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The River Káystros

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own. Still, he knew there was some difference separating him from the dead man. He jumped down like a wooden soldier. He took a couple of steps, unable to control his legs.

He heard the captain calling him. He turned and looked at him. The captain took him by the arm and squeezed him, without saying a word. Someone brought him a canteen filled with tea. Weary, he sat down on a rock. This gave him a sweet feeling of reassurance. There in the open air, the encampment resembled a sanctuary. The soldiers had placed the cadavers in a row and were staring at them, speechless. He felt the warm liquid sing as it went down his throat. Something stirred inside him. It was his body's irrepressible longing for life. He raised his eyes high above the treetops and looked at the sky.

"It's the Feast of the Fifteenth of August," he thought. "People will be fasting in the village."

He thought next of the man who had his belly blown away. He was sad. But deep inside him, joy had begun to well up; a wild, ineffable joy.

1960

THE RIVER KÁYSTROS

For Angeliki and Iakovos

THOMÁS FIRST MET HIS WIFE in the street. It was the last year of the German occupation, and he had a dried fruit pushcart in front of the Ophthalmology Clinic. Just one block over, in the basement on the corner of Homerou and Panepistemiou, there was a dressmaker's shop.

Every day, during her noon break, Anna came out to buy pumpkin seeds. Being the youngest in the shop, she had to do the errands for the other girls. She would leave the money on the glass top of the pushcart, and while Thomás was busy weighing the small paper bags, she was busy studying him, unobserved. She would take them and, blushing, leave in a hurry. She was small—not too short—and slender, around sixteen. Thomás thought about speaking to her but, in the meantime, the shop closed down and he did not see her again.

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Thomás, at the time, was almost twenty-two and had never been with a woman. Damianos Toplidis, a machinist's apprentice, and Elias Bezetakos, a reserve laborer in the Piraeus Port Authority, his two closest friends at that time, were in the habit of going for a long walk on Saturdays: starting from Phyles Street, through Bathes Square, going from bordello to bordello, stopping at the Metaxourgeio Silk Factory district. They had often encouraged him to join them. And even though this walk titillated his imagination, and in spite of the discomfort from his unrequited dreams, which left him exhausted for the rest of the night with unfulfilled sexual yearning, he refused. He insisted that it should only happen when he fell in love.

Lela was a tall blonde with a big dog, which she walked every afternoon. She was a maid in one of the houses on Massalias Street. She often passed in front of Thomás's stand and on occasion she bought things. The way she had of copying her mistress's mannerisms to perfection, plus the dog and the house on Massalias Street, made her unusually glamorous. Thomás began showing her, cautiously, that he liked her and she, in turn, responded. From then on, regardless of whether she bought anything or not, she would stop for a while and visit with him. One night, in fact, as she was saying good-bye, she called him "my dear." Thomás couldn't believe it. He stood motionless, waves of happiness billowing up inside of him. He continued to watch her until she turned the corner of Sina Street, she walking in front, the dog behind. Mesmerized, he walked to the corner railing and craned his neck so he could observe her without being seen, and catch just one more glimpse of her. He was just in time to see her disappearing down Bessarionos Street, arm in arm with a German soldier. It felt like a ton of bricks had been dumped on him. He left his pushcart where it was and ran after her, his heart at the breaking point. He saw her kiss the German. He was holding her against a garage door and she was clinging to his neck, the dog's leash around her wrist. After returning to pick up his cart, he walked down to Stadiou Street, crossed Klauthmonos Square and, up until the heavy traffic subsided, pushed it along aimlessly through the deserted commercial avenues. It was in early April, all this. The next day he picked a new spot. He set up shop at the entrance of Zappeion Park, on the side of Amalias Avenue. Anger gnawed at him for a whole week and he made up his mind he would hate women for as long as he lived. But, gradually, he

began to forget. His glands functioned independently of his volition, and they had started to trouble him once more. He would stare at the women passing in front of him, some by themselves, some in pairs, tanned and bare-armed, dazzling him with their scent. He wanted to fall in love again.

Early one Sunday afternoon, he saw Anna. She was standing in front of the Anglican church and was about to cross the street. Thomás thought she had grown a little taller. He called out to her and she hesitated at first, as if she hadn't recognized him right away. Then she said hello and started blushing. His awkwardness was every bit as bad as hers, but he did not want to miss his chance.

—Where do you work these days, he asked her.

—I don't work.

—Where are you going?

—To see an aunt of mine in Metz.

—I was going to the Stadium to see the games. Do you want to walk there?

Anna said nothing. Neither "yes" nor "no". Thomás got behind his cart and began pushing.

There had been a shower earlier, and even though the road surface had dried, the air still carried the freshness of the water. They reached the statue of the Discus Thrower without speaking. The Stadium was empty.

—They must have postponed the games for fear of the rain, Thomás said.

