

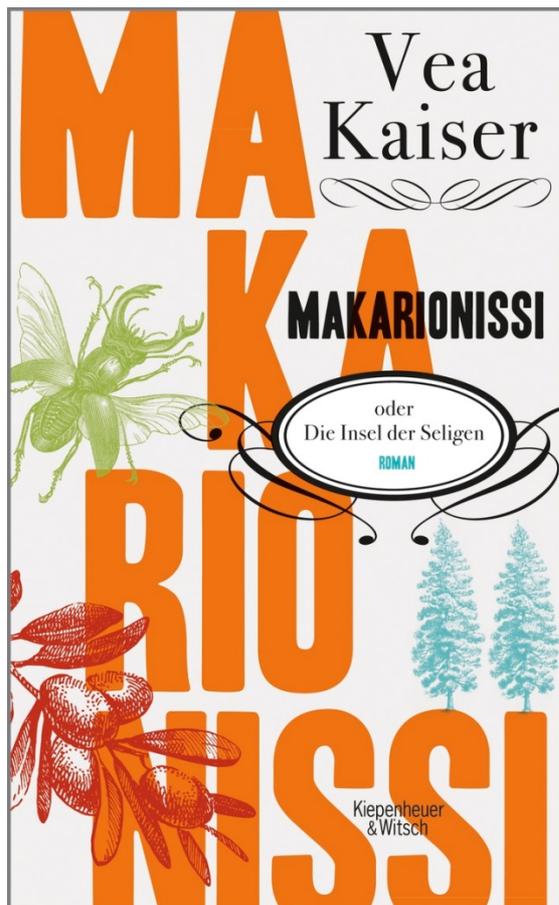
Sample Translation (pp. 15-40)

Makarionissi or The Island of the Blessed

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Prologue

In Varitsi, a small mountain village near the Albanian-Greek border, they had a proverb that the darkest hour was always just before dawn. But in the spring of 1956, when Maria Kouzis gave a start and clung to her bedroom wall, whose stones, centuries old, calmed her wildly beating heart somewhat, she was sure that she had never before experienced such a dark night, even though it was just after midnight. Maria wondered: had she got lost in her thoughts, had she lost her way in waking dreams, or had she simply dozed off? The old woman did not trust sleep, because those who sleep too deeply, miss what is going on around them. At any rate, however, she was convinced that she had just received a sign. Maria Kouzis had learned to trust signs in the course of her life.

When she was a young woman, all the animals in her home town in Asia Minor had given birth to monsters. A two-headed calf, a kid whose shimmering white skin felt like that of a human baby. Even the wild dogs kept their distance from these creatures, and after a little bird that had fallen from the nest had no wings, in 1918 Maria Kouzis and her mother had decided to leave Asia Minor. Her father, a professional businessman who had studied in Paris, ridiculed the rune-reading and stayed. The Turks, who fell upon the town a few weeks later, in a devastating drive to cleanse the whole coast of Greeks, stabbed him to death, plundered the house and set it on fire.

In the refugee-filled streets of Piraeus, where she had ended up with her mother, one day a street trader gave her a cup of coffee, a luxury that she had missed terribly. But Maria did not glug down the black gold, and instead concentrated on the grounds: they had gathered slowly on

the bottom of the cup, while a ring had formed on the top rim. And as the omen of the ring had promised, she had met the man of her life a few days later: a rich salt dealer from the mountains in the North West. He was impressed by her intelligence, her culture, her charm – and married her, although she couldn't cook and had no dowry. And thanks to that cup of coffee, Maria had fetched up in the bed in which she still lay today, many years after his death, in a grand house built of solid stone walls, the biggest house in the whole of Varitsi, the mountain village near Albania that the most important salt trade route passed through.

Maria Kouzis firmly believed that the ancestors in heaven sent signs to show their descendants the way. The signs could appear anywhere and at any time, but she didn't believe in crystal balls, which she thought were humbug for gypsy women.

When she started upright in her bed on that night in 1956, the sign had come to her in the form of a dream. And as soon as she had established that she was actually awake, Maria Kouzis, known in the village only as Yiayia Maria, grandmother Maria, ran into the courtyard with a smile on her wrinkled face and fell to her knees before the walled icon shrine, her white hair gleaming in the moonlight all the way down to the soles of her feet on which she sat, uttering one prayer after another, and kissed the glass of the shrine until it was completely misted with her breath.

That night Saint Paraskevi had appeared to Yiayia Maria in glorious pomp, and assured her that the marriage plans she had for her grandchildren were completely in order.

