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Mesopotamia

Emi saw him again on the last news bulletin of the night. She sat down to drink her wine in front of the television, put her feet up on the coffee table, and there he was right smack in her face. Man of the day. It had been less than an hour since they ran the interview with him on *Friday Profile*. Now here he was again, approaching the cameras set up in the hall of the Parliament. His green eyes squinted behind his glasses. It was his tic.

“The administration will demand that full light be shed on the situation,” he told the reporters who had gathered in hopes of a statement. He stood there in the colonnade, waving his hands as if a fly were buzzing somewhere nearby. “As always, the opposition is simply wasting its time creating baseless accusations of scandal. Our primary concern is the well-being and interest of the Greek people.”

His favorite phrases: “transparency,” “curbing corruption,” “making an example of the guilty parties.” They made him seem shallow and incapable of thought. Emi had a hard time admitting to herself that she had ever fallen in love with him.

She listened to his entire statement. As if he were sitting there in her living room and it would have been rude for her to stand up and leave while he was still talking. She turned down the volume with the remote control and went to check on the kids. She could hardly believe that she had born her sons with that man spouting bullshit on the television. Not that long ago he had stood there beside her, in that very same doorway, and they had listened together to the boys’ rhythmic breathing.

In summer his shirts wrinkled easily. He would come home from the firm, remove his cufflinks, roll his sleeves up to his elbows. Emi would gaze longingly at those slender wrists. She’d be dying to tell him all about her day. Should she show him how their older son had learned to write his last name in trembling capital letters? Or should she relay the phone messages first, to get it out of the way so they could have the whole evening to themselves? They would sit there on the sofa, slowly sipping their wine and saying, “You won’t believe it,” or “Did you hear what happened at the ministry?” In those days Emi was still working at the ministry. She would share information with him, important things he made the most of as soon as he became minister, before the scandals broke.

They were methodical in their habits. They watched the news at eight, then turned off the television and went in to admire their sleeping sons. Then wine, conversation, more wine. They drank a lot and made fun of people they didn’t like. They were often invited to dinner by more powerful colleagues, people with connections, and they made sure to return the invitations. Emi would serve champagne and cook stuffed pork and roasted potatoes, which were in fashion then. As soon as the guests were gone, they would snicker about the cheap wine someone had brought, or how someone else ate with his mouth open. Then, pleased with themselves, they would go into the kitchen and load the dishwasher together.

In the early years they undressed one another. Later on they undressed on their own; they were no longer so entranced by the ritual. During the final phase they skipped straight from wine to bed, where they dropped like logs into sleep. Emi didn’t remember exactly how that phase had begun: the first nights when he started coming home at all hours, the municipal council, the late-night meetings with Deli—and, shortly before the divorce, his assumption of the ministry. They distanced themselves from one another simultaneously and decisively, with the pragmatism of people who realize love doesn’t last forever.

She had watched *Friday Profile* with the boys. She smiled when necessary and managed not to say even a single time, “Your father is a fool.” They ordered pizza. They got up every so often to get paper napkins, or water, or to throw something in the trash, but they never left the living room for long. They didn’t want to miss a word. The reporter, sitting there with his legs spread as if he were in the coffee house, was known for asking very personal questions.

For an hour and a half they heard his praises sung on that set with its leather armchairs. Alkis wasn’t wearing a single article of clothing Emi recognized, or at least none she had ever ironed. His shoes were patent leather, and since he was sitting with one leg resting on the other knee, Emi noticed that the sole facing outward was barely scuffed. From the ministry to his car, she concluded. He no longer walked down the street like normal people. A little further up, beneath the buttons on his shirt, his belly formed a pillow. Inside his jacket he was wearing pink, a pink button-down and a tie—God forbid—with flamingos on it.

Emi sighed. If she’d had daughters, they would all have been able to make catty remarks about his new wife who bought him those ties. With the boys it was different.

On the show they were now asking him about the ministry, about the scandals that kept breaking and the first subpoenas of witnesses. And Alkis, spreading his legs like the interviewer, as if he were in a coffee house, too, and felt utterly at home, used his favorite phrases about full light, polarization, and the government of the just. “It’s in our hands,” he said, “to strengthen our coalition with our citizens and with society.”

“Mom, do you think he stole lots of money?” her older son asked, his mouth full of pizza.

Emi shrugged. “We’ll never know.”

“Konstantinos at school says everyone in the government stole lots of money,” her younger boy said, scratching his head. “That’s what his father says.”

