

On the Acropolis hill, in Athens where it all happened, the cicadas are still singing. Over a glass of wine in the old taverna at the edge of Parthenon's shadow, I watch the sun sinking beyond Eleusis, behind Aegaleon, the black mountain. And in the twilight, I see the ghosts. Victorious Greek soldiers back from ferocious battles. Rugged, moustachioed faces parading in the streets of Pankration. Sounds of golden trombones and cornets, the triumphant clashing of cymbals. A sea of blue-white flags. In the cool light of a noon in December. Miss Julia, the head teacher, marches along, her fiery eyes flashing. Mr Yiannidis, the professor, and comrade Petros, the assassin, follow. And Dorothea, the German girl, the lover of Odyssey. Then, us boys of the mulberry tree. The time of Metaxas, the dictator, the renouncer of Pericles, the infatuate of Mussolini.

The sun has gone and in the darkness, I think of those days. Ruined by the dysfunctional men with the grand plans. The soulless ideologues, the murderous clowns of history. Days blackened by the enemy, hunger and executions. Hellenes killing Hellenes. In the streets of Pankration where I was playing, witnessing and surviving. A long time back.

Now, the blood is washed off the streets and the

bodies are dust. Gone too is the wailing of the mothers of the young dead. Now, the streets of Pankration at the foot of the Acropolis hill, are no longer deserted. Over a glass or two of wine in the old taverna, I hear the laughter of youth, blind to the killers of tomorrow waiting in the wings. I sense the arrogance of the new innocence secure in the pervading peace. I think of the past buried in didactic books, and remember.

1

That night at the taverna on the Acropolis hill, in the summer of 1984, I was not alone. Napoleon was sitting next to me, his grey hair still thick and boyish. Once, when we were young and restless, I had gone to Piraeus to see him off to a new life. He had stood at the edge of the deck, waving his hand as the boat glided into the mist. And now, Napoleon is back. When I met him in Pankration, in the narrow street where we both grew up, it was as if time had not moved. A harmony of moods as we conversed, moments of meaningful introspection. There was so much to say but we understood it would take time. We knew there was no hurry. We knew things would be said, sooner or later. I had asked him to meet me at the taverna that night, the time had come to tell him things.

Sitting side by side we faced the cobbled street and the rambling throng of tourists. “It’s the same street Athenians walked up and down at the time of Pericles,” I remarked vacantly. “You can see Socrates strolling along barefoot if you shut your eyes.” He laughed.

“Didn’t Yiannidis say that? Do you remember our eyes-shut voyage to Periclean Athens? Do you remember Mr Yiannidis?”

How could I forget him? Him and the mulberry tree. We sat under its foliage on summer afternoons, listening to his stories, mesmerized by his accounts of our ancestors. Their glorious minds, their theories and axioms. We remembered Miss Julia, our head teacher, her spirited oration as the Germans crossed our borders. We remembered the war, the famine, the killings. We had seen the naked corpses in the ditches as we walked to school morning after morning, observed the gory details on their anatomy. We had watched the men as they were shot, lined up against the wall. I thought of his brother, our football coach, found in a nearby wood, his throat slit. He was nineteen. There were people, things we left out. We kept looking at the passers-by, drinking our wine, him fiddling with his worry beads.

“Yea, I remember everything,” I said, speaking to him and myself. “Everything. Our street, the boys, the neighbours. There is so much I want to forget but can’t.” There was silence, only the clicks of his worry beads. I was thinking of Dorothea, the German girl with the violet eyes, the years that passed since I last saw her that fateful summer of 1944. He had not mentioned her. It was as if she never existed.

“There are things, certain things I want you to know,” I said. He gave me a sidelong look. There was a shade of irony in that look as he spoke, a guarded defiance in his voice.

“Things to tell me, eh? What are they?” He was calm, observing me, fomenting me.

“It’s all written down,” I said. “A kind of memoir.”

“A memoir, eh?” he said, still observing me. I hesitated.

“Yeah, for the young ones. To know what went on in Pankration when we were young.” And for you my friend, I wanted to say but couldn’t. Not yet. A little silence.

“Am I in it then?” he asked, as if he had read my thoughts. I nodded.

“Of course, your silkworms too. All of us.” He laughed.

“My silkworms?”

“Yes Napoleon, your *Bombyx mori!*” We chuckled. “Listen, would you like to read it?” I was hoping he would. “I have it with me.” He moved his head, seemingly pleased.

