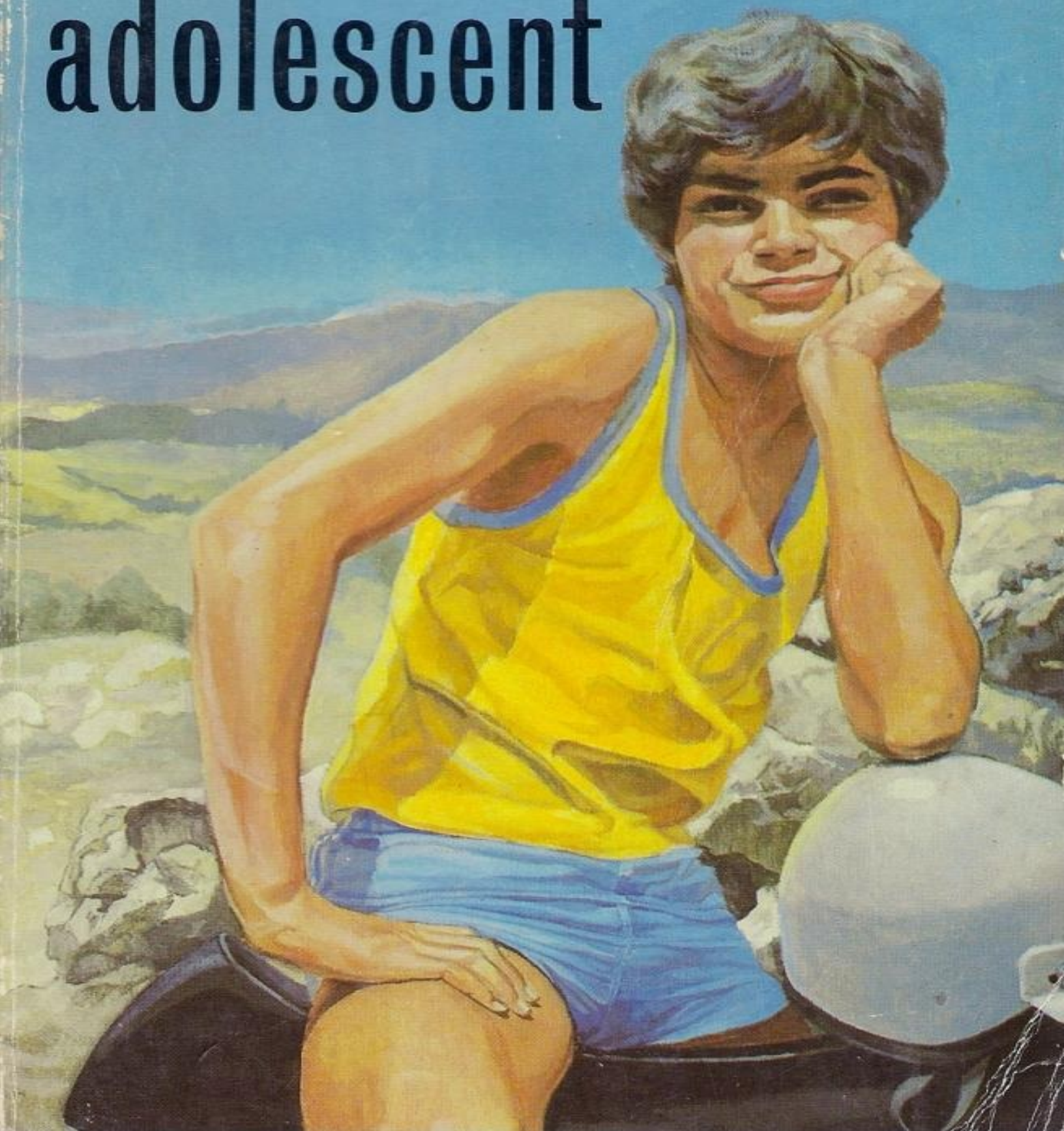


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The Coltsfoot Press,

Amsterdam

The Coltsfoot Press
P. O. Box 3496
1001 AG Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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Cover painting and design by Mario de Graaf

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Phototypeset in The Netherlands by Spartacus
Set in 9/10 Times Roman

Printed in The Netherlands by
Van Boekhoven-Bosch bv, Utrecht

ISBN 90 70154 29 3 4

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An earlier version of "Takis" appeared in *Panthology One*. Most of the material in "Pavlos" was first published in the story of that name in *Paedo Alert News* No. 12. "Spiros" appeared in *Spartacus Magazine* No. 2 under the title "Hustler, What's It Worth?"

1. Andreas

THERE IS NO DOUBT, a pedophile needs a guide.

I was fairly new to Greece, had had my holiday, done my island-hopping; and then run short of money. At the same time I realized I had to stay here. There were a thousand reasons, and surely not least the stunning beauty of the Greek boys. Their mere presence was an environment I could not sacrifice.

At the age of thirty, cut free and set adrift from my conventional moorings, I was ready for them. Whether they were ready for me remained to be seen. I made no move to approach them.

I was living in something of a dream-state. The years I had spent working in theater and film in Sydney, filling my spare hours sporadically writing plays, had probably not sharpened my sense of reality. I could look after myself, but did not think too far forward, nor too far back. If I had enough money to live on, and lived frugally, I was O.K.

It would have been easy to get a job in Athens, something steady. Or else, to pack up and go home. Having satisfied my curiosity about Greece, Ancient and modern. A wish I had nurtured in my mind since schooldays.

But I did neither of those things, preferring the dream. Which was pleasant enough.

I am not sure how seriously I had been infected by the gay fiction I had consumed, extolling the virtues of Greek lovers – including young boys. Perhaps it had lain, deep and simple, in my subconscious when I bought the air ticket: go to Greece, and have what you've always wanted! No more sexual frustration, indulge yourself, on the other side of the world.

Just being in Greece gave me an exhilarating sense of freedom. It was like the feeling at the end of a school year, and the beginning of a long break.

I had the energy of a school-boy, and many of his attitudes.

Deeply tanned from months of idleness, my sun-bleached hair flowing over my shoulders, as it had not done for some time.

Optimism, eagerness, a touch of recklessness. Instinct told me I was in my element at last. How could I leave?

So, I cashed in my return air ticket and found a small room in Plaka, the old sector of Athens under Acropolis. A very small room, but it had a bed, a table and a tap, and a direct view of the Erichtheion.

Outside my door was a delightful little courtyard, crammed with potted flowers and ferns, crawling with jasmine and bougainvillea, and overhung by a venerable grape-vine. It was guarded by a large tortoise-shell cat; the garden, the cat and I were watched over with discreet loving care by my landlady, who lived upstairs, and rented the room for a song.

It was a primitive sort of base to settle into for a year – or as long as it took me to finish the book. But a good writer's lair: snug, private, and within wishing distance of a thousand surprises.

At the time I lived there Plaka combined the best and worst of modern Athens: enchanting, winding laneways in which you could hardly stretch your arms without giving offense; charming nineteenth century houses of two, three and more stories occupied by the same families for generations. A pride in clean, neat dwellings, bursting with pampered plant-life inside and out.

An atmosphere of acceptance, and human concern, recalling the old village life. A tangible rapport with the magical antiquities, above, around and below.

One became a member of a small community of people who knew and respected one another. And loved their unique quarter with quiet devotion.

Coming home to Plaka, up, out of the nerve-jangling mess of central Athens, into quite another world, another time. Succor, peace, nourishment.

You will see what I meant by a writer's lair. I was happy, complete in our simplicities.

My work made no demands on the emotions, being well-researched and commercial.

This book was a real stroke of luck, in fact, handed to me on a plate by a transient friend and fellow-Australian who had been asked in London to do the job. Now he was going home, and felt unable and unwilling. Though he'd already done a lot of the spade-work. I felt about half-competent to take it on, but ready to work at it. A godsend. Or, as I thought of it then, a stroke of fate. Keeping me safely where I was.

My friend managed to sell me to the publisher – on probation and, later, I sold the man the book. I have never enjoyed a job more.

Of course, by that time I had met many people in Athens, entered other worlds and dabbled in other fields of labor.

I ate simply but well: fresh vegetables, feta cheese, beans, lentils; and resinated wine bought in bulk from the old lady on the corner, who filled my lemonade bottles from her old, dusty barrels with unhurried ceremony.

Neighbors who gave and greeted and shared, but never intruded.

A sanctuary of the spirit.

But there is that other Plaka, better known: the racy network of bars, discos, brothels and taverns which has radiated from the central conviction of how best to trap tourists and their currency.

A few blocks of desperate, neon-lit venality, engulfed in a miasma of amplified music; streets which come into their own late at night, and early in the morning.

Quite near my room – cozied in winter by a kerosene heater were several small bars and discos.

From observation, and neighborly chat, I learned that these were gay establishments. None were very well known, or well patronized. Basically, they were another version of the standard Greek cafe, plain and custom-bound. Happening to serve young men of the city who preferred to spend their hours of relaxation with other young men.

At first glance, hurrying past on my way home to my den, I would have said there was nothing sexual in it. On later occasions, when the scene was spiced by the presence of youths from the suburbs and Piraeus, I came to see just how sexual it could be, and regularly was.

At weekends, especially, after midnight, my narrow, cobbled street would be lined with hustling boys – none of them over twenty: the older ones preferred to pose inside the bars. Outside, we had the leather, the denim and the bikes.

I was obliged to run, but slowly, a provocative gauntlet in order to reach my trellised gateway, descend, stoop and light the oily wick of warmth and company.

The regulars came to recognize me as a resident. I was spared many flicking keys, glowering looks and inviting shuffles.

The weekend boys, we called them. I often wondered, noting their youth, and classic masculinity, why they wanted to be on the game.

"To pay off their motor-bikes," Christopher explained, laconically.

Christopher was a New Zealander, a high school teacher who was now living comfortably in Athens on private English lessons. He'd been at it for years. Nearing forty – a fact which seemed to unnerve him, from his constant, twitching reference to it – Christopher was a vivacious, handsome man, with a lively wit. As people often remarked, he must once have been a stunning looker. Without question, he was great company, and I took to him from the start. Different as we were, in many ways.

I met him at an embassy bash – free drinks attracting all types – and I believe the attraction was mutual. Though not sexual. We became fast friends.

The first thing I learned about Christopher was that he took his work with Greek kids very seriously. He reputedly did a good job.

The second was that he was an unfailing, indefatigable guide to a good time.

"Saturday night is their tithing," Christopher continued.

Personally, I was far too impressed by their looks and physiques and far too immersed in my own manuscript, to become a player in the game.

Christopher was more than tempted, and favored one or two of these bars. But he never had the cash to play, or the disposition to lose.

He was always urging me, half in jest, to tumble one of those glossy young studs down my steep stairway and into an educative bed.

None of this had any issue beyond diversion, until the night I saw Andreas.

Coming home later than usual, from the theater. My head full of Tennessee Williams.

And here was this tall, skinny kid, in black jeans and synthetic fur coat, leaning against the wall, half way between 'Vassilli's Bar' and my bed. Very young. No more than fourteen, surely.

The moment I turned the corner, swinging up the last step, to the level of sanity, we became aware of each other.

There were several boys, draped across their bikes as usual. Some of them were so unreasonably good-looking as to suggest the cover of a gay magazine. One or two said hello, allowing me into their conspiracy as I passed.

Andreas had no bike. No leather.

Never showed any interest in such things.

Another dream, his, entirely.

A touch bourgeois, perhaps. Uxorious.

But romantic, to the core.

With a stockpile of loyalty and affection ready to greet the dream, and hold on to it.

His eyes followed me intently, as I passed through. I returned his gaze a dozen times.

Caught by the odd impression he gave: of delicacy and hidden energy. The darkness of him, fire behind the smile. His hair black, thick, unfashionably long. A girl's style. But nothing else about him suggested the feminine.

Even those extraordinary brows and cheekbones, which, in concert with a practiced pout, earned him the nick-name of Sophia amongst his comrades, were all his, owing nothing to Italian actresses.

As I pushed open the squeaking wooden gate, reluctant to descend, he nodded, almost bowed, and greeted me politely.

"Good evening." In some strange, provincial style.

If I never met him again, I knew, I would not forget that moment, that promise.

Andreas belongs in the world of grand opera.

I doubt if he has ever seen an opera performed. But he would be at home, from the overture on.

Several nights I saw the boy standing in the street. Loitering. Not displaying himself in quite the same provocative way as the bike boys.

And always greeting me with a discreet smile.