Anna said nothing. They crossed the bridge and stopped by the pillars of the main entrance. The iron gates were shut. This was a genuine hurdle and, at the same time, meant the end. Anna would be leaving any minute now. Thomás tried to think of something that could change this course of events, but his mind was at a standstill. A small wave of panic began sweeping over him unexpectedly. He let go of the cart and crossed his arms. The sky over Zappeion Park was ballooning unnaturally.

—Listen, he said to Anna.

She stood there, hunched slightly over and not speaking, as if she were leaving it to him to take the initiative for everything that was about to happen to him.

—I lied to you about the games. I said it so we could walk here together.

—I know, Anna said, and began fidgeting with her hands.

Thomás was embarrassed, but could no longer back down.

—Do you want to meet again, he asked her. I won't have the cart and we'll be freer to walk around.

She raised her eyes and looked at him for the first time.

—I'm engaged, she said.

Thomás hadn't expected this. He lowered his head, not knowing what to do. He noticed her fidgeting nervously again with her hands.

—With no engagement ring, he said to her.

—We've given our promise. We'll exchange rings next month.

It must have been his destiny. He was beginning to choke with anger again—a bit different this time. Anger because he felt ridiculous, and anger at Anna herself who had been pledged already, yet stood there in front of him as though she were expecting something.

—There's my aunt, she said then.

In the brilliance of the aftershower, Thomás could make out a broad-hipped, strong, forty-year-old woman approaching from the direction of the Swimming Club. She carried a basket of garden greens on her back and the most dazzling rainbow was forming between the hills of Philopappos and the Acropolis. It was an apotheosis.

As she crossed the streetcar tracks she caught sight of the two of them. Without a trace of surprise she changed direction and walked towards them. As she came closer Thomás was able to see her features more clearly. She was blond and, in spite of the tiny lines around her eyes and lips, her face was youthful, almost like a girl's. She set her basket down, and for a few moments she carefully studied Thomás. But her gaze held neither hostility, curiosity, nor scorn. It was unpretentious, and for this very reason, calming and reassuring.

—Who is the young gentleman, she asked without taking her eyes off him.

Her question was also without pretention. And although, ostensibly, it was being put to Anna, it was meant for him alone. Anna remained silent.

Thomás introduced himself. And although he had felt like running when Anna first spotted her, he was now feeling emboldened under her beneficent influence. He told her who he was, but also how much he loved Anna, how intensely he wanted to marry her, how happy he wanted to make her—he alone and no one else. He told her everything straight

out, though somewhat garbled, without stopping for breath. He poured out his soul there at her feet, dredging up all the bitter loneliness in his body until he was completely empty.

—Poor thing, she said. And she turned to look at Anna.

That was just like Aunt Matina. The other suitor had come to her for Anna's hand, and it was she who had arranged for them to exchange pledges. Now it was she again who would undo it all.

Many months later, when Thomás was more composed and wanted to find out the reasons for her change of heart, he asked her about it. She replied simply: I had never heard a declaration of love quite like yours before.

The details were arranged on the spot. In short, the whole affair would have to be presented as an elopement. Not a voluntary elopement, because Aunt Matina did not want anyone to be hurt. Anna needed to disappear for a few days, and when the worries of all concerned had been put to rest, she would show up at her place once more, but this time as a respectable lady, married by a priest and in church, too. Everything else, she would see to it, would be taken care of. It would be up to them, up to Thomás, that is, to show themselves worthy of her love and trust, and to follow her instructions. Her determination scared him. Scared, not intimidated him, which Aunt Matina picked up immediately. So when Thomás tried to mumble some reservations, simple reservations about his unpreparedness for the suddenness of it all, she stopped him with an ultimatum.

—You either take your filly and get out of my sight, or the other man gets her.

Thomás gave in. He took Anna to his mother's and then set out to find Damianos and Elias.

His mother had been through a lot herself. She was still nursing him when she brought him from Smyrna in 1922, and she had worked hard in order to raise him. The harshness and the loneliness of the life she had led—a loneliness relieved by several clandestine and very short breaks, with the fear of discovery draining her in advance (and the guilt for her infidelity towards a dead husband and a very young son finishing her off)—had left their marks upon her. A woman of few words throughout her life, she knew that she had not raised this son to be her own lover, and she also understood, from the height of her own setting sun, that a human life is nothing much. She set all her bitterness aside, less because

her own life had been wasted than because that was the way life was, and accepted Anna to the very best of her abilities, without reservations but without much enthusiasm either. One did not need to be terribly experienced to know that the bride her son brought home with him was an inexperienced little girl. Sizing her up, and noticing her narrow pelvis which was clearly visible under her short, worn cotton dress she thought: she will have painful childbirths. So she liked her.