It was getting late. The waiter, sitting by himself in his long apron, had glanced at us mournfully. We left the taverna to walk down the ancient street. A large dog spread over the cobblestones yawned as we passed it, teeth glinting in the moonlight. We stopped at the cross-roads to go our different ways.

“Look at it,” he said, his eyes yearning. I turned to see. The Parthenon marbles on the Acropolis hill shone.

“You could see it from our street then. Not anymore,” he lamented. “Jesus, Alkinoos, where have all those years gone?” I sighed.

“Ah! Those years.” I took the memoir out of my bag. “Take it,” I said. “It’s about us, those years.”

“Yeah? Warts and all?” He held the manuscript with both hands as if it were made of the thinnest of crystal. “You off tomorrow, then? Hamburg, you said?” His voice was hoarse and so was mine as we hugged to bid each other goodbye. I watched him strolling away, limping heavily, one leg shorter than the other. The men of the

Gestapo had seen to that. “Don’t forget!” I shouted. “I’ll be back next year, in the spring.” He turned his head briefly. He had smiled. That summer of 1984, I had returned to Pankration, to our old house. I had returned to see Napoleon, give him the memoir, my Pandora’s box. I was on my way from Chicago, via Athens, to a sabbatical in Hamburg, determined to find Dorothea. She had been taken away by the Nazis, people said, back in 1944.

2

The taxi brought me to the house that evening through the entanglement of high-rise concrete obscenities that Pankration had become. The driver moved with confidence along with the myriad of noisy, fast-moving cars and motorcycles. I kept looking out of the window, hoping to recognize my old neighbourhood, but flashing neon lights distracted me.

“Where are we?” I asked. He took his time.

“Almost there,” he said grumpily, in the tradition of Athenian taxi drivers. That hasn’t changed, I thought. Minutes later we stopped in the middle of a narrow one-way street, cars parked bumper to bumper on either side. “That’s number forty-five,” he said, moving his head to the left. “You better hurry.” Cars behind us hooted impatiently. I stood on the pavement dazed by the façade of our beloved house, the place I was born and raised. Seeing the blemishes on the front door, the graffiti scratched on it, I knew I had arrived. I turned the key, pushed the door open and switched the lights on. I had thought about this moment, alone in the house for the first time. I had anticipated the eeriness and the apprehension. I had planned to postpone the feelings, to stave off the memories. How naive I was.

Walking through the hall, my steps were hesitant. Waves of sudden memories, unexpected thoughts rushing into me, overwhelmed me. The ossified past I had just entered was turning into another present. The art deco furniture was all there. The stand in the hall with its brass hooks where my father hung his fedora hat; my mother's dressing table in their bedroom, the lingering aroma of her face powder still in the air. I remembered her sitting on the boudoir chair combing her hair, unaware of my presence, abandoned in her thoughts. I walked past the great wardrobe, its full-size mirror covered in grainy stains, a whiff of naphthalene. I touched the brass railings of the bed with trepidation, thinking of their half-covered bodies on hot summer nights. I saw the elegant set of chairs in the salon, dressed in grey-blue velvet, impressions of palm leaves on it. And the masterly carved rosewood doors of the sideboard, a statuette of Aphrodite resting on the pink marble-top.

I looked at the faded wedding photograph on a table in the salon. My mother sitting on one of the velvet-dressed chairs, a bouquet of gardenias in her hands, large almond eyes. A faint, anticipatory smile below her Athena's nose. My father standing next to her, his black hair combed back. Eyes slanted, almost oriental, and a Charlie Chaplin moustache. He was confident then, cosmopolitan and playful. And much older than her, some twenty years. When I last saw him on a brief visit, he had aged, though was still immaculately dressed. His false teeth clattered a little as I said goodbye. I had seen his wet eyes but left regardless. Afterwards, he cried. 'He knew he would not see you again,' said my mother later. She wrote to me when he died. I cried too. The image of

the clattering teeth haunted me. I kept looking at the photograph, his debonair posture, the mature twinkle in his eyes. Yes, I had gone away but hadn't he done so himself? Flee his town in northern Greece, then under the Ottomans, to avoid conscription in the Turkish army? His father, a merchant tailor to the Turks, had arranged his escape with a ship sailing for Marseilles. On his way to Paris, he had met an older French woman who took him under her wing, eventually to become his lover. I imagined the scene. A train from Marseilles, the belle époque years. Travellers in Edwardian clothes, long skirts and boots, beards and elaborate moustaches, bowler hats. Was he intoxicated by the foreign tongues around him, the promises ahead, the alluring smile of the French woman sitting opposite? Had he looked at the never-ending fields of marigold as the train steamed ahead? Questions I could have asked him but never did. Stories never to be told. Only remnants of his life in forgotten photographs.