Waiting for someone, or something, you would have said. Remaining, all the while, his own man.

I started to dream about him.

One night Christopher called.

Crashing down through the dripping, dangling vines to assault my sanctuary with his lively presence.

"Come on, my dear! Out of your torpor! Out of this fuggy den. I am taking you off to 'Vassilli's'."

"A kindly thought, Christopher, but, you know, I really don't feel like it."

"Of course you don't! You *never* feel like it. Stirring yourself, that is. You need a good prod, and, out of the goodness of my heart, I am here to do the prodding. Come on now, you know bloody well, once you're there, you'll love it!"

It was true. I *did* need a prod. And always enjoyed my visits to the bar, once surrounded by that very special atmosphere. In fact, as my friend well knew, I never went into a bar without being precipitated into some adventure. Willy-nilly.

Some of these forays marked me for life, I'm sure.

And Christopher was jealous of the whole sequence. But interested. And a genuine friend.

So, off we went to 'Vassilli's Bar'. Hardly a sperm's shot away.

With unobtrusive Greek pop music issuing from the speakers, and the usual stench drifting up from the toilets. Where I was, one night, shockingly seized by a high school student. He proved to be more than acceptable company, once removed to a more fragrant setting.

I was hardly inside the door when I saw the kid, half-sitting on a bar-stool, coke in hand, staring dreamily up into the colored lights. And mouthing the words of the song being played.

As the opening of the swing-door automatically drew eyes, I drew his.

Christopher was off at a bound, exultantly to greet some old flame, in a far corner.

And I was left standing in front of Andreas. We greeted each other, much as we had in the past, out of doors. He drew himself up slowly from the stool to give me his name.

His wide, feline eyes glowing with private satisfaction.

I wondered what he was doing there, inside for a change.

We made some small talk, as I took him in more closely.

A well-mannered boy, restrained, dignified – but you could feel energy and fun waiting to burst forth at any moment.

And, more than ever in this dark stable of studs and loners, he looked very young.

While I chatted to him about my work, I was distracted to note that he was only half-listening. Not ignoring the words, but seeming to watch me say them, his eyes moving slowly over my features, my gestures. At one point, I stopped in mid-sentence, startled as his hand moved up to touch my hair; and fall to his side again, lightly brushing my cheek.

A simple gesture, but unexpected. My face continued to burn pleasantly from the contact.

We moved closer together, as the music rose in volume, and my mind framed a question.

"Oh, there you are!" bawled a rough American voice.

We broke apart guiltily, and Andreas introduced me to Alex, the man he had come to meet.

I detected an extra note of satisfaction in the boy's voice, in presenting me.

Not a bad chap, Alex, on first meeting. A bit crude, conservative. But frank, at least, generous with the drinks and bonhomie.

And definitely handsome. With his thick mustaches neatly cut, brooding eyes, strong features and trim physique.

After a period of polite chat I excused myself and rejoined Christopher.

Andreas followed me away with his eyes. For the next hour we were continually catching each other at it. Except for the five minutes or so when Alex took the boy firmly by the shoulders and delivered what appeared to be a stern lecture.

At this point he had the boy's undivided attention. Wide eyes beginning to shine; perhaps with tears.

I was spellbound. And disturbed.

Even more so when I saw Alex turn and amble over in my direction, the boy having slipped downstairs to the toilet.

That half-smile on the American's face – was it threatening? My heart began to flutter, as I imagined nasty situations. Into which I had thoughtlessly blundered.

I introduced him to Christopher.

"Kid seems to have taken a shine to you," Alex informed us.

A chill flickered up my spine.

"Oh?" I responded blankly.

"Young Andreas," he reminded.

"Oh," I said again. "Andreas. Yes. A nice kid."

"He is indeed," Alex smiled broadly in confirmation. "A nice kid. And a *good* kid. Solid gold. Don't you expect to find many like him in Athens, 'cause you won't. That's why I hate to see him get hurt."

"Look, er... Alex," I panicked, in the direction of innocent explanations. "I'm afraid there's been some kind of mistake. If that was my fault, I'm sorry, but really..."

He took my elbow, gripped it hard.

"Wait, friend, wait. You've got it wrong. Here, let me buy you another drink."

He did, and we sat at a corner table, the boy watching us big-eyed, back on his perch at the bar. Looking so young, with his reddened eyes dull with anxiety or fear.

"Like I said, friend, Andreas is a good kid. But not for me. Not my type, I know it. We've spent a very pleasant month together: Mykonos, Hydra, Crete, Rhodes. We had a ball! He was good to me. I don't know a word of Greek, and his English is pretty good – I reckon I was good to him, too."

He unwrapped a cigar, lit it.

"Bed, sex – no trouble. Still, even there..." he added thoughtfully. "Anyway, I'm off soon. Tour of Italy and France. Trouble is..." He leaned forward confidentially. "The kid let himself get a bit *stuck* on me."

I stared at him impassively.

"He's in love with me, in fact. Told me a hundred times. Not too surprising, at his age, and all, but it's no go, and the sooner he buys that the better for him. He wants to come to Italy with me. Can't be done.

Anyway, I wouldn't. Mistake at this stage. Now's the time to finish the thing. Poor kid, I sure have enjoyed his company."

Alex puffed away at the cigar, his spaniel eyes reflective.

"Wanted to tell you all that, 'cause I could see the kid liked you. And I might be mistaken but I thought it was mutual. But when I turned up you buzzed off. Maybe you wanted to, or maybe you thought you had to. I just wanted to say you don't have to. Don't lay off Andreas for my sake. It's over. Put it crudely, the kid's free. You want him, go for your life!"

Crudely, was right.

"You've been very frank," I said. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it. Have to be off now, friend. Best of luck."

Alex was up, pausing at the bar to give the boy a pat on the shoulder, a few last words. Andreas leaned forward to kiss him, full of yearning sadness. Then the American was gone.

I never saw Alex again. But I certainly heard of him. From Andreas. The man stayed in his mind. More than a beautiful memory, some kind of symbol, or standard.

In many ways Alex was a tough act to follow.

For the present, never mind: I was on the bill. Soon to perform. And feeling somewhat rushed about it.

A reluctant stand-in, pushed out from the wings.

Not so reluctant, surely. Andreas was a very attractive kid.

But resenting the way he had been handed over to me, with Alex's full permission to go ahead.

And sensing some pressure of will building in the boy.

I hate being pushed.

Still, I soon learned to be grateful for his initiatives.

Now, as I sat nursing my sensibilities, Andreas staged one of his famous come-backs: rising to dance with a boy not much older than himself, all smiles, and bouncing, bumping energy. It was quite a transformation, and I had some difficulty in holding on to my vision of the abandoned lover.

"Who are you ogling?" Christopher wanted to know.

"He's a lovely sight, you have to admit."

Christopher cast a glance toward the laughing Andreas, tautly brilliant in boogie.

"The dark one, dear? Too faggy for me."

"Oh, come on. It's just his short pullover," I quipped. "Makes him look vulnerable."

"My god."

"Well, he's not a bit effeminate."

"Give him half a chance and he will be," Christopher replied knowingly.

"I think you've got a false impression. I've met him before – in the street."

"I don't doubt it."

"Sans bike, Christopher."

"In any case, dear, he's far too young."

"For what?" I wondered.

Christopher executed one of his theatrical sniffs, and swept off to find more savory company.

Andreas came over then and asked me to dance. But I was too inhibited by his performance, apart from the audience.

So, we sat together and got acquainted, over cigarettes and cokes.

Narrow shoulders, thin arms and long, expressive hands.

A provocative drawl flavoring his English.

Tight black jeans, frilly white shirt, unbuttoned, worn-down boots and bits of silver jewelery.

There might have been an alien touch, to those pendants, rings and bracelets.

But for his hot thigh rubbing urgently against mine. His long fingers fluttering over my arm, my wrist, as he talked.

In fact he was bringing out the artillery, and I was sinking fast.

Seduced and enchanted.

I bade Christopher goodnight, and he shook his head good-humoredly as Andreas and I left the bar.

We had discovered that we were hungry, and were heading for the nearest souvlaki bar. Passing first the amiable bikies.

Andreas took my arm and held it firmly against his side thenceforth, possessively, proudly, rather like a woman.

Otherwise, thoroughly like a boy.

My hands searching out his slim body, back and forth, as his hair brushed against my cheek and I breathed the enticing aroma of his young flesh.

We hurried on, our intimacy escalating, until abruptly set back on our heels at the bottom of the first

stairway. One level below sanity.

The headlights were blinding. The car lurched across in front of us and screeched to a halt, blocking our path.

We stood dazzled, blinking.

Two men climbed out and made straight for us. I gathered they were plain-clothes cops. How nice. And me a local resident.

Andreas was shaking with fear, his teeth beginning to chatter.

While I fought disbelief with rising indignation.

As they pushed Andreas against a wall, and ripped his I.D. card from his shirt pocket.

"Country boy, eh? You want to be careful. In the city."

"Yes, sir," the boy replied, meekly, head hanging.

I could barely endure it.

"Pigs," I thought, as they demanded my passport. I pretended not to understand.

"Please, David," the boy whimpered, as they searched his pockets. "Give it to them."

In answer to that abject, pleading tone, which I did not understand, I handed over my passport. The cop examined it cursorily and returned it.

I barely had time to fall back on my dignity, before he was going through my pockets, one by one, systematically examining the contents. Opening the box of matches, pulling each cigarette out of the packet to sniff. A strange experience entirely. I was furious.

"Tell him I shall go and complain to my embassy tomorrow!"

Andreas translated, miserably. The reply came back, dry enough:

"Tell him to do what he likes."

Then they were gone, with a squeal of tires on wet cobblestones.

Andreas stood trembling.

I embraced him.

"Bastards. Don't let them upset you, love."

I had not given a thought to the danger we might be in. Sex with minors, and all that. Front-page scandal stuff. But perhaps they had only been looking for drugs.

"If *Alex* had been here," he said unexpectedly.

"What?"

"He's a *spy*. He would have shown them a card, or something. And they would have left us alone."

"Andreas."

I was touched, amused, jealous.

"It's true. He has about three passports."

"C.I.A., is he?"

"I don't know," he murmured, vaguely. "But he's something High Up."

Andreas has great faith in such formulas.

"Let's get a souvlaki, shall we?"

We did. But he had lost his appetite.

And his animation. The shock possessing him still.

In the cold night air.

As I learned, piecemeal, his history.

Left his village for Athens. Half his decision, half his stepfather's. To get him out of sight. Of the mother who seemed to favor him over her husband.

And, possibly, to sink, disappear into anonymous success in the big city.

Even, perhaps, to escape the army.

The prospect of which caused him an almost continuous shudder.

Not that his call-up was at all imminent.

But it would come.

Life being what it is.

Meantime, he dabbled in some vague, part-time course of study. With occasional gifts from Mama.

And other admirers.

Living with two cousins in the suburbs; university students; straight, but tolerant.

Biting into the hot, greasy pitta, relishing the spicy meat and tomato filling, with the zatsiki running down my fingers, I contemplated his solemn realities. And wondered whether our little adventure was already over.

Until the 'girls' arrived.

The girls being Vangelis and Nikos, two friends of Andreas, young boys, but... well into the butterfly syndrome.

After some hilarious introductions we were all tumbling into a taxi together.

And then, more or less at the speed of light, but with frequent use of the foot-brake – as is the way of Athenian taxis – we were delivered up into this quiet suburban street.

Grey, wet, cluttered with parked cars, concrete balconies and damp washing.

The apartment building silently shrieking with outrage as we lit up the foyer at this very late hour.

Nikos lived with his mother. But mother was out. Slept around, he explained.

He had much freedom of the house to make up for absences of parental concern. And often used it, these days, in trying on his mother's clothes, jewelery and cosmetics.

Andreas and I were pushed onto a sofa in the living-room, while the 'girls', giggling with excitement, went off to prepare the show. I could see, now, that they were both younger than Andreas. And he spoke to them accordingly.

Left alone, we fell briefly into silence. As the boy's hands caressed me, explored me.

I was dying to take him in my arms and possess him, but some echo held me back.

He took hold of my face in his long, warm hands and kissed me on the forehead, the nose, the chin.

I was aroused, but thinking.

"You are thinking of Alex, aren't you?" Andreas teased shrewdly.

"Yes," I admitted.

"Don't," he explained.

Then we fell upon each other, with greedy mouths, unable, in the tightest embrace, to get close enough.

For a first kiss it was explosive. The way the boy put body and soul into it. Beyond my experience. Probing with his tongue, sucking, breathing heat. My whole face on fire.