The roots of his hair formed a centrifugal shrub high on his head. Emi looked at him with a kind of tenderness that was coming to seem more and more like despair as the boys grew older. They were already ten and twelve.

The interview turned to personal matters. Alkis talked about the baby, who was eleven months old and had “stolen his heart.” Emi turned discretely to see if there were any traces of jealousy on her sons’ faces. Just then Alkis started talking about his boys, whom he called his “buddies”—a word that made Emi shudder. Since when did he use words whose sole purpose was to awake that vulgar kind of sentiment? Was it Deli’s influence or his own aesthetic, which had been ripening within him all these years?

When they were younger they used to lie under the eucalyptus or walnut trees in the parks at Oxford, analyzing their personalities ad nauseum. Alkis told her about his father who was a minister of Parliament and used to take him on campaign tours. He was a tall man, and a bit the worse for wear when Emi finally met him toward the end of his life. He would look her in the eye and squeeze her hand when she bent over him to ask how he was. Did he actually like her or was it just his manner? After all, her former father-in-law had squeezed countless hands, sung pop songs into the microphones of packed tavernas, and often, after his speeches, had danced a zeibeikiko in the middle of some improvised stage. When he was little, Alkis thought his father was a singer. It wasn’t until first grade that he discovered that his father’s profession was in fact “political chicanery,” as he called it one day, bitterly.

It was spring and they were walking down Thorn Walk.

“Why do you call it chicanery?” Emi had asked.

“He was a professional con artist,” Alkis answered, looking away. “He lied all the time, about everything, get it? And he barely ever got through an entire conversation with me. Every time we went to the kiosk for newspapers he had to stop and shake everyone’s hand. He couldn’t ever finish a sentence. He ran around greeting every stranger on the street, as if they’d been in the army together.”

Emi had laughed. She always laughed when Alkis turned his childhood into high drama. The only thing that bothered her about him in those days was his girlish whining, his sense that life

had been tragic because his father was just another father like all the rest. Her father hadn't taken her to the park, either, like in American movies, nor had any of the fathers she knew. They didn't play frisbee, they didn't wear loafers or checked shirts, they didn't have dogs. They worked all day and at night came home to eat whatever was waiting for them in the kitchen and go to bed.

He'd said, annoyed: "What's so funny?"

Emi found everything funny or exaggerated back then. No one she loved had died, even her grandmother was still alive, crocheting doilies for Emi's dowry. Everything flowed pleasantly and self-evidently like water over the riverbed.

She remembered that day quite well. They turned left on South Round and walked in silence toward Parson's Pleasure. It was a part of the park with weeping willows and walnut trees that led straight to Mesopotamia.

Mesopotamia means a region between two rivers—and at that spot the Cherwell in fact split into two. To all appearances they were a happy couple, forming a solid piece of land between two streams. Mesopotamia was a perfect image of their relationship back then.

They had reached the point in the program when one of the reporters goes to the interviewee's home to show that he, too, is a normal person like everyone else, just with a bigger house. They'd filmed before the scandal broke, and there had been no attempt to cover up the extravagance of the place. Deli—Emi refused to call her by her first name—welcomed the crew at the front door with a surprised smile, as if she hadn't been expecting them. She was wearing a deep fuchsia caftan with a revealing neckline. Her hair was blonder than ever and her fingers tapered to squared-off nails, painted to match her dress. A dog wiggled beside her on the couch. It kept batting its tail on an enormous Chinese vase and Emi caught herself wishing, *Yeah, go on, break it.*

Alkis appeared at the top of a spiral staircase freshly shaven, wearing a track suit. He descended the stairs proud as punch, bouncing on each stair. The boys jumped up to show her on the screen how the staircase led up to a loft where the two of them slept every other weekend at the house in Ekali.

"Get out of the way!" Emi shouted and the boys looked at one another and sat back down.

Alkis and Deli, arm in arm under an arch in the living room, were talking about how they'd fallen in love with the house at first sight. Emi greedily devoured every detail of their bad taste: the thick metal feet on the coffee table in the living room, the gilded candlesticks, the puffy curtains and behind them a glimpse of the yard. Then, as if the television crew shared her desire, they all trooped outside. The hedges had been shaped into cones. A significant sum from the money embezzled from the ministry must have gone to the villa's gardener: the yard was enormous, dotted with guest houses and ornamental trees. Her sons were right. Only they hadn't told her everything. They'd gone on and on about the basketball court and the ping-pong table. But what caught her eye right away was the little bridge and the artificial stream that split into two around a miniature island. She leapt from her seat and ran over to the screen.

