Maria and I were born on the same year, in the same village, Zagora on Mount Pelion. Our houses were right next to each other. The two of us went out together for the first time to play in the dirt, together we chased her cat and together we played hopscotch on the cobbled street. She was a thin, blonde girl whose words were few and laughter even sparser. When we turned five, even those rare occasions were cut short. Her mother died, you see. “She didn't die” it was whispered around the neighborhood, “she hung herself.” Nobody knew the why or the wheretofore. She’d been an unsmiling woman, who never went out of her house, never spoke to a single soul. “He’s the one who did the lass in”, they said, “that pisspot her husband, coming home every night drunk as a skunk.” The truth is that every night I did hear with my own ears Mr. Lambros yelling and cursing. The strange thing was that he was having his fights all by himself. The mother and daughter were lying low, we never did hear their voices. Until the day that Polixeni left, taking her daughter’s laughter with her.

That fall I went to school for the first time. Crisp uniform, new bag, I could hardly wait! I expected to see Maria at the schoolyard but she never did show up that day, and not afterwards either. I kept meaning to go looking for her and ask her but my mother never
let me. “You sit tight”, she said to me, “I wont have you meddling with that drunkard.” And do you suppose I had the courage to go looking for her at their home? I was plenty scared of mr Lambros. I was lying in wait for her to come out like she used to, to play with her cat, so I could ask her. But I waited in vain. It was as if her orphaned home had swallowed Maria up, and she just plain disappeared. In turn, I grew forgetful, made new friends at school, got invited over to their place to play and, so, I left Maria to her silence.

Years went by, I went to secondary school and, after that, to high-school. All these years I watched Maria grow up from afar – once I caught sight of her washing the carpets in the yard, another time in the church at Easter, decorating the Epitaph for the procession, yet another time on her way back from the grocer’s carrying two bags; this was the extent of our meetings. We would barely say hello and off she’d go in a hurry. “Wont you stay and chat for a bit, Maria, we’ve become such strangers?”, I asked her once when we bumped into each other in the street. “Some other time”, she said, as if startled, “I’ve dinner on the stove.” And in two bounds, she was gone.

After I finished school, I moved to Athens. I studied to be a teacher and then I married a boy from Volos, who'd been with me at University. Once we graduated, we decided to go back to Zagora. We didn’t fancy Athens – too much filth and noise. We wanted our flowerbeds, our chestnut trees and the sea of Chorefto spread down below. So we came back and got jobs at the very school where we had been taught our a, b, c’s. We could hardly wait our turn to teach the first graders to read and write. He had, too, a verandah overlooking the Aegean, a garden full of hydrangeas and we had each other; we were happy. Whenever I went to see my mother, I 'd ask after Maria. My mother didn’t know a whole lot more than I did. “I do see the girl”, she told me, “coming in and out, busy all the time with household chores. She is her father’s servant. Caged up. No girlfriends, no husband, no
one to socialize with, no place she goes out to. Never a sound from her. We only ever hear that lout yelling up a storm, nights when he comes home drunk – though he’s aged badly now, all his going down to the tavern and his wine drinking have slowed right down”.

“Did she ever ask after me?” I persisted. “Not after you and not after anyone else either”, my mother said and hung her head.

That was the reason why I was speechless that evening when she rang the bell at half past ten at night. We’d finished dinner with Panagiotis and were lounging on the couch, watching a Woody Allen film on television. I went to answer the door, half distracted, with my mind still on the movie. I took one step back in surprise when I saw her there with her head held high, looking at me wordlessly with those darkened eyes of hers. She’d grown old before her time.

“Maria”, I stammered, “Maria… this is a surprise!” She made a gesture as if she would like to go hide somewhere. “Is this the wrong time?” she said. “I can come by some other time, if it is.”

“Why, no, not in the least…I so wanted to see you…” I assured her while grabbing her by the arm and practically dragging her inside the house. She took three steps and stalled. She didn’t want to go into the living-room.

“We’d better not, your husband’s in there”, she said. “Can we use the kitchen?” I led the way to the kitchen, letting Panayotis know we needed to talk. I made her sit down while I put on some coffee. Maria sat upright, stiff as a board. It was more than obvious that she had something on her mind, something she wanted to put into words, but didn’t dare. “So, what’s up, Maria dear?” I broke the ice, “we sure managed to lose touch!”

She wasn’t versed in small-talk and social etiquette. She went straight to the point. Not effortlessly, to be sure. The words came out of her mouth one by one, like stones. “I want to ask a favor of you,” she said, going bright red. “Anything at all,” I assured her, patting her encouragingly on the back to get her going.

“I want you to write a letter for me,” she answered more
quickly now, as if she wanted to get it out of her mouth before she changed her mind. “Right this minute…if you can,” she added, with even greater haste. “Why, of course, it will be my pleasure…” I said and started searching fumblingly for pen and paper. I got them and sat across from her at the table. “All set”, I said. “Go.”