Andreas had uncovered my erection, and was stroking it firmly, when Nikos and Vangelis returned.

Dressed up in Mama's finery, faces painted, and not without skill.

A record was tossed on the pick-up and off they went, into their routine. A bawdy mixture of belly-dancing and mime. The latter referring to Andreas and me. And our intentions. The nature of which were obvious enough, with our hands lost in each other's underwear, our lips wandering ever further afield.

I don't enjoy drag shows as a rule. But this young pair went at it with such humor it was difficult to find fault. With most of my attention already claimed by Andreas.

He seemed to enjoy their show. Without taking much direct interest. Just putting in a quip, a compliment or two, with tact enough for both of us.

How he loved to play that role, as I learned. My diplomat.

When the record was over Nikos and Vangelis took extravagant bows, and received our praise. We were then kissed solemnly on both cheeks.

Somehow, they had us off the sofa, carrying us into a darkened room with a large double bed. Mama's bedroom.

Gently, they laid us down on the quilted bedspread, and withdrew. The door closed softly.

Again my face burned with bold, erotic kisses. We rolled about, clinging together.

Quicker than I could, in my passion, he removed our clothes. Pulling me firmly on top of him, thin arms locked behind my back.

My hands roamed the dark gold of his satin skin. As he gazed at me, eyes full of secrets.

He murmured some special little things I might do, to give him pleasure. Like nibbling his ear-lobes; and fucking his ass.

At the first I was a great success, judging by his groans, his eyes rolling upward under the dark lids.

With the second we struck, as it were, a snag.

I had my arms tight around his shoulders, my face buried in his neck, as I drove up between his thighs. An excruciating sensual thrill as I approached penetration.

When his hands, pressing hard on my back, stopped me.

"Wait. David. I'm sorry. It is impossible."

"What's wrong?"

"You're too big. I can't."

I paused in my attack.

"Never mind, love. It doesn't matter."

It didn't. I was thinking, I can come just like this, the insides of your thighs so hotly around me. It feels like I am inside you already. We shall pretend I am.

But he was pushing me up, guiding me into a kneeling position.

My balls tickling his stomach, and making him laugh.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "It was the same with Alex."

I almost lost my erection on that line. Would have, but that he took hold so fiercely, stroking so appreciatively.

His whim was that I should blow sperm in his face. I warned that he was in danger of drowning, but he was undeterred.

In the event I became so excited that I had to extend the target area.

In short, I made an appalling mess of Mama's bedspread.

Andreas was ecstatic.

Satisfied, and vastly amused.

As I lay exhausted, amidst frills and chintz, and the smell of face-powder, he mopped up busily with Kleenex.

Calling in Nikos to see.

More in boasting than apology.

Nikos was impressed by my grossness, said it didn't matter. Drew a Kleenex and joined Andreas in his efforts.

We made a date for the following evening, and I left the three of them giggling in the kitchen, preparing an early breakfast.

After sleeping until noon, I spent some time lying in the sun with the door open, pretending to read. While my mind and body reverberated from the impact of Andreas.

My nostrils still full of the scent of him, my tongue tasting of him, my whole body hot and restless with the touch of him.

In this volatile condition, perhaps I drank too much coffee, smoked too many cigarettes.

In any case, my thoughts took a perverse turn, away from blissful gratitude, toward petulance and common egotism.

Thus, in solitude, did I lose the way, indulging selfishness.

I got it into my head that our adventure would have been more satisfying, not to say poetic, if I had not been pushed around so much. Pushed and managed, by Christopher as always, by that boor Alex, by the lousy cops, and even by the boy. Who had, I decided, manipulated me from the start.

My mind became more irrational as it went about its destructive business. Nobody had asked me if I'd wanted the boy. He had been thrust upon me. Having been thrust, he had hung on. I remembered that possessive grip on my arm. In retrospect, I resented it. As I resented having been pushed into that cab. (I'd made no protest at the time.)

I deplored the dressing-up, the amateur drag show.

Became very intolerant of those harmless thirteen-year-olds.

If Andreas hung around with that type he would soon be a swishing queen.

Furiously, I smoked, held inner council.

And why shouldn't the boy go whatever way he wanted, spangles and all?

Because *I* wasn't going to let him, that's why.

I barely admitted this to myself.

Still under the influence of his youthful charms.

From now on *I* would be in charge. And it would be better. For both of us.

Look, he hadn't even asked me if I wanted to have sex with him.

(This about the nadir of my nonsense.)

He'd just gone ahead and started it himself.

Raped by a bloody schoolboy!

(I should be so lucky.)

Perhaps there was an element of truth in my perversity, but no important truth.

I hope that experience has taught me this much about love-relationships – only the central fact matters, whatever it is. A hundred other things about the two people concerned may also be true, and interesting. But they don't count, in the face of the first.

I think that we men who love boys should be helpful about this, sharing the secret with our younger partners.

With Andreas I showed no such wisdom.

As a result, we continued for months to nag and pick at each other, and quarrel over nothing. While people who knew us, and liked us, and were jealous of us, shook their heads.

Of *course* our first sexual encounter was imperfect: how trivial.

We had different friends, habits, tastes: how natural.

We saw the world through very different eyes, Andreas and I. That, I would say, is a situation which is – potentially – very enriching.

While the central fact about us two, crystal clear the first time we saw each other in the street, and amply confirmed when we went to bed together, was simply that we were wild about each other: deeply attracted, physically and emotionally. We only had to see each other, to be together. To touch each other, in order to set the fires burning.

That never changed.

If only we'd kept our minds on it.

As for sex, we quickly found the ways to satisfy each other.

Apart from this, we gave each other great comfort and joy.

All the rest was nonsense.

I went off to meet Andreas in a dangerous mood. Unworthy. Determined on making stands, and laying down lines.

When I stepped into the lurid, lasered darkness of the disco he had nominated I felt confirmed in my resolve. The boy had to be disciplined. Educated, or else, I already felt, my soul would sink into a shallow, plastic swamp.

The place was the center of Plaka, right on the horror stretch. Its interior was anathema to me, in every way: junk-music pumped out at a painful volume, mirrors and glitter of every kind, the density of cigarette smoke close to saturation point, a tiny dance-floor encouraging togetherness and discomfort.

I might have enjoyed it another night. For a while. As a sort of healthy contrast to everything I normally found enjoyable.

But, on this night, full of resolve....

Andreas came to me almost immediately, palpably pleased to see me, radiating reminders of the night before. He embraced me briefly, kissed me on the cheek, then, looking at me hard, his wide eyes dancing with mischief, once on the mouth.

I responded, and for a moment it was just like the beginning.

Then he began to talk to me, and the trouble was that I couldn't *hear* him. This made him shout in my ear, which I found very annoying. The 'music' was bad enough.

Did he have to wear so much jewelery, I wondered. Looked a bit sick on a kid.

Didn't worry anybody else, though. Someone came up to greet him every few minutes. Several stayed longer. There was a lot of kissing and hugging. I was introduced each time, but these boys spoke only Greek, and I was excluded. This made me feel *de trop* and I resented it.

Andreas was flying. I had never seen him talk so much, laugh so much. Animated again. Until such time as opera might replace disco, he was in his element.

This was not a gay joint. But most of the patrons were male, and all were young. Coke was the thing. Coke and Marlboros and wild repartee.

I became grumpy and impatient. It was plain jealousy.

Andreas was getting a lot of attention. None of these people was interested in me. They were all older than he was, and more than a couple showed personal interest.

Andreas found many dancing partners.

Belle of the ball, he was.

I smoked, and sipped warm coke, and fumed some more.

Not realizing why he liked this new experience. Showing me off, and at the same time showing me his own social success.

More than once, he explained away a tete-a-tete by shouting in my ear, "He said you were beautiful!" And kissing me.

Resistance built up.

Some damp, parental side of me insisted that I hated all of it, all the tack.

Finally I decided to get out. Sick of watching my boy tossed from man to familiar man. Bumping his vivacious way amongst the dancers, flashing pleasure from his distant eyes.

I put down my glass, pocketed my cigarettes and walked out.

Strode along the windy street with satisfaction.

Breathing deeply of the fresh night air. Very sure of myself.

Like an infant who crawls out of the nursery when he is ignored by the nurse.

In a matter of seconds Andreas was beside me, coatless, aghast, breathing hard.

I ignored him.

"Where are you going?" he demanded nervously. Looking so beautiful that I ached.

"Home," I grunted.

"I'm coming with you," he announced, taking my arm as before.

My frozen indifference preserved the silence.

He clung to me unhappily, as I made my way briskly back to the house.

"Why do these things always happen to me?" I heard him soliloquize. Sounding completely natural, out there in the cold, unconcerned with effect.

I was being unfair, of course. As I was so many times to Andreas.

Subconsciously aware of the genuine treasure I had stumbled upon. Sensing the need to fight for it.

By whatever means.

At the same time I did not then know what I later learned, that 'these things' did indeed happen to Andreas with unfortunate regularity: that is, he repeatedly alienated the men he loved.

Several of whom I was to meet.

When we reached my place, I firmly removed his hand from my arm and bade him goodnight.

Closing the gate on him, I averted a dangerous embrace. My eyes warned him against following.

Within minutes I was alone, he was outside somewhere, crying. We had split. And yet I felt curiously free and happy.

Exhibiting a common but ugly trait of human behavior

THE NEXT DAY, WANDERING in Monastiraki market, I chanced to bump into another American, name of Dwight, who frequented 'Vassilli's Bar'. Christopher had introduced us, and we had a nodding acquaintance.

We sat down at an old cafe and had an ouzo together; benevolent under a sudden blessing of warm winter sun.

"You're lucky, you know," he said after a while.

"Oh?" I wondered.

"Your boy, Andreas. You're lucky. Not everyone finds something like that. Not ever, perhaps. You two are so obviously in love with each other."

"Yes, I know I'm lucky," I replied hypocritically.

I felt lucky, at that peaceful moment. Even though I had dismissed Andreas brutally the night before.

However, my companion went on in the same vein, frequently returning to my great luck.

I tired of this, at length.

"And *he* is lucky, too, of course," I asserted. "Whether he realizes it or not. Why, he knows me hardly more," I added pointedly, "than you do."

"Oh," the fellow responded, not at all put out. "I'm sure he knows his luck. And will know it better as he knows you better."

This with a kindly smile, shaming me.

NEXT MORNING, SLEEPING IN late after a session at the typewriter, I was rudely awoken by persistent tapping at my door.

Hating morning callers, especially before coffee; underslept and unwashed.

"Yeah?" I mumbled irritably, opening to Andreas,

"Well?" he reacted, fiercely. Drawing himself up in indignation.

I should at least have been pleased, his blazing eyes suggested, to see him.

"Come in, then," I said, intimidated if not mollified.

"Wait!" he cried, grabbing my arm and throwing the door wide open on the world. "Look!"

Automatically I looked out into the garden. My mouth falling open with astonishment.

Everything looked different. The garden, the vines, the walls, the Acropolis. Transformed.

Gleaming soft and white.

"Snow," I breathed, gratefully.

"It's been falling all night," he laughed. Happy as a small boy. With the snow, and my reaction.

I had seen snow perhaps twice in my life before. But even disregarding that, I would have felt the touch of magic. It doesn't often snow in Athens and when it does the effect is large. The idea doesn't suit the city, somehow. Nature has to change it completely for the brief period of its white possession.

This was the first fall in years, and the residents went crazy, a crowd of suddenly innocent, child-like folk.

Andreas and I went crazy too, hopping about the garden, scooping up wet handfuls to throw.

After a bit of this Andreas slipped quietly into my room and began to undress. Unveiling his slender brown body in the pearly snowlight.

"What are you doing?" I hissed. Darting in and closing the door.

His arms went about my neck, his mouth opened to me, reaching.

"Let's have sex," he growled.

"No!" I laughed, throwing him off. I was too distracted by the snow to see him, to respond. "Let's go for a walk. I want to see how much there is."

For a moment his face went rigid with anger. Then he put on his clothes again. Assumed a cool, dignified air.

As we climbed the stairs up into a twinkling precinct, his hand once more possessing my arm.

First, we climbed Acropolis and stood beside the Parthenon, alone there, holding on to each other in the icy wind.

Below us, an unfamiliar city of white roofs and whiter streets.

When we could bear it no longer, ice forming on our foreheads, we galloped and slithered down to Monastiraki, and caught the metro to Kiffissia.

