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Potted Peppers

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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.

—Nothing happened then. We went our separate ways at the Nikoloudi arcade. I took the street car from the Academy to go home.

—Argyropoulos's statement is very different.

—It probably is.

—I don't understand why.

—I can't say it any more clearly.

—How long did you stay at the "Petrograd"?

—Maybe three quarters of an hour. Maybe more. After his coffee Michalis ordered a brandy.

—Now there's an earth-shaking piece of information.

—I hadn't seen him for fourteen years. Not since the day of his second trial.

—Just tell us what you talked about.

—Women.

—Cut out the smart alec business.

—I'm not trying to be a smart alec.

—How old is your daughter?

—I don't think that has anything to do with all this. Okay, she's seven.

—Argyropoulos says you were waiting for someone.

—Then Argyropoulos ought to know who it was.

—You would make things easier on yourself if you told us all you know yourself. Ingeborg, whose name was in your address book, has been located in Rhodes.

—I've got nothing to say, unless interrogators like racy stories.

—Interrogators are interested in facts, like four bomb explosions in twelve days. You could make things a lot easier on yourself.

He must have thought I was an idiot, or else he was one.

—I have nothing to tell.

Another man came in at this point. It was the first time I heard his voice.

—Out there, they think of you as a soaring eagle. Don't turn out to be a rooster.

The comment was calculated to hit two ways, and it was humorous. I thought of telling him that, but all I said was: "Right."

He must have thought my response was sarcastic. He took some time before speaking again. His voice was soft and sharp, like a razor blade.

—I am in a position to shut your mouth forever, or to open it so it never closes again.

I could tell he was seething mad. Up to that point they had been careful not to touch me. That just made things all the more threatening.

—I'll level with you: I suggest you spill everything you know of your own accord.

I couldn't think of anything to say, so I said "right" again. A stream of air brushed past my face as he raised his hand, but before he could bring it down on me the door opened and the lights were dimmed.

Another man had appeared. He was wearing a tie and his shirtsleeves were rolled up. The smell of soap assaulted my nostrils. He was clean-shaven, and he looked me over as if I were an inanimate object. The other men got up from their chairs. I could tell from their silence that there was a kind of complicity between them.

He told them to take me away. Two men took me by the arms and pushed me outside. A typewriter could be heard from the far end of the corridor. I was taken down to the sub-basement. The cell was dark and the door shut on me like an incinerator door. I stood in the middle of the floor and stretched out my arms, the way arthropods spread out their antennae, trying to touch the walls. The walls were cool and smooth, covered with a thin layer of dust which stuck to my fingertips. I walked to one corner, leaned my back against the wall, and let my body slide downwards.

In the dark I could feel my eyes burning from the interrogation lights and the nerve endings in the back of my eyes still felt like hot pieces of wire. I knew they were trying to break me. Feeling drained from lack of sleep and the torment of the interrogation, I turned on my side and pulled up my knees, as if I were a jackknife, feeling crushed by the weight of the four-story building above as though by a ton of atmospheric pressure.

They woke me up and took me to a different room, which looked like a schoolroom. There were some benches in it, and a blackboard on a stand in the corner. They left me there without saying a word. Through a solitary window some light, real, authentic daylight was coming in. The window was very high and it probably looked out on a courtyard. As I waited for them to come in I sat trying to figure out what this whole set-up might signify. I then had a sudden urge to look outside that window.

I stuck my ear to the door but couldn't hear anything outside. I placed two benches against the wall, climbed up on them and jumped as high as I could, trying to grab hold of the window ledge. As I was doing this, the benches fell out from under me and my hands just could not hold me up.

Before falling back down I managed to catch a glimpse of the sky, serrated by the tiled roof across the street.

I got up amid the clatter and the dust, fearful lest I had done some damage, my eyes glued to the door. I heard the key turn, and when the door opened there was a tall man standing there in a uniform and with rank insignia, too. He stood there for some time staring at me grimly. Then he came over to me. "Scum," he said coldly.

I sensed the danger and tried to keep calm, but it only served to provoke him. He raised his leg adeptly and brought down the heel of his boot on my toes. I was wearing a pair of light canvas shoes when I was arrested. The pain went straight to my heart. I bent forward so as not to scream and saw him bending his knee, getting ready to kick me in the groin. My reflexes were fast and I was just in time to pull my hands in front of me to shield myself. This made him even madder. He tripped, pulled back a couple of steps and from there, putting all his weight behind him, brought down his fist on my face.

My glasses flew away, and blood started pouring down my face. Half-blinded I felt him grab me from behind. He took me by the neck like a puppy, shook me a few times, threw me down on my knees and shoved my face into an ashtray filled with sand, cigarette butts, and wads of spittle. There was no time to feel nauseous as I was expecting that at any moment he would finish me off with a few swift kicks.

Completely unexpectedly, he let go of me. For a while I could hear him panting heavily, out of breath. He called me "scum" once more and went out. I heard the key turn in the door. I stayed in the same place for a long time, lacking the strength to move, feeling a strange sort of satisfaction that things had not gone any further. I found my glasses and put them on. I got up and wiped my hands on my pants. I was wondering if the whole incident was part of the ritual of the interrogation, or merely my punishment for being bad. I walked over to the blackboard. This must have been the room for the illiterates in the corps. Half-erased letters were still visible on the shiny black surface. I recognized

the smell of chalk, even though my nose was still bleeding. I turned around, sat down on a bench and tilted my head back, trying to get the bleeding to stop. I had not had a nosebleed since childhood. Propped up against the wall, with my head back, I could see the bright square of the window across from me.