The old woman had already arranged many marriages. Yiayia Maria had paired up even boys and girls who couldn't stand each other, if the signs heralded a favourable outcome, and in this way ensured a continuing existence for many families. She herself had always been pitied for having given birth to twin daughters but no son. But Yiayia Maria had made up for even that shortcoming, by marrying them both well. She had given away Despina, the elder by twenty-one minutes, who was sensitive, affectionate and thoughtful, to a clever teacher from the upper village, and Pagona, who had two strong arms and a powerful desire to work, to an industrious craftsman – two good matches, although the girls had inherited a tendency for their teeth to rot from Yiayia Maria's late husband, and just as Maria herself had been shorter than average, and blessed with few charms.

But then the hens had crowed like cocks, scissors had fallen sharply to the floor, grass had faded in the spring and war had come. In 1940 the Italians, in 1941 the Germans, and when the foreign enemy had been endured, the country was divided about who it should be governed by in future. Despina's husband produced a son, took off with the Communists and was never seen again. Pagona's husband fought for the troops loyal to the crown and stayed in the village. Pagona had given him six daughters, of whom only daughters one and three survived, the second perished in the famine of the civil war, the fourth and fifth, conjoined twins, died after three days and the last was born dead.

Times of war had so starved the village that even the sorrel between the cobblestones was made into a thin soup, and messenger pigeons sang their own gallows song – and hardly anyone wanted to have children. Yiayia Maria had read the signs. But her greatest concern had not been hunger, it was that her own grandson would not find a wife to marry if, as the signs foretold, peace returned. The few girls around had already been promised since birth to other boys. No one knew the unwritten laws of Varitsi's marriage arrangements better than Yiayia Maria. And no one knew better than she that her beloved grandson, by the name of Lefti, would presumably come off empty handed.

When her daughter Despina sat at the spinning wheel with the boy at her breast, Yiayia Maria complained loud and long about how terrible it was that Lefti would soon have to leave the village to find a wife. And when Pagona was peeling apples, Yiayia Maria lamented that Pagona's family would never be able to claim the family inheritance – her girls were already too old for Lefti, so that a marriage would be unsuitable. Yiayia Maria beguiled her daughters, filled them with cares and anxieties, and soon the twins began to whisper – first quietly, then more loudly – how lovely it would be if her children could marry, until the spring of 1948, when Pagona, on her mother's advice, forced herself into the old wedding linen and got her husband Spiros drunk. And repeated this twice more, until her belly swelled and she gave birth to a girl, who was christened Eleni. Spiros was furious. Pagona had promised him not to bring any more children into the world in these difficult times, but Pagona whispered in his ear about how this child was further proof of his virility. Special attention was paid to the girl; Despina looked after her because she was not only her niece, but also her future daughter-in-law, Pagona cherished her because

the little one would secure the inheritance to her branch of the family, and Eleni was the new apple of Yiayia's eye. This happened to the older granddaughters Foti's and Christina's dismay, who found it completely unfair that their grandmother had never told them fairy tales, but provided stories for Eleni even when she was far too little to understand them.

Eleni and Lefti blossomed, they were healthy and strong. Yiayia Maria took care to ensure that they were never left in a draught, and that nothing would stand in the way of their later marriage. Nothing but Yiayia Maria's bad conscience. Every time she looked the girl in the eye she wondered if it was right that Eleni had only been born so that a boy could make a good match. And when they played intimately with one another, their grandmother thought about how they were cousins, and what if her great grandchildren were born with pigs' tails?

But on this unfortunate spring night in 1956, after the old woman had waited seven years for a sign, in the dream St Paraskevi had taken seven-year-old Eleni's hand and put it in the hand of eleven-year-old Lefti, while all around them sunflowers grew from the ground, multiplied endlessly and turned their heads towards the saint, as if pointing towards the sun. And while Maria Kouzis plucked flowers from the garden in the middle of the night to decorate the icons, tears of joy ran down her wrinkled skin, because she saw the future of the family and the continuing existence of the legacy as being assured. The children would marry, they would lead the family in Varitsi to renewed prosperity. Now the time of peace could begin, the peace she had dreamed up since as a young woman she had gazed from the sea at the plumes of smoke above her home.

In her relief there was one thing she didn't think of: that sunflowers were the flowers of unhappy, hopeless love. That would only occur to her a decade later, when it was all too late.

When someone comes back

In 1956, in the mountains on the border between Greece and Albania, there were lots of secret places. There were caves in which the partisans in the civil war hid their weapons so well that they couldn't find them again later on. There were bridges without parapets that had once been built by human beings, and which led across the little mountain streams, so well disguised that only deer used them now. And there were woods so dense that only the tellers of fairy-tales could conjecture about who or what lay hidden in them.