I remembered his *Diplôme d'Honneur* in a gold-plated frame hanging in his shop, a trophy from the Académie Internationale de Coupe in Paris. On his return to Greece he had become a merchant tailor to the rich and powerful in Athens. Standing on a chair in his shop as a child, I had admired the calligraphy on the diploma, perplexed by the date, 1913. So long ago. Laurel-holding hands of bare-breasted nymphs, extended over his name, bestowed respectability on it. I remembered his enigmatic smile, how little I knew him. How surprised I was to hear he could hypnotize people, put them in a trance.

I looked at the photograph unable to move on, memories surfacing randomly. I thought of his

generosity, little incidents that stay with you for life. That day in his shop, dizzied by the infinite number of my reflections in the three-panelled mirror. Later, he had taken me to a cafe where I was treated to expensive pastries. How different this was from my mother's attitude, her ethereal look in the silk wedding dress belying an unyielding disposition. 'How about a nice piece of plaster?' she would respond to my requests for food outside meal hours. *You were a Spartan*, I thought, glancing at her, wondering what to remember, what to let lie hidden.

I walked away slowly but could not leave the room. There were accounts to be settled. I went back to her, aware of a change in my mood. Sweet nostalgia had turned into heavy-hearted regret. I pulled a chair and sat down facing her, gazing at her taciturn eyes. I could hear my words, soundless in the silent room. *It's been a long time mother but you are still following me, everywhere. Wherever I go, whatever I do you are there, behind me, watching over my shoulder, appraising me.* I remembered her reluctance to approve. 'You could have done better,' was her unspoken but implied observation. 'Praise him before the journey's end, and he will go no further' was her dictum. I grinned at her, as if she were there, in the room with me. *Is this what worried you mother?* I got up, wary of the path my thoughts were taking me to. I had remembered the anger, the quarrels. I was no longer a child then. I was rebelling, escaping from her. The room was stifling me. I walked into the hall and out into the garden.

I breathed deeply in readiness for what was waiting for me. The tall wooden frames that had carried the young vines and the juicy grapes looked ramshackle under the

weight of the aged, intertwining branches. Spiderwebs stretching from one wooden pole to another, glistened in the moonlight. The grapes, smothered by the webs, had shrunk and blackened. No trace of the rosebush, no snapdragons, only lifeless twigs embedded in the few surviving pots. The stone wall I had climbed with my sister to watch Mr Aristarchos tending to his hens looked small, pitiful. His house, and the big plum tree, were no more, devoured by the sprawling new apartment buildings of the 1960s. I sat by the tiled steps leading to our garden and saw the bronze water tap at the bottom of the wall, still wrapped with an old piece of my mother's stocking to stop the leaking. And there, in our dead garden, I remembered her burial, watching the Albanian diggers shovel the earth back onto her coffin. Under the moonlight, cooled by a gentle breeze, I felt at peace with my thoughts. My mother's early life, the stories she told us as we sat around the stove in the winter, came back to me. Her life as a girl on the mountains of Arcadia in the Peloponnese, the poverty they had endured upon her father's death from Spanish influenza. I remembered her pride in showing us his diploma, pointing to the ornate signatures certifying the graduate's competency to practise 'General Medicine and Obstetrics'.

She had told us of my grandfather's commitment to the Hippocratic Oath, travelling great distances by mule in snowstorms to deliver a baby, refusing to take money from the poor, a principle exploited by the wealthy. Stories of arctic winters, of heroic efforts by her widowed mother to keep their house warm, the feuds with neighbouring landowners eager to snatch pieces of her land. She had told us of her resolve to study, fulfil her dream

of following in her father's steps, escape the fate of other girls kept out of school by the society of her childhood. How her priest and teacher uncles, impressed by her academic potential, had allowed her to enter school. How difficult it had been for her, the only girl in the class, to live with the bullying and ridicule inflicted on her by the boys. The bullying came to be so bad she could no longer attend classes. In the end, it was decided to send her to a rich uncle in Athens where she could study at the local Gymnasium. The uncle had just returned from Chicago where, after years of daring undertakings, he had turned himself from a down-and-out immigrant into a wealthy merchant, a patron of Hellenic Societies abroad, and an opera lover. But it wasn't to be, for the uncle's wife, an imperious woman, blocked her husband's decision. To appease her, piano and English teachers were hired for a while. 'But no Gymnasium,' she had said bitterly. 'It was as if I were condemned to life imprisonment. Stunted forever.'

