what was your share of mistakes in your marriage that led to a divorce? Since we are on a self-improvement mode perhaps we can correct the flaws that led to the breakup. Or do you happen to be flawless?”

I poured whisky in the glasses, added some ice and soda water and gave her a glass. She was smiling at my retaliation.

“I am sorry,” she said. “I warned you I am too inquisitive and a little too blunt and I tend to annoy people.”

“Never mind. I am really interested.”

She picked up her glass, said ‘Cheers’ and took a good gulp. I did the same. She was silent for a moment then looked at me with a smile.

“I really should not be telling you this, especially since I would rather put it well behind me and not recall all the pain it involved but it seems to me unfair to comment on your marriage while being secretive about mine.”

She put her feet up on the couch and circled them with her arms. Her hair had loosened up but the bun still held. Her color was a dark brown. The color one sees sometimes on dedicated sun worshipers who devote endless hours to sun-soaking immobility. Her eyes were large, intelligent and mobile. With her mouth they defined her emotions; merry, inquisitive, serious or teasing. Large eyes of an open nature as opposed to small ones of a cunning one.

“I don’t want to press you to tell me things you’d rather not. But I must confess I am interested.”

“In my marriage,” she began, “there were sins on both sides.”

“Sins?”

“Yes, not sins against divine law or anything of the kind but a moral transgression on a social level which was bound to bring unhappiness and failure in the end. I was married off at twenty-five to a very rich man of sixty. A widower, of course. A well preserved ex-debonair who did not want to waste his last half dozen years of fading virility. He could have taken a mistress, you might say, but no, my husband was morally upright, socially active, was well known, and jealous of his reputation. He explained to me that he would have been unable to endure the gossip behind his back that a mercenary relationship would generate. You might further suggest, he could have married an older woman but my dear George, men with vast fortunes think they deserve the best. In any case they can buy it.”

“And were you for sale?”

“More or less. All people have their price. Or didn’t you know that?”

“Were you poor then?”

“Not at all. He would not deign to buy a poor girl. He wanted a rich, educated girl of his class.”

“So your parents were to blame.”

“My parents, of course, primarily but so was he, marrying a girl so much younger than himself. Many a time during quarrels I told him his vast egoism ruined my life, which was not altogether true. My marriage lasted about ten years, a not entirely unhappy decade for I would be unfair if I denied the good times and, well, here I am, still alive and kicking. And believe me, if I seem prim and proper, I gave as much as I got. Punches, that is. Below the belt.”

I laughed.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Patience, dear boy.”

Sip by sip we emptied our glasses and I refilled them with more whisky than soda and ice, to keep Andy talking.

“You did seem prim and proper at the Irothio. Now not as much.”

She gave me a coquettish look and said, “Oh?” Followed by a smile.

I told her that in a way tradition spoiled her life by the fact that her family imposed on her an unnatural match and tradition derailed mine. I met my wife before her first marriage and we spent a year and a half in an idyllic relationship. I was madly in love with her from the beginning and though one cannot be certain, I believe, at the time, she was in love with me. I wanted to marry her but I had an unmarried elder sister and tradition in Greece requires the man to marry off his sisters before he may consider marriage for himself. Although the custom is weakening, at the time the difference in viewpoints caused considerable turbulence in my family and violent quarrels went on for months and abutted to nothing. Fanny, my wife, left me in disgust and I fell into a depression so severe that my family, which was previously adamant in their opposition to this marriage, started phoning the girl, begging her to come back to marry me. But for Fanny it was all over. It never ceases to impress me how resolute a woman is when she takes the decision to sever a relationship. For her there is no turning back.

“So what happened, then?”

“You didn’t finish your story.”

“We’ll get back to it.”

“Well, each went his own way. I had a few flirts, a few affairs. You see, even when I was thin and handsome I was never a Don Juan.”

“No, you are not made of that stuff. You are too gentle and kind.”

“I got her news from time to time from mutual friends and in turn learnt of her marriage, the birth of a baby girl, then that her marriage was in trouble, that her husband was violent and maltreated her, that there were complications in the family because Fanny’s father lent a large sum of money to the husband and the business went broke, that they divorced and he disappeared without repaying the debt. Apparently, he has not seen Fanny or his daughter since. About a year after her divorce she called me up and we started going out together again for I was as much in love with her as ever. Financially she was hard up and because of the child was unable to work. I asked her to marry me and she gratefully accepted because it was no longer love or happiness that was the issue but a question of survival, of the daily bread.

“The girl comes and sees me now and then. Mostly when she needs something. She is always very sweet and tender with me and calls me father and I want desperately to believe it. But then she again gives no signs of life until the next time she needs help or money. So you see Andy, if my stupid family had been less stubborn and tradition-bound, I would have married Fanny early on and we would have been spared the wounds of bad feelings, her marriage and our separation. Moreover, I would have had my own child whose love I would not have to second-guess. And to emphasize the futility and stupidity of the whole affair I have to tell you that my sister eventually got married quite happily and has two daughters.”

We were silent for a while sipping our drinks.

“Don’t you think we ought to go to sleep?” she said.

“It will soon be daylight. I shall fix some breakfast and then we can go to sleep. In any case, you have not finished your story.”

“And what are you offering for breakfast?”

“Fried eggs, bacon, toast, butter, orange marmalade, tea or coffee or anything else you wish. I am well stocked.”

“Do you have grape fruit?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

“Wonderful. Half a grape fruit, a single slice of bread and a small piece of cheese each, is all we’re having.”

I was exasperated. Hunger was gnawing at my insides. The whisky opened my appetite.

“Aren’t you a bit too bossy after an acquaintanceship of barely six hours?”

“Take it or leave it. It is part of my friendship.”

“Okay. Get on with your story and then we can feast on half a grapefruit.”

“So where shall I start? Well, I was wily enough to start with my husband’s major mistake, at least towards me, which was marrying a girl thirty-five years younger than him. With his millionaire’s ego which was fed and sustained by the bowing and scraping servility of his household and entourage. With his insistence on having a child at that age as a public affirmation of his virility. With the secluded life he required me to endure. I suppose many a poor girl would have been more than happy to be in my shoes to wallow in the security of his millions but, George, I was an educated person. I spent five years in England. Two in pre-university courses and three at university earning a BA in sociology. I tasted freedom. Freedom of every sort, both social and intellectual. I read books, went to the theatre, to concerts and ballet because I enjoyed them, not just to see and be seen. I had sex with a number of young men. I believed in the feminist movement that was dawning at the time. Gloria Steinem was our guru but she was not the only one. I corresponded with Germaine Greer who wrote *The Female Eunuch* and did not miss a single one of her lectures. When I wrote to her she answered my letters. Imagine? She liberated me. I worshipped her.”

“So why did you get trapped into this marriage?”

“My family was terribly old fashioned and traditional. We are from the city called Trincomalee where a large concentration of Sri Lankan Tamils is found.”

“A few years back,” I told Andhana, “I met a young man, here in Greece, from Singapore who was a Tamil and a Moslem. Are most of you Moslem? Forgive my ignorance, Andy, but you are a small part of the Indian nation one rarely hears about.”

“Don’t make me laugh, George. Tiny Greece of ten millions ought not to profess or condone ignorance of the Tamil nation. With more than 77 million speakers in the state of Tamil Nadu in India and in Sri Lanka, Tamil is one of the widely spoken languages of the world. It has a continuous literary tradition of over two thousand years. You Europeans are just so self-centered and especially you Greeks think you invented civilization and are still its custodians.”

“I agree and beg your pardon.”

“There are Moslem Tamils as well as Christian Tamils but the vast majority, that is about 90 percent, is Hindu.”

“I thought they were Buddhists.”

“No. Sri Lanka has been the center of Buddhist religion and culture from ancient times and it is the religion of the Sinhalese majority but not all its citizens are Buddhists. Almost a third of the population, mostly Tamil, is Hindu with a small percentage comprising of Christians and Moslems. And please, don’t ask me what the difference between Buddhists and Hindus is because I shall scream.”

“Tell me, please Andy, what’s the difference between Buddhists and Hindus?”

She smiled broadly indicating she was not fooled.

“I’ll tell you anyway,” she said, “but not in a sentence because it cannot be done. Hinduism is rather a form of civilization than a religion as it is understood in the West. It is a system of castes, which nowadays is in the process of disintegration with the encouragement of the state although religion is not state-controlled. A Hindu accepts five main general ideas as the framework of his spiritual life. First, the Hindu’s idea of the highest way of living is that of the holy ascetic and there are many kinds of hermits that lead a very frugal and solitary life. A man may lead an ordinary life but is expected that nearing his end he will turn to asceticism. Of course, largely this is rapidly being bulldozed to extinction by education, modern industry and business and lately by electronic communications.

“Secondly, a Hindu does not believe in the importance of historical events. He does not much care whether a story is true so long as it contains a spiritual meaning. Thirdly, Hinduism allows beliefs and disbeliefs of almost any kind, there are Hindus who are atheists and others who believe in many gods such as Vishnu, Shiva, Kali, and so on who are different aspects of the Supreme Being, known as Brahma. Then, there is reincarnation, which you surely must have heard about, which is the concept that living things have a succession of lives, past and future. This chain of births and rebirths, called samsara, is governed by the principle of karma. Thus the result of virtuous deeds is to be re-born in a higher caste, while the result of vicious action is to be re-born in some unpleasant state, such as a worm or a pig. Lastly, Hinduism teaches that whatever Being lies behind and above this physical world, that Being has nothing to do and is not concerned with morality.

She smiled.

“A Hindu would not be likely to have written the Ten Commandments.”

“How strange!”

“Not so strange, George. I hear there is a sect here in Greece that believes in the twelve ancient gods of Olympus. That they perform ceremonies dressed in ancient garb and that the Church has excommunicated them and outraged ordinary people disrupt their ceremonies.”

“The witches of Salem all over again, except we should burn both the heretic worshippers on one stake and the clergy of the Greek Orthodox Church on the other.”

She laughed and went on.

“In a way, although I am not a Buddhist, I find Buddhism to be the sanest religion. Buddha or Siddhartha Gautama was born in 560 BC in northern India. Initially a Hindu prince of a soldier caste he became dissatisfied with the Hindu beliefs which he considered too extreme especially the excessive asceticism and the practice of yoga. He did not entirely reject these but he thought that they were inadequate and in particular, the self-torture went too far. So he proceeded with his new teaching which could be shared by everybody, in which there should not be too much fasting and body punishment, and in which moral conduct, especially kindness to others, including animals, should play a leading part.

“The end aimed at was a completely happy state, or Nirvana, in which the individual ceased to be intensely engaged in himself and his future and aimed only at being absorbed into the life of the Great Self. Buddha’s central message was that life was full of unhappiness and tension; that this was caused by people’s thirst for all sorts of unsatisfying material things. That to get rid of the unhappiness you must get rid of that thirst, for only by reaching a state of desiring nothing can man attain true happiness. To do this, the best way was to follow Buddha’s own particular system of meditation and disciplined conduct. Many of the Ten Commandments figure in his teachings of what is allowed and what is not.”

“Thank you. That was very nicely and simply explained.”

“I have a daughter, George, and I used to talk to her about many serious things in as simple a manner as I could. Also don’t forget I am a sociologist and even though most of the things I learnt have long been forgotten, important chronicles like Buddha’s life still linger in my memory.”

“Where is your daughter?”

“I have not seen her since I divorced fifteen years or so ago.”

“My God! Why not?”

“Because my life went awry. It was the unfortunate result of the contradiction of my education and the traditional life I was expected to follow. My parents sent me to England to be educated and then tried to squeeze me into the straightjacket of tradition and the constraints of their conservative, bigoted and parochial society. My father was a prominent lawyer who was wealthy enough to afford to send me abroad for university education. My mother was a narrow, silly little mind whose constant concern was our public image and whose guiding principle and personal code of correct conduct was ‘what will the people say’. I loved her and despised her and pitied her at the same time, if that is at all possible. Well, perhaps God, or Brahma, or whatever Higher Being is in power, has punished me for this and created circumstance where I lost my own daughter. You see, I was a wild child.....”

“No, no, I can’t believe that, Andy. You seem the soul of moderation.”

“Which goes to show you that appearances often mislead. Anyway, I have slowed down, inevitably, with age and after the many slaps I received in my life. But as a child I was wild and unruly. I was rude, untidy and never studied properly. Instead I spent my time reading romances, which, however, later gave me a taste for serious literature. For my secondary education I was sent to a high-class boarding school in Colombo and was expelled because I got into the habit of sneaking into my friend’s bed after lights out. Some girl reported it and we were caught in *flagrante delicto*. Hell, we were only hugging and learning to French-kiss. Nothing more, I swear. My poor, gentle friend was expelled as well, a victim of my passion. After many hurdles and many changes of schools my parents were happy to pack me off to London. It was my paradise. I mellowed there, George. I became a mature, rounded off human being.

“In my final year, I met a Tamil boy from Trincomalee, my home town, who was on the periphery of my group of friends. He was about our age, reasonably presentable and was known as ‘rich Hiram’ because he drove an E-type Jaguar which was the sports car of rich movie actors and playboys. He also seemed to have plenty of money and lived in a snazzy apartment in Knightsbridge whereas most of us lived in bed-sitters in Earl’s Court. He had managed to enroll in the Economics department of some university or other but did not seem to be putting much effort in his studies. He moved from one coffee bar to the next and from one girl to another, his popularity with the chicks, I suppose, due to the E-type.

“During Christmas London becomes a ghost city because a good part of its population returns to the villages and smaller towns of their origins, for the festivities. It is the only time of the year that London is dull and depressing. I happened to see Hiram at a party a few days before Christmas and we were bemoaning the coming days of boredom when he suggested we take a trip to Scotland in his car. ‘But it’s so bloody cold,’ I told him. ‘I have a heater in my car, dearie, not to worry, moreover we’ll be staying in good, well-heated hotels and, by the way, it’s my invitation,’ he said. I was unattached at the time and thought, what the hell, I’ll go. All in all, it was an enjoyable, itinerant week we had moving from cities, to villages, to hamlets in the highlands and

lochs of Scotland right up to Inverness. Mostly gray, with rain and snow in places but, oh, the dour winter beauty of the Scottish countryside will remain with me for good.

“We slept together of course and I smile to remember the eggs and bacon, toasts and buns with champagne instead of tea that that mad boy ordered for breakfast. And our unsteady tottering exit from the hotel to go to the car. We had plenty of laughs and fun, no doubt about it, but Hiram was not for me. I was not in love with him. Never could be. Despite a mad streak in him which amused me, he was shallow and spoilt and when one disagreed with him he sulked and scowled and it took time for him to get over it. So when we returned I had no further use for him and ungratefully dropped him. I considered we had served each other’s purpose, in a good way, might I add, and now we were quits. When I left London for good that summer after graduating, he asked me to take a small package of medicine to his father in Trincomalee. With such stealthy and furtive methods fate sometimes knocks at your door.

“Back home, with a BA in sociology in my pocket, I started wondering what to do. Seek a teaching job, apply for a post in the government bureaucracy or look around in the private business sector? I was hardly a month there and I bitterly regretted having returned. I had on one side my father’s seeming indifference and on the other my mother’s constant pestering that I should get married right away. Her nerve-wracking speculations about this and that young man, his prospects and whether he would make me a good husband, were driving me cuckoo. And then, the unexpected, the utterly bizarre, the answer to their prayers exploded in our midst like a thunderbolt from Shiva. A visit from Hiram’s father to ask for my hand in marriage.

“A few days after my return I had telephoned him and went to his house to deliver the package Hiram gave me. I said house, but in reality it was a mansion in the outskirts of Trincomalee in the midst of many acres of gardens. I had gone in a taxi and as I entered the main gate which was manned by armed guards, I walked up a paved road that led to the mansion. It was early afternoon and a few people were still working on the grounds, sweeping, tending the flower beds and moving about purposefully. The mansion was in the style of an Indian temple such as one sees in the Khajuraho complex but on a smaller scale, with elaborate carvings and statues decorating it. A butler in frock coat, white shirt and black bow tie answered the door and told me Sir Karam was expecting me and led me to the library. Karam, by the way, was knighted by the British for services rendered during the war. He had vast tea plantations up in the highlands and many factories processing the tea gathered by hand by his dirt-poor laborers. Tamils, by the way, because the Sinhalese will not work for such low wages. The Tamils were originally imported from India as cheap labor. Perhaps Karam offered free five-o’clock tea to the British army officers in Ceylon and was knighted for it.”

Andchana giggled and continued.

“He came in after a few minutes, a sprightly grey haired, pleasant looking man of sixty, of average height and impeccably attired in a light grey linen suit. A real Englishman, in accent and bearing except he was our color. They are a dying breed his type of people but you still find some in India and Sri Lanka. People who made piles of money during the English colonial days and rubbed shoulders with their overlords. They have exquisite manners and a steely stare. They have more money than even they can imagine and covet even more. They want to be admired, loved and feared but they don’t know that they can’t be all three at the same time and mostly they live in an artificial world of voluble flattery and hidden spite.

“He greeted me graciously and thanked me profusely for taking the trouble to bring him the medicines he was unable to procure at home. We sat on comfortable leather armchairs and he ordered tea, assuming, he said, I would not be interested for a

drink this early in the afternoon. We slid into polite small talk and he asked me about Hiram. About his studies. I told him I could not vouch for his progress as I happened to be in a different college. 'You know,' he said, 'I don't really care if he graduates or not. In fact I'd rather he didn't, so he won't get any fancy ideas about staying to work in England. I want him back here to take over the business eventually. So I let him sow his wild oats for a few years in England in order that when he returns home he will be ready to settle down and take his work seriously.'

"I felt like telling him that I had sowed my wild oats too for five years and now I was back and was suffocating. But I couldn't give a damn. I left an hour later and he asked me to come back next week to go riding with him. I told him I didn't know how to ride. He said now was as good a time as any to learn and that he had a stable of really fine horses. So the next week I went riding with Karam in the woods near his home and I rather liked the experience. He told me to feel free to drop in on my own anytime to take the same good natured gelding for a ride and I did this once more before the shock of his proposal nearly knocked me out of my senses.

"You must wonder why I accepted to marry Karam. I was forced, George, I was bludgeoned into it. You must bear in mind that we lived in provincial Trincomalee, not London or Paris. I was bullied mostly by my despicable, hysterical mother. It was a madhouse. She was either screaming at me or crying or fainting. Day in, day out, telling me that this proposal was sent to me from heaven, that there does not exist a girl that would refuse. 'My prayers were answered,' she would tell me sobbing, 'and now you want to throw your luck away, you devil girl. You will be the death of me.'

My father was cool and tried to make me see sense. 'Andchana, my dear,' he would say, 'you shall have everything at your fingertips, you shall have security.' 'I don't want to marry you, father,' I told him. 'What are you talking about, girl? You shall marry Sir Karam, not me.' 'It's the same thing, father.' 'Don't talk nonsense, girl.' 'Father, Sir Karam probably expects a virgin. I am not a virgin. I have slept with any number of boys.' 'Shame. For shame girl, shut up. Just shut up.'

"And yet, now and then I thought of the money and it was as if I had taken a drug, a hallucinogen. I entered a dreamland of corruption, of selfishness, of vile thoughts. That's what money does. I would have everything at my fingertips as my father said, clothes, travel, cars, and lovers, why not? It would be my revenge and in a few years he would die and I'd be free and very, very rich. So to make a long story short, otherwise forty-eight more hours would not be enough for a thorough recounting, I married Karam in a grandiose ceremony where everybody was happy except me. He was a kind and thoughtful husband but, George, it was a marriage without taste, without passion. Such marriages exist, I am sure, and it is not for me to condemn them though instinctively and emotionally I do not understand them. I cannot substitute money and security for love, tenderness and a compatible sexuality. I shall not go into our sexual life except to tell you that, after the few initial months of adjustment, it was just about tolerable during the first two or three years and then it fizzled out. He wanted a child and refused to take precautions and I was pregnant by the second month after the wedding. A baby girl was born and from the very beginning not only a wet nurse was in attendance but a whole staff of nurses. I was a sort of daily visitor of my child when I was not reading or riding or going to town for shopping. Her father spent more time with her than I did and their bond grew stronger as the little girl grew up."

She looked at me, smiled, then rolled her eyes and shook her head as if in exasperation.

"I really don't know why I am telling you all this, George. I mean, I hardly know you."

“Perhaps that’s the reason.”

“Perhaps I want your reaction. I mean, at the Irothio you met a seemingly respectable, middle-aged woman and little by little as the layers of her life unfold a new and rather sluttish persona comes into view.”

“Certainly a new, surprising persona emerges but I would hardly call her sluttish.”

“Wait and see. Karam had a country house up in the mountains close to one of his plantations. We used to go up there during weekends in the summer months with the baby and a nurse or two. It was a lovely coquettish little villa, permanently staffed, with a well kept garden in the middle of the subtropical forest. Although they say that there are no really dry areas in Sri Lanka, the north east mountain forests were comparatively dry and the climate cool and pleasant. Karam built us a stable and brought four of our horses so that we would be able to ride. It was an exercise we both enjoyed.

“Amongst the servants were a syce and a younger boy to look after the horses. There weren’t any dangerous animals in the vicinity and we used to take long rides of an hour or two. It was the only truly companionable time I had with my husband who was a fine horseman and tried to keep up with the sport despite his age and increasingly frequent back pains. So usually, we rode on our favorite horses and the syce and the boy rode the other two to give them their exercise.

“The boy must have been sixteen or seventeen when I first went to the mountains and I followed his growth as the years went by because he stayed on in our service. He was an orphan and felt very lucky to have found shelter and permanent employment with us. He loved the horses and kept them shining, literally shining with interminable brushing. He was a Moslem Tamil and was almost illiterate but he was shy and gentle and beautiful. He was small like me though just a mite taller, thin and well built, with beautiful, sparkling black eyes and an enchanting smile ...”

“And you fell in love with him!”

“Wow, George, how did you guess? You’re a genius.”

“And I can guess the rest. You became Lady Chatterley of Trincomalee”

“Well, okay, go on, then. Tell us the story.”

“No, no. Pardon my presumption. Please go on.”

“A few of years after I gave birth to Zahra, I started going much more frequently to the mountain even when Karam was busy or unwell. The villa was for me like Marie Antoinette’s Le Petit Trianon. I was at peace there, to read, listen to music and ride with Amed mornings and afternoons. Of course the elder syce joined us most of the times and we were stiff and constrained but when we were alone we talked familiarly and I taught him many things about the world beyond the mountain and the neighboring villages which was all he had seen in his life.

“One day we were caught in a thunderstorm while riding some distance from the villa. We were drenched to the bone and, luckily, we found a rock outcropping which gave us some shelter. The funny thing is, the horses themselves refused to move beyond this ledge and we squeezed there to weather the storm. I was so close to Amed that our faces almost touched. We dismounted and were squashed together under the rock outcropping between the two horses. I shook my hair like a wet dog to rid it of the rainwater and with my hands tried to do the same to his hair. He smiled his lovely, luminous smile and I kissed him and we made love standing between the horses. I see your eyes widen, George. I see you want to ask, ‘how?’ But I am not prepared to titillate your imagination with descriptions. It can be done.

“It was the start of an affair that lasted many years; till the end of my marriage, in fact. I often thought of my father and how wise he was. I had finally everything at my

fingertips, comfort, security and passionate love. Love because I really loved that beautiful, lowly, ignorant boy, his puppy adoration and considerable aptitude and capacity in lovemaking. We were scrupulously careful and were never discovered.”

“So how did it end?”

“I forgot to tell you that Hiram attended our marriage. I am sure he was shocked as hell but kept his peace. He acted as if our brief affair in Scotland never happened. Subsequently he returned home to Trincomalee roughly once a year to visit his dad and stepsister, but did not seem too keen to return for good and take over the reins of the family business. Karam was in his seventies when he finally put his foot down and ordered him back permanently or else the funds would dry up. So Hiram returned home, disgruntled, in his middle thirties without having done an hour’s work in his life and with an apparent intention of continuing this *dolce far niente*, which like smoking, is an addiction difficult to break.

“There were many, many quarrels with Karam and when Hiram happened to be in the house he was more often than not, long faced, ill-tempered and surly. He showed little affection for Zahra who was now about ten and to me he openly expressed his contempt for the marriage I had contracted. ‘I thought you better than that,’ he told me. ‘It’s true, after all, that all women are mercenary bitches.’ And would add, laughing, ‘Well, I hope, at least you are having a good time in bed with him.’

“After a while, when his relations with Karam turned truly ugly he started, to use the modern terminology, persistent sexual harassment. He tried to embrace me and kiss me on several occasions and when I repelled him he told me not to act the faithful wife. I was afraid to tell Karam in case he revealed that we had been lovers. It would have opened a new front of conflict that would not only complicate my life but endanger my encounters with Amed. By that time I no longer slept with Karam but had moved to a bedroom on my own. I never locked my door, not even now that Hiram was at home. I did not think he’d have the audacity to enter with so many servants roaming around the house but he did, very late one night, and he attacked me. He reeked of alcohol. We scuffled silently but I was no match against him and he raped me. I could have shouted and screamed but I didn’t. The complications of that, to my mind, would be more painful than my violation. I never talked to him again and never looked at him. He tried on several occasions to apologize but I did not give him the opportunity. What little concern I formerly felt for him vanished. He simply no longer existed as far as I was concerned and, another thing, I locked my door at night.

“The end came soon after that. In a particularly violent quarrel with Karam, Hiram, probably drunk once again, shouted at his father that he had fucked his wife before he married her and had fucked her after his marriage. Poor Karam nearly had a fit. He started trembling all over and he couldn’t enunciate his words properly. I thought he would have a stroke or a heart attack. He called his guards and told them to throw Hiram out of the house as he was, with just the clothes he was wearing, which they did. Despite everything, I was shocked and dismayed. The silly fool had it coming. But could a father’s heart turn to stone?