"What's this?" she shouted.

"Mesopotamia," her younger son replied. "It's where dad goes when we want to think."

Emi threw her head back and laughed a deep, satisfying laugh. When her sons asked what was wrong, she said, "Nothing, I just remembered something funny."

Her sister called later at night..

"Did you see him? My lord, what a charlatan!"

She was in the mood for one of their rambling, late-night conversations—two divorced sisters and the men who had ruined their lives. Emi realized that her friends and relatives insisted on her feeling abandoned and alone, but she was unable to exhibit the grief and heartache they expected.

Her sister talked on and on. Emi closed her eyes and effortlessly imagined herself back in Mesopotamia. The sun made her knees weak. Crocuses bloomed all around. She wanted to lay down

on the grass, and to pull him down, too, to tell him, "Shut up already! Look at the squirrels, the mulberry trees, the sun peeking out from behind the clouds. Live a little."

On the other end of the line her sister was speaking in the same irritable tone as before. Emi asked, "Is it raining?"

"Not over here," her sister said.

It was a sudden summer storm. The rain fell suddenly and impatiently, as if telling her, "Speak up. Louder".

"I'm going to hang up now, I need to close the balcony doors."

Instead of closing them, she opened them all the way and inhaled the scent of rain. She ran out toward the front gate, splashing in the water. The yard had once been pretty, with trimmed grass and ornamental shrubs. In the past few years she'd left it to its fate. It was all dry leaves and mud.

She went as far as the gate and flung it open without knowing why. Water gushed in the gutter beside the sidewalk. The cheap asphalt the municipality had paved the street with had cracked. There were little streams everywhere, and a lake in the middle.

She kneeled down over the brown water. A quivering moon was reflected on its surface.

"Shitty rain."

She went back inside, locked the door. She chewed an aspirin and lay down under the sheets.

She was woken by honking. The minister's driver had come to pick up her sons. Their bags were packed and when they heard the horn they ran into her room, shouting, "Mom, we're leaving!"

"You're not going anywhere yet," Emi said, sitting up in bed.

She put on her robe and dragged herself to the kitchen to make coffee.

"It's not the end of the world," she said. "He can wait. Saturday is the only day when we have any chance to talk."

"Yeah, but you were sleeping," her older son said.

"And we talked yesterday," said the younger.

"We didn't talk yesterday, your father did. We just listened."

"But that's what people on TV do, they talk".

She poured her coffee silently. "How did he seem to you guys?"

"He was ok," said the younger.

"Everyone's going to ask us about the money again," said the older.

Emi nodded. "It's natural. We live in the world. And the world gossips."

"What should we tell them?" her younger son asked.

She sipped her coffee. "That you're just kids and you don't know anything about it."

"Get real, mom, we can't tell them that," the older said. "They'll think we're total idiots."

"Don't you get real me," she said, frowning.

"Dad doesn't care if we say stuff like that."

"Of course he doesn't. He has a huge house, sons every two weeks, a yard full of bridges. I got left with the problems."

Her older son sighed and started tapping the toe of his sneaker against the kitchen closet. Emi covered her ears with her hands.

"OK, I got it. You can go now."

The boys hoisted their bags onto their shoulders and ran for the door.

"Wait a minute," she said. "Where's my kiss goodbye?"

He was young, around twenty-five, with harsh features. Maybe it was his deep tan. He was wearing grey sweatpants and a white t-shirt and was leaning against the hood of the car with his hands in his

pockets. As soon as he saw them coming, he started cracking his knuckles.

"Who is this guy?" Emi asked.

He stood at attention before her, but kept cracking his knuckles. His fingernails were caked with dirt. "I'm Sotiris's son, I mean Mr. Sotiris's, the driver's. My father broke his hand."

"And now you're trying to break yours?"

He was handsome and very fit. He looked at her, puzzled.

"What you're doing with your fingers, I mean."

"Oh, that? I do it all the time."

The kids had made themselves comfortable in the back seat.

"Do you know how to drive?" Emi asked.

He started to crack his knuckles again, then stopped. He got into the driver's seat and reached over to fish his license out of the glove compartment. Then he came back and showed it to her.

"I was kidding," she said, glancing sideways at the license. "It's just, they're my kids, you understand."

"Mom, we know him," her older son said impatiently, sticking his head out the window. "He's the gardener."

Emi felt sick to her stomach and leaned against the hood of the car.

"The gardener?"