But in Varitsi, a village in the middle of those mountains, there were no secrets. Varitsi lay inescapably on the old main trade route through the high mountains. Here, for centuries, the toll had been paid for the mule caravans bringing salt southwards through the mountains. The houses stood along the main road and huddled against the slopes, almost all the way up to the pass. Each house stretched its biggest wall towards the main road. Thick stones that looked impregnable to those who passed. And yet all those walls had ears and eyes. Small, hidden windows. Loopholes, turrets, so that no one could creep unnoticed through the village. Everyone knew even where the dogs hid their booty.

So it was not long before the village, on that spring Thursday in 1956, noticed that someone had returned, someone unseen since he had gone off to the civil war in 1946. For some years men had tended to leave rather than return. Apart from some travelling traders the route through the mountains was barely used now for the transport of goods. There were new roads, shipping routes, and when the men wanted to feed their families they went into the valley to find work at the tobacco works, or looked for occasional work building roads. Some gave up

and tried their luck abroad. Postcards reached Varitsi more often than people, and the unimaginable fact of someone long thought dead coming back threw the whole village into a state of furious excitement.

Yiayia Maria didn't like excitement, she thought excitement was an illness that damaged the heart. She was sure it had been her husband's excitement that had taken him to the grave so soon, and no sooner had she stretched her head into the street in the early morning and discovered that it was the arrival of someone in the night that had caused an unusual amount of excitement, she dragged her beloved grandchildren out of bed and allowed them for once to go up to the meadows with the goats.

Eleni and Left beamed with joy.

The winter had been hard and the spring had been rainy. Until a few days before they hadn't been allowed to leave the village boundaries, after the rivers, which flowed around the little village on the slope of Mount Kipi on all sides, had become fuller than ever. For weeks what had normally been harmless little trickles that snaked their way along deep gullies, over sharp stones and waterfalls, had grown into monstrous, untameable forces of nature that could drag tree trunks with them as if they were delicate flotsam. Yiayia Maria had been worried that her grandchildren might slip and plunge into one of the streams. Since the war had ended and tuberculosis had become controllable in the early 1950s, the wild water was the most common cause of death in Varitsi – the water was more of a threat to life than wolves, bears, lightning and winter cold.

Locked up in the house for all those weeks, things had become deadly boring for both cousins. They had played marbles, stone-paper-scissors and boardgames so often that at night they dreamed of dice. They had taught the sheepdogs to stand on their hind legs at the command *hands up!* and at *bang!* to fall on their backs, and their Yiayia Maria had told them so many fairy-tales that her vocal chords were inflamed and she could only croak. Not even annoying Eleni's adolescent sisters Foti and Christina was fun any more, and Eleni and Lefti were at war with the other children. They couldn't remember when the hostilities had begun. Lefti had already had scars on his head from arguments with the other children when Eleni was born. And even before Eleni could speak, she had never cried when she was hungry or tired. But she

had roared her head off whenever Lefti got a smack or even an angry word.

Varitsi actually consisted of two villages: core Varitsi, also known as the lower village, guarded the trade route. Since the war only forty of the sixty houses were permanently inhabited. The upper village, on the other hand, was two kilometres to the North-East. It had once been just as big as the lower village, but hardly anyone had come back here from the war, which was why the inhabitants of Varitsi began to call the upper village Micro-Varitsi, small Varitsi. The family's meadows were not far from Micro-Varitsi, and Eleni and Lefti drove the goats to the west past the village, where they had a good view of both villages, as well as the narrow winding road that connected the upper and the lower village. In the morning they looked for brightly coloured beetles, at midday they shared the packed lunch that their grandmother had tied up for them, and in the afternoon Lefti had an idea for a magic trick.

'I'm Lefti, the ruler over light and shade!' he intoned in a deep, disguised voice, and leapt onto a rock run through with veins of quartz. Eleni had to clutch her belly with laughter.

'You're Lefti! My Cousin!'

'The ruler over light and shade commands you to climb behind me, to see what the ruler sees!' which Eleni did without demur. Lefti stretched his arms out and together they looked down into the valley. 'I now command the shadow to devour Varitsi!' he said, opened his hands, and Eleni was amazed: the shadow cast by the mountain peak actually moved along the sides of Lefti's hands and gulped down the village in slow nibbles. Eleni had always known that her cousin had magical abilities. She was amazed – but then some children's voices rang out. Eleni and Lefti discovered a cluster of people moving along the snaking road towards the upper village. Eleni eagerly grabbed her cousin's shirt.

'Look, Lefti!'

The cousins stood in silence on the quartz-veined rock and narrowed their eyes: someone had come into the village, and was being accompanied to their destination by skipping, squealing village children.