A carriage crowded with excited city-dwellers like us, heading for the suburbs to find more of this marvel.

Andreas holding reverently in his gloved hand a leaking snowball which we had made up at the ancient temple.

At Kiffissia we joined the joyful, playing throng of day-trippers. Crunching through the grassy parks together, hand in hand.

Before catching the train back, stooping at the wooded roadside to make another snowball. Which survived the journey, hardly diminished.

We got off before the city center, and hurried, happy, through the concrete jungle, its gray now enlivened by the crystallizing snow, to the apartment where Andreas stayed with his cousins.

I met one of them, a pleasant youth, hospitable, but, at the time, preoccupied with his girl-friend and their weekly coupling.

So Andreas and I retired to the kitchen, shut the door, and fell on each other. Kissing up murmured memories of our enchanting excursion.

I became immensely aroused, couldn't keep my hands off him, his hard, hipless warmth, his cheeky buttocks.

Andreas shooed me away like any forbearing housewife. And prepared to cook.

While I hovered and slavered like a sex-starved husband.

"You see," he nodded, wisely, stirring the lentils into the stock of onions and chicken bones. "Now you want it. You could have screwed me at your house, but you didn't."

All said with a kind of detached understanding, mildly scolding.

"I want you now, by god," I croaked.

"I know," he sang happily, chopping up the celery and carrots and adding them to the brew. Ripping open a cellophane packet of pasta with crackling superiority.

I saw his point well enough.

Told him so.

And gradually my neglected hunger responded to the aromas of cooking.

We sat side by side at the laminex table and made a hearty meal.

After, my hand strayed across his shoulders, and I looked at him, yearning. His eyes rich in wit and understanding.

"One moment," he whispered, and slipped out of the kitchen to consult Cuz.

Who left shortly after with his sweetheart for the movies.

Whilst Andreas, my darling boy, and I frolicked naked in the comfort of central heating.

Gorging ourselves on each other, experimenting, discovering – look, wallowing.

"Andreas," I gasped at one point, as we lay on the rug between climaxes, the stained cushions surrounding us with mute evidence of our lust, "you are amazing! I came to Greece," I added sincerely, perhaps a little self-consciously, "to find you."

He tossed his handsome head. Arching his back.

"Just what Alex said!" he cried, exultant.

APART FROM REFERENCES TO this departed Paragon, the jealousy, and effort of avoiding odorous comparisons, we managed to find a thousand things to squabble about: money, movies, bars, music – you name it.

Andreas was not greedy. He never asked for money. And we both derived joy from the presents I gave him. Like the black kid gloves I gave him on Christmas Eve. Very much to his taste.

He was always appreciative.

On the other hand, he did have a tendency to assume control of my budget. It was understood that I would pay his way through our entertainments. That was only sensible. But he soon demanded to know, and learned, how much money I had, how much I could expect, and exactly how I was spending it at the time – down to the last detail. Naturally this got on my nerves. Sometimes enraged me. As when he discouraged me from buying something for myself which I happened to mention. Putting it off for me, prudently. Or, changing my order in a restaurant, using the language I lacked to economize on wines and cuts of meat. Well-meant but unwelcome.

Andreas tacitly sounding out his prospects. Watching over them.

I must say he never cheated me. And he wasn't selfish about money, himself. Twice, on his own initiative, he borrowed money from his cousins and brought it to me, when I was caught by some banking delay, irritably broke.

But he could not stop giving me advice, on everything. Firmly, and often absurdly. When his experience was clearly smaller than mine, I objected. Or when he didn't know what he was talking about.

But it had no effect. Not in the slightest deterred, he went on giving it to me. At times it drove me crazy, and I had to yell at him to stop. This produced dignified silence on his part. Forbearance. His face implying how much he had to put up with from my obstinacy and bad temper.

I rarely ventured to give *him* advice about anything. It would only have caused a fruitless row. When it was something serious, like a venereal infection he was carrying, had given to others and now to me, I had to press him very hard indeed, virtually threaten him, before he would do what was necessary.

When it came to movies our tastes differed widely. The result was that we never enjoyed a movie together. One of us was always fidgeting, mocking. As Andreas was rather more effective in this role, we usually went to his choice of movie, while I suffered, or yawned. It worked out better that way.

Quieter, anyway.

The bars, as I said, were places I visited seldom. Discos I loathed in general. Andreas liked to go to a bar or a disco, not just often, but every night. If he couldn't force a rendezvous the night before, when we were locked in passionate combat, then he would call at my room. Around eleven o'clock. Every night.

It became nerve-wracking.

Either I succumbed, and went off, against my will, to sit in some smoke-filled room and watch him dance. Or else I begged off, unable to face another night of amplifiers. Worried about my book. Then he would stalk off alone, indignant, unhappy.

If I did decide to stay at home it was to pass hours of tension, knowing that, later, Andreas would send somebody down to reason with me. A discreet friend let slip that Andreas was miserable, distraught, in tears. Then I was virtually compelled to go and join him for a while. If he didn't send someone down he would come himself – but much later. This was better, since we would eventually make love, but only after another hour of sulking recrimination.

Through all this period Andreas and I continued to enjoy fantastic sex together. More exciting than anything I had known before.

And he was always the one to start it.

But it hardly mattered, in practice. Andreas wanted it so often that there was small opportunity for me to recover, let alone make a move myself.

It may seem unclear what possible complaint I could have had.

We loved each other very much.

We wanted each other.

And we *had* each other.

It was just that, along with my happiness, and knowing my good fortune, I felt overwhelmed by the boy. Andreas has a very strong personality, a very strong will. I don't think I am weak in these directions but it was my first experience of an affair which exerted such pressure on me – sometimes approaching suffocation.

I was in love. And yet I felt trapped. Fearful that my freedom was ebbing away.

Some of this I put down to our narrow lives, our restricted routines. The stress of an over-crowded city acting on us continuously. Thrusting us unnaturally one against the other, like the walls of my little room.

JUST BEFORE CHRISTMAS, some money came through from a scenario I'd worked on and forgotten. It was a golden opportunity to get away for a few days. I proposed the idea of a holiday to Andreas, a sort of late honeymoon. He jumped at it.

We decided to take the boat to Hydra.

I knew that Andreas had been there with the famous Alex. To some extent he would be seeking out the traces of old dreams.

However, I had also lived on Hydra in the past and had my own memories. Alex was in Venice, more than a sea's journey away. Andreas had sent him a card in Rome, declaring his undying love for me.

The trip got off to a bad start: I had a long wait at the bank owing to holiday pressures and reduced staff, only to find that I could not cash my draft immediately. I should return in the afternoon. But we'd be on the boat to Hydra by then. Finally the manager arranged for me to complete the transaction at their Hydra island branch, where I still kept a small savings account. At least we would have money.

But all this rushing about from clerk to clerk had taken longer than I realized – until I looked at the clock.

I almost ran home, and packed in haste. I was to meet my boy at Pireaus; he would take the metro from his cousins'.

I hurtled down to Monastiraki and waited impatiently for a train which seemed very long in coming. My restlessness turned to anxiety. Supposing he didn't wait for me? Thought he had misunderstood, or that I had changed my mind, and our holiday was off? It was unendurable to imagine him waiting in doubt.

When I finally jumped off at the terminus I quickly spotted him. Studying the magazines on display at a bookstall. My heart gave a lurch of relief.

Hurrying up behind him, I put my arms about his slender shoulders and kissed him gratefully on the neck.

"Hullo, darling. I'm sorry I'm late."

Instantly he swung about, pushing me off. His eyes blazing with anger. Face twisted with the insult he had suffered.

"And about *time!* he bellowed. His outraged voice echoing about the cavernous station.

I had never seen him quite so angry. It was awesome. How had I dared to keep him waiting?

"You're over an *hour* late, in case you don't know!"

Apologizing earnestly, I attempted to explain my problems at the bank. But he was scornful.

"Well, there was no need to stay at the *bank* all day," he retorted. "You could have watched the time."

Andreas always had an answer. The last word belonged to him. By a divine right. Which he never questioned.

I gave it up.

"I'm going down to the boat now. There's not much time," I muttered. "Come if you like. If you'd rather not, I understand."

I hurried off to get the tickets. Andreas following casually, at a distance, smoking.

The atmosphere on the wharf, the attractive little boat, with its gay trim of blue and white flags, the smell of the sea, which stretched out beyond the harbor. All these did their work.

We calmed down. Picked up the holiday spirit. Andreas exchanging jokes with the other waiting passengers.

We found two wooden benches on the rear deck, spread out our things and relaxed in the balmy sunshine. Even after the boat set off the breeze was benign.

Andreas became sleepy after an hour or so. Resting his head on my shoulder. I suggested he stretch out along the bench and use my lap as a pillow. He hesitated, finding a public display of affection indiscreet. But no one was watching.

Shoes off, long legs curled up, his dark head resting comfortably between my thighs. Soon fast asleep. As I stroked his neck.

When the boat turned into the island harbor, sounding its horn raffishly, Andreas stirred, sat up, eyes full of the new scene. Refreshed.

I was forgiven.

Yearning with love for him, as we disembarked, and went to the first hotel we saw, to take a room.

That plain room, its window looking out across the harbor, with its bobbing masts and twinkling colored lights strung between poles for New Year.

Later on there would be fireworks.

How well we would come to know that room. How many times it would change color in our eyes and minds over the days.

Andreas was not unaware of the romance of our situation. We dropped our bags on the floor. He whipped the curtain across the window and sank into my arms. To deliver one of his blistering kisses. I had been waiting for this. Held onto him. Letting myself burn up.

"Andreas!" I murmured.

He broke free, stripped in seconds, and sprawled out on one of the twin beds, wagging his pert little bottom.

"Andreas," I resisted, feebly. Dying for him. "Perhaps I'd better go to the bank, first, to make sure."

He groaned softly into the pillow.

"It won't be open yet."

He was right. The banks closed for siesta, opened again around five or six.

I dropped my clothes on the floor.

"Lock the door," he instructed.

I locked the door. Approached him.

He reached back with his hand to pull me down, my knees on the bedside. His fingers slid up my arm, across my chest, down to my stomach. Magic fingers tickling my cock, and under my balls. As I caressed his thighs and buttocks.

"My god!" he declared, archly. "Do you expect me to take *that* great thing?" Then, in another tone, "Get the cream."

After the first touch of our burning bodies it was difficult to hold back.

But there were instructions, as usual. I followed them, checking my own will.

Then we were together, my arms encircling him. As he began to move with me.

"Screw me!" he grunted.

The wanton.

Oh how wildly we toiled and thrashed together.

And after, cigarettes. Silence. As he lay back, recovering strength, reliving the moments. His eyes opaque, gaze turned inward. A complacent smile on his lips.

Until,

"Let's do it again."

"In a minute."

But he had taken the cigarette from my fingers and stubbed it out in the ash-tray.

Rolling onto his side and pushing back against me.

"Andreas," I moaned. Helpless.

"Don't forget the cream," he reminded, practically.

IT WAS AFTER SUNDOWN BY the time I slipped downstairs to go to the bank.

Leaving my demanding lover dozing naked in the darkness.

The bank was closed.

At first I didn't believe it, trying the door. Locked. Then saw the notice: 'New Year's Eve. Dec. 31st. The bank will close at 11:30 a.m.'

Stunned, I rushed around to the post office, to confirm.

Yes, the clerk assured me with satisfaction; and when would the bank be open again? On Thursday. Three days later. On *Thursday*? I repeated stupidly. But it was so. Information only, no sympathy, for stupid foreigners.

I went back to the hotel, angry and fearful, to break the news to Andreas.

"So what?" he murmured, languorously. "We don't need money."

It hadn't come home to him yet. But it would.

"I feel lousy," I confessed. "I ought to have checked, when we arrived."

"Come here," he replied, stretching out his arms.

As he removed my shirt, I thought rapidly. Very little cash in my pocket. No return boat tickets.

We could eat at the hotel. Boring, but a godsend. With the loose change we could just about cover cigarettes. No bars, no drinks, no dancing, no New Year's Eve reveling. Poor Andreas.

"I'm sorry, love," I said, stroking his face. "Looks like I've spoiled our holiday. What a bitch!"

"We'll see," he murmured.

A little later he went out for a walk, while I lay back and smoked a guilty cigarette. He returned with a paper bag full of presents. Bought with all the drachmas he had with him. Chocolates, cigarettes, chewing-gum, magazines, comics. Triumphantly he spread them out before me.

"Bless you, my boy!"

He had cheered me up. For the time.