“Karam then turned to me and asked me if what Hiram said was true. I told him of our trip in Scotland and of the rape a couple of weeks before. He asked me why I had not told him all this before? I had no answer to that and he told me that I could not longer stay at his house. I would have to leave the next day but that he would pay me a stipend for the next six months until I settled down and found a job. He would also initiate proceedings for a divorce. I asked him how I would be able to see Zahra and he said I no longer had a daughter because I was a dishonest and unworthy mother and spouse and I thought that obviously he was right because I had not been a particularly

good mother and was an unfaithful wife for many, many years. Much more than anything else I grieved for Amed. I never saw him again, that beautiful gentle lover. He must have heard terrible stories about me through the servants' gossip and so he might have considered it a blessing that he managed to get out of this affair unscathed and kept his livelihood with the horses he loved.

"I left for Colombo the next day without either seeing or notifying my parents and I have not seen them since. I had no further use for them or the recriminations I would face. I don't know if they are dead or alive. The same goes for Karam, though about a year after I left, I heard that father and son made up and that Hiram finally took to the business in earnest. I was glad for that because Hiram would be taking care of Zahra soon enough. Their father would not last much longer. In Colombo, I found a small flat and applied for a job at the foreign ministry where I was accepted thanks to my university degree. I worked at the ministry for four years and then was sent to Thailand, Venezuela, Morocco and, now, Greece. Quite a globetrotter don't you think?"

"And Zahra?" I asked.

"Zahra is a distant memory and a dream waiting to come true. It's the void in my life. An emptiness I shall never get used to. It torments me day and night. But now, I'm just too tired. Let's have the grape fruit and go to bed. I have to call my office to tell them I won't be going to work today. By the way, what did you think of my story?"

"Fascinating. It's like a novel. I think you made it all up, Andy. I mean, I see you sitting there in my pajamas with rolled up sleeves and trousers and I can't believe it."

"The grapefruit, George. It's getting late."

We went to the kitchen and sliced a grapefruit in half. The largest I could find. We had the programmed slice of bread and a piece of cheese and when I begged for a second slice, the answer was no. We had a fight as to who would sleep where. She insisted on the couch but after I swore I would not sneak to the kitchen for a bite she realized that my sense of hospitality was non-negotiable and reluctantly went to sleep in my bedroom while I folded myself like a giant embryo thin legs, thin arms, bent head and huge belly, on the couch.

It was nine o'clock and we woke up at three. Cornflakes and milk without sugar, tea and coffee without sugar, it was the start of an elimination of all things that made life worth living. But it was so nice to have her around, witty and high spirited. I suggested a restaurant for a meal and she informed me that restaurants were, henceforth, out. She dressed in her exotic sari, combed her hair, made up her face and looking very attractive, we walked to a neighboring supermarket and bought vegetables and curry. At home she asked for an apron. Being a bachelor but a resourceful one, I brought her a large bath towel, which I wrapped around her and she set to cook three different vegetable dishes with a little curry and very little salt.

"In Casablanca, I met a young doctor who told me, '*les legumes, c'est la santé*'. And I also read that when Karl Lewis was training he was on a vegetable diet. One would have thought that he would be eating plenty of meat to give him strength, but no, his coach fed him just vegetables so as not to put on the slightest bit of fat. The strength came from the exercise and the energy from the vegetables."

"Conclusion: no more meat?" I asked.

"Exactly. For a while at least."

"And the young doctor, was he nice?"

Andchana smiled.

"Yes, very," she said.

"Did you take off the ring when you met him?"

“Yes I did. I always remove the ring when I want to give romance a chance.”

“I see.”

We had a reasonably tasty vegetable curry lunch with no bread and no cokes. She suggested I pour the whole stock of cokes I had in the refrigerator down the sink or give them to my enemies. She made me promise to have just an apple for dinner and no more alcohol. After lunch I drove her to her house which was a ten minute drive but took us a half hour because of the traffic. She thanked me, I thanked her, we exchanged phone numbers and she told me if I valued her friendship to stick to the diet guidelines she set during our meal. It was a threat and a promise.

Back in my apartment I felt a terrible loneliness. I was so used to being alone I had forgotten what it was like to share a little human warmth. I went to the bedroom and smelled the sheets where she lay. A faint hint of her odor was still lingering. It would keep me company when I would go to bed. I picked up the phone and called her.

“Hi Andy, it’s me. I just got home and it seems so empty. I miss you. I mean, we almost clocked twenty four hours together.”

She laughed her lighthearted crystalline laugh.

“I miss you too, as a matter of fact. I suggest you read a book or watch some TV and tomorrow we’ll get in touch.”

We called each other every day, late evening, because of the unholy hours of my work. Her first question invariably was, ‘what did you eat for lunch... Okay, and what did you have for dinner last night?’ I met her a week later to go to the movies. I was shocked to see her in jeans, shirt and jumper. I stared and she laughed.

“The East has been westernized, George. A long time ago. How do I look?”

“Very pretty, very young and the hairstyle suits you. Is that how you go to work?”

“Sometimes. But usually in a normal dress. The sari is for formal or semi-formal occasions. But let me look at you. You have done wonders, George. Good for you. You must have lost at least three kilos. How do you feel?”

“Much better. Much lighter. I no longer have the feeling that my belly is encroaching on my throat and will soon choke me. But the lack of food is exhausting. I have no stamina and I tire easily.”

“Keep up your patience and will power. Another two or three weeks of this fasting to get rid of the rest of the grease and then we shall ease up and start a little exercise. Nothing strenuous, mostly walking and I shall join you in this.”

We went to the cinema and then to her house for tasty vegetable dishes and this became a regular weekly affair. Sometimes we met on a Sunday, as well, for coffee in one of the many Kifisia shops and talked. It was a tough regimen she put me through but I stuck to it because I respected her and could not risk her disapproval and loss of interest in me. I had become attached to this unconventional, mature woman with an open mind, youthful outlook and sense of humor.

She had spoken freely of her past but I did not know much about the present. She had friends, both fellow countrymen and some Greek acquaintances which she saw now and then during the week but I did not think she was linked romantically with anyone. She was not a woman to spurn a liaison which would be to her liking but the wedding ring was in place and I did not think she put it there just when she was to see me. As time went by, as usually happens, I found her increasingly attractive but we had reached the stage where we were such good pals, such sexless intimates that I thought it unthinkable ever to make a sexual pass at her.

In a month and a half I had lost fifteen kilos and Andchana permitted me to consume a little meat once or, at most, twice a week. We started on the hour long walks

in the Syngrou estate in Kifisia, which is almost a small forest, plunked in the middle of three suburbs and in time increased our exercise to an hour and a half and then two hours. By the end of three months I was almost back to my normal weight. I felt so much better and stronger than before and both my uric acid and sugar levels were more or less normal. The hospital doctor who treated me and had lost hope I would ever follow his instructions to lose weight was delighted and said he was almost certain a woman was involved in this transformation. ‘You must be in love,’ he told me. ‘Almost,’ I answered and he laughed. ‘In this business, almost, means you are a goner,’ he said.

A month later, on a Saturday night as we were sitting in the cinema, I noticed, by chance, that Andchana was not wearing the wedding ring. I wondered if it meant anything, if she had a bath and forgot to put it on again or if she was sending me a message. At a moment when the actors were embracing tenderly on the screen, I picked her hand and kissed it and then held it for the rest of the film. I had never done this before and although she squeezed back my hand, confirming the removal of the wedding ring, I did not know whether I could turn our sexless camaraderie into a viable sexual ambiance without awkwardness. As we came out of the cinema, I asked her if she would like us to go to a nightclub to have a drink and dance a little. She smiled and said she’d love to.

We went to a fashionable joint despite our not very suitable attire, sat in a dark corner and I ordered a bottle of Mœt & Chandon. When she heard the order, she smiled.

“Champagne! Wow. Have you come into money?”

“Perhaps I have come into something more precious.”

She laughed and in a jocular tone said,

“Cut the sweet talk, George, and state your intentions.”

“I have adhered to your diet fanatically, not for my health but in the hope that if I became presentable enough, that wedding ring would disappear from your finger.”

A half smile was permanent on her lips.

“Am I really irresistible? I had no idea. In any case, you are now presentable enough to attract younger and more attractive women.”

“Never crossed my mind.”

“How nice!”

The waiter came around with the champagne, showed me the bottle, opened it and poured it in our glasses. We clinked and drank a sip. It was quite something. I could see she relished it. We emptied the first goblet. Then a second and a third and I thought it was time to get up and dance because I was already very dizzy and a fourth goblet would have eliminated what little dancing skills I possessed.

“I am not a very fluid dancer; a little bit wooden, I’m afraid.” I said. “However, would you like to dance, Andy?”

‘Sure. That’s why we’re here for.’

“No it isn’t, but let’s dance.”

The half smile permanent on her lips but also on mine. I held her tightly. It felt wonderful. Her smell, her warmth, her hands around me, eager, tight. I moved awkwardly, jerkily, but it did not matter. She tried to follow.

“Then why did we come here?” she asked.

“Are you naïve, or something?”

“I have, perhaps, not yet attained your levels of sophistication, George, so would you please spell it out for me.”

“No really! You are impossible!”

“Please.”

“Andy, my darling....”

“Did you call me ‘my darling’?”

“Sure I did. You’re not deaf, are you?”

“Forgive the interruption. Please go on.”

All this, while I was dragging my feet on the dance floor and Andy, firmly in my embrace, pluckily trying to follow. The music was fast but we were moving a step every four beats. The music was loud. I could not think properly. Not with three glasses of champagne in my belly on an empty stomach and Andy in my arms. Not with her odor making me shaky and her body glued to mine.

“Please go on, George.”

“What was the question?”

“The question is, why are we here dancing when, apparently, according to you, we did not come here to dance though you asked me, coming out of the cinema, if I would like to go to a night club to dance a little and I answered in the affirmative assuming, at the time, you meant what you said.”

“Now this is a rather complicated question but, despite the champagne that has gone to my head, I shall try to answer simply. We came here, my darling, to get acquainted.”

“Didn’t we know each other before, George?”

“Of course we did, my silly darling. I meant get acquainted sexually.”

“Oh? And did we have to do it here?”

“Oh Andy, why are you so pedestrian? Would you have rather I told you, coming out of the cinema, ‘let’s go to bed’.”

“Well, not quite.”

“You see? I wanted to dance with you, not for the sake of dancing but to hold you tightly, to feel your arms around me, your body on mine, to look at your lovely eyes, smell your perfume, to awaken your sexuality and to kiss your mouth.”

“My sexuality is awake, my darling.”

“Did you call me my darling?”

“Yes, George. Now kiss me for heaven’s sake.”

There was pandemonium on the dance floor. The music going full blast and the young people performing wild acrobatics all around us. We started kissing and got lost in the sweetness and tenderness of our embrace. We kissed on and on oblivious to our surroundings and only regained consciousness when we suddenly realized the music had stopped and people were looking at us with amusement. We smiled diffidently and red in the face slinked to our table.

“See what you did?” she said laughing.

“Couldn’t have done it alone, Andy. Let’s finish the champagne and go home.”

“Yours or mine?”

She was game. I was ripe and cooked a long time ago.

“I am falling in love with you,” I told her.

“I thought you already were.”

“More and more. It’s a free fall.”

“You can say that again. It’s giving me vertigo.”

Andchana remembers :

When I left Greece about a year after the Athens Olympics, I decided to return home. Our Foreign Ministry seemed pleased with the work I had done covering the games in Athens and offered me the post of Cultural Attaché in Peking to do the same sort of thing in China. It was a considerable promotion because, besides the reports I would be sending the ministry, I would be in charge of the journalists, reporters and the Sri Lankan TV teams that would be arriving for the Olympic Games that promised to be the biggest that ever happened. I would have to ease their work by being a liaison between them and the Chinese Olympic organization. It would have been a terrible hassle. I had been through it in Athens and was sure Peking would have been many times worse.

I was fifty four. Ever since I started to work and earned my living by my own means, I never thought of marriage or perhaps I should say, remarriage. Human beings differ in their sexual urges and this difference is, I think, especially pronounced in women. I have been blessed, and perhaps it is more of a blessing than a curse, with a strong libido. In every post where I have served I discreetly kept an open eye for a good or, in any case, a tolerable companion and I have been both lucky and unlucky in this. The relationships usually ended with the termination of my stint in that particular country. Not much pain was involved because, happily, it usually also turned out to be the end of the cycle of the relationships as I was never fortunate to have had a really passionate affair. It was the same with George and in a way our love affair was my initiative and achievement and was due to my perseverance in his physical transformation, which I must admit would have never happened without his cooperation. But his previous life, like an ogre, charged impetuously to ruin his happiness and mine. The trouble was that he was too good a person and in bondage to a love he could not master.

Anyway, I had also this in mind. In China I would probably not have had the time to spare to meet eligible companions. As for the Chinese, I do not dislike them but they seem too different from us. It is funny that I should have this concept of racism especially since I felt, both in England when I was studying and in Greece during the three years at our embassy, the distaste for the color of my skin. Much less in Morocco and Venezuela and not at all in Thailand. Intellectually I reject racism; instinctively, despite myself, I have certain aversions. There is quite a large Chinese population in Trincomalee. Our communities were separate and never mixed much. The Chinese seem from another planet. They are cold fish. Very intelligent, diligent and frugal, and probably as ruthless as the Japanese, in whose hands they suffered so appallingly. They are liable to dominate our planet very soon if we do not pollute it to destruction in the meantime, with their considerable help. I remember the saying, which came out at the height of Russian power, that the optimists study Russian and the pessimists Chinese. I am ashamed of my views and they are probably quite narrow-minded and incorrect but there you are.

I was not at my best, in any case, as I was about to leave Athens. I was depressed and I felt that the time had come to confront the anguish, the affliction and wretchedness that were consuming me unbearably all these years. I could not postpone it any longer for fear of the consequences. I declined the ministry's promotion, much to their astonishment, and asked to be transferred for home duty. It was my right after four consecutive foreign postings.

I returned to Colombo and in the two weeks' holiday allowance I was given to arrange my affairs before reporting for work, I prepared my flat which had been locked

for so many years. A quick slap-dash paint job and with my furniture arriving on time from Greece, I devoted the first week to making it habitable once again. We still have poor unfortunates who work as servants in our country and I found a sweet girl of twenty-something, to help me out and stay with me at home. All the while my stomach was in knots. I could hardly eat and hardly sleep despite the fatigue. I was lucky with the girl because with her chatting she kept my mind occupied with trivialities and eased my agony.

Sometime in the second week I packed a small suitcase and took the early morning train to Trincomalee. The journey took six hours and I arrived at noon. Fifteen or so years after I left. Checked into a cheap hotel near the station because the more expensive ones are mainly out at the beaches to the north and I did not wish to waste time. I went out in the street and started walking rapidly towards Karam's offices. It felt strange to be walking again in my hometown, in a crowd of busy chattering people with my skin color instead of in the midst of palefaces. The leisurely car traffic of old had become almost as hectic as that of Athens. New high-rise buildings had sprung up but the three-storey office building was still there, colonial, spruced up, with a large brass inscription:

KARAM & HIRAM MAHAWELI Co. Ceylon Tea Producers.

I climbed the stairs, entered the reception hall and asked for Hiram. I was directed to the third floor. Outside his office a secretary asked my name. I told her to tell him a relative of his wanted to see him. 'Please, I need a name,' she insisted. 'Okay, tell him his ex-stepmother.' She stood and just stared at me. 'Anything wrong with that?' I asked. She woke up and said, 'No ma'am.' Entered the office and suddenly the door bursts open and a portly Hiram bustled out and stared at me for a moment with wide-eyed bewilderment and then with a hoarse cry rushed to embrace me. There were tears in his eyes. He pulled me in the office and shut the door.

"Andchana, Andchana, I can't believe it. My God, I have been praying one day you would show up. For years I have been feeling so hideously guilty for what I had done to you. Thank goodness you are fine. You so look well."

"Zahra, Hiram. How is Zahra?"

"A fine girl, Andchana, a fine girl. She's well. Wonderful. Blooming. Half this business is hers, you know. She lives with us at home, with my wife and two children. At least, I did this much for you; I took good care of her because father died soon after you left. He summoned me and we made up and he made me swear I would love and protect Zahra. He died a few months later. He was unwell and unhappy in his last days but at least he had the satisfaction to see me take the reigns of this business. Zahra works here too but is not in the office just now. We shall go home for lunch and you shall see her."

I started crying.

"I just can't believe I shall see her today, in a while. I am so grateful to you Hiram for taking care of Zahra."

"Oh nonsense. Nonsense. She is my sister, after all. You shall keep our secret, though, won't you? No need to tell you I humbly beg your forgiveness."

"Our past has no place in the present."

"Thank you, my dear Andchana. It is one of the happiest days in my life."

"Do you think it's a good idea to just pop in without warning?"

"Yes, yes. Of course it is, my dear. It will be a grand surprise."

"And my parents?"

"Both dead. It was harsh of you to give no sign of life all these years. Sometimes, we offspring are inconsiderate to the point of cruelty."

“What is done cannot be undone. They ruined my life.”

Hiram called his wife. He told her he was bringing a lady for lunch and asked if Zahra was there. Zahra had a lunch date and was getting prepared.

“Please tell her to wait for us. I want her to meet this lady.”

Unlike Karam, Hiram had put on weight as most Easterners do when they are comfortably moneyed and comfortably married. He had acquired a fussiness, which sometimes comes with age and a full pocket; plus one or two of Karam’s mannerisms. I was touched by the emotion he showed on meeting me and by his sincere affection for Zahra. We left the office directly and were driven in his limousine to his house. During the drive I gave him a short account of the last fifteen years of my life and he told me of his marriage and the happy family ambience Zahra grew up in.

“She did not cease asking for you, though,” he said. “A mother is a mother. That’s all there is to it. She’s irreplaceable. She kept on telling me that there was a void in her life despite the happy home we provided her. I suppose, my dear Andchana, you must have felt it many times more.”

A lump in my throat kept me from answering.

It was a funny feeling entering what was formerly one’s home. Nothing much seemed to have changed in the fifteen years that had elapsed. And anyway, any change was likely to be detrimental. Karam was a connoisseur of art and had made of it a museum of rare pieces. But I hardly noticed the details for my heart was beating so hard I thought I might faint. Hiram’s wife met us at the door and he introduced me as a colleague of his university days in London. A pleasantly polite and good-looking woman, possibly ten years younger than him, who was starting to put on weight as well. Her name, Nana, a pet name with the accent on the first vowel. And two children, a girl of twelve resembling Hiram and a boy of ten who looked like his mother. We moved to the sitting room and we sat down. Nana made polite small talk and must have thought I was a moron because I just nodded my head without catching a single word. Hiram sized up the situation and asked her to call Zahra. She left us and came back a minute later to tell us Zahra was coming. Hiram turned to me and said,

“Take it easy.”

Zahra entered the room with a smile and came towards me. She joined her palms in front of her chest and lowered her head in the traditional greeting and then stretched her right hand for the handshake. I stood up from the couch. I could barely stand. She was too beautiful a creature, this girl, to be Zahra, to be my daughter. I searched her face to resurrect the ten-year old I left behind more than fifteen years ago. Yes, it was there, that face, hidden behind lost years, peeking at me through all that beauty. Oh my darling, it is you! We shook hands and she said,

“I am Zahra.”

“I know,” I replied and tears streamed down my cheeks.

She looked at me perplexed. And stared and stared trying to understand. Suddenly she turned to Hiram and uttered a piercing cry,

“Hiram?”

Hiram, in tears was trying to smile, trying not to cry, his mouth performing improbable contortions.

“Yes, yes,” he said nodding his head. “Yes.”

He could say nothing more. Zahra almost lunged to embrace me.

“Mother,” she cried, “Oh mother, where have you been?” and suddenly we were all crying including Nana, who turned to Hiram and told him,

“You should have warned me, Hiram. I shall not forgive you.”

After we calmed down, Hiram ordered a bottle of champagne to be opened for the happy occasion. We sipped the wine and talked disconnectedly for a while because I could not take my eyes off Zahra and she could not stop embracing me. To a thousand of her questions I offered a minimum of explanations while trying to divine the official family version for my absence from the family hearth. Hiram came to my rescue by telling them that it was not a good time for cross-examinations on either side, that misunderstandings between spouses happen and harsh decisions are taken by both sides. Andchana had been abroad for many years, in our foreign service, twelve years in fact, and had refused a big promotion to be with us. By and by she will learn more about our past and present life just as we shall find out about hers, the countries she served in, the people she met and so on and so forth. And now for lunch.

Zahra phoned and cancelled her lunch date to be with us, and Hiram sent his driver to pick up my suitcase from the hotel because he thought it inconceivable that I should stay away from the house which was once, and always will be, my home. I remained in Trincomalee for the rest of that week and returned to Colombo on Sunday, the day before I resumed work. I had almost achieved Nirvana. The unbearable black hole in my psyche had been sealed. The sun had dawned for me again and was shining in my life. It had a name. It had warmth and love. It had a life that included me and allowed me to live another life within it and through it. I was in love, deeply in love, in deep maternal love with a girl called Zahra.

On Monday I started work. A new routine, a new optimism with Zahra constantly in my thoughts. It was somewhat strange to be back in the Foreign Ministry in my country. Colombo had expanded; its population at twice the rate, the crowds, the traffic jams comparable to European cities, which meant approaching the unbearable. The people in the street seemed better off. One did not see the abject poverty of the past. But one missed the cleanliness of Athens. My new colleagues received me politely especially as I had gone up in grade after my twelve-year service abroad. I was quite a senior person and in six years I would be pensioned off. At least on the surface, I found no animosity on their part on account of being a Tamil.

Things had calmed down considerably since the days of racial violence in the early eighties. In Jaffna, the north-east of Sri Lanka, the Tigers were still struggling for Eelam, for an independent Tamil nation, but the general population has understood that each outbreak of communal violence did the country's fragile economy great harm and created the very situation that the Sinhalese least wanted. More and more Tamils moved north to the relative safety of the Jaffna region and in turn more and more Sinhalese left that area. The result has been that in effect a separate state was being created in the north by the very opposition to it. However, most Tamils recognized that cutting off a slice of this already small island-nation was simply not on.

George often asked me about my fellow citizens. I clarified that the seventy to thirty percent ratio of Sinhalese to Tamil, means, of course, that the Sinhalese have the upper hand in governing our country. We have two official languages, Sinhala and Tamil but government business is carried out in Sinhala and all educated Tamils are Sinhala-literate.

The Sinhalese, who are predominantly Buddhist, are an easy-going, warm-hearted people and to a large extent this may be due to their religion, which emphasizes love, compassion, gentleness and tolerance. One can perhaps explain the animosity between the two races in that the Tamils, by contrast, are dourer and hard working. They are unquestionably good businesspeople and in many areas control the economic strings. They're the small shopkeepers and local industrialists. That is not to say that they are excluded from government. There are important Tamil ministers and high

officers in the bureaucracy and police force. Furthermore, they dominate higher education and win a disproportionate number of college and university places. One finds a similar situation of antagonism and confrontation in Malaysia between the indigenous Malays and the intruding smart and industrious Chinese.

We had many absorbing conversations comparing our two countries. He was harshly critical of his own countrymen and I think it was because he truly loved Greece and its ancient civilization and could not bear the pettiness the average Greek, or should I say, the majority of Greeks, had fallen into. The first time he expressed himself was the day we met, coming out of the Irothio. Greece had won the European football championship and he considered the massive, hysterical celebration beyond any measure of sanity. The rudeness of the slogans that were yelled grated him by their vulgarity, the lack of sportsmanship and lack of the slightest generosity towards the losers. He attributed this behavior to an obvious inferiority complex vis-à-vis the Europeans.

He said that whenever a well-known personality or a female film star visits Greece, the most significant pair of questions asked are: 'do you like Greece?' and 'what do you think of Greek men?' The answers, 'lovely country', when the poor girl has only seen the Parthenon from the balcony of her air conditioned hotel suite, and the second stock reply, 'very good-looking men', assuage the wobbly ego of Greek patriots and macho Greek lovers.

Two other events left him aghast. The first happened a few months after the football championship. The same Greek National team, the European champions, visited tiny Albania and were beaten, there, in a football match. A small group of Albanians immigrants, working in Athens, hoisted an Albanian flag and marched to Omonia to celebrate. It was not to be. A bunch of Greek sports fans were lying in wait for them. They beat up the Albanian group for their impudence and one young Albanian was knifed to death.

The second was the Kenderis-Thanou case in the Athens Olympics. The two sprinters were favorites for their respective events. The day before the race they were summoned for a urine test for drugs. They left the Olympic village, unauthorized, to avoid the test and invented a patently fraudulent story of a motorcycle accident and were thus disqualified. So far so good. The athletes had used drugs and got their due. At the 200 meter race where Kenderis was the ousted favorite, the race was won by an American athlete. A small bunch of American spectators started cheering and the whole stadium started chanting ...Kenderis...Kenderis. It was this chauvinism and lack of morals that galled George. It was the admiration of the Greek for the concept of '*mangia*'.

Mangia is doing something illegal and getting away with it. It is insolent, rascally behavior. It is, he claimed, in the very psyche of the Greek and it is a Greek word which cannot be found in any other language. He made me laugh with the examples he gave me. Mangas is a man who uses his car to hook women. Mangas is someone who throws his plastic coffee cups and cigarette butts out of his car window. Mangas is a man who made money ruthlessly by ruining others. Mangas is a politician or a tax officer who takes bribes. He is the journalist who abases and humiliates a person's self-respect. Mangas is a man who has many women. He is the taxi driver who swindles a tourist. Yes, the politicians are corrupt but so are the citizens. The puzzle to unravel is: which is the cause of which. I used to tell him, politics are the same the world over though undoubtedly they vary in degree. From mild, occasional corruption to flagrant kleptocracies. Sri Lanka is hardly an exception.