'Lefti!' Eleni cried excitedly, 'it's your birthday in two weeks. That must be your Dad!'

Since the first man who was supposed to have fallen in the war had returned to the village three years ago, Lefti prayed constantly that his father too would come back one day.

Neither Lefti nor Eleni knew much about the things that had happened before they were born, except that there had been two wars. At first both villages had fought against the Germans. But after the Germans had been defeated, the country had been divided; some wanted a king, others Communism, and this feud had been acted out even in Varitsi. The lower village had fought on the side of the royalists, while the upper village, from which Lefti's father came, on the side of the Communists. The royalists had won, which was why a picture of the king hung in every house, while almost everyone who had fought for the Communists had disappeared – the few who had come back were not greeted in the street or served in the kafeneion. No one really knew what had happened to those still missing. Locked up on an island, fled over the border, dead – the adults murmured behind their hands. But every day Lefti remembered that his father had promised on his life to come back. Lefti's heart raced.

'Come on, Lefti!' called Eleni, who had already run off. Eleni's parents had strictly dinned it into her that she was never to ask anyone about Lefti's father and his fate. Lefti's father was a bad man, they said, a traitor to his homeland, but Eleni didn't care who he had fought for. Eleni was always on Lefti's side. Lefti put his knapsack over his shoulder, whistled the goats over and followed Eleni.

A good shepherd takes care that no weak link is lost, but Lefti was soon so excited that he walked ahead of the goats like Eleni rather than behind them.

'Lefti, why are you in such a hurry?' called the teacher who came towards them in the upper village, and who pressed himself against the stone wall of a semi-derelict house so that the children with the foolish goats in their wake could get past him. 'Lefti, that was a question!' he roared after him when he received no answer. The school year was already over, so that the children could help with the many tasks demanded by farming in late spring, but the teacher was of the opinion that he could not allow his authority to be undermined during that school-free period.

'No time!' said Lefti, without turning round, and the schoolteacher rummaged hastily in his trouser pockets for a pen and a bit of paper. He wanted to remind himself to make the boy pay for his impudence with the hazel rod on the first day of school. Like so many men in the village he too had almost entirely lost the ability to remember in the war. Above all now, when he was on

the way to the Kafeneion, the source of the delicious tsipouro in which the teacher drowned his last little bit of memory every evening, until his head felt like a cleanly wiped blackboard. Because the only thing that united all the inhabitants of Varitsi, whether red or blue, was that they no longer wanted to remember.

Meanwhile Lefti ran down the narrow sidestreet as quickly as he could, at the same time taking care to ensure that Eleni, whose legs were rather shorter than his, didn't fall over the edge. Unlike core Varitsi, the upper village was built on a steep slope. The houses crowded closely together, and badly cobbled stone roads from which weeds sprouted led in a baffling arrangement between the various houses. Eleni, Lefti and the herd of goats changed direction twice before they reached the others. The new arrival was standing in front of Lefti's family's former house and trying to break the lock that held the front door barricaded shut since Lefti and his mother had moved to join Eleni's family in the core village during the war. At first it was supposed to be temporary, but the missing window panes and the half dilapidated roof looked abandoned not temporarily but for ever. Like all strangers, this long-vanished man was surrounded by the village children of Varitsi because he, like the few people who had come back, was still wearing the traditional costume in which he had left. The children were less interested in who he was, where he came from and what he had experienced than his curious suit, the strange hat, which looked like living illustrations from the history book that the teacher read from in class, in a broken voice. This homecomer had a narrow, pale face, thin, light brown hair, pale eyes, a thin beard and bushy sideburns, and his whole posture made him look like a thirty year older version of Lefti. Eleni reached for Lefti's hand. Lefti stared at the man, who suddenly stared back, and when the man opened his mouth and asked hoarsely, 'Lefti?', Lefti dashed towards him and pressed his cheek against the stranger's belly.

'Dad!' Lefti clawed his hands into the thick fabric of the man's jacket, determined never to let go, because for the first time in his life he felt complete.

The homecomer grabbed him by the shoulders and fell to his knees.

'Heavens, Lefti, you're the spitting image of your father.' Lefti took a step back. 'It's me, Uncle Thanos. Do you remember?'

Lefti didn't remember, but noticed with embarrassed emotion how the children standing

around him were studying him. Only Eleni had turned round and was looking at the goats, which were browsing on the weeds that flourished beside the collapsing walls.

'Lefti, where is your father?' His uncle was about to say something else, when the sound of heavy boots rang out in the narrow streets of the upper village. Immediately Mr Mavrotidis and other men from Varitsi appeared, and regardless of the children charged at Lefti's uncle. Without saying a word, Mr Mavrotidis grabbed the homecomer by the collar and threw him to the ground.