The wedding took place that same evening at the home of the bridegroom, with Damianos as best man and Elias as second groomsmen. The priest, who had had a summary ordination typical of the occupation years, had no parish of his own and made his living by sprinkling neighborhood homes with holy water and officiating at holy unction ceremonies whenever he was asked. The two tall candlesticks were the most luxurious feature of the wedding. Elias had found them all by himself, on a Sunday and on such short notice, too. They were white, solid, with no ribbons, but with embossed motifs on them. They had been used, but who would notice at such a time. Elias had also removed the funeral mauve ribbons, as the candlesticks were supposed to be returned, in their original good condition, after the wedding ceremony.

He had had to walk two kilometres in order to borrow them from the "Mystras" office annex on Petros Rallis Avenue. The fee, following serious haggling, was agreed upon then and there: three gallons of olive oil, payable in advance. Elias never revealed the secret of his success. Because, aside from the necessity of providing the candles, there was also his own macabre inclination for playing practical jokes, which he quickly suppressed for fear of hexing the couple. This fear was completely unfounded as far as the newlyweds were concerned, although Elias never found that out. He was killed by a stray bullet a few months later during the December uprising in Athens, somewhere in the general area of the Silk Works, as he was trying to cross from the ELAS Liberation Army lines over to the other side. He was peddling British cigarettes and other such goods in demand at the time.

Twenty-four years have passed since then. Anna bore Thomás three sons and, contrary to her mother-in-law's predictions, her births were easy. But neither did she, the mother-in-law, live long enough to see this. She died at the age of fifty-five, without so much as a sound, for almost no reason. One evening she was helping Anna, who was indisposed, clear

the table and, while she was doing the dishes, she said to her: "If it's a girl, I want her to have my name." These were her last words. The next morning, curious about her silence, Anna and Thomás found her already dead in her bed. They buried her the following day. For Thomás this was—and would remain—the second turning point in his life, the first being his marriage. There were the births of his children, of course, but these events had the immediacy of natural processes. And since the baptisms took place at later dates, religious ritual did not manage to color those events either.

His first son's godfather was Damianos, in accordance with the dictates of custom: The best man must be the godfather. These commitments and the friendship they presupposed did not stand the test of time. It has been over five years now since Damianos' relations with Thomás and Anna have begun to cool.

Phonì was the cause of it all. Damianos, a sworn bachelor, was involved with her for about two years. He used to drag her to his friends' homes on holidays, to parties and celebrations, but had no intention of ever marrying her. "Who, her?" When Phonì became pregnant and refused to have an abortion, he blamed everybody he knew.

Thomás is convinced he will have to come to terms with this. "It's just a matter of time," he keeps saying. "How much time?" Anna jibes at him.

Anna is not the skinny cricket that she used to be. Childbirth and household chores have made her put on weight. Gone is her old figure. She has become "like a bag," as she says. But even now, there are moments when something appears in her gaze, a spark from the old days, something from the good old days when she was in her prime, a mere flash of light. Thomás gets all teary-eyed when he looks at her. For no reason he has become very emotional. They still sleep in the same double bed which, because of their tight budget, he bought from the Monastiraki flea market on the second day of their marriage. It is too small for them now. The fire that made them think this smallness was an advantage has cooled down considerably, but Anna says nothing because she knows Thomás is planning to buy her a new, expensive, king-size bed, the perfect one for her. And he is going to do it, one of these days. Forty-five years old, his hair thinning and his waist bulging, Thomás worries excessively about his sons. The eldest is in the service, the second one wants to

become a ship's engineer but Anna won't let him and they fight like crazy about it. And Thomás laughs to himself and wonders who this tough kid has taken after—probably a distant uncle of his who had joined up with the notorious bandit Tsákitzis—full of amazement at the routes family blood will follow before it comes to the surface!

His third and youngest son is his true hope. He is attending high school and will probably achieve all those things he never did or dared to expect in his dreams. He's the spitting image of his grandmother, and cut from the same cloth too. Just as careful with his words as she was, and people who don't waste any words are resolute. At this thought Thomás's mind begins to wander: he thinks next of his mother who brought him at the age of six months from Ionia and, improbable as this sounds, there is still a picture of that place half-buried in his consciousness, the courtyard with the grapevine in his father's house on the slopes of Mt. Odemesion, the view overlooking the valley of the river Káystros. But how is it possible he would still retain this memory, or was it sucked from her breast? Thomás is unable to find an answer to this and leaves the past behind. He begins to dream of Anna and himself instead, that is of how the two of them will grow old together. These are bittersweet dreams, naturally, and a bit pessimistic, but without the slightest hint of death overshadowing them. At least not yet.

1966

POTTED PEPPERS

ONE OF THEM was standing behind me reading what was supposedly my wife's statement. I didn't even have the courage to protest. I asked them where they were holding her. They answered that she was in good hands. They then asked me again about Wednesday evening. I knew their technique. I told them that I had already answered that question. One of them banged his hand on the table and stood up. The lights were blinding me. I could hardly see them.

—You met with Argyropoulos at Omonoia Square. And then you went for coffee. I want to know what happened then.