I indicated I was depressed when I left Greece about a year after the Olympics. I was anxious to return to Sri Lanka in any case. The need to see Zahra was eating my insides. It had become an obsession. My relationship with George had ended a few months earlier and of course I was sad but I was not heartbroken. I loved him with a calm and cool moderation and maybe that was how he felt about me as well. I had gotten used to him, to the routine of seeing him, to the moderate sexual encounters which were a pleasant bonus to the continuing good chemistry that developed between us ever since that first day of our misadventure on leaving the Irothio. The sex tied us together but at our age, it was not the overwhelming passion that one reads in novels, love poetry and opera.

Many times, I smile and wonder if that overwhelming passion can ever happen in middle age. I would have liked it. And I dream and try to think what kind of man would enthrall and fascinate me and throw me into raptures and ecstasies. If he does exist, he probably would not look at me! But that's beside the point; I still try to imagine his qualities and type.

When we started spending weekends together I was surprised by the number of phone calls George received on his cell phone. He had a large number of friends and he usually got up and moved out of my range of hearing. If this was a precaution, it was a useless one because I did not understand Greek. Anyway I doubted that it was another woman for, after all, he did tell me that he had not made love for over three years. Later I was to find out that, though he did indeed have a large number of friends, many of those calls were from his wife and daughter. They were keeping in constant touch monitoring his moves. A sort of remote supervision by cell phone. At the time, I was unaware of the situation and George himself was very secretive where these two women were concerned. He never talked about them and when I brought up the subject he clammed up and was visibly irritated. I did not know whether he saw them at all and I did not care. There were times when he was not in the best of moods but I never associated this with them. I imagined that he must have had problems at work.

I met his daughter by chance one Saturday afternoon. We were having a coffee at one of the open air places in Kifisia, as we were in the habit of doing, and a tall pretty young girl passing by with two other girls approached him and with an air of surprise, embraced him and kissed him. George stood up and they spoke for a few moments in an extremely familiar and hearty manner. He introduced her to me as Mina, his daughter. We shook hands, the girl giving me a thorough looking over and then ignoring me. I supposed at the time that her lack of English prevented any further conversation but she left without saying good-bye to me and that left me with the impression that she was deliberately rude. George was all smiles. With a smug grin he asked me what I thought of her. 'Pretty but not very polite,' I said. He ignored that and said that she was a fine girl; he was sure she loved him and she was surprised and very happy he had lost weight and looked so healthy. She had just finished the technical college and he was trying to get her a job with some architect friend of his. Unfortunately, he said, everything in this country is done through connections. The merit system does not exist.

A second meeting was at the Olympic stadium that famous day of the Kenderis...Kenderis chant. I was invited by George and again we saw Mina by chance. This time, she was chilly even with her father. I think that was the occasion that triggered the ladies into action. I had been seen once too often with their beloved step-father and husband. What were they afraid of? That I would conspire to strip them of their hoped for legacy? That I would lay hands on the money he provided them with? Did they think I was another of the poor, wretched souls from Asia who come to earn a few euros as domestics in their lily-white racist little country?

Anyway, the siege began in earnest. The phone calls multiplied by a factor of two and three. The wife's indifference suddenly turned to wifely concern. Exactly what sort of concern I could not deduce for George was tight mouthed but he was much more often moody and out of sorts. Our relations, bit by bit, lost their good humored tranquility and tempers were on edge even though both of us tried to keep them under wraps. By that time, I began suspecting the cause of this steadily worsening situation, and one day I asked him point blank, even though I knew it would vex him but I could hold it back no longer,

“What are they doing to you, these witches?”

He was shocked and silent for a moment fighting for self-control.

“Andy,” he said, “it is no concern of yours.”

“Which means,” I answered, “that I have no place in your life.”

I had just arrived at his house a half hour earlier and seeing his mood, I had asked the question substituting the letter ‘w’ for the more appropriate letter ‘b’ to qualify them. We looked at each other angrily for a few seconds and then I picked up my bag and left.

He called on the phone a few days later to apologize and we started seeing each other again but the magic had gone out of our relationship. The sexual passion was not strong enough to counterbalance the falling out and bring our relationship back to what it was. Nor even close to it. The siege, moreover, continued and the light-heartedness and good spirits, which made us happy to be together were most of the time missing. A month or so later came the ending. In any case, we were seeing each other more out of habit than need and because the memories of happier days had retained a few strands of affection still intact, which tenuously held us together. We were in Kifisia for coffee when he told me that his wife was moving in with him because Mina wanted to share the mother's flat with her boyfriend. It was all right, he said, they were going steady and planned to marry.

“Of course, you understand, Andy, we shall not be able to see each other any more.”

“Of course, I understand that, George. We are more or less finished, in any event. You will return to where you are happiest, your beautiful wife, and in a few months I shall be returning to Sri Lanka to find my daughter. Wish me luck for that. I hope you take care of yourself and will not drift back to the state I found you in. You are already letting yourself go and putting on weight with all this bickering that has been going on, on all sides. And a word of advice: now and then, give your wife a few slaps across the face.”

He laughed and I smiled and we parted as friends. A week before I left Greece, I met him by chance downtown near the offices of his newspaper. He was once again a walking little barrel.

“Why, George, why?” I asked him.

“Didn't you know,” he said, ‘it is the fate of fat people to go on a diet, to reduce, and then promptly put on back the weight they had lost and then some?’”

I was sure the reason was different. He had ignored my advice. He was a gentle person and did not, for a moment, consider bestowing those much-needed slaps on his wife's face. He was destined to resume his tribulations and self-inflicted, masochistic penance on the altar of love.

Athens 1st November 2008

AN INDIAN STORY

Mumbai

Hell is a strange concept. A marvel of human imagination and perversity. Eternal, sadistic torture and unbearable suffering. Never ending. Without possible salvation. Who but our great religious thinkers could have invented it? Amongst their many metaphysical aberrations it is the most depraved. But we must not judge them too severely because man is inherently sinful. Sartre said *L'enfer c'est les autres*. I am finding this out, little by little. Thinking about it while hiding in my room.

This room is a bit of a hell, too. It's like a furnace and stinks like hell. Grubby, ammoniac toilets, onions and curry. But what the hell, for the price I pay it could be worse and, anyhow, I'm getting used to it. It is buried deep in the slums. This whole part of town is hellish. Still, no one will find me here even if as a European I stick out like a sore thumb when I venture out of my room. Which I rarely do in the mornings. Besides, it rains most of the time. It is mid June and the monsoon is in full swing. Even so, I do go out late at night and get lost in this tide of humanity. Literally lost and I have to ask to find my way back. I always find somebody who speaks English to help me with the directions.

I walk up the alleys and rickety houses, the hovels and the beggars sleeping under sheets of plastic or cardboard to shelter them from the rain. Past the carts with fruit and food and an unimaginable variety of merchandise, and the tiny shops and eating houses reeking with the most exotic smells of spices, sometimes appetizing, sometimes sickening. With children playing in the hubbub, well after midnight, in the rain, barefoot, their rags drenched, merry and energetic. Pulling at my shirt telling me things I do not understand. Things I can hardly hear from the din of the crowd. That peculiar Indian lilt of speech even from a child. With music drifting from the radios, through open windows. Music as strange as Arab chants, a little more congenial to my ear even if the singing voices are unusually thin and strident.

I usually go out at night for a meal. The mornings, I spend in my room at the boarding house. I would hardly call it a hotel. Not even tenth rate. Though there is a broken signboard with the legend, Ratnam Hotel. I smile again at the aptness of the designation for the vast majority of its guests are rats. Sweating it out in my pajama trousers, bare on top, drinking tea now and then, and nibbling on some paratha bread I keep on hand well sealed in a round, tin toffee-box I bought without the toffees. Reading from the secondhand books I rummaged from a pavement bookshop, to while my time away. I sort of like it that way. With the money I have I will stretch it as much as I can. Perhaps a few months, perhaps a year. To calm down and think things out and to give the Andalusia ample time to leave after it unloads its merchandise and perhaps loads cargo from India. They would not wait for me forever. They can hire an Indian for half my wages.

It seems as if I was here forever. And yet hardly a week has passed since I wrapped a pair of pajamas, underwear, and a pair of trousers with a shirt, in a paper bag

so as not to arouse suspicion and left the ship for my day off. My money safely in a money-belt inside my shirt. I hardly looked at the view I admired from the porthole of the engine room as we were entering the harbor. The fine sweep of the bay, rising up to the wooded heights of Malabar Hill behind, and the modern seafront buildings.

I walked in a hurry and I saw them following me. All three of them. They had left the ship earlier and I was correct in presuming they would lie in wait for me. Switch-blades in pocket. I did not hasten my pace. What good would that have done? They could not touch me just then. They were bidding their time and I provoked them by dawdling and looking around the city, at the people, the commotion, the car traffic and the noise, the shops and the lovely Victorian townscape. I found a moneychanger by and by and converted a few dollars to rupees and stood playing around with the money to get familiar with its looks and value. At a corner I saw a shoeshine boy and stood to shine my shoes. I glanced at them out of the corner of my eye. They, too, stopped twenty paces or so away and were talking to each other waiting for me to finish and move on.

For a moment they were absorbed. I dropped a coin to the boy, patted his head, and with one shoe half done, slowly rounded the corner and took off at a sprint, as fast as my legs would carry me, not even looking back. Round another corner and down some steps to a basement storage and kitchen area of an exclusive-looking restaurant. I eased myself behind a few sacks of rice and stayed there for many hours smelling the pungent odors of Indian cooking wafting from the kitchen, being absorbed by my thoughts and distracted by the furtive dashes of rats in search of their dinner.

I would have done it again. Not only that. I would have liked to bring him to life, to kill him anew. I never really knew what hate meant, before. Theoretically, yes. Theoretically. Not the real, gnawing feeling that eats up your insides. That floods your brain with a single overwhelming thought. That gives meaning to the phrase, revenge is sweet. Hate and revenge. Almost as satisfying as love and lovemaking. Almost as exhilarating when you have them paired. Almost as blissful.

I must have dozed off and I came to by a shove and a loud harangue in the liquid sound of Indian speech. A man was bawling at me. Not a word, I understood except that he was fat and jolly with a white filthy apron and was trying to be stern and failing sadly at his task. After my initial shock, I smiled at him. I pointed to my head and then, with my index finger made a circular motion pointing up.

“I was dizzy grandpa,” I told him, “and I came here to this lovely spot for a nap.”

He examined me carefully and made a motion telling me to stay put. I thought of beating it, afraid he might call the police but he came out directly with a chipped plate full of rice and a little meat and curry sauce. Plus a chapatti. Probably leftovers.

“Gee, thanks, just what I needed.”

I wolfed it down using the chapatti and my fingers for knife and fork. God, this Indian food is strong, tasty stuff. So different from the subtler and bland Japanese fare. When I finished, he took the plate, smiled at me and made the universal sign for money, rubbing thumb and index finger. He wanted to get paid. I answered with the universal sign of empty pockets, showing him empty, upturned palms with a shrug of the shoulder. He laughed and motioned me to get moving. But I was starting to get street-wise.

“Tea?” I told him with a smile.

“Chai?”

“Yes.”

He went inside the kitchen and came out with a glass full of milky, spiced tea.

“Thank you grandpa. I hope you put some sugar in it.”

He smiled, not understanding. And I thought all Indians spoke English. He was too young to be my grandpa. And too Indian. With a lovely thick, long mustache and two rabbit teeth, showing with his smile. A mane of straight, black, shiny hair, probably smelling of curry and onions. Two large, black, twinkling eyes and a belly worthy of a fussy cook who tastes his cooking once too often. He left me and went inside for the tea was hot and I took tiny sips burning my tongue, delightfully quenching my thirst a fraction at a time with each tiny sip, enjoying the spicy whiff. I took the empty glass to the door of the kitchen and I saw him working at something or other and waved at him. He came and I shook his hand and told him,

“Thank you grandpa,” and I kissed his hand.

He was shocked and stood staring at me while I climbed the steps to the street. I was grateful for his kindness but sometimes I do exaggerate.

Cautiously I surfaced on the street. It was raining and I walked next to the walls for shelter. No sign of the trio. I walked away from the port, looking at the shops and restaurants and the infinite variety of people. They were all Indian but you could tell they were not the same. Different faces, different clothing, probably different tribes and languages and religions and castes. A country of a hundred spoken languages. People who lived together but the tensions were always close to the surface. Their differences trivial and uncompromising. The fanaticism ignorant and overwhelming. Hatred and violence never far away. And the wealth! I was taught that Indians were poor. I did not imagine so many were so rich. Together with the prevalent jalopies you had the fine American cars, the Bentley limousines, and Rolls Royces. The beggar, sitting cross-legged on the pavement, leaning on the wall of a luxury hotel or an exclusive restaurant was symbolic of this coexistence of opulence and abject poverty but gave hardly an idea of the scale or of the extremity. Bombay truly deserved its name as India's City of Gold. A hellish City of Gold.

I walked for over an hour, instinctively to the north, away from Colaba and the commercial center called the Fort. The rain switched on and off and the atmosphere was hot and humid. I was wet both from rain and perspiration. The city was changing its aspect as I walked on. The suburbs getting shabbier and the crowds thicker. Now and then I asked passers-by for directions. Not that I knew where I wanted to go. I asked them where I could find a cheap hotel.

“Semi-cheap, around here. Very cheap, keep going north. Better take a bus to Dharavi.”

A nice elderly gentleman with white hair gave me this advice and pointed out the buses. I took an ancient, red double-decker and rode it for a quarter of an hour in mad traffic and narrow streets clogged with pushcarts and animals and street cricket matches until the conductor told me to get off. And when I did get off that bus, God, I thought, Cairo at its worst is not as bad as this. What kept me there was that the alternative would have been my body found at some other port of call with a knife between the shoulder blades.

I asked a young man lounging near the bus stop if he knew of a cheap hotel. He smiled happily. I interrupted his boredom. A good-looking young man. Dark, with pleasant features and the smooth, black, shiny Indian hair. It made me think that, on first impressions, Indian men were better looking than Indian women.

“Please follow me. I shall take you to the best one.”

“No, no. I want a cheap hotel.”

“It is cheap. It is the best of the worst. The Taj Mahal of Dharavi,” he said and laughed.

I followed him wondering whether I would manage to survive this ordeal with my sanity intact. My mood was turning sour. I felt my initial good humor evaporating. Down noisy streets and crowded, soggy alleys, we stopped outside a shop selling linen and the young man told me that if I planned to stay for any length of time it would be a good idea to buy two sheets and two pillow cases.

“Why?”

“Because you might not want to sleep on the ones provided by the hotel.”

He laughed again. We entered the shop and I bought the linen hoping I would not have many more unwelcome expenses and then to the hotel. I did not even feel like talking. I gave curt, monosyllabic replies to the young man’s attempts at conversation. I must have seemed rude but he appeared not to mind. He told me his name was Rami. He seemed to have taken a liking to me.

The Ratnam was on a street, not an alley. A narrow street, but still a street. There were tenements on both sides of it and further up the road a number of small workshops. Two or three carpenters, one varnisher, an ironmonger and a small factory that manufactured shoes. Dilapidated or not, the Ratnam was the jewel of Mahim Road. The reason for its classiness being that its rooms hosted one or two persons instead of whole families, while in the other tenements humanity brimmed over and overflowed into the street, their balconies clogged with the family laundry. It was not old but badly designed, badly built and more than badly kept. As you entered, there was no desk to establish the fiction of a hotel. One entered a narrow passage that led to a wooden staircase that zigzagged up four floors getting narrower and steeper in the process. There were three rooms to each floor and a tiny squat toilet with a shower above it and a small metal sink whose original color could not be surmised. The water ran in the taps at unpredictable intervals and this contributed to the stench that emanated from there.

When we arrived, that first time, at the Ratnam, Rami tilted back his head, cupped his hands over his mouth and shouted, “Mr. Kumar.” A very hooked, very large nose with a pair of thick spectacles astride it peered down at us from a balcony on the third floor.

“Come down Mr. Kumar. I have a customer,” shouted Rami.

“Go away Rami. There are no vacancies.”

“Mr. Kumar, he's an Englishman!”

“Oh all right. I'm coming.”

I could not bring myself even to smile. Mr. Kumar came out of the main door squinting at me, smiling at the Englishman. His nose dominated and overshadowed an agreeable mouth, all teeth intact. His dark forehead was lined and to its left and right, a largish pair of ears protruded beneath frizzy, un-Indian, milky white hair. If one ever wondered whether a man could be cantankerous and good-natured, at the same time, he had the answer in the person of Mr. Kumar.

“You are very lucky, Sir,” he told me. “I have just one single vacancy.”

“You are very lucky,” said Rami laughing heartily. “I doubt that you have seen such luxury before.”

“Go away, Rami. Let me show the gentleman his room, in peace.”

Rami had too good a thing going for him to leave. He could not miss the show. Mr. Kumar, short, thin, shabbily dressed, probably in his early seventies, a little stooped and clearly stiff of joint led the way. Led me from one shock to the next. Up the shocking, less than rigid staircase, to the first floor and into the shocking little room, with its painfully greasy aspect. Walls, floor and rickety furniture seemed to have been given a coating of kitchen grease with a brush. The evidence was in the air. The smell was sickening. Rami opened the window that gave to the street and told me with a

laugh, that half the stink would go and as for the other half, I would get used to it. The bed was made up with a threadbare red cotton blanket on top and Rami pulled the blanket and pointed at the sheets and the pillows with a smile.

“Was I not right?” he asked me.

“You are getting me quite annoyed, Rami,” said Mr. Kumar.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Kumar,” said Rami, “I told the gentleman this is the best hotel in Dharavi. There is none better. And the most expensive. I hope you make a special rate for him.”

“Oh, do mind your own business, Rami. Why don’t you go, now? Your usefulness has come to an end.”

“I want to make sure my friend is comfortably settled in.”

I had to smile at that despite my gloom.

Mr. Kumar stared long and hard at Rami and then continued with the shock treatment.

“Here, dear Sir, you have a primus kerosene stove and all the cooking utensils you shall need. This door leads to your private bathroom and you are very lucky on this floor because the water runs longer than on the floors above. Of course we expect our guests to use the water in moderation. Very, very carefully.”

“I would imagine, they have not much choice,” said Rami. Then he went up to Mr. Kumar, confidentially bent close to his ear as if he did not want me to hear, and said in a loud enough voice, “Mr. Kumar, please, don’t show him the bathroom. He might change his mind about staying here.”

Mr. Kumar thought it wiser to ignore him while at the same time taking his advice about displaying it.

“All your neighbors, Sir, are peaceable, upper-caste people and one or two university students. You should have no problems with them. Mr. Rami, here, was a tenant for a while. But he has left us and now the hotel is very quiet and calm. The room and private bath will cost you two hundred and fifty rupees a week, payable in advance. The light bulb is forty watts. If you wish we can put a stronger bulb but there will be a small surcharge for it.”

“We’ll take it,” said Rami, “but with a hundred watt lamp and no surcharge.”

“Oh, mind your own business, Rami,” said Kumar. Then, turning to me with a smile that deflected attention from the nose and piercing spectacled stare, he said, “Are you agreeable, Sir?”

“With a hundred watt lamp?”

“Yes, yes, all right.”

“Then, it’s a deal,” I said.

God, I thought to myself, that’s dirt-cheap. I took out my roll of Indian money and carefully peeled off two hundred and fifty rupees. The slow inspection of the unfamiliar notes and seeming reluctance to part with them made everyone happy. I was happy because the room, though rotten, was unbelievably cheap. Kumar was happy because he concluded he bagged an English tightwad, probably overcharging him in the process and Rami was happy because, I assumed, he would get a commission, or at least, a tip from Kumar. Perhaps, even, a new friend.

“Thank you, Sir,” said Kumar. “Today is Tuesday. Tuesday is payday. Remember that every Tuesday you must have the money ready if you shall be staying on.”

“Mr. Kumar, would you kindly take your sheets and the lovely red blanket with you. We shall not need them,” said Rami undoing the bed to reveal a mattress that made me itchy all over. Then he asked Mr. Kumar if anybody would be coming in to clean the room and got an angry glare for a reply. He took the new sheets and made the bed

quickly at a practiced pace while I watched for there was not enough space to allow me to lend him a hand.

“I shall let you rest now,” said Rami. “I shall pass later in the evening to make sure you are all right and do not need anything.”

“Thank you, Rami. My name is John. I would be very happy if you would join me for dinner, later on.”

“Sure, I shall pass by at around ten. Welcome to your new home. Even if it is only temporary.”

Later, after Rami left, Mr. Kumar came back into the room with the hundred-watt lamp and held the lone wobbly chair for me while I replaced the existing bulb. The operation achieved, he smiled sweetly and asked me what brought me to Bombay.

“I’m here for a short holiday,” I said. Short holiday! In the slums, in the sweltering heat, in the monsoon.

“Well, I hope you enjoy yourself.”

“I am sure I will Mr. Kumar.” God!

“I did not ask your name. A grave omission on my part. This boy Rami makes me lose my mind.”

“John Dominic.”

“Not very English-sounding.”

“No, it’s Maltese. My mother, however, was Greek.”

“Ah so! Socrates, Plato and Aristotle! Alexander the Great, almost a fellow countryman. The Parthenon, Byzantium. Oh, a glorious history! I am very happy to have you as my guest. You must come upstairs, sometime, for a cup of tea and to sign my hotel register. I reserve it for special, distinguished guests.”

“Thank you Mr. Kumar, I shall be happy to come.” Distinguished, I thought. God. A raped murderer hiding for his life. But yes, distinguished. Distinguished by the fact that I would not bow to intimidation or submit passively to injury.

We shook hands when he left. He was sweet, after all. Despite his hotel with its grime and smells, its waterless water-closets and stained walls, its rats and cockroaches. I looked out of the window. The sun was setting behind the clouds. The day was fading, calling it a day. Something the milling humanity outside my window seemed unwilling to do.

I unpacked my belongings from the soggy, disintegrating paper bag. I opened the cupboard and before I shut it to avoid a second whiff of its smell, saw it was divided into two sections, one with shelves and the other with a wooden bar and a few wire hangers for suits. Space enough for my meager belongings but perfumed out of bounds. I left my unpacked clothes on the chair, removed my shoes and changed into my pajama trousers. I did not have slippers and when I walked barefoot, my feet felt sticky on the greasy, wooden floorboards. An unpleasant sensation, but I figured it was the least of the new discomforts I would have to get used to. Either that or a knife between the shoulder blades. How did I manage to land in such a fix?

I sat on my bed. On clean sheets covering a mattress of three thousand and one nights, a thousand and one stains, perhaps, a thousand and one bugs and tried to put it out of mind. Only to dream of my bunk on the Andalusia. Above that of Gonzo, our elderly cook, who was fond of me and treated me often to a succulent fried banana sprinkled with sugar. With my wonderful, beloved porthole next to my pillow. My companion and pastime, my tranquilizer and breath of fresh air. My window to the world of dreams and thoughts, hopes and longings. A world as turbulent and as calm as the waves that passed by. As exhilarating and graceful, sometimes, as a glimpse of a dolphin that followed our ship for a couple of miles. And as black and frightening as a

heaving, moonless, threatening sea. Two other sailors shared the two adjacent bunks. But both the language and my porthole isolated me from them. On my bunk I was in private quarters. In luxury. They were clean, rat less and roach less.

It was getting dark, moving on to nine. I did not switch on my hundred-watt lamp. I did not need light to think. I did not need mosquitoes, either. Half the stench of the room was gone. The other half, I was getting used to. I was thirsty and walked, just as I was, to the bathroom but the taps were dry, just the odors gushing. From my window, I spotted, further down the street, a teashop-on-a-table and its ten-year old waiter. I called to him from the window, "Chai." He saw me and up came a spicy tea in double-quick, special, barefoot delivery. Special, with a smile. With two smiles, if you counted mine, and a ruffling of hair, with no water to rinse one's greasy hand. He waited till I drank the brew, a small respite from drudgery. The tiny man. His childhood misplaced. We exchanged some Indian words in one of the hundred languages I did not understand and a few words of simple English, which he didn't either.

What would Anna be doing just now?

For two weeks I did not leave the neighborhood. My depression lifted little by little after the first few days. I started getting used to the misery, the heat, the downpours. I went for short walks and shopping in the vicinity. There were things I had to buy. Underwear, shirts and one or two trousers, towels and soap, bottled water and toothpaste. An umbrella, slippers and a dozen small things that I bought as the need arose. Chlorine detergent and a kitchen brush to scrub up my room, to clean out the cupboard and bathroom as best I could with so little water. My trousseau and my Proust were probably still in the Andalusia, sailing back to Europe by now, minus their owner. I wondered if the captain alerted the police. Obviously, he must have. One man lost at sea, another on land. How long before the police found me?

India. So vast. So much to see and I having to keep holed up in Dharavi. I wondered how I was going to get out of the fix I was in. Thank goodness for Rami. We met practically every evening for a meal. He obviously knew his way around and we went to cheap eateries where the food was half decent and tasty. Sometimes taking a bus to nearby districts. But even in Dharavi one found a wide variety of small, modest eating places. Apart from the traditional Indian curry and tandoori dishes, I particularly enjoyed the Gujarati joints with their vegetarian cuisine. I looked forward to our meetings.

We would spend a couple of hours over our meal drinking innumerable cups of spiced, exotically perfumed teas when we finished our food, chatting all the while. He seemed to have plenty of time on his hands. As a student, which he claimed he was, he could not have been very diligent. He hailed from a town called Surat to the north of Mumbai and a well-to-do Hindu upper-caste family. His father was a cloth wholesaler and wanted Rami to earn a university degree. He managed to enroll in an economics course at Bombay University. He explained that if you do not have a special interest and are not much of a swot the most innocuous choice is economics.

"It is pretty useless," he told me, "but it sounds impressive and if there is something going for it, it is that it disciplines your thought processes. It is like an intellectual game. It codifies the obvious. Supply and demand of goods and services, money and interest rates and that sort of thing. I am sort of surfing along."