'Welcome back, Communist pig!'

The uncle landed in the gravel, and Mr Mavrotidis kicked him with his heavy army boots. It was said of Mr Mavrotidis, whose cheek was adorned with deep holes from shotgun pellets, that during his military service he had tortured reds by pulling their fingernails out with red-hot pincers. There were no police in Varitsi, just Mavrotidis and his men who formed a kind of village gendarmerie. Their words were obeyed, their blows were not questioned. Lefti was in shock. Eleni grabbed Lefti's hand, whistled together the goats that had fled the altercation in all directions, and without turning round again, she dragged him away with all her strength.

After they had left not only Uncle Thanos' cries but also the upper village far behind, they slowed down. Eleni sucked on her little finger.

'Careful, or your fingernail will fall out,' Lefti said, repeating Yiayia Maria's words, even though he didn't believe them himself. Lefti sighed and counted the goats which scoured the edge of the path for weeds. 'The kid is missing,' he said, and called for it. Except the kid didn't come. Instead, by way of answer he heard:

'Dad! Dad! Come and wipe my bum!' followed by loud boyish laughter. Lefti took Eleni's hand firmly in his own, when Mavrotidis' son Loukas, his best friend Stavros and three other village boys jumped out from behind the trees. Since Lefti had been able to think, Loukas had been his enemy, even though he had never done anything to him. Loukas was like his father, so much so that Lefti assumed Loukas' cheeks would, when he was older, be decorated with the same shotgun wounds as his father's. Loukas kicked stones in Lefti's direction with the polished tips of his shoes. Stavros, a heavily built farmer's son who followed Loukas everywhere, held the missing kid by its hoofs like a sack of flour.

'Give the kid back,' Lefti said carefully. Loukas took what he wanted: whether it was the

sweets that Lefti sometimes got from his neighbours, or marbles that he couldn't hide quickly enough.

'The goat wailed almost as pitifully as you did after your criminal father.' Louias took his hands out of his waistband and shoved Lefti. 'You're a coward like your father. Bulgarian bastard!' Lefti fell deliberately to the ground, in the hope that Loukas might leave him alone. Lefti narrowed his eyes as Loukas took a step forward – but suddenly Loukas screamed like a pig before the slaughter. Lefti couldn't believe his eyes. Eleni had bitten Loukas' forearm like a rabid dog. Of course the boys wanted to help their friend, but no one knew how. After all, there were binding rules in the village, and one of them was that you must never hurt a little girl.

After half a minute that brought tears to Loukas' eyes, Eleni let go of him, whereupon Loukas looked in panic at the bite while his companions stared awkwardly at the ground. Lefti struggled to his feet, grabbed Eleni, who was spitting out Loukas' blood, and ran away with his cousin as quickly as he could – followed closely by the goats, who ran without bleating, as if they had understood the gravity of the situation.

By the time Eleni and Lefti got home the twilight had already engulfed the stone walls in the colours of approaching night. Lefti opened the gate to the courtyard and shooed in the goats, which dashed eagerly for the water-trough.

'Loukas tastes like raw pig,' said Eleni, while Lefti struggled with the jammed bolt that fixed the second leaf of the courtyard gate to the ground. Lefti wiped his hand on his trousers, ruffled her wiry, dark brown curls and said:

'If I am the ruler over light and shade, from now you are the heroine of my kingdom!'

'Not a princess?'

'Princesses are lame. They're always just frightened. Heroines defend themselves.'

Eleni thoughtfully laid her head on one side, then skipped cheerfully into the house.

'I'm a heroine! A brave heroine, not a cowardly princess!'

Lefti sighed and wished he could see the world through Eleni's eyes for just one day. His cousin didn't just have a strong father who was respected in the whole village, but also a mother

who didn't cry herself to sleep every night, let alone the fact that she always, when she felt no one was looking at her, pushed aside the curtains to stare out of the window. Eleni's sisters Foti and Christina were hysterical and pathologically jealous, but they were still her sisters.

Lefti carefully closed the gate behind him and put the iron chain around the handles with which the gate was normally only locked on winter nights, when wolves and bears came into the village in search of food. Lefti took three deep breaths and sat down on the end of the stone trough, in which scented roses grew, from whose petals the twin sisters made rose extract to sweeten puddings. Lefti's ears thundered, and his uncle's cries echoed in his head.