Then, outside, the Fireworks display began. We pulled back the curtain and stood at the window, our arms round each other.

It was spectacular. More startling in this small, tranquil port.

The cubist houses changed color a dozen times. The explosions echoed and re-echoed around the harbor. While the sky erupted continually with dazzling star-bursts.

For as long as it lasted we felt small, still, content.

Andreas loved it.

In the impressive silence that followed we munched chocolate, smoked, and soon went to bed.

"Do you remember," Andreas asked me, "the night in 'Vassilli's Bar', when we exchanged rings?"

I did indeed. Everybody had noticed, in the end. Even without the helpful commentary of Dwight. His voice desperate with excitement.

"Listen! Don't look now, people, but we are witnessing a gay wedding!"

They were. His ring for me, mine to him. Our eyes plighting our troth. With silver bands.

We drew together under the sheet.

For more of the same. Though I could have slept, from sheer fatigue and the desire to escape our problem. But there was no chance of that.

Andreas slept in spells, woke up demanding.

Midnight instructions.

The bed became very hot. I could not sleep, even when he did.

Finally I crept over to the other bed and stretched out alone.

This woke Andreas.

"Where are you? What are you doing?" he grumbled.

"I'm here. I couldn't sleep. Good night, Darling."

He did not answer. I could feel his anger coming across the room like infra-red waves. In the morning, he would have been cool to me, had he remembered.

NEXT DAY WAS SUNNY AND COLD. We walked together about the picturesque harbor, now deserted. Climbing steps between silent houses. Roaming about the rocky hills.

But Andreas was not really one for walking if nothing else was involved.

An inspiration sent him off to a boat-shed, where he found a fishing-line and some bait. For the rest of the morning he was perfectly happy sitting on the end of the breakwater hunched over his line. While I strolled about the waterfront.

He surprised me by catching a number of small fish. We took them to a little cafe in a back alley where they fried us up a delicious lunch.

Good old Andreas. Clever boy.

After lunch, the weather turned bad – a blustery wind brought heavy rain from the south. We were forced to return to our hotel room.

Now, the crunch was approaching.

We lay on our separate beds, reading, swapping jokes, working out puzzles.

A radio or television would have helped.

Having to be careful with the cigarettes was an extra annoyance.

It grew darker in the room. There was no heating, and everything felt damp. Nothing broke the silence, unless we spoke.

I began to feel depressed. My eye constantly on Andreas, waiting for an outburst of nerves. Boredom and frustration would set him going at me, I was sure. Still, he looked happy enough, reading his comic for the third time, or trying to draw fireworks on the back cover with my ballpoint.

The rain had really set in when our cigarettes gave out.

"I'll go and get another packet," I said, my voice shaky with apprehension.

He smiled patiently.

"There'll be nothing open now, love. After dinner."

"Can you wait that long?" I asked him, amazed by his equanimity.

"Of course," he said, laughing. "We don't have to smoke. *That's* no problem. Maybe it will do us good."

"Maybe it will," I concurred, wondering. "Don't you mind, though?"

"No," he said, simply.

He was unoccupied now, but showed no sign of restlessness.

I studied his form. Relaxed, beautiful.

His thick, black hair tumbled about his face. Lips composed.

Desire grew in me.

"Andreas," I ventured, bravely, "do you feel like having sex?"

He turned his head quickly to look at me. Our eyes met in their familiar compact.

"O.K.," he said, grinning.

We undressed, and I took him in my arms at once. There was a slight strangeness about it. In the surrounding silence and gloom. Was it going to work? I raised myself on one elbow, and wondered aloud:

"Andreas? I hope we're not making love just to pass the time. I hope we're not reduced to that."

"What a way to pass the time," he cracked, unconcerned. "Don't you really want me now?"

It was a smug taunt. He could see and feel how much I did.

"I want you, too," he added, with a growl. No trace of pretense in his voice.

"You really don't mind, do you? That I've messed up our weekend."

Still expecting an explosion.

"You call this 'messing up'?" he laughed bawdily.

"Well, no."

"I call it – what we do best."

He was dead right.

"And," he continued, lecturing me a little, "here we are, with a terrific opportunity to do it. As much as we like. Listen." His face lit up with inspiration. "We can really *work* at it. I mean, we *can get it perfect!*"

"Yes," I gasped, getting the idea all right, but still doubtful about his staying power. Our temperaments.

"There's two more days to get through, yet, my love."

"You're silly," he said. Shaking his head. "Two whole days and two whole nights. To make it *perfect* together! What a chance!"

It was, too. A golden chance.

I don't believe we wasted it.

WHEN ANDREAS WENT INTO THE ARMY, at a rather early age, he was not so much sick of my company, I think, as eager for a change, desperate for new experience. It was his nature. He even felt a need to do and complete a duty which he knew would be long and unpleasant. Well, he faced it, and he did it.

In the beginning, it was not possible to visit him, nor to write very often. We were out of touch for months. And his second camp-location was up on the northern border.

Still, I managed to visit him several times, over that long two and a half years. And he to visit me. Each time, I was delighted to observe his growth and development.

He emerged, at last, a very handsome young man, straight and strong.

With many new admirers. Both in the army, and outside of it.

He enjoys Athens, and has a good time, in his own way.

To me, he remains a dear friend, whom I like and admire.

When we get together these days it is always a lively session.

He is full of stories of his adventures.

And we are both heart-full of memories. Good memories.

2. Takis

It's COZY AND COMPANIONABLE, to be sitting in this almost empty ferry-boat, braving the bleak mid-winter weather. To spend a few days in Athens.

A handful of people, nodding and exchanging greetings as we jump down from the wind-swept quay and into the heated saloon.

I amble over to the bar and take my morning coffee, with special pleasure.

A few days in the city will be stimulating.

The solitary life can become oppressive at times, and the concerns of a small, island community, claustrophobic.

Not that I am at all ready to give it up. I have chosen my island retreat, and I still need it. My life in Athens lost its charm long ago.

The expatriate community I was slowly sucked into, after too many chance meetings. The film-dubbing, congenial and remunerative, but intermittent, at best. The modeling agency I was persuaded to join. Lugging my photographs from one advertising office to the next. That whole world of phoney glamor; the unhealthy obsessions with clothes and grooming. The TV commercials. Small parts in foreign film productions – which give a temporary sense of achievement. But lead nowhere.

Nobody makes it big in Greece, is a maxim often heard here. Though dreams and temptations abound.

At 33, my Greek has improved; but my 'career' remains a memory of unconnected events. Truth to tell, I'm not career-minded. But have managed to save money, while spending a lot. When the right opportunity arose, I quietly withdrew. Choosing my island, renting my little stone house, immersing myself in the book which, this time, *I* wanted to write.

Visitors are, thankfully, rare.

Still, such an existence also has its health hazards.

These little excursions to Athens are regular therapy. Contrast and balance. A little shopping, a little extravagance. The latest movies. The refreshment of good talk with old friends.

I return to my place by the rain-splashed window, content.

And hesitate, as I notice the boy stretched out on the seat opposite. I must have made a mistake. But, no, there is my bag on the floor where I left it.

Well, where did *he* come from? Suddenly.

Lying on his stomach with his head cradled in his arms.

I'd say about fourteen or fifteen.

Though Greek boys can fool you. Like boys anywhere, they can't wait to grow up. And often it seems they don't.

The boat begins to lurch and sway. I gaze out at the stormy grayness of the Saronic Gulf, and then back at the boy. He must be seasick. Poor kid.

Not a beauty, this one. Not the sort who makes you catch your breath at first sight. Just an ordinary Greek boy.

But appealing. Something self-contained about him. Small, sturdy, well-proportioned.

Stretched out there in his old blue jeans and sneakers, with a hand-knit pullover and a white shirt.

His face and neck still brown, in January.

Small, brown hands. Black hair cut short and brushed forward. Black brows, with thick black lashes

beneath. Even features.

His lips parted in sleep.

Now we soar and plunge as the waves grow bigger.

The engines churn on mesmerically. It is almost dark.

The sleeping boy crawls into my thoughts and holds them.

Not that there is anything to distract them. Alone for three hours on the water. Just sitting, and waiting, to arrive.

His neck.

Perhaps his neck could be called beautiful. Rising so smoothly from his shoulders.

I feel a sharp chill, as I realize that his eyes are open and watching me. Watching him.

For a moment we are caught like that.

Strangers, and foreigners.

His dark eyes alert, but calm.

It seems absurd, not to talk to him.

"Hullo," I say. "Are you feeling OK now?"

"Hullo," he says seriously.

Then he yawns, stretches and sits up by the window. Rubbing one hand over his face and hair to stir himself. As he stares out at the sea.

He yawns again, and I ask him his name.

"I am Takis."

"I am David."

"Where are you from?"

We have begun.

Takis is just thirteen. He is not seasick, only sleepy. Returning from a holiday with relatives, on the island next to mine. After a late farewell dinner.

His father, a baker in Piraeus.

I explain my origins, my occupation, my income and marital status. And thus, in the Greek fashion, we are now friends.

"Look, look!" he cries excitedly, pointing out the window. I peer out into the sheets of rain, but cannot see what he means.

To turn and find that he has jumped across to sit beside me. Chuckling.

Enter, Takis the clown.

At his own suggestion, he goes to the bar to fetch me another coffee.

I am caught by something odd in his gait, his gestures.

But – wait a moment.

He stands at the bar, grinning.

Having just given a good imitation of me. Yes, my walk, my movements....

Has he watched me so closely, then?

When he returns with the coffee, he is meek and contrite.

This is too much for me and I burst into laughter.

The beginnings of The Game. To be developed over the days to come with wit and invention. The game, wherein I am the stern master and he the obedient servant – in public, that is. Only we know the private reality.

His conversation becomes lively and amusing, full of risqué anecdotes.

Later, he sleeps again, his head resting on my shoulder.

He has been a perfect companion.

This gives me some joy, and I wonder if he doesn't feel the same.

Arriving at the harbor of Piraeus, I am jolted back to full awareness. The crazy traffic, the blaring horns, the swarms of jostling people. After the rather uncanny stillness of the island, this is another world.

Feeling a little guilty about my preoccupation with Takis, about perhaps making too much of him, I prepare to bid him a polite farewell.

The boy is indignant.

"No, no. We must *eat* now."

I am thinking that I shall wait until I get into Athens. But he has already picked up my valise, and leads me by the arm to a nearby restaurant.

We wine and dine. The seafood is delicious. Watching me make a glutton of myself, Takis is highly amused.

And I think, well, why shouldn't I buy him a good feed, after enjoying his company so much? But, in a while, I am astounded to see him call over the waiter and pay our bill himself. Embarrassed and ashamed of myself, I naturally protest.

Who knows where that money came from, or how often he has so much in his pocket?

I am defeated, however. He is already out the door with my valise.

Is he going to steal it? I wonder, for a moment, in total confusion.

But Takis is a good kid. I've known that for hours. Om.

"Takis!" I shout, racing off down the crowded street in pursuit of him. "I must get the train to Athens now! It's late! Look, maybe I'll take a cab!"

He turns and waits for me, impatiently, a little angry perhaps.

"All right, Takis, thank you. Thank you very much. Now tell me. What do you want? I don't understand what you want."

God forgive me.

The boy looks at me, and lets out a long, tolerant sigh.

"Come on."

He sets off again at a brisk pace. This chunky little demon.

"Where, Takis? Where are we going?"

"You're too tired to go to Athens now," he calls over his shoulder. "You're gonna stay at my house."

Hurrying down a series of unfamiliar, narrow streets to arrive finally in front of a small semi-detached.

Takis announcing gleefully to his mother:

"This is David, and he is a kangaroo!"

The woman nodding and smiling shyly, while I am apologizing and trying to explain, but Takis is already inside with my luggage.

Homecoming, and introductions.

The house is full of cheerful noise.

Dad brings out the ouzo, and launches into tales of his wartime experience. The battle of Crete; hiding Australian soldiers in his basement. Exciting stuff.

Takis sprawls on the carpet between us, reading a Bugs Bunny.

I am somehow relieved to find two beds in his room, and I crawl willingly into mine, dazed and exhilarated, wondering how they accept me so easily. But, then, Greeks are like that,

More so than I imagine, perhaps: in a moment Takis slips in beside me.

This is his bed, he tells me patiently, the other one is his brother's.

His brother's?

Then the sweet shock of his skin against mine, the surprising urgency of his embrace, the hunger rising in me as we kiss.

Such generous boy-given kisses.

I have never before tasted. His body hardening like a man's against me.