I told him I jumped ship.

"Why?" he asked.

"I want to see India."

"Is that all?"

"Yes. Do you think the police will find me?"

“Oh, not unless you go looking for them. What passport do you hold?”

“British.”

“Then you’re all right. As a former colonial master the authorities will enjoy admonishing you sternly but with an undercurrent of fondness. At most you will be deported. We have a love-hate emotional complex with the English.”

At our next meeting he came with several travel guides to India. I thanked him for his thoughtfulness and started reading them in the mornings in my room. It was through them I discovered, in pictures, the many wonderful temples of India and was fascinated to learn that some of them had erotic sculptures and that the *lingam* (phallus) and to a lesser extent the *yoni* (vulva) are ubiquitous symbols in the temples. I marveled that the prudish India of today has such an unusual and unexpected legacy. I had the vague awareness that Indians tended to spiritualism and mysticism which I dismissed and scorned just as I dismissed and scorned our own Christian religious beliefs and rituals and what little I knew of the Muslim faith. I found in Hinduism a peculiarly childish faith that sustained their proclivity for asceticism.

I once read a book on such holy, ascetic yogis and swamis and was unable to feel the slightest empathy or understanding for their path to holiness. Perhaps my ignorance matched theirs and perhaps because I did not hear their teachings first hand, I was convinced that their life of deprivation, of ash-swathed nakedness, of begging and hunger, of inactivity and meditation, was coupled with a good dose of laziness. What a contrast, what a surprise those temples with their sensual, uninhibited *nayikas* (heroines), *apsaras* (celestial beauties) and erotic couples were. The desire to learn more of their history, the desire to visit them increased day by day. But for the moment I was shuttered in my room.

I started extending my forays out of Dharavi in the following weeks. A movie now and then with Rami as a whispering translator in the dark, in an attempt to get the feeling of Indian mores through the so called masala movies. Not much help, really. All in the same vein. Over three hours of implausible plots, violent action, exaggerated acting with the modern-day *nayikas* bursting into song every five minutes, loads of sexual innuendo together with religious piety and moralizing. Their success determined by the stars, their music and sexy choreography. You have seen one; you have seen them all, as that other beautiful *apsara* called Samia used to say. One afternoon, a bus ride to Juhu Beach, to the weekly, weekend carnival on the beachfront of luxury hotels with massive crowds, strolling along among the snack sellers, fruit vendors and fortune tellers. With a few swimmers soaking in the sea and noisy, un-gentlemanly beach cricket matches by youngsters. A sense of incessant movement to and fro which kept me interested as I looked at the Indian faces of the middle class and tried to assimilate looks and types. The men and women. But they were all a blur in those early days.

“On weekdays it is completely different,” said Rami. “The place is deserted. You can come for a swim.”

It was already early August and the monsoon rains were thinning out. I started taking the bus in the morning and spending the day on the beach. I bought a small, light sun parasol, a large beach towel and a moisturizing sun lotion and spent lovely, lazy days on the beach. Rami told me to start visiting the Mumbai sights but for a few weeks I could not envisage changing my beach routine. I wished those days would go on forever. I swam and slept, read a little and meticulously spread suntan lotion on my body to protect me from the merciless sun. My sickly white skin was getting pleasantly tanned.

I got to know some of the regulars that frequented the beach in the daytime. A few Indian families with children and an English lady on holiday who was staying at a

hotel just off the beach. I saw her a few times and we sort of smiled a vague greeting when our eyes met. When I asked her, a few days later, to keep her eye on my things while I swam, we started talking and from then on I sat next to her when I found her on the beach.

She must have been in her early fifties, a typically English face with short blond hair and a la-didah accent. Of normal height, a little stocky with largish breasts and a firm, well-kept, tanned body outside her small bikini which drew and mesmerized stray Indian stares. Her icy blue eyes did not enhance her face as much as a set of perfect white teeth and a particularly pleasant smile, which she kept in reserve for special occasions. She was stern, this Marjorie Swinburn, perhaps because she spent a lifetime studying. An anthropology lecturer at Sussex University, she was on a sabbatical and had come to India for a couple of months. She was married and had two daughters but she needed this long break from family and study and lecturing. Her batteries were flat and they needed charging, she told me with a smile.

“And you?” she asked.

“Oh much the same,” I said. “Flat batteries. Totally flat.”

She smiled.

“One would not have thought batteries go flat so early in life.”

“Each bears his own cross.”

“Dear, dear,” she said smiling again.

Well our conversations were minimal the first few days. “Nice weather today.” “The sea is much too warm.” “The humidity is stifling.” That sort of thing. And a few words with the Indian family next to us with two young girls and an adolescent boy. Obviously rich because they came with their car and chauffeur and sandwiches and soft drinks in a portable icebox and a servant girl of seventeen or eighteen. The family spoke in English and I enjoyed that lovely Indian lilt and wondered if speaking in English was snobbism. Even the servant girl spoke in English. I swam and slept and sometimes I woke up and Mrs. Swinburn was gone and next day she apologized for not saying good bye.

“You were sleeping so peacefully. I couldn’t wake you up for an au-revoir.”

“I think it is I that ought to apologize for sleeping in your company.”

“Nonsense. We are here to recuperate.”

For a few days we swam separately keeping watch over each other’s affairs and then we swam together and asked the Indian lady to keep watch. She swam quite well, Mrs. Swinburn, and she complimented me on my swimming which was far superior but nothing like my Port Said days. We dried in minutes in the hot sun and I spread suntan lotion on her milky English skin and the first time I did so she said that after such familiarity I might as well call her Marge because, anyway, she called me John and Mrs. Swinburn made her feel she was back at university which she wanted to forget for a while.

Familiarity spread to the Indian family and I asked the lady why they spoke English. She told us they lived in London for five years as her husband worked at the Indian Embassy and were back only recently. And the young girl? She has been with us for about a year but she is very bright and has picked up the language extraordinarily fast. I smiled at her and she looked away, at the sea. She had been keeping a close watch at my evolving familiarity with Mrs. Swinburn, the application of lotion on her back and our increasing chatter. All this, while keeping on the go with the children, laying out the tablecloth on the sand and the food and the drinks and drying the children as they came out of the sea. Resisting the bullying of the boy and running after the girls

with the food, collecting the soiled plates and putting away the remnants which would probably be her dinner at home in the kitchen. Yes, the white people interested her.

“Marjorie, are you here to study the Indians?”

“Good Lord, no. Do you realize what the word, Indians, involves?”

“Well, yes, superficially. But being an anthropologist and all, I thought you might be.”

“India is a jigsaw puzzle of races, languages and religions. It is a continent, not a country. I came here for a rest. A little traveling, yes, but for pleasure. I want to see a few things like the Khajuraho temples and the Sun temple at Konarak.”

“Fascinating, isn’t it?”

“I presume you are referring to the erotic sculptures?”

“Yes.”

“But it isn’t only that. The temples themselves are quite extraordinary. The Sun Temple at Konarak is a masterpiece of conception and workmanship and those of Khajuraho quite magnificent in their architecture and sculptures. I have read books about them.”

“I had no idea they existed. When I was in Cairo I happened to see one or two Indian films and another few here in Mumbai and from their insipid prudishness I would not have expected such a heritage of explicit eroticism.”

“The world changes, John, not always for the best. Don’t forget that this country was dominated at one time by the Moslems, and Islam is essentially a conservative religion. Then came the British with their Victorian prudishness and at the turn of the century began establishing their art academies and imposing our supposedly superior culture, the consequence of which was the disappearance of traditional Indian art.”

“My God, I feel so ignorant. Will you tell me more about this art of theirs?”

“Right, but first let’s go for a dip. I’m getting awfully hot.”

We got up and walked to the sea.

“Will you keep an eye on our things?” I asked the servant girl. She smiled and nodded. She had large, beautiful eyes full of intelligence. Her fine, black hair in a tangle. She was wearing a sari and was barefoot. I had never seen so much femininity and seductiveness in an adolescent. Such an emanation of uncontrived sexuality. No wonder the boy was constantly around her, twisting her arm, pulling her hair and tripping her. At his age, teasing and bullying was the only way he knew to express his attraction to her.

We entered the warm, placid waters and swam for a while with an easy stroke. In the deep the water was cooler.

“That’s much better,” said Marjorie. “Quite wonderful, in fact.”

“Yes. Are your batteries getting charged?”

“Oh, definitely. Are yours?”

“Yes, they are. I wish I could spend the rest of my life lazing about on this beach.”

“I must confess John, I am quite intrigued as to why a young man your age would need so much peace and calm. You must be, what, twenty-six?”

“Yes, more or less. I have had a difficult life, Marjorie.”

“Why don’t you call me Marge?”

“Marge is too common. It reminds me of a harassed English housewife.”

She laughed.

“I am both a harassed lecturer and a harassed housewife.”

“But you are not common.”

“Thank you, my dear. So, will you tell me of your difficult life?”

“Well, at the moment I am in a bit of a fix. I was an assistant engineer on a cargo vessel and I have jumped ship. I am keeping low hoping I shall not be discovered.”

“Why did you jump ship?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Okay. I shall not pry.”

We swam back to the shore. The girl smiled at us.

“Everything all right?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“What’s your name?”

“Tahira.”

We lay on the sand to dry and then after spreading some lotion on our bodies, each helping the other on the difficult-to-reach parts of our bodies, we moved under my small parasol.

“Are you going to sleep?” Marjorie asked.

“Not if you shall tell me about the Indian temples.”

“It’s the erotic sculptures you are interested about, is it not?”

“Well, yes. It is most unconventional, you must admit.”

“And sex interests you.”

“Doesn’t it interest you?”

She smiled.

“As I grow older and my sex life diminishes, it interests me more and more.”

“You are surprisingly frank, Marjorie. But why should that be?”

“In my youth I was so engrossed in my studies and later when I got married, so preoccupied with my family life, that I feel I missed not so much the sex but the passion that ought to accompany it. The eroticism that is depicted on those temples tells of an existence where the sexual game was absolutely central to the being of the Indians. I don’t know if that, in fact, is true though it seems to be so, at least for a part of that society that had the time, leisure and wealth to indulge in it. It is a concept so foreign to the western culture in which we grew up, where being successful in other fields of endeavor overshadows sex and makes it almost peripheral to our life.”

“All the northern Europeans though more progressive and less inhibited in sexual mores than us southerners also seem less interested in sex.”

“A very unscientific observation that seems to be true but might not be,” said Marjorie smiling. “It will need research and statistics to verify. But we are roaming off the point.”

I smiled too.

“Yes, let’s get to the point,” I said.

“Sexuality seems to have played an important part in the religious life of primitive society. In ancient India erotic art was conceived as a sexual impetus that generated divine pleasure and led to the union with the Supreme Being. It has always been part of the Brahman, Buddhist and Jainist traditions and reached its peak in the Tantric period. It covers the vast range of tribal to popular art, of rural to urban life. It is part of the temples, sculptures and drawings. It permeates India’s thought and literature. In India it was a way of life that has not been replicated in any other civilization. It has never been moralized nor prohibited. Sexual symbolism and depiction is a cultural element pervading the whole of India.”

“But other cultures have had erotic literature as well.”

“Yes. Most cultures with the exception of the Judeo-Christian legacy have had erotic literature. Persians, Chinese and Arabs have almost as prolific an abundance of

erotic texts as the Indian Sanskrit texts but in these cultures the texts have not achieved the same status as in India where the arts of love are widely considered as classics because sexual imagery plays such a crucial role in its art, its thought, its literature and religion.”

“Were most of the texts written in Sanskrit?”

“Ah, interesting question since we are talking of India. You see, John, Sanskrit is, you might say, the Latin of India. Most of the Indian languages evolve from Sanskrit and they are known as Prakrit. The rest are the Dravidian family of languages which are spoken in Southern India and the Deccan Peninsula. The Sanskrit texts are the greatest mine of erotic literature. They form an uninterrupted chain from the third to the seventeenth centuries. The texts have been handed down from hand to hand. In them, sexuality and religion have always an intimate linkage. Ritual copulation and sexual dialogue were an important part of the rites. And there is a constant interaction between the religious and the recreational. For example take the *devadasi* which were girls that danced in temples for the gods and brought eroticism into the music and their choreography. Of course, their patrons were mostly the princes and the well to do and they often participated in their sexual activities.”

“A change in Indian culture, though, was inevitable, as you said. I could not imagine this eroticism continuing in our miserable days.”

“One cannot make comparisons, John, nor draw conclusions. For one thing, our knowledge is so pitifully limited. It comes from the few texts we have and from them we try to recreate the workings of society at that time and the life of the average man. During the Gupta period, which was about 300 to 550 AD, the lifestyle of the aristocracy started becoming apparent in the literary and artistic compositions. A little later, in the tenth century the *Kamasutra* of Vatsyayana appeared which not only speaks of sexual technique but advocates a creative mental attitude during *Kama*, the sexual act, that should lead to perfection but was not separate from desire and pleasure.

“Vatsyayana was a sage and wrote the *Kamasutra* as a devotional duty. It is written in Sanskrit and is a proposal, a guide of the art of living in society. It brings together the three goals of the Hindu tradition. *Kama* (pleasure-desire), *Artha* (possessions-riches), and *Dharma* (duties-religion). It is the mainstay of the rich erotic tradition of India. It speaks of the felicity and sexual equality of men and women. It underlines the importance of song and dance, of conversation and clothes, of the good life. Of course, he also talks in great detail of the sixty-four aspects of sexual union defining sizes of the lingam and yoni, the different permutations and positions but it is also a document on the art of living and how to experience fully the pleasures of life.”

“Obviously the society that he wrote for must have been mature and ripe for his teachings.”

“Oh yes. I would go so far as not to call them teachings but a sort of etiquette or protocol because Indian society at the time was liberated, happy and frank. Women circulated freely in public, young men courted young women without raising eyebrows. Pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relations were normal and the courtesans like the *hetaerae* in Ancient Greece were admired and socially accepted and not scorned as in our days.”

“Still, would the fact that sex was free and easy and happy lead to the practice of decorating the facades of their temples with erotic sculptures?”

“That’s where the Tantric tradition comes in. It is another Hindu trend that considers sexuality as fusion of the magic of sensuality with spiritual fulfillment. It involves the principles of *Kama*. It has a highly developed ritual which consists largely of *sexo-yogic* postures. It was in the early tantric period just before the tenth century

that eroticism in art reached an important turning point, that of the union of sexuality and religion. Erotic art was henceforth indispensable in the ritual practiced in Hindu temples and the achievement of the plastic arts. On a more personal level, the erotic profile was part of the individual's identity. His prowess and erotic skill were not to be measured by the frequency of the act. In the ancient Indian tradition, sexuality was a primary feature of a refined aesthete."

"That's a strange way to describe an accomplished lover. Refined aesthete! How refined an aesthete can a man whose thoughts are centered on sex be?"

"I really have not thought about it."

"Was Casanova a refined aesthete?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Are women refined aesthetes?"

"And why not?"

"Are you a refined aesthete?"

Marjorie smiled.

"Are you?" she asked.

"Modesty prevents me from answering."

She laughed.

"That is an answer in itself. Not a very modest one either!"

I laughed. It was a welcome break to rest and digest the little lecture Marjorie just delivered. The Indian family was getting ready to leave. Young Tahira was turning like a top collecting the paraphernalia the family had strewn on the sand. The chauffeur came to collect the umbrella, the lady's chair and the box with the empty bottles and plates. The rest was carried by an overloaded Tahira. The family said good-bye and walked away nonchalantly carrying nothing.

"Good-bye Tahira," I said.

She turned and smiled. A spark of happiness in those bright eyes.

"Shall we get on with our erotic lecture?" said Marjorie.

"Yes, please."

"According to the tantra, woman is the primordial force in life. She has a dynamic and dominant role. The tantric rituals are dedicated to this cult of femaleness and elevate her to a cosmic force. Woman is the source of all aspects somber and luminous: she is creator and destroyer, sensual and sublime, good and horrific. The tantric philosophy emphasizes that the fundamental and supreme energy can be aroused by the training of systematic breath control which is a technique of yoga and goes as far as to deem sexual intercourse a conduit to the ultimate felicity associated with the Divine. There is a sexual energy so intense that can liberate the psyche. Sexuality is neither moral nor immoral; it is amoral."

"Alas," I said, "modern man is much too pressed for time to master the yoga techniques of breath control. He doesn't know what he's missing, I presume."

Marjorie smiled and continued.

"Tantric culture and practices are in fact incomplete without the recognition of the divinity of the female figure. And this principle of female adulation is held to be the most innocent expression of the tantric cult. The more extreme forms of tantrism begin with drunkenness. The orgies start with the adoration of the woman in her entirety, from head to feet. Wine is poured on the head and it is lapped up as it trickles down the body and is considered highly energizing. The sexo-yogic postures so widely displayed on the sculpted ornaments on the facades and the interiors of temples are considered part of the tantric practices. But it is not just a matter of sensual pleasure as has so often been assumed. They clearly suggest that the contortions in the sexual play of tantric yoga are

destined to reach the supreme energy and felicity by means of a union with a partner and this is, perhaps, why the postures are so unconventional. The tantric images are therefore a route in the journey from the earthly sphere to the cosmic one.”

Marjorie stopped.

“Any questions?” she asked.

“Oh yes, many, but first many thanks for a learned, concise exposé.”

We went for a quick dip keeping our eyes on our parasol and clothes and when we came out Marjorie put on her beach robe over her bathing costume and asked me if I would join her for a bite and a drink at the hotel. The talk on eroticism, the pictures I had seen of the temple sculptures, the buildup of my sexual energy in these last six weeks of inactivity had made me often dream of Marjorie as an apsara on a plinth of a Khajuraho temple minus her bikini in a sensual curving posture. An unlikely blonde, blue-eyed apsara, her hand caressing her appropriately heavy bosom. Sometimes, one leg around a man facilitating the entrance of his lingam in her yoni and at others, squatting on the ground with the lingam in her mouth. The wisps of fair pubic hair escaping the confines of her costume gave me a thrill whenever I spied them. I yearned to see, to touch and kiss her yoni. I wondered if she ever considered me as a sex partner in a tantric fantasy. I wondered if women had such fantasies.

“But Marjorie, I am hardly dressed for the hotel.”

“Don’t worry; the guests are pretty casual in their dress.”

We walked the short distance to the hotel, left my bag and parasol at the concierge and entered the bar. A small table for two, two toast sandwiches and two whiskies and soda.

“This time you pay, Margie, as I have very little money on me, next time is mine.”

“Margie?” She smiled.

“Better than Marge.”

“When is next time?”

“Tomorrow?”

“Fine.”

“Question: Have you read the Kamasutra?”

“Yes.”

“So have I. It is amusing. Is it not? And a little tedious with detail. Too many positions, too many details of sizes, kisses and embraces, embellishment and shampooing. I have also read a little about tantrism. Not so much the culture as you expounded it but practical advice on sex. Amongst other things it advised men to avoid ejaculation especially as they grow older. Ejaculation sort of spends desire whereas if a man can learn to withhold his sperm he retains his desire and can have a lot more sex. The point is can one learn to do it? It is the yoga part of breathing techniques.”

“It need not concern you at the moment, I should think,” said Marjorie smiling.

“May I ask you something indiscreet?”

“Go ahead.”

“Coming to India for a two-month change of your life’s daily routine, did you consider having a casual romantic liaison if somebody appropriate crossed your path?”

She smiled.

“Somebody like you?”

I blushed because she saw right through me.

“Not necessarily,” I said. “Somebody, anyone that attracted you. You were very frank to say that sex preoccupied you now that you are growing older and let me hasten

to add that you are still very attractive and on the beach you get plenty of admiring stares. I am just wondering if you thought of the possibility.”

“Yes. I have thought of the possibility. Vaguely. As vague as my sense of having missed sexual passion in my life.”

“You would go through with it if the occasion presented itself?”

“Perhaps. I am not sure.”

“All this eroticism does not affect you?”

“Where is this eroticism? In pictures and temples and Sanskrit manuscripts? Where is it in modern India?”

“It is in the mind. All this representation evokes it. After all, you did miss passion in your life.”

“Yes. The lack, the deficiency is there but in our world there are so many substitutes. I have been surfing in life on these substitutes which are rewarding nevertheless.”

“I don’t know. Perhaps I am primitive but sex is on my brain. Especially when I don’t have it.”

“You are a man and you are young. Women are different.”

“Do you feel it would be a betrayal of your marriage, of your family?”

“If they found out, they might be hurt. But that’s not it. They need not find out. It is how I feel. And my feelings are complex. I have married a very intelligent professor of literature. He is a brilliant talker who mesmerizes you when he opens his mouth. When I read to him my writings or discuss a lecture I am to give at university, he asks questions that I have not thought about, that I cannot answer. He is not handsome but I fell in love with his mind. He fascinated me. I am still in awe of him but that does not mean physical attraction and anyway marriage kills physical love and passion.”

She smiled.

“It paralyses the lingam and anaesthetizes the yoni. We hardly make love but there are compensations. Two lovely daughters, nineteen and seventeen, pretty and intelligent and full of life. A successful career. What more do I want?”

“Well obviously a little more,” I said.

“Such as?”

“A small break from the placid, happy life you have been leading. I’m not being ironic. A person needs a change even from happiness.”

We drank the whisky and polished off the sandwiches and she ordered another round of drinks.

“Let us talk of John Dominic,” she said.

I recounted a short, expurgated version of my life. Port Said, parents, growing up, the Lycée, Anna, the Suez war, a devastating death, Cairo, Anita, Samia and her prince, Anna again, the Andalusia and my arrival, almost a fugitive, in India. I talked for some time and remembered Antigone, my love, my mother, my lovely mother and my eyes glistened and Marjorie was surprised. The people I run away from, people I loved and had to escape to work out my destiny.

“Why did you jump ship, John?” she asked.

“It’s getting late, Margie. I must be going. I still don’t know my way around too well and I need to keep a low profile. I promise to tell you that story tomorrow. I need to get it off my chest. It was so nice talking to you. Thank you so much for the lovely invitation.”

We left the bar, I picked my stuff from the concierge and she walked me to the door. We said good-bye and I kissed her lightly on the lips. I was quite tipsy. She smiled and kissed me back. She was quite tipsy, too.

I had dinner with Rami that evening. I was in high spirits. I could not get the kiss on the lips out of my mind. I sensed the tantric virus edge into our bloodstream, hers and mine, with all that talk of tantra. Somehow, I knew that even at that moment Marjorie was thinking about me. Was telepathy an illusion?

I went to Juhu early the next day. The sea, calm as usual, the sun not yet scorching. The beach was empty and people started trickling in an hour later. The Indian family arrived with their chauffeur, equipment and supplies, with bright good mornings and a smiling Tahira. They flopped on straw mats on the sand and sipped soft drinks with straws. Not for Tahira.

I told her "Good morning, Tahira," and she smiled. "How are you?"

"Very well, thank you."

"What a polite young lady you are."

A smile.

"Are you going to swim today?"

"No."

"Don't you want to?"

"I haven't got a bathing costume."

The Indian lady seemed annoyed at my familiarities with Tahira. No need to spoil the servants. I went in for a dip and swam for a while but was bored and came out. I dried off in a jiffy. The sun was showing its claws. I started spreading sun lotion but could not reach my back. I called Tahira and asked her to help. She smiled came over and cupped her hands. I squirted the lotion and turned my back and she massaged it gently on. Marjorie arrived just then.

"I have been neglecting my duties," she said smiling as Tahira was putting the finishing touches on my back. "Good morning everybody. Tahira, keep away from my boyfriend."

Tahira was startled and alarmed. Marjorie went and hugged her.

"I'm only joking," she said. "Silly joke. I'm sorry, my dear."

The Indian lady called Tahira and told her something very sharply in Hindi. She left us and sat down with the family. Now and then she cast hurried, veiled glances at us.

Marjorie took off her robe and hung it on the spokes of the parasol. The casualness of the gesture pleased me. We were becoming familiar, almost a pair. She kissed me on the cheeks and the proximity of her body, her apsara breasts, my hands lingering on waist and hips gave me a thrill. The tantric virus was eating my insides.

"So how are you today?" she asked.

"Wonderful! The sun, the sea, the company, the time that is ours to waste happily, what more do I want?"

She smiled.

"Happiness is contagious. I am happy, too. I feel free. It will not last long but the change is good. I sorely needed it. I hardly think of my family these days."

"But you did think of me last night."

"I did. How did you know?"

"Because I thought of you, too. Things that seem outrageous become acceptable with time if one keeps thinking about them. Familiarity does not always bring contempt. Sometimes it makes the improbable seem possible. Perhaps it is just a daydream, just wishful thinking."

She smiled. She did not miss the hint.

“This talk of tantric eroticism must be aphrodisiac at twenty-six,” she said.

“Not at forty?”

“You are very sweet and subtly flattering. I’m fifty-one.”

“At fifty-one, then?”

“Women are different.”

“Is sex for a woman always a means to an end? Oh, surely they enjoy it but does it have to be tied to something else? Are there no women who need it just for pleasure, pure and simple? Devoid of other considerations? Has our world become so humdrum and materialistic? Is passion dead? What I find wonderful in the culture of tantra is that women coupled with men to attain this state of divinity. The idea that sexual pleasure and fulfillment is an end in itself and is as close as man ever gets to God. To being Divine.”

“I presume there are women who look for sex simply for pleasure but our world has become complex and so has the concept of pleasure. It is tied to the intricate web of our society, our mode of living and our human relationships. It is no longer simply a matter of unadulterated sensuality. And then, don’t forget, for a woman in her fertile period there is the ever-present complicating factor of pregnancy. The fear, or hope of it, is always there to preoccupy the woman.”

“True. But could you, Marjorie, if that’s under control, not forget for a moment your western culture and opt for the intoxication of the senses?”

She looked at me and smiled.

“I don’t know. Perhaps. It is not a question I can answer in the morning, on the beach, in the scorching sun. Which reminds me, will you apply some lotion on me?”