One of the shaggy sheepdogs trotted towards him, prodded his knee with his damp nose and grunted happily when Lefti ran his hand through his tousled coat. When their neighbour Yorgos had come back a few years previously, one of the few people from core Varitsi to have fought with the Communists, the thugs had stormed into his house and beaten him all night. Lefti, whose room abutted Yorgos' house, had had goosebumps competing with one another up and down his back. When Lefti brought Yorgos his goat's milk a few days later, there was a picture of the king hanging in his room. From then on Yorgos praised the monarch, even though after that night he was missing most of his teeth, and the once strong and handsome man was now a hobbling cripple.

'You know,' said Lefti, and scratched the animal under the chin, whereupon the dog blissfully stretched its neck, 'politics is the worst thing in the whole world. Because of politics the Italians invaded the mountains. Then the Germans occupied the whole country. And then, when the enemies had gone, they all fought against each other. All because of politics. Because they can't agree who should govern the country. Because of politics my father went to war and never came back. They've probably locked him up on some island or other. And now? They all say we have peace now, but no one is peaceful. They all hate each other.'

The dog's eyes were firmly closed, it grunted from the depths of its throat, and Lefti persuaded himself that it was grunting out of agreement.

Lefti decided two things that evening: from now on he would give up all hope of his father coming back. And for the rest of his life he would avoid getting involved in political matters. Politics, parties, everything just tore families apart and drew invisible borders through villages.

No, thought Lefti, he would never have anything to do with any of that. And he brought his left hand firmly down on the back of his right. He had forgotten that the sheepdogs were covered with fleas.

The family house was big and had lots of rooms, but they were small, cramped and dark. There were more walls than air, as the thick stone walls kept at bay the cold that prevailed reliably in the mountains from October till March. Only the kitchen was big and spacious. On one side there stood a massive wooden table made by Yiayia Maria's father-in-law. It sat at least twenty people, but since the weddings of the twins, the last big party before the start of the war, it had only been half occupied. Yiayia Maria's husband had died when he had learned that the Italians had attacked his mule convoy. As if he had seen into the future, he had clutched his chest, announced that he didn't want to live in this world, and toppled over with a convulsive expression. But at least he was spared having to look on as his fortune and family shrunk from year to year. Yiayia Maria's parents-in-law had died in the first famine. Some of Pagona's sisters and brothers-in-law had left, others had succumbed to tuberculosis. And Despina's in-laws had joined the Communists. People never normally talked about this part of the family, but on the evening of his return the women chattered about the uncle they had believed lost while they prepared the evening meal. On the other side of the kitchen there was a three-metre-long stove. Two pots stood on the cast iron grill above the embers. Eleni's mother stirred it and asked Eleni on and on about what the uncle had looked like, what he had said, how he had smelled, only to tell her off every time she answered that she shouldn't have run to see him. Meanwhile Eleni let Yiayia Maria pull from her curls leaves, weeds and other souvenirs of her day in the open air.

'Your hair needs cutting!' she said, every time she plucked out a beetle, threw it on the floor and hastily crushed it under her heel. 'And if a stag beetle gets caught in it, just hope it doesn't pinch off your ear!'

'Lefti really thought it was his father?' asked Christina, and put two water jugs in the middle of the table.

'He's so naïve,' Foti smirked.

The kitchen smelled of freshly baked bread, and the only one who didn't take part in the

conversation was Lefti's mother Despina. She was unwrapping cheese from a blue linen cloth and cutting thin slices from it as if in slow motion. Despina didn't even look up when Lefti came in and sat down beside Eleni without saying a word. Pagona and her daughters went on chattering as if Lefti weren't in the room. They were wondering where Uncle Thanos might have come from, how Mavroditis had probably locked him up in the old toll-booth, and what this event meant for the family, when the door swung open and Spiros came into the parlour, which was lit by oil lamps. In his arms the iron basket full of firewood looked as if it weighed no more than a handkerchief. Spiros set the basket down on the floor with a crash, and the conversation fell suddenly silent. Spiros Stefanidis was one of those men who are both loved and feared by their family. The women laid the table in silence, and even Eleni went unmasked and washed her hands.

'Thanos is no longer a part of this family. And you chickens stop clucking about him,' he said in a voice that stifled any possible contradiction.

Foti and Christina laid the table. Despina cut the cheese slices into little cubes. With two wash-cloths around the handles Pagona lifted the pot of goat soup onto the table top. It was only when everyone was sitting down that Yiayia Maria broke the silence.

'Spiro, Lefti will soon turn twelve. You should take him down to the valley tomorrow when you fetch the herds,' the old woman said, and Lefti raised his head for the first time since he had come into the house that evening. Going along to the transhumance was the greatest honour that a boy could experience, because it meant that he was now one of the men. That not only was he allowed to pick up his own staff, rinse out his mouth with schnapps and clean the gaps between his teeth with a penknife, he could also hear the dirty jokes and the stories strictly banned by the women, which were only allowed when you drove the sheep up to the summer meadows.