I suddenly heard the voices of people coming downstairs. They were having an argument of some sort in sharp tones. I thought that maybe they were interrogating someone. I immediately thought of Argyropoulos. I listened closely for some time. The words reaching me were unclear. It was mostly the interrogator's voice which could be heard. Intrigued, I went over to the window, but still could not understand anything. I went back to my bench. Then the terrible sounds of someone being beaten could suddenly be heard up above. And immediately afterwards, they began noisily raising and lowering the blinds. This lasted for a long time. The noise of the blinds was not sufficient to cover the sounds of the beating. Then, all of a sudden, a woman's shriek was heard. It started out like an animal howl, and for the longest time it reverberated inside the walls of the courtyard, helpless and desolate. Then, as suddenly, it stopped, just short of covering the entire gamut of pain. You would think a hand was gagging the victim. They were torturing a woman. A second, male scream was heard. Much shorter, almost like a gasp of surprise. I could hear someone swear. "Bitch." I could tell that the tortured woman had bit him. Then windows began to shatter. Someone yelled: "She's gone crazy, hold her down." Then someone else, sounding scared, yelled: "Mrs. D., Mrs. D." It was my wife's name. Even before I had time to take it all in, it was as if I had already witnessed the scene that followed: the man who had been bit lunging at her, enraged, and finishing her off with a final blow. There followed an interval of silence, until someone began making a hurried telephone call frantically requesting an ambulance. They had killed her.

I wanted to restrain myself, but I just couldn't. I started running in circles around the benches. I stopped under the window. I didn't want to give them the satisfaction, but I couldn't help myself. I cupped my hands in front of my mouth and began shouting at the top of my lungs: "Murderers."

The ambulance siren screeched like an echo to my cry. I heard it brake at the front gate. I heard steps on the stairs. They went past me, then

went upstairs. My senses were heightened unnaturally. I heard them whispering conspiratorially. I heard the words "cardiac arrest." I heard another voice scolding someone: "That's not how you beat people, moron." Then another set of steps struggling down the stairs. I threw myself against the door and began pounding on it. Someone came running and opened it. He managed to put his leg in front of me and block my way. I was beaten until I collapsed. I began to sob. Out of shame at my own impotence. In tears, I asked the man to see if the woman they were bringing down was alive. I told him she was my wife. He answered that no one was being brought down.

I was sure he was fooling me. I went back and sat on my bench. There was nothing else to do. I began crying softly, almost calmly. The guard got worried. He came over to me and said kindly that he understood and that I should not worry. I raised my eyes and gave him a blank look. I think that I was beginning to come around. He went away and left the door open. He came back after a while with someone in civilian clothes. It was the commandant of the section and he tried to persuade me that no one had been tortured. I told him calmly that there wasn't one single man amongst them. He accepted this without getting angry. He led me to his office saying that he would make a telephone call and have my wife brought to me. He called an orderly and gave instructions to escort me to the wash area.

I had not forgotten how water sounds. I turned the faucet and let it run for a while. Then I washed the blood off my face. They marched me back to the office where the commandant was. Trying to be polite, he motioned me to a chair.

—Your wife is on the way, he said. You are only allowed to see her, nothing else. I am not the proper authority for anything else.

I said nothing and this must have made things difficult for him. He went over to the window and looked outside. There were two small ceramic pots with peppers growing in them on the window sill. I could feel the water drying up on the back of my neck. Then there was a knock on the door, and the same orderly stuck his head inside.

—The lady is here, he said.

The base commandant motioned him to get out of the way. He stepped aside without speaking. At the end of the corridor, between several other open doors, I caught sight of my wife. She was flanked on either side

by two men, as though they had been keeping her there in the wings for some time, ready for the performance. She smiled at me and slowly raised her hand in greeting. Then they took her away. I felt no emotion of any kind. My mind was merely recording things. The commandant went and closed the door himself. He avoided making any comments on my error. He simply said: "I'm sorry."

He must have been smart once. He went to the window, cut two leaves from the plants and rubbed them between his fingers. Then he smelled them. My gaze followed his movements. He sensed it. There he was, all of him, in that one gesture. A resigned, middle-aged man, probably with weight problems. He made an attempt to smile.

—Peppers. I take care of them myself. They remind me of the countryside.

For a fleeting moment I thought about returning his civility. I thought of telling him that as soon as I got out of there I would cultivate gorse. But I decided the metaphor was somewhat pompous, even if his knowledge of mythology was not that limited. It made no sense to ruin his mood. In the final analysis, there was something quite human about his hobby and his homesickness for the place he came from. He had not spoken of his "village," he said "the countryside."

I allowed myself to return his smile.

He stood there uneasily for a moment and then rang the bell for me to be taken away. Two clean-looking men came to get me. They took me directly to the room where I had been interrogated. The interrogators were still there waiting for me.

1971

PANAYOTIS

HE WAS BORN IN KYNOURIA, in the village of Karapoula. He was drafted in 1919. In the fall of 1920, after a year's delay, he was called up for duty in the army.