"Not exactly. I'm an agronomist, but I want to specialize in landscape architecture. I do what I can. There's a whole team of us."

Emi looked at him. "Who built the bridge by the river?"

"Oh, I designed that."

"What's your name?"

"Mihalis," he said, meeting her eye for the first time.

His eyelashes are very long, Emi thought.

"And you're Emi. My father told me."

"What exactly did your father tell you?" she asked, holding her breath.

"I know you're the minister's ex-wife."

She imagined them around the dinner table, eating and gossiping. They certainly wouldn't call him the minister, or her the ex-wife. They'd just say "him" and "his ex."

Mihalis paused, as if awaiting instructions.

"Could you do anything with our garden?" she asked suddenly and a bit urgently. "It's drowning in weeds."

"I could come by this evening. Would after seven be OK?"

"Sure," Emi said. "I won't keep you any longer. And get well soon."

"Excuse me?"

"For your father, I mean. I hope he gets well soon."

The boys in the back seat were already playing with their video games.

In Mesopotamia night was slowly falling—the sky was the color of lavender. Alkis and Emi were stretched out on the shore, facing one another. They were showing one another their precious stones. They each had a collection, and were exchanging the ones they had doubles of. She wanted the dark stones, he the pink ones. Emi thought: I'd rather no one have them than him. She swept the stones into her arms and threw them into the river. Alkis grabbed her by the hair, almost pulling it out. Then Mihalis appeared and started fishing the stones out of the river with a net. Only they weren't stones anymore, but tiny speckled quail eggs.

The doorbell woke her. Her mouth was dry from her afternoon glass of wine and she wondered what would have happened next, in the dream. She splashed some water on her face. The pillow from the sofa in the living room had left a crease on her cheek. She loosened her bun and let

her hair fall in front of her face to hide the mark.

Mihalis had changed. He was wearing jeans and a blue shirt with white stripes. He had cleaned his nails, too, and combed his hair back with hair gel, like boys in a school parade. Touching, Emi thought. She opened the gate to let him in.

They stood in the middle of the garden and Mihalis stroked the sad-looking leaves of the lemon tree. He shook his head.

"First of all, you need a good pruning."

"You're telling me..." She threw her head back and laughed hoarsely.

"After that you'll have to decide."

"What?"

"What kind of yard you want."

She looked at him thoughtfully. "What kinds of yards are there?"

"There are yards you take care of yourself, yards you have other people take care of, and yards you mostly take care of but need some help with."

"I think I'd be good at it. I just need some advice."

"That's what I thought," Mihalis said, looking at her seriously. "And believe me, it's better that way. All those people who spend money on spas should just get their hands in the soil instead."

He made some proposals and explained how much each would cost. Then they sat on the veranda and she brought him a beer and a bowl of nuts. She poured herself another glass of the wine she had opened. They drank and looked at the trees in the garden.

"I want to ask you something," she suddenly said. "How did you make that river? Did he give you plans?"

"The minister?" He set down his beer and cracked his knuckles. "He showed me a photograph."

"What photograph?"

"From England, I think. A river."

He hesitated for a minute and then continued:

"I didn't know anything about rivers. I always swam in the sea. We never went on family trips inland, because, well, my father spent his whole life behind the wheel, so the last thing he wanted on his days off was another drive. You know, I don't think I ever even saw a lake when I was a kid. The minister asked, 'Will you do it, yes or no?' That's what he said, 'I don't have time to waste.' And I told him yes. I downloaded photographs off the internet. But I'm not sure if I made a real river."

"It's a fake river, regardless."

"No, I mean if it's a river. If it's river-like."

They didn't speak. Emi scraped at a dried-up splotch of something on the table.

"I guess we all need to keep our hands busy somehow," Mihalis said, smiling. One of his teeth was slightly crooked, which made his image a little less perfect.

"How do you mean?"

"There's no need to feel bad."

Emi stopped scraping at the stain.

"That's what you mean? I'm not doing it because I feel bad. I'm doing it because it's stained."

Mihalis looked off into the depths of the garden.

"Your yard will be nicer, you'll see. More real. Building a fake river doesn't mean much."

Emi stood up.

"I'll go bring some more nuts."

"No, there's no need. I'm leaving anyhow."

"You're leaving?"

"I don't want to keep you."

Emi thought it was nice, sitting there on the veranda, listening to someone's rhythmic

breath beside her. Almost as nice as life in Mesopotamia.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said.

It was getting dark. The leaves were starting to cast shadows on the wall.

Translated from Greek by Karen Emmerich