Spiros and Yiayia Maria exchanged glances. They had always done that. No one knew what kind of curious connection they had, but sometimes it seemed as if the old woman guided the big, massive man like a marionette on invisible threads.

'It starts at dawn, go to bed early, Lefti. I don't want to have to wait.'

Even before Lefti could thank him, let alone express his joy, Eleni butted in:

'Woohoo, let's go to the sheep!'

Lefti didn't dare look at her. They had always done everything together. He didn't know how to explain it to her, but his uncle was ahead of him.

'Don't be silly, Eleni, you're a girl. You stay here.'

And as Lefti had feared, she immediately started to protest. Spiros brought his fist down on the table.

'Shut up right now, or you won't get anything to eat!'

But Eleni climbed under the table and moaned so incessantly about this injustice that Spiros finally tore off a piece of bread, tried to load Despina's tiny cubes of cheese onto it, stuffed a handful of olives into his mouth, cursing as he did so, and announced:

'I'm going to the kafeneion.'

Five weeks later Eleni checked that her sisters were still going to be busy cleaning beans in the kitchen for a while before, right knee first, she climbed onto the painted wooden chest by the window. The bedroom that she shared with Foti and Christina was on the top floor. The windows were narrow so that they didn't give off too much heat in the cold, snowy winters, and slightly too high for the seven-year-old to be able to look unaided at the village square and the main road in the direction of the upper village. A creak came from the wooden chest that contained Christina's trousseau. Eleni's sister protected the contents of the chest with her life, and if Christina had seen Eleni clambering about on it, she would have slipped her bottom. While Eleni peered outside, she strained to hear sounds from the kitchen, but as long as her sisters were complaining about the approaching marriage of their neighbour Yorgos, everything was fine.

'He hasn't even seen his fiancée! She must be as ugly as sin,' Eleni heard Foti say.

'Yorgos is a cripple and a traitor to the fatherland, I wouldn't marry him if he offered me two chests of silver as a trousseau,' Christina mocked, but Eleni wasn't interested in the moaning – Eleni was keeping an eye out for Lefti's uncle.

The mountains that loomed steeply into the sky behind the upper village had been

swallowed by the mist, as if the world stopped a hundred metres past the house. The previous day the mist had risen quickly and without warning with the rain that had come down over Varitsi over the last few days. Eleni hated that weather. When the weather was bad she had to clean the house with her sisters and grandmother, and help with the cooking, while Lefti could do what he wanted. Three weeks before he had turned twelve, and since then her own father had taken him along with him wherever he went. Lefti was allowed to go into the wood, accompany him to the valley, talk to strangers. The last time she had asked her father if she could come along he had been so furious that he had put her over his knee. Eleni hadn't been able to sit down for two days. Lefti's uncle had disappeared again just as quickly as he had appeared. She had heard her sisters talking that Mr Mavrotidis had locked him up in the old toll-booth, where everyone who had committed a crime in Varitsi was imprisoned until the gendarmerie came up from the valley and collected the miscreants. But no gendarmerie had come, she would have known, because after all there was nothing more exciting in the little mountain village than a visit from men in uniform. Eleni had already asked Aunt Despina about Lefti's uncle, but she had suddenly become breathless, and her mother had forbidden her ever to ask about him again. But Eleni was no cowardly princess. She had taken it into her head to find Lefti's uncle, so that Lefti had an adult of his own and didn't have to spend all his time hanging around with her father.

The seven-year-old pressed her snub nose against the window pane, and her breath misted up the glass. After just a quarter of an hour two figures came from the direction of the upper village. Eleni immediately recognised the silhouettes: a big, bearlike man with shoulders like a wardrobe and a skinny, gangling boy who had to take two steps to keep up – no doubt about it, it was Lefti with her father.

Eleni narrowed her eyes and watched Spiros walking into Mikis' kafeneion and Lefti following him. Her father had never taken her there, she didn't even know what it looked like inside. The chairs that stood outside when the weather was better were all that she knew of that world.

'You little rat!' Christina suddenly called out behind her, and Eleni turned round. 'I've told you a hundred times not to touch my wedding chest with your dirty fingers! Let alone with your feet!'

Christina's voice was hysterical, and Eleni hastily skipped down, but now stood in the room like a trapped animal, not knowing how to get past her sister, who was already clenching her fists. Christina took a step forward – her dirty blond hair poked out from under her headscarf, her hands were wet from cleaning beans, and her apron was smeared with green stripes.