I started on her shoulders and back and then put some lotion on her face, looking at her, caressing her face gently, almost making love to her, moved to her arms and her chest and the top part of her breasts pressed and swollen above the bra and then her belly and legs. I massaged her vigorously and took liberties to which she acquiesced.

“That was nice,” I said when I finished and she smiled.

I sat down next to her. I was happy and excited. She did not object to the more audacious caresses I ventured.

“What I find extraordinary and gratifying in the tantric culture,” I said, “is the worship and dominant place in it of the woman.”

“And yet the erect lingam is the prevailing symbol in the temples.”

“But it is woman that is undoubtedly the object of beauty. She decorates the facades of temples with her nudity and voluptuousness. The yoni is not evident because it is hidden. It is the fascinating mystery of life. I love the expressionless yet sensual, self-satisfied look of those statues. And the erect lingam on Shiva’s statues, isn’t it wonderful?”

She looked surprised.

“You like it?”

“Yes. It is not vulgar and huge like that of the Greek God of procreation Priapos which is coupled with a leer. The statues of Shiva dancing, and Shiva with Parvati at his side have a lovely, well proportioned, erect phallus and he is calm and natural. That is the difference. The Indians evidently took sex and voluptuous pleasures in their stride. After all tantrism endorses the full acceptance of human desires and sentiments.”

She laughed.

“Perhaps too much so. I find their drawings of lovemaking funny. The partners are placid, impassive, the women offering a drink to the man while at it, both half

dressed, their genitals on view, decked with their jewelry and turbans intact. Did the casualness of it all eliminate passion?"

"Good point. Well, we shall never know."

"Shall we go for a swim? To cool off from all this talk of sex?"

She swam without a bathing cap and pushed her short, blond hair behind her ears. It made her look younger. Her face was losing its English paleness and this accentuated her blue eyes. There was a twinkle in them when she looked at me which was not there before. Was it amusement, interest, anticipation? We swam for a while and then floated, barely moving, to rest. I moved close to her.

"We are very lucky to have met, aren't we?" I said.

"In what way?"

"To have each other's company. To talk, to swim together and apply lotion on each other's back."

She smiled.

"You have Tahira for that."

"Oh hardly the same thing. Poor little Tahira got a proper scolding from her mistress for her labors. I mean, with you I learnt so many things and perhaps I shall learn many more."

"About?"

"About India, about tantra, about life. About how a bright, educated, mature, woman thinks and acts. A married woman with an intellectual husband and two grown daughters, on holiday, on her own, in India."

She smiled again and did not answer.

"I wish I could decode that smile," I said. "You are keeping your cards close to your chest."

"And you are showing your hand too obviously. I do not miss the allusions."

"I had not the slightest doubt. I was thinking that time is not on our side."

She laughed.

"You really are presumptuous."

"I threw an ace last night and you did not quit the game. You faced me and raised the stakes."

"I did?"

"I kissed you on the lips and you kissed me back. Is our date on, this afternoon?"

"Of course. You have a tale to tell."

"And maybe a joker up my sleeve. Will you face me and raise the stakes?"

"I don't know. We'll see."

She started swimming to the shore and I followed her. She walked on the sand and looked back to see if I was behind her. I smiled at her and she smiled back but kept going. She looked less stocky than she seemed to me the first few days. Perhaps I was getting used to her looks. Her noncommittal smile puzzled me. She was friendly and familiar and reserved at the same time. Sometimes even affectionate. I could not guess what she was thinking. I had just a few gestures for guidance. That kiss, yesterday. The lotion applications which were getting bolder and bolder with not a squeak of protest. Her interest in me. The understanding of my double-talk which usually made her smile but gave me neither a hint of her thoughts nor a brush-off. I figured she was battling the inhibitions she was raised with and was considering whether to plunge in a short-lived, sensual-tantric affair with me. For it could be nothing more. Not with our age difference, her family, her career, our different worlds. I passed by Tahira who was

laying the table so to speak, on the sand, and she gave me a smile and a small hidden wave. What a darling this girl was. I sat next to Marjorie in the sun to dry out.

“That was a nice swim,” I said. “Most of what we do together is nice.”

A smile.

“Have you been dieting, Marjorie?”

“Why, yes. Does it show?”

“Indeed, it does. You are becoming quite an apsara.”

“And you, quite another Kama.”

“The God of love?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you Margie. That would have been very flattering if I ignored the pinch of irony.”

We rested and slept and swam and talked and spread sun lotion on our bodies and the day went by like a dream and after the Indian family left at about four we started getting hungry and proceeded to the hotel. We went to the bar for a snack and a drink. We ordered sandwiches again and two whiskies.

“The Kamasutra advises one not to eat too heavily if he is about to make love,” I said and smiled. “On the other hand, the tantrika started their orgies with drink. So we have no ceiling on that.”

“In any case, I am on a diet and I should not drink much either.”

“But I see you enjoy your tippie.”

“You speak English with an accent but you speak the language well. And, yes, I do enjoy my drink.”

“So bottoms up.”

We clinked glasses, said cheers, and both took in a good draught. We were thirsty from the sun and the salty taste the sea left in our mouths.

“On the weekend I shall be flying to New Delhi,” said Marjorie, “to see an Indian colleague.”

“A dear friend?”

“No, just a colleague. I shall be back, Tuesday.”

“So we have two days.”

“Oh cut it out, John. And get on with your story.”

“And after that we shall have a few weeks unless you have other appointments.”

“No. Nothing planned.”

“Wonderful. Shall we go to Khajuraho?”

“That’s not a bad idea. Let me think about it.”

“So, where were we? When I left Port Said, my life was in a mess. I had managed to turn down Anna, the girl I loved. Why? Don’t ask me why. Sometimes one’s inferiorities get the better of him. I saw no future with her. I worked as a mechanic with a miserable salary and no prospect of improvement. She was a beautiful girl. Far too good for me. I knew if we got together, sooner or later she would leave me. I could not bear the thought. I preferred to reject her than have her leave me in disgust. Going away on a ship seemed the only way out and, indeed, when I boarded the Andalusia it was as if I had been given a new lease in life.

“It was a Spanish vessel with a mainly South American crew. None of them spoke anything but Spanish and it was just as well. The captain and the officers spoke a little English and so did the engineer under whom I worked. We were about eighteen sailors and not a friend amongst them. We met for lunch and dinner and I did not join in the sparse and gruff exchanges between them simply because I did not speak their language. I was a complete outsider. I worked about twelve hours a day, mostly

between six in the evening and six the next day. After my initial training with the engineer and after he was sure I could manage on my own he left me to take care of the ship's engines all through the night. I would clock in at six and he would leave at eight and return next day at six.

"There was nothing much to do, really. Just keep a watch at the instruments and pressure gauges and follow the instructions that would come through from the captain's deck which were few and far between. But sometimes a chance meeting intrudes in your life that affects your plans, your routine and your peace of mind. It forces you to commit acts you could not possibly have imagined."

Marjorie smiled.

"What? Am I such a case, Margie?"

"Well, you certainly do perturb my peace of mind."

"Pleasantly, I hope?"

"Well, in any case not unpleasantly."

"Sexily, too, I hope."

"Get on with the story, Lord Kama."

"My own unfortunate chance encounter was with the three Musketeers. They were four, in fact, just like the book. Carlos and his three sidekicks. I hardly noticed them at first until they started their harassment and bullying. Whenever they saw me they laughed and pushed me around as if I had annoyed them about something. I could not fight all of them at once so I put up a sort of passive resistance hoping the whole thing would peter out. But it went on. At lunch and dinner they sat near me and Carlos would talk to me incessantly and the others would giggle. Of course I understood not a word but I figured most of them were obscenities and I would eat and pretend nothing was happening, as if they were not there. The other sailors would tell them to pipe down but they kept it up relentlessly.

"He was an ugly, powerfully built man this Carlos with a filthy smirk, wicked and debauched. The type that would couple with a ewe to relieve his sexual frustrations. The other two were more or less normal. Just bullies following a tougher bully. And the fourth, Chico, was so obviously a queer that I wondered how the captain accepted him on his ship. I was sure all three of them had sex with him. Some very odd things happen when men are away from women for very long.

"One day as I was going to the engine room below deck, they grabbed me and Carlos tried to kiss me. I managed to free myself and punched him on his nose which started bleeding like a tap. In the confusion, I ran away to the engine room and they did not dare to follow me because the engineer would be there. I thought of reporting the incident to the captain but I thought it might alienate the rest of the crew against me and once again I hoped my violent rejection of his sexual advances would put an end to this whole business which was causing me constant anxiety.

"A few days later, it must have been around two past midnight, I was alone in the engine room reading my Proust as I usually did to pass the time, when the door opened and the four of them burst in. Carlos had a switchblade in his hands. The other two moved behind me and Chico was looking on, giggling. I don't think Chico was capable of doing anything more than being hospitable to their lingams. Sorry, I should not be using this lovely Indian word for this horrible story. Well, Marjorie for a moment I thought they were going to kill me. The two that were behind me prevented me from grabbing anything to defend myself. But then I thought that they would not risk murdering me.

"Cautiously, probably following a plan, the two approached me and grabbed my hands. Carlos came and threatened to gouge my eyes out. Then they dragged me and

pulling me by the hair, made me bend over the iron table where we put our tools and with his knife, Carlos slashed my trousers and underwear. He was already aroused, breathing heavily. I could hear his breath and grunts despite the noise of the ship's motor. He took out his penis spat on it and inserted it in my behind.

"Oh, Margie, I cannot describe the pain. He was tearing into my gut, grunting like a pig, moving in and out violently. Chico was jumping about like a monkey, laughing hysterically and squealing like an animal, like a devil from a painting by Hieronymus Bosch. I cried and groaned with rage. 'I'll pay you back you bastard if it's the last thing I shall do in my life.'

"They left me lying there on the table because I could not immediately get up. When I did, I went to the small toilet and bathroom we had in the engine room and tried to defecate the filth and hatred he left in me. I was hemorrhaging from my torn flesh. I took a quick shower, folded my torn trousers over my belt and turned to my instruments and pressure gauges."

Marjorie put out her hand and held mine.

"Oh God, John," she said, "what an appalling, horrible story. I am so sorry. It really gave me a punch. Is that why you jumped ship?"

"Not quite."

She smiled and caressed my cheek across the small table.

"What, then?"

I motioned to the waiter for two more whiskies.

"There's a second installment," I said. "Want to hear it?"

"Absolutely."

"I thought once again of reporting it to the captain but what would the captain do that would assuage my rage, my hatred? Reporting it, would moreover prevent me from a personal revenge. I had to bid my time. To find a chance to hit back. I hardly ate the following days so as not to have to go to the toilet often because of the wound I had back there which I wanted to heal. I could not walk without pain and could hardly sit. I kept on seeing the Musketeers again at lunch and dinner and they stopped their habitual harassment but gave me ironic and mocking smiles. I managed to disguise my loathing and ignored them completely but my heart pounded with rage. I was henceforth careful in my moves. I did not move alone but only when people were around. At night I locked the engine room from inside and good thing, too, because they came again on several occasions at about the same hour but could not get at me. And then, finally, a chance encounter to my advantage.

"I heard the knob of the door being tried. I looked cautiously out of a porthole and saw Carlos was alone. He waited a while, tried the door again a few times and then lit a cigarette and went upstairs on deck. I figured he would rest a few minutes to smoke it on deck. I undressed hurriedly and took off my shoes. I took one of those large monkey wrenches, unlocked the door, and tiptoed to the deck. Sure enough he was leaning on the gunwale smoking his cigarette gazing at the sea. The deck was deserted. I could have smashed his head quite easily just then but he would not have known what was coming to him. It would have been too clement a death. I went up to him, held the wrench next to my leg so it would not show and called his name, "Carlos."

"He was startled and jerked around, recognized me in the moonlit semi-darkness, saw I was naked, saw me approaching him and he smiled. Yes, he smiled. It still puzzles me. Did he think I had fallen in love with him? Wanted more of the same? I went nearer and when I was within striking distance, quick as lightning I raised the wrench. Within split seconds, I saw the terror in his eyes, he raised his right hand to protect his face and I smashed the wrench on it breaking it and also smashing a few

teeth and his chin with that single swing. He let out a cry, drowned by the noise of the sea. I lifted the wrench again. I saw a desperate plea on that torturer's face before I smashed his skull with my second swing. He crumpled to the ground.

"I did not care, at that moment, if I were caught. I was totally calm. I had taken my revenge. I had been liberated. I dragged his body to the rear of the ship which was not far and heaved it overboard where the propellers were churning and frothing the water with a deafening din and the plunge of the body could not possibly be heard. I ran back and brought a bucket of water from the engine room with a mop and cleaned the blood and spilt brains that seeped out of his fractured skull. I carefully traced the path on which I dragged his body, mopping up any blood I spotted. I hoped I had not missed any of it in the darkness. I went back to the engine room, locked the door, took a shower and dressed. Finally, I was at peace. But not quite. There were the other three.

"There was a search for him the next day. It amused me that the deck had meanwhile been swept by the crew early that morning and was spotless. If I had missed mopping a single particle of him, the crew unwittingly cleared it away. Not a trace of him left. There were inquiries by the captain later on in the day and I was questioned because apart from the officer on duty with the sailor handling the tiller at the captain's deck, I was the only other person awake, that night. Of course, I said I had not seen him.

"As you can imagine, the harassment, the mocking smiles and gestures by Carlos's three companions stopped as if by magic. I caught them staring at me sometimes. I knew they suspected me of doing away with Carlos and they started being very cautious themselves. They were always moving about bunched together. I sensed their fear and their hatred. I had no doubt that they would kill me if they found the opportunity. I could not take any chances by staying on at the Andalusia. Another unlucky chance encounter might be the end of me. When we came ashore in Bombay, they were at my heels, following me, but I gave them the slip and I never returned to the ship. I have been holed up in Dharavi for weeks in that filthy slum and it is only these last ten days that I have ventured out and am enjoying the sun and the sea and your pleasant company."

Marjorie stared and stared at me. She was obviously shocked. Whereas she was sympathetic and even tender with me at the end of the first part of my story, I sensed the second part troubled her, perhaps horrified her. She kept staring at me not saying a word.

"Are you trying to hypnotize me, Margie?" I asked.

"Was that the joker up your sleeve?"

"Yes. For all it's worth."

I smiled.

"Will you face me and raise the stakes?" I said.

"No John. I pass. Please forgive me, I must go. Thank you for the drinks."

She got up and left. I was left standing stunned and confused. I did not expect such a reaction. Yes, I had killed a man. A piece of scum. An animal that abused me, humiliated me and threatened me, who was out for more. Was I supposed to turn the other cheek? Would she have preferred to comfort a victim, a loser and offer her body for consolation? She was warming up to it. Perhaps my rape minus the revenge was the perfect excuse for compassion and for a spot of tantric gymnastics. I paid, picked up my bag and umbrella, and took the bus for Dharavi. I was depressed. I went to my room and lay about unable to read until Rami passed by and we set out for a meal and the usual chatter that made me forget Marjorie.

The next two days, Thursday and Friday, I did not go to Juhu. I did not want to see Marjorie. Perhaps she did not want to see me. I also stayed away on the weekend

when the crowds thickened. I went to the beach again on Monday when she would not be there. I was upset and wanted to pay her back for her cold shoulder. I had grown fond of her and was practically sure we would end up in bed together. On my desolate bed at night, my lingam hardened at the thought of her, her icy blue eyes, her non-committal smile, without her bikini. I was very curious to find out how far an erudite, prim-and-proper Englishwoman would go. I was certain a stirring deep down in her soul had been taking place.

For the first time in weeks I started getting bored of Mumbai despite the fact that I took a bus to the city centre and Colaba and walked around looking at the people and the shops. I walked on the docks and visited some of the places Rami told me to see such as the Gateway of India arch, the Taj Mahal Hotel and the Gothic Victoria Terminus station. Remnants of an empire that was no more. On Sunday, I took the small ferry to Elephanta Island with the rock-cut cave temples and the imposing triple-headed statue of Shiva as well as the many other finely carved statues of Shiva and Shiva and Parvati. I wanted to see the large lingam that was deep in the cave but there were too many people and the guards prevented us from penetrating to where it was situated. In fact, the crowds spoiled my contemplation of an India of art and sensuality that fascinated me.

On Monday, the Indian family was in Juhu with Tahira. I said hello to them and later when the lady took a stroll along the beach, Tahira asked me why I had not come these past few days.

“The English lady was waiting for you,” she said.

“How do you know, Tahira?”

“Yes, she was waiting for you. She kept looking around.”

“And you?”

She smiled shyly.

“You are a sweet girl.”

I swam several times and slept and thought how perfect the day was even without Marjorie. I was sleeping when Tahira woke me up. The children were taking their last dip and their mother was at the edge of the water with the towels.

“John,” she said, “will you wait for me here? I will come back later.”

“What for, Tahira?”

“I must talk to you.”

“When will you come back?”

“I don’t know. Please wait for me. I shall come back.”

Her eyes were beseeching. I was puzzled. What could she possibly want?

“All right. I shall wait for you.”

She went back to their parasol hurriedly. The children returned with their mother and the family started packing. Well, they put on their t-shirts and shorts while Tahira retrieved their scattered belongings. They said good-bye and left. I wondered if Marjorie had left a message for me. I bought a peculiar spicy sandwich from a snack seller and some bottled water and returned to my umbrella. I swam again a little later just off the beach keeping an eye on my things and waited for Tahira. The sea was tepid at that time of day. At about eight the sun plunged in the sea and it started getting dark. I wondered if Tahira would ever come. At nine, I thought I’d give her another hour but not much more. The beach was practically empty and the itinerant sellers were dispersing. A few couples were still sitting here and there talking intimately in the refuge of the vast empty beach and the susurrus of the waves. The weather was warm and humid but I put on my shirt and trousers and folded the umbrella so as not to look ridiculous with my swimsuit in the darkness. By ten she had still not arrived. I did not

think she would come but I could not bring myself to leave. Almost an hour later she arrived, running, out of breath. I got up and she flung herself in my arms and held me tightly.

“I was afraid you would not be waiting,” she said.

She was dressed in the same sari she wore on the beach and held a small bag. Her desperate embrace puzzled me. I caressed her tousled hair.

“What’s wrong, Tahira?” I asked.

She looked at me with searching, relieved eyes, shining in the moonlight.

“Nothing. I have run away.”

“Are you crazy? What am I supposed to do with you?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? What would you have done if I had not waited?”

“I was sure you would wait for me.”

“You are a crazy girl, do you know that?”

She smiled. She had a smile of ineffable sweetness with white well formed teeth. Her eyes full of intelligence measuring, assessing my intentions. I was completely at a loss.

Athens

The signboard says the flight shall be an hour late and I walk towards the benches to sit and wait and I see Tahira coming out in the crowd of arriving passengers. The Athens airport is new and gleaming and malfunctioning. An hour late, an hour early, same thing, not to worry. I hardly recognize her. In the rough and ready horde emerging from the customs, the well-dressed, the shorts-and-sandal-with-a-rucksack, the serious and the smiling, it was her elegant sari that I noticed. She was pushing a baggage cart with three large suitcases she could barely move.

Five years I had not seen her. How did that beautiful young woman with the large eyes that chose to attach her spirit to mine an eternity ago in Mumbai; the pretty girl who married my business partner and was my lover whenever we met sporadically across the years come to this? It was a letdown more than sadness. A disappointment at not finding what you expect. As one gets older, one hardens. One is not easily compassionate. It was the loss of style, of poise that shocked me. Even of beauty, though Tahira was never a classic. She had an attractiveness that sprang from a lively and alert personality. A sparkling look, a rather too obvious intelligence that made you uneasy because you were never sure you could match it. A twinkle in the eye that made you suspect irony behind the sense of humor and easy laugh. She was thin and gaunt. Her dusky skin and jet black hair had lost their luster. The large shining eyes had sunk in their sockets. A face from the concentration camp of Treblinka. For she was in a hell. She told me so on the phone and I did not know what to do. I told her I would help.

She saw me, smiled and waved and pushed her cart towards the barrier. At least her smile remained intact. She threw herself in my arms and laid her head on my chest. Her desperation touched me. It was so utterly out of character. Did she think I was a magician? I did not know the first thing. I followed her instructions for thirty years. She

told me she just needed my love and moral support for her recuperation. She had it all arranged.

Love? Could five years of sporadic telephone conversations sustain love? I was never as desperately in love with her as I was with Anna. I loved her, yes. I admired her. I yearned for her, desired her and basked in her strange fixation for me. But love? And yet, her head on my chest, her arms tight around me gave a pang to my heart. I, too, held her tightly. My hardships never quite succeeded in stifling my sentiments. My first words hardly words of welcome.

“Oh Tahira, how did it come to this?”

“You see?”

We looked at each other assessing the damage. The graph of our lives was way past its apex. The curve was in steep decline. And we smiled for there was nothing else to do. Nothing we could say. Words of comfort stuck in my throat. They would be lies if they emerged. I took her cart and pushed it to the exit. She felt tired. Asked to sit for a moment and we moved to a sitting area. She held my hand and smiled again. Her hand, dark and bony, felt like a tentacle of death clutching at my soul.

“Welcome my dear,” I said. “I am so happy to see you again.”

I was not sure I meant it. Age kills charity. It breeds selfishness and self-centeredness. I see it in old people. And yet...and yet, one cannot escape his past. Tahira was part of it. And long ago, she did make my heart flutter.

“I am not. Not in this state. I hate coming to you like this but, Johnny, you are my only hope.”

“Oh hardly. There are clinics in Europe that can cure you and you can well afford them.”

“No. The methadone they use trades one addiction for another. One bondage for another.”

“In any case, everything is ready. Your room. The bed with straps. Just as you asked for.”

“Did you get the stuff?”

“Oh yes.”

“No problem?”

“None whatever. The country is flooded with drugs. Young people shoot it openly in the streets. The police stand by and watch. What can they do? Put them in jail? There are not enough medical facilities to take care of them.”

“You look fine Johnny. How’s Anna?”

“As whimsical as ever. She is utterly mad.”

“How did she take my arrival?”

“With her usual indifference. All she cares about is her cats. About ten of them roaming about the house and fifty dependents in the neighborhood. She feeds them, takes them to the vet when they are sick, neuters them to pacify them and keep their numbers down. She is passionate about them. I think she is the greatest cat of all. She shares all their traits and their soul. All nine of them.”

“And you still love her!”

“Unfortunately, yes. Or perhaps I should say, fortunately. I am not sure. Isn’t it funny? Maturity has improved her looks if not her fickleness. She has gained a little weight and she is more beautiful than ever. For her, the clock has stopped. You shall see her. She is my paranoid angel circulating in my house. The adornment and the ornament. It is enough for me to be able to look at her every day. When you have loved a woman as much as I have loved her and she has exhibited such unpredictable behavior, offering and withholding her love and her body as her whims dictate,

continuously keeping you on your toes, you cannot easily get over her. She is, has always been, my vice.”

“Had I not married Rami, might not I have been in her place?”

“Perhaps. For some people life is unpredictable and inexplicable. I think this is true for both of us. But we have shared something precious too, have we not?”

“When we first met.”

“And after.”

“Just stolen moments.”

“But precious and passionate.”

“Oh yes.”

“How is Rami?”

“Oh, don’t remind me of that pig! Getting fat and rich and more revolting by the day. But I have finally escaped him. How I managed to keep my departure a secret is a miracle. I imagine he suspects I have run to you but I am at least out of his clutches. Do you know, I actually think he was hoping I would die and he would inherit me? A compensation for my betrayals? What makes a very rich man want more and more? What makes him want to keep me tied to him when he probably hates me as much as I hate him? He has his life of which I am no part, his riches and mistresses.”

There was no answer to that. No answer to the abyss of the human mind. I got up. We pushed the cart to the parking lot together and loaded them in the car with some difficulty.

“Wow,” I said, “you are planning to live it up with all this baggage.”

“I am planning to stay a while if I survive. If you will have me. I could go to a hotel. It’s just that I want you near me for a while.”

“Tahira, we are going home. It is yours as much as it is mine. Do I have to tell you this?”

We rolled on the new highway towards our suburb by the sea from which the small villa I bought years ago was a two-minute walk away. It had a garden and a fence with shrubbery. It was as close as I could get to the sea. I could have never lived far from it. My love went a long way back. It was all in my stories. Through fact and fiction it was there. This love. At fifty-eight I was not old but I felt my life was over. I felt redundant. The only thing that kept me going was my writing, the sea and Anna.

After the highway back to narrow ancient roads, jam-packed with cars, delays and hopeful false starts. Greece modernizing piecemeal. Ruining one’s humor. But I had Tahira next to me.

“Yesterday you called me from Colombo. How come?” I asked Tahira.

“I stayed in Sri Lanka for four days,” she said. “I heard of a clinic in Colombo that uses herbs and natural minerals to cure all sorts of diseases, mental and physical and conditions of brain damage from hemorrhages with a surprising rate of success. It is becoming quite famous and people from Europe are trooping there in droves. I inquired if they dealt with drug addiction and the answer was yes. That was what finally made me decide to leave Bombay. It seemed to be my last chance. I was using more and more heroin and I could feel my end inescapably creeping closer. It was not a difficult decision. The difficult part was the planning. But I managed pretty well. I stayed at the clinic for three days and was examined by a number of doctors and was given a regimen I must now follow. I was warned it would not be easy. Quite the contrary. It involves severe suffering but I am quite determined to go through with it. It is a matter of life and death and life is sweet. I am only forty-eight and look at me. My only misgiving is the trouble I shall cause you because it shall not be easy for you either.”

“My goodness, Tahira, we will do whatever it takes.”

“And Anna?”

“Anna can go to hell.”

“You don’t mean it?”

“Not really but just as I tolerate her bloody cats she will have to put up with the inconvenience of your cure whatever this involves.”