Oh, Takis. What are you doing, so soon?

With your parents on the other side of the wall.

The door opens, and I freeze.

"It's all right," he hisses in my ear, "It's only Panayotis."

Panayotis? Of course, the brother. His *big* brother, I note with alarm. A young man in his early twenties.

He closes the door and goes to his bed, where he undresses.

I have stopped breathing. But Takis proceeds with his exploratory fondling, unconcerned.

Footsteps. I can feel Panayotis standing right beside us, his knee against the covers. Panic sweeps over me. Does he have a knife?

But he is almost naked.

He seems to stand there a long time, breathing deeply. Takis ignores him.

Unable to bear this any longer, I half-open my eyes and find big brother gazing down at us with a strange, almost motherly smile.

Then he returns to his bed.

In his own way, Takis satisfies himself and then falls asleep in my arms.

While I continue to lie awake, rigid with tension and anxiety.

When Takis wakes up, his brother has already gone. We do not meet face to face.

The boy is now all for resuming our love-making on a larger scale.

But I am too conscious of movement about the house, and insist on leaving.

Captivated as I am, I feel a mighty urge to escape.

Which could be from a sense of responsibility. Or more likely, something less elevated. Which I have often enough scorned in others: a cowardly refusal to accept affection, frankly offered.

Takis turns cunning. His small dark hands pressing down on my shoulders.

"Why must you go to Athens?"

"Oh, shopping. See some friends. You know."

"OK. I'll come with you."

"Well –"

"I'll help you."

"Takis, I –"

"What's *wrong*?" Now he is really angry. "Don't you like me anymore?"

WE SPEND A DELIRIOUS, unforgettable day: visiting the Parthenon, where Takis has never been in his life before; buying bits of tourist junk for each other; and just wandering around, being silly.

When he offers to help me he never suggests that he be my guide, since he knows I don't need one. He is in fact offering what he knows I need most – his company.

And he *is* helpful, in several small ways, after his own zany style.

And in one case, distinctly troublesome.

When the time draws near for my rendezvous with Michael and Fiona, I am about to suggest he

wander off to a movie for a couple of hours, when the temptation strikes me. Why not take him along? The idea of lobbing Takis into the cream of the British diplomatic set is too enticing.

Thoughtless of me, toward all concerned.

But I am deeply affected by our day of harmless, boyish fun. And, to plead excuse, it is too hard to brush him aside like that.

So, it is drinks with Michael and Fiona in chic Kolonaki, the reception and dinner to follow elsewhere

We greet affectionately, and Takis is introduced, with great solemnity all round.

Fiona arching an eyebrow drily, as if to say, what are you up to now, darling?

But they are English, and nothing will be said.

Takis will be tolerated, for my sake; otherwise, they will remain indifferent.

Which seems more than reasonable, for the present.

Except.

What do they know of our day together, of our first, tentative loving? Later I shall come to feel impatient with many things said to be reasonable.

The conversation gallops on, just pretentious enough to be entertaining.

Am I showing off in front of Takis now? In this glamorous penthouse apartment. With all our controlled gaiety.

And this in English, of course.

I become increasingly aware that the boy is excluded, unable to follow a word. It nags at me.

Like dropping a heavy worsted curtain, after too much intimacy.

My mind threatens to wander, but Fiona presses me with questions, urgent and trivial. And I play up to it.

Takis doesn't seem to mind. He is sitting beside me, not too close. Straight and quiet. Tucking into the ouzo, without my noticing.

But with rapid results.

Alcohol and youth combine with social pressure to produce a mild explosion: for the first time, and with some surprise, I hear the boy speak English. Heavily accented, but confidently delivered. Without warning. For the benefit of Fiona.

In that deep, throaty growl that all Greek boys can produce on demand.

"You have very nice breasts!"

There follows, as they say, a stunned silence.

We three others caught in various colors of reaction.

Fiona, her mouth still open in mid-sentence, not yet offended. Secretly flattered? Deciding, finally, to be diverted.

Michael biting into the stem of his pipe, with the air of someone who has effortlessly proved yet again something he has always known to be true.

No one has the words to end the hiatus.

Takis looking from Fiona to me with growing dismay. Which I almost believe.

Then he slips quietly from the divan and out of the room, out of the apartment, out of –

"Oh, *do* go after him, David, and tell him it doesn't *matter!*"

Fiona laughing now, in that unsettling, complacent way of hers.

"Look here," I murmur, "I really am very –"

"Go *on* now. Before he gets lost. We'll visit *you* next time."

"Do. And make it soon."

"We shall. Take care, darling."

Unable to catch the lift, I bound off down the staircase.

Plunging into the early evening crowds, feeling a mixture of embarrassment, elation and anxiety. To find him hiding, not too effectively, behind the nearest newspaper-kiosk. Not looking at me yet.

"I'll find a cab," I say gruffly, relieved to have found him.

He might so easily have disappeared forever at that point.

"OK," he mumbles, still staring at the ground. "You wait here, I'll be back."

"What? Takis! Now –"

He dashes back into the apartment building, to reappear just as I manage to stop a taxi.

"What did you –"

"Come on," he says, once more in command. "Time to go home."

He went back inside to apologize to our hostess.

His apology went something like this:

"I am very sorry I said your breasts were nice. I didn't mean it at all."

Om.

In the back of the taxi he snuggles into my side, shivering with the cold. I put my jacket around him.

"Anyway," he yawns, "*it was* time to leave."

I am pulled up by the ambiguity of this remark. However, I assent to its wisdom.

"Tonight is Friday night. Panayotis always sleeps at his friend's house on Fridays."

We settle comfortably into each other for the long drive to Piraeus.

ONCE BACK ON THE ISLAND, I experience a great sense of relief.

Back in my cocoon.

Much as I have enjoyed the adventure, I could not surrender to it.

The trip has been stimulating, as planned.

Mission accomplished.

I am anxious to dismiss it now.

To get back to normal. A normal where the kind of happiness Takis can bring is too unfamiliar to be accepted with complacency.

I charge myself with irresponsibility. I should not make excursions into other people's lives so frivolously.

But is that what I have done?

I can't remember anymore.

I only remember his laughter, and our easy companionship. More and more, each day of wintry solitude.

As my doubts chase themselves around with neurotic vigor.

I need guidance.

And guidance is on its way, as one small part of me knows already, but not clearly.

Occasionally I remember that I shall have a visitor.

Inwardly resolving that by that time I shall have found the right perspective. And I will act with wisdom and restraint.

THE BLAST OF THE SHIP'S HORN as it turns into the harbor stirs me from my morning reverie.

A pause in the light rain which has been falling all night leaves the quay fragrant with its accustomed odors: the piled-up fishing nets, the fresh donkey-droppings, the smoke from wood-burning ovens.

The boat has docked, the time of reckoning has come.

For all my nervousness, I am prepared to be firm, and sensible.

I wonder, this heart-pounding minute, how I ever got into such a thing.

Takis comes striding down the gangway, the collar of his bright blue anorak turned up against the wind. In his hand, two plastic bags, one full of clothes, the other cakes, bread and gifts from his parents. Who had agreed to this visit so warmly.

Do they think I shall be a good influence? Then I must be.

Or have they already understood more than that, more than I have?

His bright, dark eyes rapidly scanning the quay, until he drops the bags and walks straight into my arms.

A dam breaks.

I try to greet him with words, but he is already off, chattering excitedly, firing a dozen questions.

And just what kind of gray, marshmallow refuse have I been harboring in my brain this week past?

We decide to walk up to the house, despite the thousand slippery steps. Today, riding on donkeys would separate us.

For the first time in all my cautious island days, I do not care who is watching through what window, as we set off arm in arm. Deep in our own private chat.

Half-way up the hillside the rain begins in earnest, and we start to run.

"I'm afraid it's set in for the weekend," I gasp, as my feet struggle to find purchase on the wet stone.

"We'll be shut in."

Takis says nothing, clambering up beside me.

"Well, never mind, mate. The fridge is full of food. We have the stereo. No need to go out in this, really. You can lie in bed all day if you feel like it."

He grabs my elbow and we pause for a moment at the last turning. As the rain pelts down on our unprotesting heads.

The scent of wild thyme hanging in the air.

Looking up at me with a wide smile, he shouts,

"And no Panayotis!"

3. Pavlos

TWELVE YEARS OLD. Handsome little bugger, full of spunk.

He knows all about me; and I know almost all about him.

You could say we're used to each other, without the boredom that might imply. I mean, we have ceased to be surprised by our desires.

Loyalty seasons custom.

In the beginning, it was different: I was surprised that it could happen at all.

Because then, when he first bowled me over, he was just seven, going on for eight.

That was the trouble. I had never been bowled over by a seven-year-old before. In fact, it had never occurred to me that it was possible.

Well. It's not to the general taste.

Love at first sight, your Honor.

That's what happened, all right, to Pavlos and me.

And the years since that first electric moment have done nothing but confirm. We have endured. Look, we've hardly been threatened.

We've grown up together, mutually enchanted. Me finding my grateful way in a strange land. He finding his wide-eyed way through boyhood.

I don't know what he longed for and dreamed of through those years before we met; but, as for me, I can say quite certainly that I never expected nor planned anything like – us.

"But little boys, my dear! Children!"

Christopher is genuinely shocked.

I let it sink in. Needing to tell it, and to listen to somebody.

We play with our ouzos, sipping tensely, leaving the appetizers untouched.

Uncomfortably close, those other tables, those respectable Greeks.

Conversation, laughter, the colors of Friday night. But shaded now, with danger. We both feel it, foreigners. The threat of my disclosure.

"I must say, my dear," – Christopher allowing himself the smallest scoop of *zatsiki* on a chunk of crusty bread – "I did *not* expect to come back to something like *this!*"

Back from Paris, that is, ready to expound at length on his adventures. And normally I would have listened, gratefully, diverted.

"Don't panic, Christopher," I murmur guiltily. "You are not, after all, involved."

Scraping his iron chair on the cold tiles to underscore his opposition:

"But I *am*, and it is half the point at least, I *am* involved."

"You don't teach *him*," I say sullenly.

Seeing my last hope going. Of a sympathetic ear, of some helpful advice, or even encouragement.

Dreamer. Why had I expected that?

When I was, myself, heavy with doubt.

This was all years ago, you understand. Based on shallow ideas. Not experience. Which followed.

THEY HAD APPROACHED ME FIRST, this nice family upstairs. In the apartment building where I had finally moved, following my long island sojourn, into a busy central quarter of Athens. My first respectable Greek address. Some sense of security, and continuity, in my life now, with the stabilization of dubbing

work, and a long-term contract. There were two girls, and a boy in the middle. Would I give English lessons to Angeliki, the eldest? They had heard of me, from the landlord.

Nice people, but teaching is not my line, so I quickly organized Christopher, who has it down to a fine art. And everyone was satisfied.

Months passed, then Christopher was off to Paris for a brief assault on the civilized North. And would I fill in? Because. Such a good family, such a good student, not to be lost lightly.

In short, I was talked into it.

In Christopher's deafening absence, then, I began filling in. And, primed by the admirable, solicitous Christopher, we fumbled through it together.

Hospitality was generous: I was soothed with home cooking, drinks, sweets, fresh coffee.

But – when did I, did he, did we first see us?

It can't have been the first time I 'filled in'.

But anyway, somewhere early in the game, I became aware of this other presence. It was like that at first: a presence, a promise. Then, a glimpse. A tentative smile.

See Jean-Louis Barrault in some old pantomime.

This glowing, coal-eyed, gollywog of a kid, leaping out of doorways, and back out of sight again. In and out of the corner of my eye a dozen times. Theater. Tantalizing, and puzzling.

Until the good Angeliki gave the name of her brother.

Pavlos. And I was in future able to greet him, even if he should appear only for a moment or two, grinning, intense, seeming to burst with energy.

Tricks with rubber balls and cracking pistols, which I learned to answer with a mimicking finger.

And always, this instant connection between us, not to be denied, even by Sis, who was containing her resentment, confidently abiding the return of her official tutor.

So, Pavlos would open the door to me, changing any mood into joy with that first smile. His body straining towards me.

And Pavlos would bring in the coffee for me, half-way through the lesson, and linger as we labored, not listening to the alien tongue we used.

Standing silent at my elbow, breathing deeply through his mouth, the spark of recognition never leaving his eye.

Pressing ever bolder into my side, his warm hands on my thigh; the fresh ripe smell of him. Straining toward me still.

Relaxing a little as my hand slid curiously around to cup his buttocks. And occasionally, wondering, to squeeze.