She cleared her throat slightly and she started. This time there was no stumbling over words. Evidently, she knew fully well what she meant to say. In the endless days and nights of her loneliness at the empty house she must had rehearsed over and over the dark words that she was now voicing in front of me.

“Father, I’m leaving. I have tried but I can no longer live like this. Mother couldn’t either. I want you to know that I will never forgive you for not being able to write by myself even this here note.”

I was writing as if hypnotized, as if not realizing the weight of the words she was dictating. She grabbed the piece of paper from in front of me and stood up. “Maria”, I said tremulously, “you are leaving… to where? You say you ’re leaving?” I knew exactly just how ridiculous I sounded but I could not let her leave. She hung her proud head. “I can’t any more’, she whispered. “This is no life. I am an animal. I am not a human being.”

“Maria, what are you saying?” I kept repeating like a parrot, knowing, seeing it in her eyes, that there was no turning back.

“There’s another thing I need”, she added. “I want you to go to the pharmacy and get me some pills – I’m illiterate, I don’t know what to ask for, they will latch onto me. Will you go? I have no one else to ask this from. Will you go?” She had grabbed my hands and was squeezing them. “I’ll go,” I said. My head was thick. All I knew was that I needed some extra time. Maria started moving towards the door. “Tomorrow, as soon as you’re able, I will be waiting for you,” she said and was swallowed up by the dark.

During the night. I woke up several times, drenched in sweat. I had to save her, to turn her back. By dawn, I had a plan formed and was praying that it worked. Next day, after school was out, I dashed
to the pharmacist before he closed. I bought a box of multivitamins and rushed to her place. I rang the bell. She answered the door. “May I come in? Your father?”

She made a contemptuous gesture. “He’s inside, fast asleep, like a hog. Don’t worry. He’s drunk.”

I stepped into her room taking the box out of my bag. “These here are extremely strong tranquilizers,” I said. “Five or six together with some alcohol will kill a horse.”

She grabbed the box out of my hands and scrutinized it. Thankfully, she couldn’t read it but I was still worried that she might figure out my ruse and be offended.

“Thank you,” she said, her eyes almost brimming. “I always knew I could count on you.” She hugged me feverishly for a minute, then brought a glass of wine and set it next to the pills. “You go now,” she said. “Farewell and you be happy for the both of us.”

I stood my ground. “Oh, no you don’t!” I declared, determined to take things to their limit. “Since you put me in the game, I’m going to stand right here and watch you.” Maria was speechless for a moment and I took the advantage. “Don’t do it, Maria,” I pleaded with her. “We will work something out, you can make it, you will change your life around, you will see.”

She turned her head away. “It’s too late,” she said and took seven pills out of the box. In one fell swoop she stuffed all of them in her mouth and swallowed them along with a big gulp of wine. Then, she lay on the bed and closed her eyes. I sat next to her. I pulled her hand out and held it in mine, silently. There was such utter stillness in the room that we could hear our hearts beating recklessly.

And suddenly she started talking.

And crying.

She broke down.

The ice age was coming to an end of all those years of silence, as Maria was preparing to take her leave from the world. “Do you think he will even care when he finds the note? All he’ll care about
will be losing his servant. That was all he cared about when he lost my mother… Have you any idea how much I begged him? Let me go to school, I would say to him, and I will have everything set out for you. Your meals cooked and the house clean, I will see to it all. No, no, no. I know what an addle-brain you are, that’s what he used to say to me, don’t even think of crossing that front door, fancy yourself with an education, do you? A woman’s place is in the home, not the streets. That’s why I steered clear, it hurt me seeing you leaving in the mornings with your school-bag and, later on, leaving for Athens. Since he doesn’t want me to have a life, I might as well be properly dead and have it over and done with.” Her eyes were streaming like faucets now, you could see she’d realized what she had done and she was frightened. Suddenly she got up and hugged me, trembling from head to toe. “Heleni, I’m scared,” she whispered, “I’m so scared, I don’t want to die!” I stroked her hair. “Don’t fret, you silly,” I told her, “you didn’t really think I was going to let you die, did you?”

Today, I gave my sixth graders a composition assignment to do in class. The subject was: ”What I will be when I grow up.” The kids are into it like there’s no tomorrow. They only have three quarters of an hour to cover thirty or forty years and, so, they are in a hurry. In the desk at the very back of the room, one girl, about twenty five years older than the rest of the class, is smiling widely while she pens her ending paragraph.

“I will go to Secondary School, then to High School, then we will see what happens. I may become a Hairdresser, seeing as I have a knack for it, or I may become an Accountant, seeing as I like numbers. If I’m lucky, though, I will get to do the best job in the world. I’m going to be a Suicide Assistant!”

Lena’s story was sent in by the education campaign in Greece, coordinated by ActionAid Hellas

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