Later, after a few ouzos from a forgotten bottle in the musty kitchen, I was ready to venture into the street. But not before a last look into our salon. My foray into the past had conjured the long gone images. Through the open door, I saw the merry ghosts of a Sunday's evening. My father in his tuxedo, my mother in her light-blue dress sitting next to him, my godmother cooling herself with an extravagant fan, her husband, the rich uncle, smoking a cigar. The young man in the sparkling white uniform of a naval officer, standing alone, a long sword in its gold-plated case hanging from his waist. He was looking at me smiling, amused. He was calling me in. I could read his lips, 'Come in little fellow, come in,

Alkinoos, come in.' I heard the laughter, the intersecting happy dialogues. I saw moustaches wet with alcohol, scarlet lipstick, flashing teeth, a woman in a red-spotted blouse embracing an old man, shadows of others. I saw myself in white short trousers hanging from the door handle, swinging slowly. I listened to the sounds of the gramophone, the tragic notes of Ridi Pagliaccio reverberating through the house.

I stood by our front door, overwrought by the long voyage into the yesteryear, the parade of those gone. Was this really my street? Where are the houses of my childhood, their front gardens with the petunias and the geraniums? Where is the aroma of jasmine? Where have the swallows gone? And what about Hymettus? A giant of a mountain, once visible from our front door under the star-studded sky. Always there to present us with the sun in the morning. I remembered the gnarled old mulberry, its branches sprawling over the pavement. Shadows of us boys under the foliage. Of Theo and Napoleon, Meletios and Takis, the Ballas brothers. And Mr Yiannidis standing on the side, his hands moving upwards, narrating. Telling us stories of our forefathers, their feats, their triumphs. Where is it? Where is my mulberry? It's all gone. Towering apartment buildings have taken over my street. I looked up and saw a black veil where the sky used to be. Silhouettes of people on balconies, row after row all the way up. Who were they? Where had they come from? The cacophony of songs and canned laughter from television sets, the hooting of passing cars and the smell of petrol fumes, the ugly oil stains on the asphalt, the coarse chattering of youths, the concrete above me, had buried my street.

I shut my eyes, slowly drifting into the past, my street

of long ago. So much to think, so much to remember. The enemy ruled over us then. There was hunger then. There were traitors and executions. And I could see it all. Images of a world those people on the balconies would never know. No, you will never know, I thought, looking up at the choreography of silhouettes. You will never know our hell, the degradation, our guilt, our shame. I followed the hazy moonlight all the way down my street, where Napoleon used to live. His father's ancient sedan had gone and so had their house. "No, you never will," I muttered as my mood darkened, that summer noon of 1944 coming back to me. And Dorothea. Harpies, banished into the deepest dungeons in me, had stirred. Back in the house, the sounds of the gramophone were still audible. I thought of the young naval officer with the gold-plated sword, at the bottom of the Aegean sea in his submarine, sunk by Mussolini's navy in the summer before the war. A cowardly act they said.

I left our house that night slamming the heavy door behind me, shutting the ghosts inside. I had been foisted into a past I thought I had forgotten. On the way back to my hotel, I walked through the streets of Pankration wanting to see, experience, this new world, so foreign to me. I walked along surrounded by throngs of strangers, passing cafés crowded with youths, listening to voices buffeted by loud pop music. Stopping at traffic lights, I watched the enormous trolleybuses and remembered the puny trams of my childhood. Gradually, little by little, there were tinges of familiarity. Names of old restaurants, now in neon lights, had been retained, the Serbian's photography studio was larger and luxurious. The central square was besieged by concrete and steel buildings but

the old open-air cinema my mother used to take us to, squashed in between towers, survived. And so did its tall pergola, allowing flickers of moving light and foreign voices of actors to trickle through. I saw the street names, so familiar, so unforgettable. Names of our ancestors, Philolaus Street, Empedocles Street, Eratosthenes Street, Phormio Street; names of philosophers, warriors and mathematicians, sculptors and politicians.