What a sight, for anyone. For Sis, if she noticed.

United we were, Pavlos and me, gratified by a clear beginning.

Which was now, however, an ending, with Christopher back at the reins, all responsibility and caution.

We parted coolly, that Friday night, Christopher and I, after I had assured him that I would not destroy his good name nor involve him in any scandals.

I resolved never to mention the subject to anybody again.

Unless – wistfully – it should be to Pavlos.

I NEEDN'T HAVE WORRIED. His determination kept us meeting. Pavlos has always been more optimistic than I.

Living in the same building, we were unlikely to lose each other altogether. But it was more than

chance, our meeting in the lobby so often.

That intense smile, that straining of his body towards me.

Or outside on the steps, where I would find him waiting in the afternoon, when I came home from the studio, his handsome face lighting up as I turned the corner. With the eyes of a hundred neighbors upon us, I would try not to linger with him for too long.

In those days. Now, we don't mind much what they think. They're accustomed, anyway. We are a fixture around here, Pavlos and I.

Not surprising, that I came to look forward to our meetings. Those innocent conversations about the football, details absorbing us for jealously prolonged moments.

We have always had plenty in common.

Dear Pavlos, I see you as you were then. Carrying my helmet possessively, with both hands, until we parted at the lift. Always with some whispered, conspiratorial word, as the steel doors slid across to restrain us.

Look, I already enjoyed a fairly ambitious sex-life. In the Athenian style – sensuality and non-involvement. I was not a lonely character, not frustrated. Against this, I valued friendship with Pavlos more and more as time passed.

With Christopher, the subject was *verboten*.

I used to amuse myself imagining the remarks I might make, and his reaction.

God, he's a darling, Christopher. He grows more luscious every day. Those curls. That skin. You know, I think about him all the time. I even dream about him.

Most of this would have been true.

The facts were: Pavlos persisted. Pavlos cared.

I knew nobody else who was always so pleased to see me. It counts. Especially on a rough day.

Pavlos gave me the good old feeling of being loved, and waited for.

I searched for ways to please him, and amuse him. A joyful occupation.

His mother, aware of his persistence, would become embarrassed, apologizing for the nuisance.

We got around this.

I have always had good relations with Pavlos' mum and dad. This is important to both of us. Especially now that he is older, and we think more of the future.

WE HAD KNOWN EACH OTHER for over two years before we started having sex.

Not strangers in the night, you see. By then, we were very familiar and trusting.

We avoided the shocks of contact which we might have suffered, had I felt paternal towards him. My feelings for Pavlos have never been parental. The general lack of such feelings is probably a gap in my nature.

We had always touched each other a lot, in the easy way of the Greeks. And I had sneaked a few kisses when nobody was looking. Loving to bury my face in the hot fragrance of his curls.

To these kisses, Pavlos responded with little grunts of satisfaction, and that straining of his body.

We took the big step, naturally enough, when he first visited my apartment. Though this had been suggested before, there had always been an awkwardness about it.

He came, finally, under the pretext of bringing pastries from his mother. I am not sure whose idea they were, but I can imagine him bludgeoning her into baking them.

He stood at my door with a look of triumph on his face.

And so we spent our first hours together on the bed, with the shutters closed against the midday heat. Helping each other, slowly, toward nakedness and knowledge.

There was humor in our loving. Until lately, we have kept passion to a minimum.

His frank cries of protest at anything he did not enjoy reduced the fear of taking advantage. Of course, there was no question of it. Though certainly, my own sexuality was fully developed, his was now looking for ways to answer it. He wanted to indulge me.

Even now there are things we do together which give me the most exquisite pleasure, while leaving him quite indifferent.

To put it simply, he does it for me. In the sweet, calm spirit of friendship.

Yes, I appreciate it. But he knows that well.

I admit he has always loved me better than I have loved him. My excuse is, that he took me by surprise. Apart from that, I'm working on it.

How LOVELY HE LOOKS, now, as he lies naked beside me, spent and undesiring. His dark head nestling under my chin. His nipples brushing against my chest. The curve of his smooth, brown back dipping into the shadows. His buttocks rising to catch the light. My hand resting gently between. As we breathe together.

How long will we lie like this in peace, before we want each other again?

My darling, as you murmur at my throat with your love-ripened lips, I think of last summer. The rain outside the window now reminds me of the cave. Where we completed our exploration. Sharing everything, for the first time.

I didn't press you, I think. But you knew.

You could feel me straining, in those long days on the hot sand, straining, and waiting, as you had done, before.

And so you accepted it, and gave everything.

We ran, and crashed into the crystal sea of a cloudless August, swimming out as far as we needed.

To stand like reeds trembling in the cool.

Did I suggest taking off our costumes, or did you? Or perhaps we tore them off each other, I don't remember. We were a little light-headed.

Sun-baked and reckless.

The water encasing us like solid glass.

And when we moved together, it was more intimate than I expected. Our slippery bodies tangling in the wet. Awakening to the possibility. Venturing.

Until you gazed around, squinting, and said,

"Someone will catch us."

Truly, anyone within a hundred yards could see what we were at.

I was groaning for you, but not so far gone that I would risk a scene with unknown consequences.

I whispered to you shakily, "Will you help us? Do you know a place?"

And so we scrambled out; and up the shimmering, scalding rocks, up into the scrub. Panting, hand-in-hand, towards the cave.

Which you had discovered years ago with your sisters.

Deep and blissfully cool, after that hasty climb in the broiling sun.

"Does anyone come here now?" I wondered.

"No. Nobody else knows about it."

I was ready to be convinced.

"It's a great shelter," you added, "when a storm comes."

The cave's mouth lying not far off the track from the beach up to your summer house.

I spread my towel on the sandy floor, and you did the same.

"It is not raining now, Pavlos," I sighed.

Feeling, somehow, that this was a solemn truth.

You stretched out on your towel, pulling at the drawstrings of your briefs.

"No," you said easily, "But it *could* be. It could have started to rain now, and we wouldn't know."

I smiled at this piece of whimsy, lying down beside you.

"And," you asserted confidently, "you can *always* hear the rain when you're inside a cave. Listen."

I listened. God, you were right.

Realizing immediately that it was the sea. Hard to tell the difference, in the semi-darkness.

"It's the sea, Pavlos."

"Maybe. We don't know that. It could be raining."

After all, you were trying to help, and with a rush of gratitude and affection, I rolled towards you, covering your beloved flesh with mine.

Now, i SEE YOU ARE stirring. Smacking your cherry lips, as if you are thirsty. Wiggling your fingers and toes.

I love you.

What would Christopher say, if he saw us now?

Easy to guess. And who cares?

I do, though. He's my oldest friend.

And I wish he could see. How perfect we are together.

I suppose he will, eventually.

I SUPPOSE i EXPECTED OUR AFFAIR to go on forever. That seemed to be the likely outcome.

And when I heard the news that Pavlos' family were moving, I hardly gave it a thought. So we would no longer stay in the same building, so what? In many respects it would be better for us. Easier to develop our relationship.

The shock came overhearing neighbors' gossip: Pavlos' family were not just moving – they were emigrating! To Canada, like so many Greeks before them. Work, money, a higher standard of living.

And death to me.

Why hadn't Pavlos told me? Had they kept it from him, planning a surprise?

Now that *I* knew, I avoided him, troubled as I was.

When he came to me, it was clear that he had found out. And could see that I had, too.

We fell upon each other, in desperation. What should we do?

Too shocked to find an answer to this question, we sought temporary solace in making love.

Then followed difficult days, for Pavlos and me. He had started to count them, which was agony. We didn't know what to do with these precious days, unsure how best to use them.

As the date of departure grew imminent, the stress in our situation eased somewhat, as Pavlos was infected by the excitement of his parents and sisters: a long journey; a big new country; adventure!

I encouraged this enthusiasm in him, putting down my hurt. And he held on to it. As a way. Of dealing with the impossible.

At least, when the day came, it meant a resolution.

They left, it was finished.

Pavlos and I swore undying love and friendship. Otherwise, I stayed out of sight. Wanting it to be over.

That I might begin my mourning with dignity. And look for my way. The adjustment would be long and difficult. Acceptance came first.

I soon had my first postcard from Pavlos. Gay and excited, sketching a whole mass of news. How little it meant to me, reread it as I would. Small compensation.

I tried to make my reply circumspect, and well-wishing. Knowing it would be passed around. And defeating thus love's purpose.

My heart said: send a telegram: COME BACK PAVLOS STOP LOVE DAVID.

We continued to write to each other. These unsatisfactory, edited missives. Failing to span the distance between us. Time passed. That helps the healing. The postcards became more and more infrequent. Stopped.

Only Christmas cards now, one to the whole family. I suppose that will stop, too.

I OFTEN THINK OF PAVLOS. And always with gratitude. But I don't dwell on our past joys. That is all gone. I like, rather, to imagine him as he is now. Growing, thriving, continuing to discover new things.

One day Pavlos and his family will return to Greece. That was the plan. When they have saved enough money. Who knows how many years in the future? But they will come back.

If I am still here, I dream that Pavlos will come and find me.

What surprises then! Will we recognize each other? What will we remember?

That we knew each other once, in another world and time. And loved each other beyond measure.

Worth remembering.

4. Achilles

ONE RECENT SUMMER, I spent ten days on the peaceful island of Porytos. A delightful spot, not well-known to tourists, and just a few hours from Athens.

I went in the company of Michael and Fiona. We plotted the getaway over cocktails one night, and though it was their idea, it was suggested as much for my sake as theirs.

I was a bit run-down, after completing a film-dubbing assignment for a bunch of slave-drivers from Damascus. We had worked long hours in the studio, found no time for proper meals, smoked endlessly and got by on a minimum of sleep.

I needed a holiday.

Though my basic problem was emotional. I had attempted to bury it under work, and overwork, but there it lay, not far beneath the surface: the broken heart.

Time had done some of its work, and I often felt recovered. Then it would suddenly come back, stabbing me like a knife. Reducing me to impotence, pain and desolation.

Pavlos had gone.

And I had not got over it yet.

Michael and Fiona like to look after me. Fortunately. I often make a poor job of it myself.

They had not known Pavlos. But perhaps had heard something. Or knew, by the instinct of friends.

They knew I liked boys. Some, like Takis, they had met. I think, over the years, they got used to it. Saw it as a, possibly droll, part of me which they accepted without strain.

At the time I would have said that their acceptance was shaky, at best. Now I believe I underestimated their understanding, out of guilt or embarrassment. Events on Porytos tended to confirm this.

At the least, we all three knew that I went to the island a casualty.

Porytos was the ideal choice for pleasure and recuperation. It's a large island, heavily wooded with pines and eucalyptus. Most of the activity centers on the port, with its cluster of hotels, restaurants and discos.

A mile or two to the north there is another, larger bay opening into the sea through dramatic headlands. Crystal-clear water, densely salty, washing up onto small pebbly beaches.

This is where we stayed, at the only hotel. A little more expensive but, in early June, lightly patronized. The rooms were cool and comfortable, the meals were generous, and out front there was our own private beach cut off from the incurious trees by a cyclone fence. One paid ten drachmas for the privilege, and the toll was collected daily by a young fisherman who anchored his boat nearby.

A typical Saronic type, tall, lean and bronzed.

Apart from fishing and collecting our dues, he was often seen carrying off some female guest on the back of his battered Vespa. Needless to say, questions were never asked.

On the beach there were chairs, with metal frames covered in plastic strips, when you got tired of accommodating your body to the rocks. There was also a small bar of sorts, with beer and soft drinks, grilled fish and salads.

There was no need to wander far afield. Even to go into the water.

Though this I, at least, did, and often. Marveling at the transparency of the deeps, moving with surprising buoyancy, swimming out for miles, towards the headlands, to lie on my back and stare at the sun through salt-encrusted lashes.

Michael and Fiona remonstrated mildly concerning my aquatic exertions. But saw well enough my recovery. Tanning fast, winding down, finding energy to burn.

Behind the beach, under a shady plane tree, were some round steel tables, where we sometimes ate lunch. There was a small company of guests, properly introduced but communicating little.

We three felt sufficient unto ourselves. And were seldom disturbed.

Unless by one of the air-hostesses who sat in a pair and talked rather loudly. Aiming, possibly, at some magazine image of sophistication.

One of these ladies showed early signs of interest in me.

Her approach was hideously direct.

Neither reticence nor outright rudeness in my part discouraged her.

Only that she was frightened of Fiona. God bless the Class System.