And so, another part of my past was installed in my house ailing and broken. Not a memory but a person. A person who revived the memory of the striking and vibrant young woman of long ago. The past keeps coming back. I am living in it. I think about it constantly. Reality is blurred. I can hardly tell what is true and what imagination. All the short stories I write and wrote confuse me even more.

Living with Anna is no help. We are both living in dreamlike isolation. We cross each other like somnambulists. She rarely goes out of the house. In summer we sometimes go to an open air movie together. I never know if she enjoys the films. She does not talk to me. Communication at the minimum. She cannot bear me to touch her. It is her prerogative to come to me for love whenever the firing synapses of her brain and her serotonin levels demand it. Sometimes frequently, sometimes so seldom I get desperate. And when she does come, one never can predict her moods. Is that part of her lunacy? Is that what fascinates me? She is passionate, she is cool, she is kinky. It is her choice. She acts, I react. Perhaps, if she were normal I would have tired of her, her manias and eccentricities. Though I think not. She is still so beautiful, so ripe, so desirable. I look at her when she is not looking. She does not like me to stare at her. When she first came to stay with me and I could not take my eyes off her she told me that if I kept it up she would leave me. I have learnt to look at her furtively out of the corner of my eye and pretend indifference. I get my fill when we make love.

Tahira unsettled me. She pierced my cocoon of isolation and thoughts of the past. Of what happened and what may not have happened. She brought the world back to me. The world of hunger and misery, of wars and suffering, of greed and drugs. My heart and the core of my soul had congealed. Terrorists did not revolt me. They had their reasons. Torn bodies and death left me cold. Genocides were past, present and future and they were far away. Would the folly of humanity ever cease? I had not opened the television in years.

She ignited a spark of pity, a glimmer of altruism for the young woman I knew, a woman I loved, my constant, devoted lover, now a wreck. Love and revulsion were a curious mix and my feelings a pendulum oscillating from one to the other.

We reached the house an hour later. Dusk was turning to darkness. In the garden about twenty cats were milling around. At the side of the fence near the gate were neatly stacked tin boxes of Whiskers, the best cat food money can buy. I hauled Tahira’s baggage up the few steps to the house and opened the door. A kitty scrambled outside and Anna rushed past us to retrieve it. She was disheveled and untidy. A work of art. She caught it, smiled at us and explained that it was sick and should not be going out of the house. She then smiled at Tahira. A barely coherent conversation ensued.

“Welcome to Greece,” she said.

They had only met once or twice before but she approached and kissed her. Well, I thought, that’s a change of her usually surly self.

“Will you be staying long with us?” she asked.

“A couple of months perhaps, unless I become too big a burden and you throw me out.”

“Do you like cats?”

“Well, I do not dislike them.”

“Then it will be all right.”

She looked intently at Tahira.

“Are you not well?” she asked.

“No.”

“I saw the bed with straps come in. I thought it was for sex.”

Tahira laughed.

“Perhaps later,” she said. “I shall leave it for you and John.”

Inside, two or three cats were walking about and another few were sleeping comfortably on the armchairs and couch. They are ruining the furniture. Cat nails have to be sharpened and vertebrae stretched. Primordial habits of the wild surviving in sloth and luxury. A faint cattish odor permeated the house. I was forever opening windows and smoking cigars to drown it though, by now, I hardly noticed it. It was a condition for having Anna near me. When we made love I smelled her body and genitals to see if she too secreted it. No, she had her own exciting smell.

I took Tahira to her room. I tried to make it as comfortable as possible. To erase the aura that the hospital bed with the straps gave off. I brought in her suitcases and noticed, with surprise, the flowers Anna had brought in from the garden. Perhaps she is happy another person has come to break the monotony. I hate the thought. I want her to myself. When we make love I have no doubt of her shattering orgasms even when she is in her most frigid mode. Frigid or not, she always comes to me in need. Her iron body-grip of arms and legs imprisoning me in her body and her little screams leave not the slightest doubt.

I start with Tahira and end up talking of Anna.

Tahira looks around her room. It is our guest room with no guests. It is large and airy with a private bath. In a corner, two armchairs and a small table. She smiles at the flowers of welcome, comes up to me, takes my hand and kisses it.

“I had no doubt,” she said.

Does she still worship me? Making me feel a fraud.

“They are Anna’s.”

We sit for a while and talk. Like old friends. She spares me the tenderness and cuddling of the past. The automatic approach, the enlacement, the question: Do you still love me? When we would have torn each other’s clothes off and made wild, passionate love. Now the bed has straps, she is skeletal and we talk. Generalities. Bombay and Rami, her flight, Sri Lanka, my weird life of retirement and nostalgia, the writing that keeps me dreaming, the swimming that keeps me sane, a few pleasant, shared memories and a few laughs.

“Bless you, John,” she said. “I have not laughed in ages.”

She asks for the heroin. The cramps are coming on. The searing pain is not far off. I go to the den and unlock a drawer of the bookcase. I pick up one of the many small plastic pouches with white powder and take it to her. She empties a handbag with the utensils of death. Small spoons and silver tiny measures with handles, plastic syringes and a miniature gas burner. Efficiently, she prepares the dose, ties her hand with a piece of plastic tubing and searches for a vein. Her movements are quick to overtake the pain. She finds a spot on an arm tattooed with needle points and injects the liquid. In a few moments she smiles at me.

“How long will that last?” I ask.

“Oh, a day. I feel wonderful. It is a compensation of sorts for the suffering. I could even make love with you but it would not be fair to ask you. I shall take a shower instead.”

“Then we can go and have dinner.”

“I am never hungry, you know.”

“Nevertheless, you must eat.”

“Help me with this bag. I need a change of clothes. Tomorrow I shall arrange my things.”

She undressed in my presence and went to the bathroom. I got up and left the room. Her nudity revolted me. It broke my heart.

We took the car to a restaurant at the shopping center of our suburb. The main street wide with wide pavements on each side and a pavement in the middle with trees and tables of the various restaurants. The harassed waiters in perpetual motion criss-crossing the street with trays, ferrying the food from the shop and attending their impatient customers whose orders were constantly readjusted with additional dishes.

It was already past ten and the crowds were thinning out but the restaurants and fast food joints were packed and noisy. Eating out is a national pastime. Food, wine and interminable chatter, a national delectation. As we entered the shop a thousand eyes appraised us. Curiosity killed the cat. It never touched a Greek. And we were an unconventional trio. Anna was with us. I did not ask her to come. I did not expect her to come even had I asked. The cats, ordinarily, had precedence and I wanted to talk to Tahira. But my unpredictable angel got dressed in a jiffy when we were ready to leave, separated the cats in different rooms by unfathomable criteria and we all left together. She dresses like a hippy with long, colorful skirts and a throng of long necklaces, stylishly unkempt hair with perhaps a flower stuck in it. She always looks gorgeous. Tahira, in a sari. An old, young woman.

We order food and wine and appetizers. I want Tahira to fatten up. I cannot bear her like this. Anna surprises me. She is all smiles and questions about India, Bombay, Hinduism, the Tantric temples of sex, did Tahira visit them?

“Yes, at Khajuraho, a lifetime ago with John.”

“Tell me about it. It is truly fascinating. Are Indians so very sensual?”

She is as avid about sex as I am. She asks new questions before Tahira completes her answers. She is almost normal. I tell Anna to take it easy. Tahira must eat instead of talk. I press Tahira on. Tidbit after tidbit, mouthful after mouthful. She dithers like a child with every spoonful and I am the stern father. I force her to drink wine to enhance her appetite. I exhaust her and Anna comes to her rescue.

“That’s enough for today!”

She takes Tahira’s hand.

“What’s wrong?”

Tahira smiles. She is surprised that Anna does not know.

“I have a drug problem. Didn’t John tell you?”

“We don’t talk much.”

“Why not? He loves you very much.”

“Well, so do I. How could I not? He was my first lover, you know. My juvenile sex instructor though, in truth, it was a joint venture. Each with his talents. I provided the drive and shamelessness. He, the trust and caution. We learnt to love our bodies together, to examine them minutely and taste their infinite secrets and delicacies. I think we were very lucky to have fallen in love so early and to have satisfied our animal compulsions with so much purity. Even when we were not together, in later life, there was always a feeling that we ultimately belonged to each other. Not exclusively. A kind of vague but enduring link. Though I do bear a grudge. I have borne it for twenty years and it is still lingering. I still hate him sometimes and I go and make love with him because that is when I want him most. He rejected me at a time I needed him, I longed for him so badly. Perhaps I am unconsciously punishing him for it with this silence, which is a necessity for me, not a policy.

“Since I moved in with him we have come to tolerate each other’s needs and peculiarities, even if they may not be to each other’s liking. Strange as it may seem, I believe this bond of silence with John will keep us together. There is another reason, too. After my disastrous marriage and the endless squabbling and quarrels with my husband I need this detachment, this sense of self-sufficiency, which, in the last analysis, may be false because I can no longer envisage life away from John. I am very peaceful and happy. I just do not feel the need to talk. I cannot bear interminable conversations.”

All of a sudden, she was talking my Anna. An explanation of sorts for our mute coexistence. She was the relentless obsession I once denied so stupidly and spinelessly. Now, my pleasure and pain. All I had left in life.

“I haven’t eaten this much in months,” said Tahira.

Anna reaches out and caresses her hair. I am surprised at her affection. I was afraid she would be put out by Tahira’s presence in our silent household of voiceless comings and goings, occasional wild sex, stumblings over cats and annoying meows.

“You eat like a baby,” she tells her.

“I hope I don’t throw up. I do sometimes when I overeat.”

“Overeat! My God,” says Anna.

“We’ll have some coffee to settle the food and perk us up,” I suggest.

“Better not. I hardly sleep at night as it is.”

“A liqueur, then?”

“That would be lovely.”

I snapped my fingers at the waiter who was looking elsewhere. He came over with a vexed expression. He did not like being patronized. He had his mobile phone strapped on his belt and wore ordinary clothes on the job. He was as good as me. At least my equal. Greeks find such jobs difficult. Their temperament does not allow them to be either artificially polite or naturally servile. One must not take their scowls seriously. Excessive self-esteem is a failing of the race. I ordered the liqueurs.

“Tahira, tell us about your cure. It’s good Anna is with us so that she will know what it entails.”

Tahira smiled.

“Let us hope it is a cure,” she says. “It is a regimen I have to follow which will hopefully free me of my addiction. I was told about this clinic in Colombo by a friend and he claims he knows two people who were cured. On the other hand, he knows a few others who drifted back to drugs. The center is like a regular hospital with qualified doctors and staff and it treats patients suffering from a variety of diseases. They practice their own special brand of homeopathy.

“Homeopathy is a relatively new science. It is scorned by conventional medicine and for this reason it is not yet systematically studied or researched. But it is gaining ground and developing and it seems the doctors at Colombo are successfully finding new methods with plants, herbs and physiotherapy that effectively treat many illnesses. I spent three days at the center and was examined both by physicians and psychiatrists. These are standard procedures. Doctors in homeopathy want a rounded picture of their patients to see if they can mentally handle the therapeutic process without cracking up or giving it up half way. Apparently, I can.

“They were quite an experience these three days. The center is much more loosely administered than an ordinary hospital and one is free to move around and associate with other patients and even attend their therapy or psychotherapy sessions if one wishes. You see and hear the strangest things. There were other drug addicts, people with AIDS, with cerebral hemorrhages, people who sat expressionless and

uncommunicative and let out piercing screams at intervals. On top of it all, monks cloaked in saffron-colored robes with shaved heads and shining faces were constantly coming and going, reciting prayers and chants for one's recovery and well-being, expecting a little something for their travails and I was constantly running out of small change."

"The cure Tahira. What about the cure?" I ask.

"How do I know what the cure is? They gave me a quarter kilo of very fine gray powder and explained how I was to use it. I have no idea what it consists of. Apparently extracts of special herbs and some minerals. Mountains of herbs are processed to produce just a few grams of powder. It was more expensive than heroin. I wonder if it will work. Mind you, this is also a drug but much, much less addictive than heroin. Heroin is deadly. It will kill you in a few years. The methadone they use as a heroin substitute is also an opioid but is relatively harmless. If this powder does not work I shall have to resort to it.

"Methadone is mainly used as a maintenance medication. Like heroin, one can rarely give it up and even if a person manages to withdraw he usually returns to hard drugs very quickly. You see, it is not a question of will power. It is your body that decides. And let me tell you, it makes its needs felt in the most merciless and brutal manner. In a sense methadone is a normalizer of a deranged physiology just like insulin is for diabetics and anti-hypertensive drugs are used to control hypertension. It brings normality to the heroin abuser who does not eat properly, sleep normally and cannot function as a useful member of society. What I am trying to avoid, however, is the continued bondage to drugs. It is a very difficult and painful process and by no means guarantees success but I am willing to try it."

The liqueurs arrived. It was moving on to midnight and the restaurant was emptying. Tahira was obviously tired. It had been a long day. A long yesterday, too. On the move for twenty-four hours. It was the drug that kept her awake and tense.

"I think I shall probably sleep tonight," she said. "Well, I hope so. If I do, perhaps, we can start the treatment tomorrow."

"What do we have to do?"

"The whole idea is to substitute, very gradually, the powder for the heroin and when the heroin is totally eliminated we shall start reducing the powder dosage to zero. Presumably this will be feasible whereas with heroin it is totally impossible and with the methadone almost impossible. Johnny, I cannot guarantee a time limit. It will depend on my body's tolerance of withdrawal. I feel so terrible to put you through all this."

"Cut out the apologies, Tahira. They have no place in our friendship."

"Another thing, I shall need daily physiotherapy. I have a sheet of paper with instructions. We shall have to find a physiotherapist."

"I take charge of that," said Anna.

"We shall do it together," I tell Anna.

"Yes, we shall do it together," Anna tells me with a smile.

She does not often smile at me. Our love, our interdependence is inarticulate and expressionless. Is it possible, Tahira's adversity will bring us close again?

"What are the straps on the bed for?" asks Anna.

"Just a safety measure. You see, I was told that every time we shall substitute a small amount of powder for the heroin I shall have the searing pain of withdrawal. I might get desperate and try to take some more heroin to appease the torment and that is why I must be restrained with the straps. On no account must you give in to my pleading and undo the straps. The pain will diminish gradually in the following days.

With the next substitution the process will be repeated. And then, again, when the heroin will be eliminated and we shall start reducing the powder.”

We returned home and I accompanied Tahira to her room. Anna went to finalize the cats’ sleeping arrangements. It was an everyday routine. She separated the quarrelsome, isolated the meowing prima donnas, sopranos and contraltos, to the far end of the house and generally made arrangements for a peaceful night. I helped Tahira retrieve a nightgown from her bag and she went in the bathroom for a warm bath to help her sleep. I left her, changed into my pajamas in my room and read for a while. Later I returned to her room and opened the door. She was lying on her side facing away from the door. A dark, bony shoulder and the skinny legs below her short nightgown were of a desiccated mummy. She did not move and seemed to be asleep. I tiptoed to her bed and put out her bedside lamp.

Back in my room I resumed my reading. I had reached an age where I slept less and less and thought more and more. Thoughts, memories, fantasies intermingling. A strange indulgence for a former man of mindless action, of middling education and mediocre intellect. A slow, puzzling, aimless march to old age and death.

Eventually I went to sleep. Dreams of India, poverty, drugs, violence. My intestines churning. Woke up at six as usual. My first thought, Tahira. Showered, shaved, dressed, t-shirt, shorts and sneakers and went to her room. She was sitting on the armchair, in a lovely, yellow and blue silk robe reading the Time magazine she had picked up on the plane. Bin Laden on the cover. A sweet, serene, kindly face. Another disciple of God with a mission. She looked almost a different person. Fresh and relaxed, her wrinkles almost gone. Her hair was combed, her large beautiful eyes accentuated with eyeliner seemed less sunken and she had purple lipstick on her lips which went well with her colors. I asked if she slept well.

“Oh, yes Johnnie,” she said with a smile, “almost miraculously well. At least four hours’ solid sleep. From about one till five.”

I went up to her and kissed her lightly on the lips. A whiff of spicy, eastern perfume with a smile that still dominated the illness, which was still beautiful.

“You look fine, a different person,” I said.

“Well, yes. Almost normal. It’s the anxiety that’s gone.”

“I shall prepare some breakfast.”

“Oh, let me do it.”

“No way. Tea or coffee? Shall I make some eggs?”

“Tea, please, and something light Johnnie. Eggs make me puke. My insides are in a mess.”

Went to the kitchen. Stepped on a cat which let out a shriek and I almost fell. Anna to the rescue; emerged from her room in a transparent nightgown, disheveled and beautiful. She was naked underneath.

“Good morning, Anna.”

“Oh do be careful.”

She picked up the cat tenderly and examined her.

“Sorry.”

“How’s Tahira?”

“Much better. I shall make some breakfast for her. Shall I prepare something for you?”

“No thanks. Tell me if you’ll need me.”

Hey, that’s nice. Now, we have at least something to talk about.

I prepared tea and toasts with butter, jam, ham and smoked turkey. I placed them on the table we had in our spacious kitchen, ran to the garden and cut two of

Anna's roses and placed them on Tahira's plate. I called her and told her to beware of the cats. We could not afford broken bones on top of everything else. For all her prettifying exertions, she came to the kitchen in a heartbreaking shuffle.

"What's all this?" she said looking at the table. "Oh, and the roses! That's terribly sweet. Anna's?"

"No, mine."

She came round and hugged me and put her head on my chest.

"You make me want to cry," she said. "I have lost all self-esteem."

"Will you please stop? That's not Tahira talking. Let's eat."

I force fed her until she started having vomiting fits which thankfully did not result in throwing up her breakfast. So we stopped and returned to her room. Feeding her had become another torture she would have to submit to. Suddenly, my callousness was dissipating. My congealed compassion was thawing. I needed to revitalize this mummy. To give it new life. To make it as beautiful as it was in the past. When it was alive and vibrant.

She showed me the sheets of instructions for physiotherapy which I read, sitting on the armchair in her room. She sat silently on the other, waiting for me to finish reading. The physiotherapy would have to be performed daily. Basically it consisted of three main items. All three were explained in writing and amply illustrated in diagrams. A vigorous massage of the muscles to enhance blood circulation, always to be carried out in the direction of the heart. A very thorough manipulation of every single one of her joints to keep their flexibility and the rigorous and hard pressure on so-called energy sites which were also shown on a diagram of the body.

"Shall I explain the drug scheme I am to follow?" she asked after I finished reading the physiotherapy instructions.

"Sure."

"They are not very complicated. It's just that we must be careful not to get mixed up. It would be best if we make a chart with dates. I shall see to that."

She got up and brought out again the instruments of the white, slow death. In a row, on the table, she placed six small silver spoons of descending size with long thin handles. Very finely crafted.

"The little spoons are precise measures. The big one, call it number one, is the minimum dosage of heroin I currently need. The second biggest and smallest spoons add up to one. Similarly the third biggest and second smallest add up to one and the one in the middle is exactly half the measure of one. The idea is to start reducing the heroin by substituting the powder in small increments. The first week, I shall take the second biggest dosage of heroin with the smallest dosage of powder. The second week, a smaller dosage of heroin and more powder. The third week it will be half-half and then the powder will be more than the heroin until we reach the full dosage, the number one spoon solely with powder. From then on week by week we shall be going down the scale of measures with just the powder until, hopefully, I shall stop all drug intake. If you count it right, that will happen on the twelfth week. You see I lied when I told you a couple of months. I thought you might refuse to have me that long. That you might concoct some excuse. So now's the time to throw me out or forever hold your peace."

"I'll hold mine if you hold yours," I said. "Will you cut it out? Now tell me, when do we start?"

"Let me rest today, Johnnie. We shall start tomorrow."

"Okay. There is one thing I overlooked. I shall get it fixed. Then we can go for a walk to the sea and I can have a quick swim."

"Isn't it a little too cold?"

“Not yet. That’s what keeps me going.”

I went to the neighboring electrician’s shop and had a buzzer installed in my room extending to Tahira’s bed. How did I not think of it? On the days she would be strapped down she might need something urgently. When the electrician’s work was finished I put on my bathing costume under my shorts and walked with Tahira to the beach. She held my arm. We walked slowly. She had changed to a sari and wore an elegant light coat on top. I felt so sorry for her. The elegance made such little difference.

The weather was cloudy and cool. Just as I loved it. The trees on the way were shedding their leaves littering the pavements. The area was newly built and the villas and small apartment buildings were new and well built on wide streets, with gardens and flowers. My house was one of the oldest. I bought it just as Athens was starting to stretch eastward along the coast twenty years ago. I had made my first big lump of money from an African arms deal and decided to think of my old age before I really needed to. I was in my middle thirties at the time and was never settled in one place. It was providential. I made millions and lost millions. The house remained.

“Do you like this part of the city?”

“Yes. It is nice and elegant. It must be an expensive area.”

“Yes. Our house is a little run down. What do you expect with all those cats around? I don’t even feel like fixing it up.”

“Oh it’s all right.”

We reached the seaside. A wide sandy beach beyond the main road artery buzzing with excessively speeding cars. A ramshackle tavern to one side where, nevertheless, I often found fresh fish and decent barrel wine. A number of new, stylish hotels on each side blocked the view beyond the small bay of the beach. I settled Tahira next to an unsteady zinc table with unsteady, uncomfortable, wooden wicker chairs and ordered her ouzo and mezelikia, tidbit appetizers of fish, octopus, salad, stuffed vine leaves and other specialties. I removed my clothes and waded into the sea. It was calm as a lake but cold and gray because of the clouds and I swam out in my slow, leisurely style which can keep me going for hours. The exercise warmed me up but I did not swim for long. Half an hour later, I was force feeding Tahira.

“What about Anna?” she asked.

“We eat on our own. She prepares her own meals. I keep the house well stocked with meat, fish and vegetables and she can cook whatever she pleases. I am a good stock keeper. I also cook some simple stuff when I am too lazy to go to a restaurant. It suits her and as long as she is with me, that’s what counts.”

“The ouzo is good and it has opened my appetite. I am a little dizzy. I hope I shall be able to sleep for a while.”

We walked back home slowly arm in arm. Her movements were the slow movements of a drug addict. Her eyes sometimes had the same vacant look but, thankfully, it was not permanent and her mind seemed unaffected. We walked along different streets for a change of scenery and passed by small squares with coffee bars, bakeries and small supermarkets. Orange and tangerine trees dotted the pavements, their fruit rotting on the ground. Sloppily kept parks with children’s playgrounds conveyed the feeling of a residential suburb. Not the finest but one of the better ones. New, small European and Japanese cars lined the streets, not a parking space in sight.

“The Greeks are wealthy,” she remarked.

“Yes. It is a constant puzzle for me. Nothing seems to be working well in this country. There is the flashiness and affluence of Europe with many of the shortcomings of the Middle East such as a ponderous bureaucracy and the mentality of the

connection. One cannot get a job or a contract without it. Furthermore the phenomenon of corruption is expanding alarmingly. No heavy industry to speak of, the public sector companies constantly in the red, a high unemployment rate, the shipping industry wobbling and yet people are spending like mad. Cars, houses, packed nightclubs even on weekdays. There is the tourist industry of course which is spoiling our lovely islands. And, I suppose, expatriate Greeks pouring in money to invest in land and buy houses. Europe has also been a considerable bonanza. Can you imagine, with our new wealth we have an immigrant problem with Eastern Europeans, Africans and Asians who come in to make a living.”

“Do the Greeks accept them?”

“It suits the government because their low wages and meager spending keep inflation down. It suits the farmers because without them the crops would remain uncollected and rot in the fields and it suits the businessmen and building contractors who pay them less and squeeze more work out of them than Greeks. Of course it irks the working class that has severe competition on the labor market.”

“But are they accepted? Are they treated well?”

“The Greeks, I suppose like other races and nationalities think they are the finest, cleverest and most hospitable people in the world. Deep inside, however, they are not happy. They are closet racists. They resent this influx. In a sense one cannot blame them. Criminality has increased and most of it is attributed to Albanian, East European and Russian mafias that deal in drugs and import illegal immigrants and young women for prostitution. Greeks are not aggressive towards them but there is a lot of grumbling. We have not started beating them or burning them up as has happened in some of the more civilized nations of Europe. Our thugs are still oriented to the burning of shops and cars on every available political demonstration or other occasion. Sports lovers burn up stadiums and beat up the referee if the match’s result is not to their liking.

“As for me, I look with sympathy at those foreigners who come here to better their lives. What I hate most are the pimps and traffickers of women. Especially those that drive them into the slavery of prostitution by force and brutality. I cannot abide a bully. I have killed a person for that. I would not hesitate to do it again. It is the one issue that burns me up.”

“But on the whole you have settled well in Greece.”

“Yes Tahira, I am more Greek than anything else. It is a beautiful country that is alive and its people have a zest for life. Here I lead a pleasant if somewhat aimless existence and sometimes I sink into depressions but three things make it tolerable. The weather which allows me to swim nearly all year round. My writing. And Anna.”

At home Tahira showered again, took her daily heroin and promptly went to sleep. I did not know if alcohol was good for her. It seemed to loosen her up and deaden her tensions. I sat and smoked a cigar in the lounge in the company of half a dozen cats. Two of them snuggled next to me and went to sleep sharing my lap and body heat. I tolerated them indifferently. They had become too much of a good thing. I got up to go to my room to read a little and slid into a troubled doze.

I woke up a couple of hours later and went to Tahira’s room. She was up reading her magazine. She smiled. She was feeling better. I could see it. Even without the cure. I went to the kitchen and prepared a cup of tea for her and when she drank it I suggested the massage. She said okay though we had not started the cure. I called Anna and we read the instructions, undressed Tahira and with a special, acridly perfumed oily lotion she brought with her, went through the motions described. It was a sad and slightly revolting exercise for me but Anna took it in her stride and put her heart into it. We

massaged her vigorously, meticulously folded and unfolded every one of her joints and tried to locate correctly and put pressure on the energy sites. When we finished, Anna caressed her hair and kissed her.