She came menacingly towards Eleni, who pressed herself against the window. Without thinking, Eleni grabbed the full chamberpot beside Foti's bed. Christina shrieked when Eleni swung the pot threateningly above the trousseau. 'You watch out, you little wretch!'

'Promise me you won't hurt me!' Eleni panted, almost losing her voice of fear of her big sister's mighty upper arms. Eleni kicked the chest open. As Christina took out the fabrics, bedcovers, table cloths and dresses inside it twice a day, to stroke them like kittens, it was never locked, and all of a sudden everything happened in a flash. Christina dashed like a Fury at Eleni to grab the chamberpot from her. The contents swayed dangerously above the white fabric. Both sisters tugged on the pot until Eleni kicked her sister in the shin. Christina shrieked, let go of the pot, Eleni, startled, did the same, and they both stared at the flying vessel, saw each second as if in slow motion, until the contents poured generously over Christina's trousseau.

Christina screamed as she had never screamed in her life and never would again. Her scream didn't only ring out around the whole house, it shook the whole of Varitsi and startled the birds in the neighbours' garden. Christina and Foti had a tendency to hysteria, which had previously led to their mother having to grab them by their pony-tails to stick their heads in the cold water trough outside. Eleni didn't look very like her sisters – while Foti and Christina had coarse, pale skin and thick, dirty blond hair, as well as a sturdy physique, Eleni was delicate, with her grandmother's olive skin and brown corkscrew curls, which stood out so wiry and tousled in all directions that strangers often asked if they could touch her curls. Because of the age difference, Eleni had rarely experienced her sisters' hysterical transformations, so now she stood frozen in the corner while Christina roared as if her life were in danger. Despina came running first, grabbed Christina by the upper arms and tried to calm her down.

A moment later Pagona dashed in, her hands covered with flour and her face red from the heat of the oven:

'Christina! What? Say something! Has someone done something to you?'

But Christina screeched and screeched until at last Yiayia Maria strode into the girl's bedroom holding a glass of water and slowly poured the water down the back of her neck.

'The neighbours can hear you! No one's going to marry a bleating woman!'

For Christina, who would turn eighteen in two months, and who had young men strutting back and forth outside her window every day, marriage had been an idea that dominated everything for the past six months, and so she went quiet immediately, breathed deeply in and out, before she pointed to Eleni and said in a voice that sounded to the little girl like one of the monsters from Yiayia Maria's fairy tales:

'The little rat emptied Foti's chamberpot into my trousseau!'

Eleni knew that denying or protesting would be pointless, so she did the only thing that occurred to her at that moment: she ran as quickly as her short legs would carry her down the wooden steps, through the parlour, through the kitchen, out across the courtyard, into the garden, and crawled into the sheepdogs' winter kennel. She sat down in the corner at the back, drew up her legs, folded her arms in front of her knees and decided to bite anyone who tried to drag her from the kennel. Apart from the dogs. Because they bite back.

It was only several hours later, when darkness settled over Varitsi, that the family looked for her. Yiayia Maria in the house, Pagona and Despina in the courtyard and the forest behind it, only Spiros sat in the kafeneion with a bottle of tsipouro – he had stopped caring about his daughter's moods eighteen years ago. Christina refused to look for Eleni, and Foti kept her company, partly out of laziness, partly out of solidarity.

Lefti, bright red in the face because he had hardly been able to breathe in the smoky little coffee-house, came home when the searching party had just dashed outside.

'Where is everyone?' he asked Foti and Christina, who were sitting at the kitchen table sulking at the table top like cheated wives.

'The brat ran off after she mucked up my trousseau,' yelled Christina and immediately started crying again.

'We hope the wolves eat her,' Foti added.

Lefti had a headache from the cigarette smoke and stomach pains from all the over-sweetened coffee that his uncle had set in front of him. Without replying he turned round and

went outside. When he had celebrated his twelfth birthday three weeks before, his uncle had told him he was almost a man now, which had at first made Lefti, the fatherless boy, very proud. But that evening Lefti was strangely relieved when, after spending four hours listening to men talking about politics, he had been able to climb into the favourite place of his childhood: the kennel. And as he had assumed, his cousin was sitting in the back corner.

‘Don’t worry, it’s just me.’

Lefti reached for her hand.

‘It was Christina’s fault,’ she whispered.

In the darkness of the kennel Lefti couldn’t see if Eleni was crying, but when he crept over and pressed his body to hers, he could feel her shaking.

‘Eleni, don’t cry. Heroines don’t cry.’

‘They don’t?’

‘They don’t. Heroines don’t cry. You’re much too strong to cry. And anyway, I’ll look after you.’

[END OF SAMPLE]