Walking in the streets of this new Pankration, this small world of chaos, waves of intimacy began to ease my isolation and exclusion. I looked at the old and young around me, their Greek faces, the black hair of youths, the bald heads of stocky fathers. Perpetually running children watched over by warty grannies. I saw the statuesque bearing of girls promenading along and, for an instant, two violet eyes met mine. I stood by the traffic lights as the red changed to green and again to red, then to green. I stood there, people passing me by in ever decreasing numbers. Thinking of violet eyes, of golden braids. Thinking of Dorothea, of all that had happened. Knowing I had to go back. I couldn't just leave. How did I ever think I could? I remembered a dream I had once. In it, I had found myself in my old neighbourhood, having returned years after I had said goodbye to my father. Strangely, I had stayed with Napoleon's family, for some weeks apparently. Then, suddenly, still in the dream, I had thought of our house, my parents. 'My God!' I had cried. 'Why haven't I gone to them? They are only steps away...' I remembered the sadness, the remorse. I had ran up to the house and unlocked the door. But the dream, so vivid till then, had become blurred, formless. I remembered getting into the house,

the eerie quiescence in it. My mother sitting by the stove silent, eyes closed, my father next to her, weak and shrivelled, both unaware of my presence.

And as in that dream, I had been so near a precious one, my sweet Dorothea, and had not gone to her. I turned back and as I reached her street, once so familiar to me, I knew there would be more pain. I walked slowly with measured steps and a numb heart. And as I approached the house, Dorothea's house, I returned to those years. Standing by her gate, doused by the light on the veranda filtering through the tall daphne shrubs, I remembered the gold-plated plaque on the marble-clad pillar with her father's name on it, his doctor's credentials from Berlin, the visiting hours. There was a new plaque on the pillar with someone else's name. 'Notary' it read. Was he the man behind the window I could see through the daphne? A woman's shadow had appeared briefly. Did they know? There was a past in that room, on the veranda. And the garden at the back. Things had happened there. I walked to the pine tree, next to the veranda. The trunk, covered in crumpled bark, was thicker and the foliage broader. The aged branches hung oppressively over the pavement, extending into the street. I used to hide under the foliage, invisible to the patrolling security battalionists. Nazi collaborators they were, guarding the house, protecting the family and the visiting Gestapo officers. I would watch the gate hoping to catch a glimpse of her. I remembered the night her mother came out through the gate together with a German officer laughing, conversing in their language, sipping their drinks from fancy glasses.

I went back to the gate, drawn to the house, into a maelstrom of events past. Happenings that tainted my

life, sealed the fate of others. All because of the key. The key to the gate. ‘Take it,’ she had said. ‘You may need it one day. I may need you to save me.’ She had raised her head, her eyes darkened by shadows of fear. ‘Tell me you will, Alkinoos. Tell me you will.’ I had held the key unsure of what she meant, enthralled by the prospect of saving her. Saving her from invisible enemies, foes only she could discern. ‘I promise you,’ I had told her, looking into her eyes, trying to read her secret thoughts, unmask the enemy. But the enemy, her little enemy clutching the key, was there, observing her. I didn’t know it then.

I thought of the key lying at the bottom of the Atlantic and remembered crossing the ocean. Escaping Pankration, leaving the past behind. Still in my twenties and yet so much to carry with me, I had left the merry dancers, holding my umpteenth glass of wine as I stood by the railing on the deck of the liner. I had danced with a German girl. ‘I’m Renate,’ she had shouted through the noise, moving her head to the rhythm of the music. I had looked into her eyes, captive of the glistening embers in their periphery. Alone and young she was. Travelling, as I was, with strangers to a waiting future. ‘And you are?’ she had asked. The same violet, questioning eyes, the voice, the intonation I had known once. I had looked into the vastness of the sea, alone by the railing. The time had come to end this, the foray into those things of the past, the graveyard of images. I had let the key she had given me all those years back, slip off my hand, fall into the circumfluent darkness below. I had severed the bond with things best forgotten.

I had walked away from Dorothea’s house that night not knowing that what had happened in that house, the

wretched scene in the garden, would one day emerge in all its malodorous glory. In front of the gate I had thought I would never see again.

Back at the hotel, lying in bed, I thought of Napoleon, of our forthcoming meeting at the taverna on the Acropolis hill. I was to give him the memoir I had written, a story of our lives, of what had happened to us. About the secrets I had kept from him, about the war years, the ghosts. I read on through the long night.