“We shall make you beautiful again,” she told her.

That evening, we again, went out to dinner and force-fed Tahira and I plied her with drink. Anna was talkative, pleasant and solicitous towards her. Something was changing. Her eyes were alive and shining. There seemed to be a new interest in her life other than the cats. She smiled, laughed and talked in the last two days more than she did in the past two years. I wondered what was happening.

The next day started normally. Breakfast, a little tidying up, small talk with Tahira. She was so much better in just two days. Noticeably a little stronger and her face less tortured. Anna was into her own impenetrable, cat-oriented routine. She would appear now and then and smile and say “Okay” with a question mark attached.

“Yes, okay,” and how nice to have a smile. I was not used to it.

I was in and out of Tahira’s room. We talked. I tried to find out what her life had been like these last few years. Discreetly. But she kept sidetracking me and I did not press her. I was happy that her mind was as sharp as ever. Her masked intelligence lurking somewhere inside, as it had always been. I asked her when would we start the treatment and she said in the afternoon when she usually took her dose. Perhaps, even a little later when the suffering would begin because the initial dosages would not, themselves, be painless. It would take a whole week of getting used to just the first step.

We shuffled to the beach at noon for my swim and lunch, our ouzo and wine and shuffled back home. As we were entering the house, she kissed my hand.

“Please, don’t,” I told her.

“Come to my room a moment.”

We went to her room and she opened her handbag and gave me a small well wrapped package. I asked what it was.

“Half a million dollars.”

“What?”

“Just throw it somewhere.”

“I don’t need the money, Tahira. I wouldn’t know what to do with it. I am just too tired to do anything. My life has exhausted me. I want to rest.”

She laughed.

“Oh, the absurd irony of it! I don’t need the money either. I have struggled and ruined myself for it and now I don’t need it. I am a very rich woman. I have millions holed up in numbered Swiss accounts. When I die the banks shall probably be my inheritors. It is the punishment of adventurers like you and me who did not manage to live simple, ordinary lives with family and children. I am living in purgatory waiting to die and either go to hell or, perhaps, be reincarnated as a fly or a cockroach. It is all I deserve.”

“I don’t want the money, Tahira. I would feel I was being paid for my help and what I am doing has nothing to do with money.”

“My turn to tell you to cut out explanations of the obvious. Throw it out of the window for all I care. I am not taking it back. But let me tell you, I leave it for a purpose. I shall tell you by and by. When we both are stronger.”

“What is this? A riddle? I just don’t want the money.”

“Show me your room, Johnny.”

“Why?”

“I want to see how you live.”

She picked up the package and we went to my room. It is large and airy with a window and a balcony facing the back of the garden where a few cats are permanently milling around, a bathroom and a large built-in two-level cupboard reaching the ceiling. A double bed for a single man, a large desk with a computer and printer, a bookcase packed haphazardly and two armchairs. I am a Virgo. Not obsessively neat but enough to put away my things where I can find them. Tahira went to the cupboard and opened it.

“May I?” she asked after she did so. “Are these all the clothes you have?”

“Winter ones on top, summer ones beneath. I change them around twice a year. Usually too late to avoid a flu or being uncomfortably warm.”

“And so threadbare! You must be a happy man.”

“Not quite a Diogenes. Not quite as happy, either. But was he really happy with his asceticism and his earthenware jar of a home? A Cynic philosopher. A forerunner of the Stoics. Could a cynic be happy? Is anyone, in the last analysis, ever satisfied with his life?”

In the bottom part of the cupboard, a few pairs of shoes. She noticed the false bottom and lifted it by the small handle. Beneath, two used handbags and a mountain of papers, manuscripts, files, old short stories. Tahira chucked the package inside and let the false bottom drop back in place.

“There,” she said. “Now forget about it for a while.”

“Okay. Until you leave. Then, you take it back.”

“Perhaps I shall not leave,” she said with a smile.

I took the bottle of whisky I kept handy and made her take a gulp. I swallowed a deep draught myself and took her to her room for a nap.

The buzzer woke me up and I went to her room. Her face was drawn and she was preparing her dose. The first with the new concoction. Her movements were rapid and anxious. She tied her arm and expertly injected the solution into a vein on the back of her palm. She lay back on the armchair awaiting the reaction. There seemed to be none. She moaned softly.

“I feel a little better,” she said, “but not all that much. At least it is not getting worse.”

We talked for a while sitting on the armchairs, disjointedly, in between painful intervals that kept on coming but did not last long. She had her eyes closed, her head resting on the back of the armchair.

“You know, Johnny, when I am in such a state I tend to think back to my life. It has become a habit. When I am suffering I cannot think and when I am well I am not inclined to introspection. It is this in-between state that sets me thinking and, in a way, I draw comfort from it. My life could have been better but the overwhelming odds were that it would be much, much worse. What chance did a little servant girl have other than the bondage and slavery to the family that bought me from my parents. You helped me escape. You have been the sunbeam in my life. How could I have been so stupid to let you go? Oh, this blind ambition and the sweet seduction of money. It comes as a shock to realize they do not really matter.”

“They do my dear. But not that much. Only the very wise know when to stop this wild pursuit.”

“Not many of them, I imagine.”

“If any.”

“So I weigh this and that and I say that despite the madness, the struggle, the ruthlessness, the ruining of lives, the immorality of my life, it was packed with emotion and action and it was full of what I needed to feel alive. It was the journey that mattered

for I have no one to leave a legacy. No inheritors for my useless millions. And one that might have been, is lost.”

“What are you talking about?”

“So perhaps I was lucky. Except for that.”

She doubled up again in pain for a few seconds and then she straightened up and smiled.

“Comes and goes, comes and goes,” she said.

I called Anna for the massage. We had not seen her all day. We stripped Tahira and for an hour kneaded her flesh, twisted her joints and put pressure on parts of her body. When we finished Anna went to prepare a meal. She returned with chicken soup and rice with pieces of chicken. She sat next to Tahira and patiently and insistently fed her like a child. In just three days, Tahira’s concave belly was filling up. So were cheeks, her sagging breasts and creased nipples.

When Anna left she said good night. We had another couple of hours to kill. I brought the whisky and two glasses. My writing was going to hell. I needed it. I felt empty and troubled without it but Tahira needed me. Her pains continued on and off but less intense and the sipping of the whisky seemed to help. Didn’t the doctors in Colombo know about it?

“Perhaps I should write to them to enrich their homeopathic knowledge.”

She lay back on the armchair, eyes closed, her mind anchored in the past.

“Remember Katmandu? Your money was running out and I told you, ‘Give me the money.’ You said, ‘No.’ I said, ‘Don’t be afraid, give me the money.’ You gave me half of it and I said, ‘All.’ And you did, finally, give it to me. You trusted me. I left you and went into the squalid back streets of the town and bought hashish and sold it to the hippies and made a handsome profit. You were flabbergasted when I returned to you double the amount I had borrowed and some was left over for me. Oh, I believe in fate. It is not necessarily a Hindu attribute but Hinduism accommodates almost everything one wishes to believe in. That day I discovered my calling. I went back again the next day and the day after that and I made a packet with my tiny capital. Then you decided it was time we left before we got into trouble and we returned to Mumbai to Mr. Kumar’s Ratnam hotel and Rami for a while before taking off for our long peregrinations all over India. Did you know I never took to Rami? Right from the start.”

“No I didn’t.”

“Well, I did not. Even early on I had the impression he never loved me as much as he said either. He always considered himself superior to me though I could buy and sell him a thousand times over. Always that supercilious attitude. His mind anchored in the caste system where he was near the top and I a few ranks over the bottom. Even in his lovemaking he was selfish and miserly.”

“Is that why you married him?”

“One day I shall tell you why I married him.”

“Tell me now.”

“Oh Johnny, my dear, is one pain not enough? This is infinitely greater. It shall tear me apart. But you shall know, one day.”

“I am amazed that throughout our life, throughout the years of intimacy, the years we were lovers you never told me a thing and now you come out with cryptic insinuations and mystery.”

“I could not. Rami had a stranglehold over me.”

“Oh for Heaven’s sake Tahira, stop this teasing, this pointless titillation.”

“Yes. I think it is best I stop. I am sorry, John.”

We talked for a while neutrally and then decided to go to sleep. The bottle was empty and Tahira seemed calmer. She went to the toilet and I helped her to bed.

“Sorry, my dear,” I told her, “do you think I should strap you?”

“Well, let’s give it a try.”

I tied the straps quite loosely and put the buzzer next to her within her reach. I kissed her on the mouth. I wanted her to feel loved.

“Sweet dreams,” I said.

“Oh, Johnny, how can I thank you?”

“By shutting your big mouth and getting well.”

She laughed and I shut the light.

I went to my bedroom. The bedside lamp was on. Anna was asleep in my bed. I undressed and eased myself beside her. She opened sleepy eyes and smiled. She was naked and we enlaced and went to sleep. It was almost as good as making love. Sometime in the early hours the buzzer sounded. I put on my pajamas and went to Tahira. She needed to go to the toilet. I helped her and put her to bed again. When I returned, Anna kissed me and reached for my penis. I caressed her and kissed her and, against all protocol, told her I loved her madly, passionately.

Sometimes, one need not understand the changes in his life to feel an immense happiness. I was not a Hindu but I believed in fate.

I cannot tell how Tahira’s presence in our home affected Anna. What the dynamics were. The mysterious workings of her mind and eccentricities were never easy for me to puzzle out. Was her compassion for Tahira’s condition a spur that jerked her out of her self-centeredness? Of her cat-oriented world? Did my own concern and the time I spent almost exclusively with Tahira cause her to stake a more substantial claim on me? Was I, after all, so essential in her life? The fact remained that, even if communication was still lacking and incomplete, we now started sharing a bed and a nighttime tenderness that made me feel it would be ingratitude to fate to ask for more.

I was almost happy. Anna was attaching herself more and more to me and Tahira managed to break my own cocoon of isolation and indifference to everything but my immediate surroundings and needs. Her utter dependence on us and the look of infinite gratitude in her eyes could not but rouse a sensibility I thought I had lost. I really did care. It was a challenge. I wanted to restore a vital young woman to life.

Unexpectedly, her cure was lopsided. It caught me by surprise. It was the opposite of what I had imagined. I thought the initial stages would be the difficult ones whereas it turned out that as it advanced the pain and suffering increased and became almost unbearable. And there is logic to it. In the initial stages, the bulk of the heroin was there to alleviate the pains of withdrawal. As the amount diminished and her body had to adapt to a different substance a searing, unbearable torture manifested itself and became a daily event increasing from week to week.

During the first few weeks of moderate and dull pain we continued our routine walks to the beach for my dip in the sea and our tasty, ouzo and wine-drenched lunches at the small tavern. We returned home in a slow, arm-in-arm supported shuffle to an afternoon nap. Even when she did not feel up to it I forced her to make the effort. I had this idea that exercise and movement are always beneficial and would not take no for an answer until the day she broke down and cried and said she could just not make it. That put an end to our walks and my swimming but the weather was turning cold in any case and I gratefully turned again to my writing which had ceased almost completely.

A new routine established itself centered on Tahira. Breakfast together, a struggle to make her eat, an hour or so in her room, a short, hurried stroll for shopping, one or two hours of writing or thinking or reading punctuated by regular calls on the

buzzer, lunch at two or three, sometimes cooked by Anna but more often ordered from a nearby restaurant, preceded by whisky or ouzo and followed by wine at table where an increasingly sociable Anna would often join us. A nap, the regular late afternoon massage with Anna's help usually after the injection of the drug, a little more writing, a little more conversation with Tahira amid increasing pain and tears and despair and talk of giving up the whole blasted affair, some more drink, an attempt, not always successful of having dinner and then the strapping down for the night.

As a precaution I took all the drugs and kept them under lock and key and the strapping down was to forestall something more desperate as in the later stages of her treatment, Tahira often expressed a heartbreaking desperation, a wish to die. She wept and screamed that she could bear this life no longer. Then, respite and troubled sleep in Anna's luscious embrace with the buzzer often rousing us, making our hearts pound, rushing to Tahira for what little help we could offer.

Tahira seemed once again to melt away. She was losing the weight she had put on. She had vomiting fits and threw up her breakfast and lunch. I was forever mopping the floor, collecting her vomit, telling her not to worry. Kissing her, caressing her, brushing aside her apologies, wiping her tears away with smiles and jokes and memories of happier days. What kept us going, what kept her going, was the hint of improvement despite the increasing pain and torture. With every new substitution of the Colombo powder for heroin, the pain would climax but as the week wore on the body seemed to accept the substitute and the pain diminished marginally but noticeably until the time of the new combination of slightly more powder and less heroin would come and the cycle repeated again. It was an indication that a change was taking place in her body. A painful, tear-stained, often frantic and nerve-wracking but ultimately hopeful change. We were all suffering with her. Even the cats seemed to turn morose and lethargic. But a bond was binding the three of us in a sort of sacred mission. A struggle we could not abandon. A wager we had to win.

The weeks went painfully by. By the time we substituted completely the prescribed powder for the heroin, Tahira was in a worse shape than when she arrived. She suffered unbearably and her will to continue was gone. It was Anna and I, her two unrelenting watchdogs that kept the treatment on track. And we did, after all, achieve incontestable results. We had gone through half the process successfully. And we fought on for although the physical suffering was not ours, we shared Tahira's torture mentally and had to offset her doubts, her desperation and loss of hope. We bullied and cajoled her and replaced her dwindling courage with ours. It was difficult to feed her, to know the exact amount so that she would not throw up. It was difficult to be with her and talk to her because of her almost constant pain. It was difficult to wash her because she could hardly stand and Anna and I bathed her as best we could. It was difficult to give her the daily massage because her emaciated muscles were on fire and her joints almost arthritic. And yet we fought on.

We began the second phase, that of reducing the powder, a tiny measure every week. It would take another six weeks to complete the process. So short and yet so hopelessly long a time. Again, this new phase had its own characteristics. The extreme pain of the reduction of the heroin and its substitution by the powder, especially in its last stages, was over. Her body had adapted to the powder and though at every new reduction the pain was acute, it eased as the week wore on. We saw a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel.

The days dragged. And the weeks. Distressing, sad, often sleepless. Anna and I were haggard. Physically and mentally exhausted. We hardly made love those last few weeks. We just slept in each other's arms and this new tenderness gave us courage and

the willpower to persist in our endeavor. And when the last tiny dosage of powder had finally been taken it was as if a miracle had been accomplished. Not that the results were evident. Not by a long shot. But the treatment was over and all indications showed that it would be successful. We were not totally sure.

For the next two months Tahira's withdrawal pains persisted. The miracle was that she had stopped taking both drugs and powders. She was suffering but she was clean. And day by day, by tiny almost imperceptible increments her suffering diminished. We were elated but too exhausted to celebrate. Tahira was a complete wreck. She could hardly walk and had to be helped for her slightest need. Anna fed her with soups and light meals and I was constantly in and out of her room bringing her a glass of water or lemonade, helping her to go to the toilet, reading to her, talking to her, brushing aside her apologies and expressions of gratitude, getting her off her bed and forcing her to walk around the room. Fifty times a day I told her,

"Tahira, we made it! Your addiction is over."

"But look at me," she would reply.

"We have reached rock bottom but we have stopped the slide. The only thing we need now is patience. Things can only get better."

And, indeed, the worst was over. As the next few weeks went by, Tahira was visibly improving despite the pains and a persisting craving for the drugs. She started eating more or less normally. Small quantities, for she still had vomiting fits but we weaned her from the soups and boiled chickens. She was soon able to walk and take care of herself. There was no need to strap her on her bed at night. For good measure I threw away the heroin that had remained but kept the powder under lock and key.

I started taking her out for short walks. Christmas and the New Year had gone by almost unnoticed and the weather was still cold but rain or shine I insisted on our daily walks. We also continued administering our daily massages with Anna, which had now stopped being the torture they had been and seemed to help and loosen her up. Anna brought a sense of uninhibited fun to the process, which was unthinkable when every stroke of the rubdown was a source of pain. She kissed her and petted her and held Tahira's breasts and told her that we must fill up those empty little sacs. She slapped her backside because she had been a naughty girl and Tahira laughed and seemed to enjoy this playful teasing.

As her condition improved, I started writing again. I kept her supplied with English newsmagazines so she would not get bored. I also gave her some of my short stories to read and her commentary on them was razor sharp and revealing. I expected no less. Through these, she brought out and analyzed traits of my character and psychic makeup I had not thought about. She was moved by the love and attachment I revealed for my mother in some of the stories. She said it was a miracle that in the family environment in which I grew up, the conflicts with my father, the identification and concord with mother, I did not turn out a homosexual. Perhaps, she said, that was due to the fact that my mother was not strong and domineering but a woman who yielded to her fate and needed her son's support. She saw in Anna many resemblances with mother, the main one being a lack of conventional inhibitions and that partly explained my almost pathological love for her.

"You are getting along better with her, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yes, thanks to you."

"How so?"

"I don't really know. But ever since you arrived something changed in her. She is another person."

She laughed.

“So perhaps we can say, I owe you my life and you owe me Anna’s love. A small repayment for the huge debt I owe you.”

“Will you never learn that there are no debts between us?”

“No, I don’t think I will. I shall never forget what you and Anna did for me these past few months. I shall be forever in your debt.”

“Oh, I give up.”

“And don’t you think I should start thinking of moving out?”

“What are you talking about? You surely are not serious?”

“I have already been here five months.”

“You shall not leave until I give you a discharge. Until you are once again the young woman I was in love with.”

“But you don’t need me now.”

“I shall always need you.”

We talked a lot during these months of her recuperation. The slow months of my writing, of her newsmagazine perusals, of our walks which grew longer and longer, of her forced feeding once again, of our drives along the coast and our increasingly frequent dining in restaurants. We also drank quite a lot. A whisky or two before lunch and dinner, and wine at table. She called it her drug substitution, which was not altogether a joke because it deadened her lingering need for drugs. A craving that diminished as time went by but never completely abandoned her.

As she regained her strength, she grew restless. She had left behind an organization of people she worked with. People she trusted and who trusted her. She left them suddenly without warning and wondered at their fate. I could not sympathize with her. I could not feel concern for people associated with drugs and I never approved of Tahira’s involvement in the drug trade. Despite my own business dealings on the fringes of legality, I considered dealing in drugs unethical. For that reason she was reticent in conversations that touched on the subject. She did not elaborate on her business activities. Another thing that puzzled me was her deadly hatred of Rami, her husband. I did not know the reason and could not understand her inability to leave him. She told me that some day I would know but that she could not speak of it just now. It was obvious he had something on her. He held her in a stranglehold she could not escape.

“I would have killed him if I could,” she told me. “Poisoned him, drove a knife through his heart but I dare not. It would have been so easy to have him killed but he has information that is vital to me. Information that I hope one day I shall have. He is a cruel and heartless brute.”

“Please Tahira, don’t talk in riddles. Either you explain everything or hold your peace. As it is, I shall stay awake all night trying to figure out an explanation.”

“I’m sorry, John. Let’s change the subject.”

One month, then another, went by. It was wonderful to see Tahira recover. To see her body fill out, her face too, those sunken eyes regain their original sparkle and allure, her hair the shine that was gone. To see her energy return, her optimism and good spirits. Most of all her self-respect and confidence. I was proud of her, proud of Anna and myself for what we had achieved. Almost a resurrection from the dead.

As spring arrived and the weather warmed, Tahira joined me in the daily swimming routine I resumed. We started off in half-hour sorties and were soon swimming for an hour and a half. Then, an ouzo, appetizers and lunch with wine at the small run-down tavern and a happy walk home. No more the slow shuffle but the normal pace of healthy human beings. It moved me to see her sprightly stride, to see her desiccated body transformed into its former shapely contours, her hesitancy into

directness and gaiety. She held me by the arm. She kissed me often on the cheek, not any more my hand, knowing she would no longer revolt me. The worst part of her suffering must have been her withered self-esteem. Now she was playful and erotic. Hugging me and caressing me. Lingered in my arms, looking at me in the eyes. Allowing me to see her naked as if we were still lovers.

She told me, laughing, "If I don't leave pretty soon, Anna will throw me out. I am barging into your life."

Anna seemed not to care. She took our intimacy in her stride. She had taken a liking to Tahira and she would join us during our chats and participate in our discussions. Whereas in the past, the cats were her only preoccupation, we now seemed to share her life on an equal footing. I am, of course, being jocular and perhaps unfair, for she did love me and our love life flourished as never before. She had been wonderfully generous with Tahira during her treatment and now that it was over and Tahira was no longer dependent on us, her affection was unchanged. Often when we were all three together she would turn to me and say,

"Will you look at her? Unbelievable! Isn't she lovely? She is our miracle."

Tahira would smile happily. She had become a daughter. She was almost a decade younger than us and at his stage of one's life a decade counts. We had been lovers but that had ended. The relationship could not have resumed even without Anna. I was no longer her sexual peer and was afraid of disrupting the emotional balance the three of us had achieved. Her love for me was true. The memory of our passion and her nostalgia deluded her into thinking it could continue. But the implacable passage of time had wreaked its damage. My reserve to her unspoken advances might have hurt her but I was sure she was clever enough to understand the reasons and that I loved her very much.

Now that she was well she was getting restive. In me she found a father instead of the lover of old. Of the lover she needed. For a time our retiring lifestyle was a necessary change for her recuperation both physical and mental but later it started boring her. She bought a car and began touring the country and about a month later announced that she was leaving for Bombay. It was her home and the decision was inevitable sooner or later. I did not try to dissuade her. Two months after a tearful departure and promises to be back soon, Rami telephoned us and told us Tahira had been shot and killed while leaving her office the previous evening.

"The who and the why," he said, "is being investigated by the police. Nothing much will come out of it. And in any case, does it matter? In her trade death is commonplace. It's an occupational hazard. Her body will be released from the autopsy tomorrow and we shall have a small religious ceremony before her cremation the day after. I called you immediately because I thought you might want to come. I called you for old times' sake though I owe you no favors."

We were devastated. We had lost our daughter. The daughter we had so lovingly rescued from purgatory and certain death only to lose her so suddenly, so tragically. It was something I had always feared but this fear receded these last years with a past that was fading and only revived momentarily in my short stories. When she left us, I implored her to extricate herself from that hateful involvement with drugs and she promised to do so. I believe she was sincere and it is the irony of life that destiny deprived her of it at just that moment.

We decided with Anna to leave for Bombay immediately. There was nothing we could do and nothing that would change. Our love for her would neither increase nor diminish. We simply wanted to be with her at her funeral. It was a metaphysical gesture of respect and love she would never know but one that would assuage our pain. A few

practical arrangements had to be settled. The cats to start with. I was surprised that Anna agreed so readily to come with me.

“We will just have to put them out of the house and ask a neighbor to feed them,” she told me much to my surprise.

Equally important was the question of money. The phone call from Rami came on Friday evening and I would have been unable to withdraw the money I needed for the trip as the banks would be closed until Monday. As I was trying to figure whether I could scrape together a minimum amount with my various credit and cash cards, I remembered the package that Tahira had thrown in the false bottom of my cupboard. I had completely forgotten its existence and did not return it to her when she left. I retrieved it and opened it and stared and stared at the neatly piled hundred-dollar bills held together with elastic bands. That was all that was left of Tahira. That, and the few millions amassed and hoarded in Swiss banks. The futility of it broke my heart. I was not one to criticize for I was just as guilty of this wild chase of money. The difference was that age had mellowed me. Or perhaps it was the weariness of the chase or even the realization that after a certain point an excess of wealth is meaningless. That if you are to continue living you need other kinds of nourishment to sustain you. The tragedy was that Tahira was killed just as she had reached that point of understanding.

At the bottom of the package I found a computer diskette and wondered what it was about. I put it on my desk for later scrutiny and left the house with a packet of the hundred-dollar bills to book our tickets for the next day’s flight to Bombay. I kept thinking that, somehow, Tahira left it for that purpose. It was totally illogical this persevering thought that would not leave me in peace. That Tahira knew she was in danger and if she died she wanted us at her funeral. She wanted us to go to Bombay.

When I returned, I speedily and carelessly packed a bag with some clothes and noticed that Anna had not only packed hers but had emptied the house of our fellow residents, the cats. I was exhilarated. The house seemed strange without the constant slinking motion of the animals, and peaceful. Perhaps when we return Anna will decide to keep them out for good. We would provide food, of course, but not shelter. I went to her room and found her on her bed crying without a sound. Just tears in her eyes. Was it for Tahira or the cats? I kissed her and told her our flight would be departing at midnight with a short stop in Cairo, Aden and arrival at Mumbai by noon the next day. We had a few hours to spare. I went to my room and put the diskette in the computer. It was a long letter.

My dear, my darling John,

I shall be leaving Mumbai for Colombo tomorrow and hopefully a few days later I shall have the immense happiness of seeing you though I am not sure if this will be reciprocated. I have made arrangements behind Rami’s back. I have stopped trusting him a long time ago but his intentions these last few years have never been more sinister. He would put all kinds of obstacles in my path, not least psychological ones. He holds me, my darling, where it hurts, as you shall see below. He wants me to die and I am clearly one step away from death in my present condition. He would have killed me if he could. He has the thugs to do the job. But he knows I also have faithful collaborators who would not leave my death unavenged. I often wonder, is he so naïve to think I would allow him to inherit me? But that is not the point.

I am a mental and physical wreck. I do not know if I shall recover and I live in a state of dreadful uncertainty. Not for myself but for a creature that is alive. For a being I have never seen. And I have been living with this hellish torture and suffering many, many years.

We shall talk about many things when we meet in Athens but I cannot predict if I shall have the mental and moral strength to burden you with this agonizing predicament for I am sure you shall accuse me of being heartless and unfair to have kept it a secret from you. This is the purpose of this letter though I do not know when you shall read it or when you might open this package with the trifling sum I offer to cover part of the expense I shall cause you. If I am alive, I beg you to leave things as they are for the slightest wrong move could be disastrous. I have still hopes that I shall be able to negotiate it with Rami. He is so greedy and avaricious that I think I might be able to come to an arrangement.

After the two heavenly years we roamed all over India together and we returned to Mumbai to take up Rami's offer of collaboration in his import-export venture, you left for Greece to investigate the market. You asked Rami to take care of me, remember? Didn't you know, you silly man, that this was the best way to throw me in his arms? And then don't forget you stayed away almost two years conducting your business with Rami by phone. Subsequently you were puzzled that I married him! You claimed you could not understand this decision. Really!

The reasons were three: I took your long absence as an indication that you had made up with Anna again and that I had lost you. I was, of course, lonely and depressed and Rami took full advantage of the fact. He was the perfect gentleman and he wooed me relentlessly. He had started making money and he satisfied my slightest whim. Not that I needed his money. I had already made connections in the drug trade and had more money than I needed. But he took on his task as my protector seriously and well in my loneliness and his constant attentions we eventually jumped in bed. And don't forget, at the time he was a good looking young man.

A few months before you returned to Mumbai that first time, I fell pregnant. Rami wanted a child and suggested we get married, which we did. I did not know if you would be coming back and when we met and arranged my first adulterous encounter, I was five months pregnant. I did not tell you afraid I might arouse your scruples. We made delirious love during the two weeks you were in Mumbai, if you remember, and this might have contributed to my miscarriage which happened just after you left. It was a baby boy that I lost and Rami was inconsolable. I think he suspected my infidelity and our relations started souring at that point. Still we led a more or less conventional conjugal life though I suspect that he started extra marital dalliances of his own after that miscarriage. We still made love and though I wanted a baby badly, my body refused to get pregnant.

On your third or fourth visit to Mumbai, Rami put a detective on my tail and his suspicion of our love affair was finally confirmed. Our marriage broke down completely. There were of course terrible quarrels and recriminations. He insulted me in the worst possible language with the most vulgar variations of the word 'bitch.' Which of course I was. At least towards Rami.

I found it amazing that in order to keep the business with you on track he gave no indication whatsoever to you that he knew of our affair. He kept his indignation and loathing well controlled and not the slightest sign was apparent. On my part, I dared not tell you that he knew about us in case you repented for this betrayal and left me.

My darling Johnny, you were the sun in my life. You were life itself and I have not the slightest regret for anything except perhaps that I was never close to you physically as much as I would have liked. You were busy darting from continent to continent to sell arms, I was busy half a world away making my useless millions and we could only meet sporadically. My God, what a colossal idiocy that was! We had the

commonest of human maladies: greed. And we forgot to live. Or rather we subsisted with an emptiness haunting our lives.

The funny thing is, well not so funny of course when you think about it, is that despite his hatred, Rami did not ask for a divorce and when I suggested it he flatly refused. He was thinking of my money. Wanted to be in close proximity to it even if it was not in his hands. As for me, Rami provided a sort of corporeal security. He was becoming very wealthy and our house was guarded like a fortress.

Years later, after you decided to enter the arms trade and ended your collaboration with Rami you started coming to Mumbai secretly just to see me. Rami was, of course, unaware of your comings and goings until the time he saw my swollen belly. I was pregnant in my sixth month and the swelling was obvious. He looked at me and said, 'So the bastard is back and is about to pollute the world with additional little bastards. Shall I arrange for an abortion?' I can arrange my own abortions, I answered. But I did not. I was terribly mixed up because you told me you were seeing Anna again and I did not know what to do. I had already made up my mind to keep the baby. I was thrilled with my pregnancy but I wondered whether I should tell you I was expecting your child now that you were with Anna. I did not, of course, and perhaps I should ask your forgiveness for that but the consequences were dire mainly for me.

As he saw my belly expanding, Rami realized I would keep the baby. He was furious. In his mind, you were the cause of the loss of his son and now I was to bear the child of his betrayer. I could see him burning up every time he saw me during those days of increasing heaviness. When the time came, he insisted I should deliver at a private maternity clinic where he was a major shareholder. I was surprised at his concern and his solicitous attitude. I thought perhaps he might have relented from his uncompromising hatred.

I believe I had a normal delivery. The minute the baby was out I was given an anesthetic and put to sleep. When I woke up, Rami told me that the baby was stillborn. It was a boy and he sent it to be cremated. The shock was devastating. I started screaming and crying and could not stop. 'You should have let me see my son,' I told Rami. 'I would have liked to see him, even dead.' I stayed three more days at the clinic too depressed to do anything other than sleep and cry during my waking hours. Rami did not visit me again in those three days. A young nurse took pity on me and kept caressing my head. On the third day, just before I left the clinic, she whispered that she would tell me a secret if I promised not to reveal who told it to me. I promised, and she said that my baby was alive. It was a girl and they took it away as soon as it was born. Two women, one of them a wet nurse, were waiting for the delivery. I was stunned but elated. My happiness was immense even if I realized that a new set of problems was now facing me. But at least my baby was alive.

Next day at home, trembling with emotion, I confronted Rami. 'Utter nonsense,' he said. 'Who told you?' One of the doctors, I answered. 'Which one?' The obstetrician. 'He's a bloody liar. I'll get him fired.' You're the bloody liar Rami, I said. If you don't bring me my baby, my little girl, I'll have you killed. He laughed. 'Do it and you shall never see her in your life. You shall never find her. She is already out of the country. You deprived me of my son; I shall deprive you and that double-crossing bastard of your child. See how nice it feels.'

With a telephone call he fired the obstetrician immediately despite the man's protestations of innocence. I was not upset. He deserved it for collaborating on such a scheme. I sent my high-powered lawyer to check the clinic's registers. Everything was in order. A baby boy was born dead and was immediately sent to be cremated. At the

cremating parlor the cremation was registered. Rami was thorough in carrying out his plan.

No need to tell you, I hired detectives by the dozen and had Rami followed twenty-four hours a day but they obviously could not be on his tail when he suddenly left the country on business trips. I pleaded with him, I cried, I offered him money by the millions; nothing doing. I thought it useless and counter-productive to let you know. If I was wrong forgive me. I have lived in this hell for thirteen years. I started taking light drugs to relieve my tensions and misery and little by little drifted to heroin and was hooked for good. I am in a pathetic state. One step away from death. Am I going to die without seeing my baby? Is this a just punishment for my infidelity?

My darling Johnny, I have written wills and left powers of attorney and affidavits both here in Mumbai and with the banks in Switzerland giving you the power to draw on the funds deposited there. If I die, try to find our little girl whose name and surname I do not even know and transfer this small gift to her. It is nothing for it cannot guarantee happiness. I could not give her what would have been infinitely more precious: my love, my affection, my loving care.

Below you shall find the name and address of my lawyer.

Tahira.

Synthesis

We arrived at Mumbai airport more or less on time. I had a number for Rami's mobile from long ago but when I called he answered.

"So you have come," he said. "You at least have a little decency towards some people."

I disregarded the comment.

"I shall be glad to see you Rami, even on this sad occasion. We are both growing old and it would be a pity to keep old hatreds smoldering. What are the arrangements?"

"I recovered her body today and the cremation ceremony shall take place tomorrow at eleven." He gave me the address.

We took a taxi from the airport to Shelley's, a hotel I patronized frequently on Mumbai harbor. I was thinking that some of its rooms and beds had seen extraordinary action on occasion. Tahira was an avid lover. But life is a roll of the dice. Now Tahira was gone and I was here for her funeral with Anna. Did I share some blame for derailing her life? Of course I did. Though not alone. She, herself, was in charge of her life. Rami, with his supercilious airs was both victim and victimizer. Even Anna was unwittingly to blame for coming and going from my embrace, denying me a steady course. I was constantly welcoming Tahira and then fading away from her. Oh, what useless speculations! She is gone. Now I have to try to implement her last wishes.

Up in the room I kiss Anna. We are both dead tired but I undress her and we make love. It is almost a compulsion. I call her Tahira. She smiles and is excited. Her eyes are shining and is more than usually delirious with desire. She is a reincarnated Tahira. We reach an explosive orgasm and I say, "I love you, Tahira. I shall always love you." Anna kisses me feverishly over and over again.

Next day at the cremation center the taxi could not approach the building. The police had cordoned off a large section of the street and huge crowds were gathered around it. We pushed our way on foot and reached the hall where the ceremony had already started. I saw Rami, portly and partially bald, surrounded by bodyguards. I went up to him and we looked at each other for an uncommonly long time.

"My condolences," I told him.

He smiled grimly.

"Perhaps I should be offering them to you," he said.

I moved aside.

"This is Anna. She insisted on coming."

He smiled again, a little more congenially.

"Thank you Anna. Thank you for taking care of Tahira for such a long time."

Well, well, I thought. How civilized!

The coffin was on a marble stand and all around it were people; some simply standing, some chanting and others carrying receptacles of incense all around the area. It was spring weather outside which is already warm in Mumbai and sweltering inside. Eventually the ceremony was over and the coffin was opened for a last look at the deceased. People filed past her and some of them dropped a flower inside the coffin. Tahira looked peaceful and motionless like a statue. She was as beautiful as the day she left us. If she had felt any pain when she was shot, it was not evident on her features. Anna and I stood staring at her for a moment with a lump in our throats but we were pushed from behind by the other mourners and had to move on. It took over an hour for all the people to file past the coffin and pay their respects to Tahira. The top was then secured and the coffin was lifted by four bearers and placed in the furnace. Flames sprang up inside and Tahira would be soon reduced to a handful of ashes.

On our way out I approached Rami and told him I would get in touch with him the next day. He shrugged his shoulders and we left. I called him the next day. He said he was busy and I told him I did not come all the way from Greece to ask for an appointment. I had to see him urgently and it was to everyone's advantage that we reach an understanding. He balked. An understanding about what? He said he did not need an understanding with me. I told him he should decide that after our talk and finally, reluctantly, he agreed.

We went to his villa on the Malabar Hill. It was a fortress just as Tahira had described it. We passed the security checkpoint where we had to empty our pockets and pass through a metal detector. He was certainly taking no chances with us.

He received us stiffly with a little sour smile. A little more sour for me than for Anna. He ushered us into a room with bookshelves, a beautiful period desk and comfortable armchairs. When we sat down, a butler asked us whether we would take light refreshment or a drink. A refreshment, please.

"You look well and fit John and Anna is more beautiful than I imagined."

Anna said, "Thank you."

"And you, Rami, you have let yourself go. Business and money is not everything. I know money is like a drug when it starts piling up. One continually requires greater doses of it to feel contented. The contentment lasts for a while and then it's back to the grind for more. I was very lucky. I know you will laugh. A few years back, I was caught out in the Belgian customs with a sizeable quantity of arms with false papers. I intended to ship them to a country under embargo. The customs man who was going to push them through was suddenly transferred elsewhere and another employee uncovered the scam. You know, wrong manufacturer, wrong destination, forged government export permits...etc. The arms were confiscated, I lost the bulk of my fortune and went to jail for two years."

Rami laughed.

"Was that your lucky break?"

"Indeed it was. I quit the rat race. I returned to Greece to a small villa I bought many years back. Do you know what I do? I write stories and I swim every day. That's all. And, of course, I have Anna who is divorced and is now living with me. Yes, I was lucky indeed with that stint in jail. It would be unreasonable to suggest that you quit your activities all at once, but you must slow down."

"Tahira was shot because she started restricting her activities and froze out some of her clients. I am certainly not in the same position but I cannot envisage quitting. I was blessed with two sons out of wedlock from different women and I have adopted them legally. They are involved in my businesses but cannot yet bear the full responsibility. I must be around to help them."

"Which brings us to our contention, Rami. Tahira told us that she gave birth to a baby girl which she never saw because you took her away as soon as she was born."

"I will not beat around the bush..." Rami started saying.

"Good," I cut him short. "because I did not come all this way to engage in charades. The issue is much too serious for that."

"As I was saying," said Rami, annoyed at my interruption. "I shall come to the point at once. Yes, I took the child away. Tahira with her actions caused the death of my son. That was my revenge."

"Tahira had a miscarriage. Who is to say that having sexual intercourse a few days previously was the cause of that miscarriage? Was that the scientific opinion of a gynecologist?"

"You can be sure I enquired about that."

“And?”

“In case of a rape or violent intercourse a miscarriage could result if the woman has such a predisposition. In any case, I was one hundred percent convinced that was the cause.”

“I am sorry Rami. That is still speculation. Did you not consider that the son you lost was also her son? That she must have been as devastated as you? It was a gross and heartless action to take the baby away from her mother.”

“Her mother was a bitch.”

“Her mother was a bitch and I was a filthy bastard. Whatever the circumstances, I concede that much. I truly regret my actions and I apologize to you. I do not expect your forgiveness but I do expect a measure of understanding and compassion, which you denied poor Tahira. For thirteen years she lived with one single thought: the baby girl she had never seen. I was a son of a bitch but you were mean and heartless beyond human limits.”

“So what now?”

“I want to see her. I am her father, for heaven’s sake.”

“For thirteen years she has known that I am her father and that her mother, a European, died soon after she was born. This, to justify her fair complexion. I cannot suddenly tell her, ‘Listen Zeba, I am not your father. This gentleman is.’ No, I think things will have to remain as they are. In any case, I have grown to love the girl.”

“Oh how I hate you for this last phrase. You denied Tahira her love for the girl and Zeba’s love for her mother. Nevertheless, rest assured things will not remain as they are.”

“Oh yes? What do you propose to do about it?”

“We must think of a way out. If you value your life you must cooperate.”

“Are you threatening me? Don’t make me laugh. I am better guarded than the president of the USA.”

“A lone gunman dispatched President Kennedy.”

“If I am dispatched, to use your terminology, you shall never find Zeba. Tahira, with far greater resources than you, never came close. So stop your silly threats.”

“You’re wrong. I think if you are dispatched, everything will come to the surface sooner or later. You are an important man and the press will start burrowing in and out of your affairs. Business and private, legitimate and illegitimate. Anyway, I am not threatening. I am trying to give you a measure of how imperative I consider the issue. I am prepared to go to the limit. Furthermore, I have power of attorney over a large chunk of Tahira’s cash and I want to turn the money to Zeba’s name. Above all else, however, I want to see my daughter. This is a non-negotiable demand.”

Rami was silent for a while. I assumed he was considering his options.
Confrontation or negotiation.

“Zeba is not in India,” he said finally. “For the last two years she has been a boarder at a well-known public school for girls in Kent. Her two nannies live in a house I own in Notting Hill in London. She spends her holidays with them and I usually fly on these occasions to see her. In fact, I was about to leave as she is home for Easter. Tahira’s death delayed my departure. Perhaps I could bring her here for a few days. But we have to think what we shall tell her.”

Inwardly, I heaved a sigh of relief. Rami opted for cooperation. Perhaps the fact that I had access to Tahira’s money helped.

“May I suggest a scenario?” said Anna who was silent all this while.

“Please do,” said Rami.

“It assumes primarily the good faith of both parties because after all we shall agree on a plan that will conform to the best interests of Zeba, your daughter, Rami, and yours, as well, John. I personally feel I shall be safeguarding Tahira’s side, though it is obvious that Zeba’s interests are also those of Tahira.”

Rami smiled.

“That was an interesting and fair introduction. Please go on.”

“You shall get in touch with Zeba to tell her that you wish her to meet her mother’s brother, her uncle. She will be surprised because you had never talked to her about him previously. You shall explain that for years you were not on speaking terms because of serious business differences but that there had been a settlement of the dispute and reconciliation. Henceforth, Zeba shall start spending her holidays in India and on her way here and back you shall arrange a stopover in Athens for a few days so that she may see her uncle John. We shall be glad to accommodate her nannies that will accompany her. By and by and with your approval Rami, we shall take a trip to Switzerland with Zeba and Tahira’s lawyer and shall turn the money to her name. Tahira’s property in India shall, of course, be subject to Indian law and you will get your legal share. I presume Zeba has your surname.”

“Yes.”

“What do you think John? Do you cede your title of father and accept that of uncle?”

“I think I must Anna, since it seems the only practicable way which will enable me to see Zeba quickly. It is as wise a suggestion as Solomon’s when he threatened to slice by sword the child in two and give one half to each of the claiming mothers.”

“Well, it seemed the most sensible compromise. Rami has no reason to refuse; it was up to you, John, to accept a curtailment of your sovereignty. This is the general outline. Innumerable details will arise in its implementation but with good faith and especially keeping in mind Zeba’s best interests, they ought to cause no problems.”

Rami said the only thing that worried him was that someone might open their big mouth and that Zeba would start questioning our story. For example, that he was never married to a European woman but to an Indian girl.

“We shall face the problems as they come, Rami,” said Anna, “and we shall make the small adjustments required.”

“I suppose it is inevitable that one day she will learn the truth but just now, at this tender age, I don’t want any psychological traumas.”

“You really do love her, Rami,” Anna said smiling.

“More than you can imagine.”

Rami said he would leave immediately for England and would be back within a week. Would we be able to amuse ourselves until he returned? No problem. We would wait a year if necessary. We invited Rami for dinner at a fashionable nightclub-restaurant. He arrived in a two-car motorcade with a bunch of bodyguards who took positions just outside the dining hall and in the street below. Admittedly it would have been difficult to dispatch him. We discussed some of the information he gave Zeba about her mother such as her name, Eva, and other things we should know not to find ourselves in contradiction with what he told her. Fortunately, he told her she was Greek and was acquainted with her through the business she transacted with Indian firms. We drank champagne and he danced with Anna. I paid the bill with Tahira’s money. I spoke to her mentally. I told her, her money was well spent. We were getting results.

At the hotel my head was spinning with champagne and I think Anna’s was spinning even faster. I undressed her and kissed her passionately.

“Tahira,” I told her, “in a few days we shall see our daughter.”

Her eyes had a strange glint and a lascivious smile lingered on her lips.

“Yes, my darling John,” she said, “I shall see her with Anna’s eyes.”

We made love violently like I did with Tahira in the early days when she was seventeen and we felt our souls about to leave our bodies to join the Supreme Being. I felt it again with Anna-Tahira. I knew we were hallucinating. An orgasm like an unending streak of lightning put us out of action for the night.

A week went by quickly with visits to museums and temples and dreams of the wonderful uninhibited India of eroticism, of lingams and yonis, apsaras and devadasis. We visited the shopping district near our hotel, the Colaba Causeway, and even the slums of Dharavi. We walked to the Ratnam and asked for a room. It was still there; slightly more dilapidated, minus the cantankerous Mr. Kumar but surely with the rat population intact. Sorry, no vacancies. A young man, presumably the new owner, looked at us in bewilderment. Anna shuddered.

“We lived with Tahira at the Ratnam for a month after her getaway from the Indian family. We were back to hiding once again. No more Juhu beach. Mr. Kumar did not like it and doubled the rent but I threatened to leave and he made a small reduction. We slept on the same bed like brother and sister for two days and Tahira asked me if I liked Mrs. Swinburn more than her. I asked what made her think so. She said she could see I enjoyed rubbing her with suntan lotion. She said she was sure I would enjoy it even more without her bathing costume. I said if I liked her all that much I would have gone back to her. I said I was quite happy with my little Tahira. ‘I love you,’ she said and took off her nightdress. She kissed me and we only petted that night. I did not have any condoms and I did not want a pregnant Tahira on my hands. I bought some the next day and we made love in the manner of these last days my darling Anna.”

“Lucky Tahira.”

“Oh, come on. Do you have any complaints?”

Anna smiled.

“No, my love,” she said. “How could I?”

“After a month we were bored to death and we left Mumbai. Our only recreation was our evening meal with Rami and later our delirious lovemaking. My money was running out and in Katmandu Tahira took notice of the drug trade with the tourists and the hippies, found a supplier and started dealing. It was the beginning of her catastrophe because she got hooked with the easy money and later with the drug itself. On the other hand we would not have been able to spend those two lovely, carefree years meandering across India. It was a happy time for us but I was uneasy because I felt a kept man. We returned to Mumbai and I entered into a partnership with Rami on an import-export venture. Soon after I left for Greece to see what products besides olive oil I could send him in return for Indian spices. I left Tahira in his care and planned to be back within a couple of months. But we met again, my darling Anna, and two years went by before we separated for the third time and you married that stuffed shirt. The rest, as they say, is history.”

The day before the week ended, Rami called and asked us to go to his villa in the afternoon. When we reached his house, my mouth was dry and my heart was pounding. There was this vast, unbearable anticipation to see my daughter. Rami did not have even a picture of her in the house from which I could infer what to expect.

At the nightclub he told me, “She looks slightly like Tahira and at times she reminds me of you but thank goodness not too much, which allowed me to take to her immediately.” I kept restraining myself from calling him a heartless monster every time he talked tenderly of Zeba. I felt so terribly distressed that Tahira died with such a grievance in her heart. It was this overwhelming emotion that caused the metaphysical

Anna-Tahira switchover we experienced in lovemaking. We felt it intensely, overpoweringly but could not be certain that, in fact, it carried beyond us. We never dabbled in mysticism. India, however, was steeped in it and perhaps it was this that predisposed us so deeply and vividly. It was a source of great solace.

A smiling Rami received us in the same room as previously. I looked around expectantly.

“She’s here, John, don’t worry. We arrived last night. She is thrilled to be in India. It is the first time she comes to this house. She was shocked by the security but I suppose she will get used to it. She will meet her brothers too though, of course, you have priority. As you can imagine, she was surprised to learn she has an uncle. Surprised and happy because she will learn more about her mother. It is a constant question mark in her life. I hope we don’t fall into any contradictions.”

“Where is she for heaven’s sake?”

Rami got up smiling and left the room. I looked at Anna and she smiled at me. She was as eagerly impatient as I was. I felt Tahira was peering through her eyes. We remained silent for a few minutes until Rami returned, stood aside at the door and with a small bow of a major-domo announced,

“Miss Zeba Zerhani.”

She came in, my little Zeba, slowly, a little uncertainly, a smile hovering on her lips. Our eyes locked. I jumped up from my armchair, moved towards her as in a dream. Entranced, I looked at her eyes. Tahira was there in her clear, sharp appraisal of me. That was the split-second impression before I embraced her and held her tightly to my breast for a long minute, choking the need to say, ‘Zeba, my baby, my daughter.’ She turned to Anna when I released her and moved towards her. I had lost my power of speech. Anna stood up and told Zeba, “I am John’s wife. What a beautiful niece we have. We feel terribly happy and fortunate to have finally met you.” They embraced and kissed.

She was perhaps three years or so younger than her mother when I first met her. There was a slight resemblance with a little added softness that came from a coddled childhood. Her hair was black, shoulder length and held back with a buckle and though her skin was fair, she was more Indian than European. Large eyes and a thin, slightly prominent nose. It was this mixture together with her beauty that made her alluring. She was dressed completely à l’Indienne. A brightly multi-colored sleeveless waistcoat over a white silk shirt; bare midriff and white silk loose pantaloons tightening at the ankles. She was barefoot with bright red toenails and was absolutely enslaving.

We sat down again and Zeba lifted slightly her shoeless feet at us.

She smiled.

“Please forgive my bare feet. I have lived the last few years in England and I never felt completely at home there. I have English friends, of course, but the fact remains that I am different. I rather enjoy it, too. To feel different from them, that is. As you see I am trying to acclimatize myself to India.”

“I am very proud of her,” Rami said. “She is consistently the top of her class. She excels in sports as well.”

You bloody bastard, I thought. You bloody son of a bitch. I looked at Anna. She was smiling ecstatically. Was Tahira in her soul?

Zeba looked at me intensely.

“Did mother resemble you, Uncle John? Father has not a single picture of her. They did not live in this house when she was alive and during the relocation to this one two whole albums were lost.”

“Eva was a little younger than me and did in fact resemble me slightly but whereas I have fair hair, had, I should have said for now it is turning gray, hers was a dark brown. In any case your Dad’s hair was jet black so you had no chance for any other color. Rami was a good looking young man when he married Eva.”

“Do you have any pictures?”

“Not with me, unfortunately. I have agreed with your father to have you visit Greece on your way to and from England and when you come to Athens I shall show you the photos I have. Would you like that?”

“Of course.”

“Your mother was an exceptional woman. She was a successful businesswoman who has left you a considerable amount of money.”

“Daddy has a lot of money. Why should I care for more? Money is important but the emptiness of a missing mother has been at times almost unbearable. When I was younger I used to cry a great deal. I feel a strong bond to you Uncle John because you are the closest person to her. I felt it at first glance. Please don’t get annoyed if I ask too many questions about her. I want to know so much: your childhood together, her adolescence, her friends...everything. It is my only consolation.”

I have a problem on my hands, I thought. Good thing I am a writer. As soon as I am back in Athens I must start constructing at length and in detail the fictitious life of my fictitious sister Eva, not forgetting to fabricate a number of pictures of her. It is a fiction that shall bring my daughter Zeba close to me. The emptiness of her life without a mother was painful and I shall try to alleviate it with a lovely fairy tale, but the ache of pretending to be an uncle to my daughter is infinitely more painful than I imagined.

In our room at Shelley’s, strong magnets pulled us together. We kissed violently, passionately and I asked Tahira if she saw her baby, our baby Zeba. “Yes,” she cried. “Yes, she is wonderful. Take care of her, my darling John.”

We made love deliriously and in a ferocious orgasm felt our souls leave our bodies and soar to an abyss of harmony. I woke up hours later. The light was on and Anna was snoring quietly. She looked exhausted and very beautiful. I kissed her and she opened her eyes. She smiled and kissed me. Her tongue caressed my lips and sought entrance to my mouth.

“Haven’t you had enough?” I asked her smiling.

“I was asleep my love.”

She took the initiative and made love to me like an Amazon on her steed.

Tahira did not return again. After our last tantric orgasm, her essence fulfilled and peaceful, dispersed in the abyss of harmony.

Limnos 14 July 2010