One day, cornered over my grilled swordfish and confronted with probing questions, I stated bluntly that I was an actor, that I was resting and that I hoped she would understand if I never removed my sunglasses.

I fear I made an impression. She attacked no more. But observed, keenly.

In a more tranquil manner, I myself observed the island, and its inhabitants.

Such lovely boys I glimpsed on my rambles!

Michael and Fiona were content to spend their time at the hotel or beach, and why not. But I, as always, grew restless. They understood, and, judging me recovered from my debility, saw me go without comment.

After my first walk into town I hired a bicycle, which I sometime rode, hurtling down avenues of eucalyptus with adolescent joy. And sometimes pushed up steep hills, my shoulders and calves singing with the sheer pleasure of exertion.

The days became hotter. The nights warm, and fragrant with promise.

It was my custom to cycle in the early evening, when I shared the road with others similarly meandering.

Most of them young boys.

A friendly company it was, a fellowship of the road, expressed with vivid smiles and shouted greetings. Obligatory to ring your bell when you passed another cyclist.

All in all, we spread some merry sounds, as the darkness slowly descended. The kids got used to me, seemed to enjoy my presence.

I'll bet they knew all about me.

One evening, I was pedaling dreamily along the dusty road which linked our bay with the township, when my eye was caught by a lone pedestrian.

A boy I had not noticed before during my excursions.

Certainly not noticed before, I affirmed with agitation, as I drew nearer.

I rang my bell to warn him, and he turned, smiled politely as I drew alongside him.

The wheels of the bike wobbled dangerously, in response to the shock that coursed through my body. Leaving a weakness in the knees.

I ought to have greeted him at that point. He had stopped to wait for me. But it was all I could do just to stay on the bicycle. Finally, I righted the machine, found my balance and pedaled on.

Belatedly ringing my bell.

Looking back, I saw him standing there, still, a quietness about him. Then he, too, continued on his way.

My feet drove me on toward the port. They knew, as feet sometimes do, that my head was in no state

to drive.

Sitting over an ouzo and anchovies at a harbor cafe, I gazed out at nothing, my sight turned inward, as I saw again the prince I had discovered.

Relishing every detail.

He had been fourteen, maybe fifteen. Not tall, but wiry. Beautifully muscled and lithe as a panther. Regular exercise showed in his movements. This boy had looked after himself.

Blond hair, silver-white, rather long, but neatly parted. Light blue eyes, beautiful in shape and subtle in expression.

Complementing this startling fairness, a golden olive skin which glowed from his fine brow right down to his bare feet. He wore only a pair of nylon shorts.

Stepping along that leafy way like a message from the gods.

A hint of their creative powers.

And, something different about him.

Nothing to do with my kids-on-wheels club, somehow. Another style to him, entirely.

On the one hand, showing no hesitation, or silliness.

No defenses dimming those alert blue eyes.

And a definite sense of poise.

On the other hand, some distance in his noble face. As if, whatever might happen, he would not be personally involved.

An intriguing mix.

No chance of putting this meeting aside, and forgetting.

Indeed, I slipped back into the hotel quietly, that night, skipping dinner. With an ambiguous and not entirely fictitious excuse. Retiring to my room, to lie naked on the cool, thyme-scented sheets. Smoking, dreaming, awake. Staring at the full moon blazing coldly through the window.

I didn't sleep. Not in any normal sense.

The golden boy never left my thoughts. Though I thought nothing coherent. Just saw him. Sometimes so clearly that I thought he had walked, knowing, through my open window, to stand beside my bed in his moon-spangled shorts.

I suppose I dropped off, in snatches, dreamed. I may have come in my dreams.

He might as well have been there with me.

Until the dawn, I did not escape him.

RISING NEXT MORNING, feeling sleepless and confused, I made a poor breakfast companion.

An even more irritable one on the beach.

The air-hostesses were shrieking continually, as if in the midst of some skybound disaster. Michael and Fiona were their usual urbane selves. But inclined to stir my hangover with humorous digs, expecting confessions of nocturnal adventures.

I could not endure it. Not even the taste of coffee. Let alone my morning swim.

I excused myself with as much grace as I could muster, and went off for my bicycle.

There is only one thing to do in the case of nervous obsession: act.

Off I pedaled, soothed by decision, to seek out the doubtless disappointing embodiment of my midnight apparition.

To no avail.

Every day for three days I cycled, round the sandy coves, up and down the lanes of glittering eucalyptus, before the mocking chorus of cicadas. In and out the alleyways around the port.

I did not find him. Not a glimpse.

It was immensely frustrating. I mean, a boy can't just disappear, not on an island, like that.

It made me more nervy than ever.

Fiona feared a relapse.

But, physically, I was in the peak. Bursting with energy.

Michael, sucking slowly on a prudent pipe, prescribed fresh diversion. An outing, perhaps.

After consultation with our affable hotel manager, we set off together to visit the ancient temple of Poseidon. Sill standing proudly high on the rocky crags beyond the pines. Looking out over the sea. A broken column or two surviving, to remind. It was said. Some kilometers the walk, but shaded, worth it.

Not far from our hotel we found the track, and turned off sharp right from the roadway, doubling back eastward as we began the climb.

The way was wide enough, but uneven and steep. Loose rocks and unexpected potholes caught us, one by one, and we were soon wishing we had something sturdier than sandals on our feet. The day was hot and, as the thickening trees shut out the sun, unpleasantly sticky. Small insects swarmed about us, clung to our faces and legs. Conversation lapsed and the cicadas took over. Discomfort.

Then Fiona slipped on a loose stone and fell, twisting her ankle. It was not a serious sprain, as far as we could tell, but after resting a while Michael and she decided to return to the hotel. I wanted to go with them but in some access of good manners or guilt they insisted that I continue on my own.

Strangely, I felt grateful and relieved.

As soon as I was sure that Fiona could make it back, leaning on her husband's shoulder, I resumed the climb.

The track grew steeper, and more deeply shaded.

What began to get on my nerves was not the heat, nor the insects, but the sense of making no progress.

I would labor up one rocky stretch, a hundred meters or so, turn the sharp bend hopefully, only to find an identical stretch ahead of me, enclosed by the pines. This pattern seemed to be repeated endlessly, for hours.

I was almost mesmerized, feeling both thwarted and determined.

Pine-scent in my nostrils, cicadas in my ears.

It had the flavor of a bad dream.

Then suddenly I turned another hairpin bend, looked up, and saw at last an end to the track. The pines thinned out into brush. The rocks became sand.

With a fresh burst of energy, I galloped up the last slope, to stand at the windy peak.

In wonder.

Dazzling blue sky above and around me. A sheer drop before, and the endless sea, equally blue.

For a moment I lost my bearings.

Maybe it was the heat. Maybe it was the stubborn exertion of the climb; I had not rested as I might.

Or else the deep wound of losing my cherished lover was bursting impatiently through the glossy patina of holiday fun and fitness.

I felt dizzy and unsteady on my feet. When I closed my eyes, I saw, for a quick, shattering moment, the image of Pavlos, his dear face, as I remembered and had half-forgotten. But I could not hold it clear in my mind. And opened my eyes again, hopelessly.

Suspended within a vast blue sphere. My feet touching nothing. Shaking myself free of the illusion, I looked around me, and found that I was actually standing in the center of the ancient temple, its remaining columns encircling me.

The wind howled, tugged at my clothes.

Lurching to one side, I fell against a column. Clung to it with open arms.

Again the sensation of weightlessness.

If I were to let go, I fancied, the wind would take me, lift me off the ground, and I would rise peacefully into the blue.

Peacefully and willingly. Welcoming oblivion, after pain and loss.

Then I saw the boy.

Half-hidden on the opposite side of the temple.

A strange smile on his face as he watched me.

I couldn't speak. What was he doing here, suddenly, my golden prince? Had he followed me up the mountain?

The ancients had certainly chosen well the site of the temple. It was perfect. And perfectly did the boy fit the scene. Blending in effortlessly, with his classic beauty.

For a time, he played hide-and-seek with me. Disappearing completely, then silently appearing again, each time in a different place. Yet I never saw him move. Not a muscle.

Then he was gone.

The wind dropped, the sun burned down on my head. Was reflected by the ancient marble floor.

I searched a while, but knew he was no longer there.

ONCE MORE THAT NIGHT, I had very little sleep. I was bewitched, but did not know by what.

Except for this strange and beautiful boy.

Did he *live* in the ancient temple? I wondered. That would explain my failure to find him about the town.

Then I must return to the temple. Every day, if I found him there.

Such were my midnight thoughts.

The next time I saw my blond beauty it was in more mundane circumstances.

Michael, Fiona and I lay on the beach after breakfast soaking up the morning sun.

From his boat, anchored close to shore, the fisherman made eyes at me, signaling discreetly that I might dive into the shallows and pull up the anchor for him. As I had done once or twice before.

But I had no appetite for diving.

Let alone for the fishing trip he continually suggested.

I thought I would leave him to the air-hostesses. In tandem.

Pretending not to notice his frown.

Our peace was disturbed by the sound of footsteps crunching over the pebbles. Oh, no. My thoughts had been overheard. A fresh attack.

Cringing, I opened one eye.

Surprise.

Both eyes wide open, I sat up slowly to watch the new arrivals.

First came the portly Greek gentleman in his late middle age. Whom we had seen checking in to the hotel the previous afternoon. Balding, white-skinned, and spindly-legged, an ample paunch hanging over his swimming trunks, he was not an inspiring sight.

By contrast, his companion, who stepped half a pace behind him, was close to perfection.

My elusive inspiritor, in fact, displaying his lithe, tanned body with the same easy grace as before. Golden hair shining in the sun. A brief white costume hugging his narrow hips. Revealing his bold maleness. Emphasizing the curve of his buttocks.

"What a very beautiful boy!" Fiona exclaimed. "Don't you think so, David?"

"How could I say otherwise?"

"He doesn't look a bit conceited – for a Greek," she marveled. "I wonder if he knows how gorgeous he is."

We both wondered.

I had a shrewd suspicion that he knew, though.

The Greek put an arm loosely about the boy's shoulder (His father? Uncle? Godfather? But there was no resemblance, and their manner was quite other: patron and obedient servant.) as he coaxed him into a trot.

They splashed into the water and swam out a short way. The boy accommodating his stroke to the man's age and condition. Nicely done, really, this bit. Then they stopped, to play about restrainedly in the shallows.

So, I understood. Available. A rent-boy.

So much for Poseidon.

Then I recalled Christopher's talk. That last night in 'Apotsos', before I left Athens.

"To *Porytos*, my dear! Well. That should suit you down to the ground."

"I hope so," I replied, missing his tone. "It should be nice and quiet."

"Oh, *really*? Not for you, I think."

"What do you mean, Christopher?"

"Well, you do know," he hesitated, "about *Porytos*?"

"What?"

"About the House. With boys."

"What's this, now? You're joking."

"No, dear. I'm not. *Porytos*. A house with young boys. Quite famous – among the cognoscenti. Been there forever, I believe. A classy clientele, too."

"Oh, come on, how would you know?"

Christopher considered being offended.

"I've *heard* my dear. From more than one. As, I daresay, I shall hear from you, on your return. But don't bother."

I only half-believed him. Christopher was extravagant in talk whether in his cups or out. And ever ready to wax ironic on the subject of my predilections.

Though I did know, of course, of the existence of such establishments in Athens. Not exactly Houses with Boys as one might imagine them. But billiards parlors, and shops with electronic games. From where a boy could be taken home, by arrangement with the manager. I could not speak of these from experience. Inhibited from plunging into such a milieu. A stranger, amidst relaxing youths, my intentions all too obvious.

And no wizard at billiards.

"In any case," I affirmed, sincerely, "I go to *Porytos* for rest and relaxation."

Christopher raised his glass to me, one eyebrow with it. And I promptly forgot about the House with Boys.

I COULD SIT STILL NO LONGER. Rising from the prodding pebbles, I strode down to the water's edge, cast a quick glance in the boy's direction, then plunged in, and swam out into the middle of the bay, as if against the stopwatch.

Showing off.

Once out there, at that maddening distance, I felt I must miss something, and wanted to be back.

Swimming in with equal gusto, I cut my pace near the peaceful pair and began a slow side-stroke towards the shore.

Passing close to the boy.

Our eyes met. He acknowledged me, nodding and smiling slightly.

Looking different in the water. Hair slicked back. His taut body glistening like some wonderful sea-animal's.

While his patron attempted a duck-dive, I murmured:

"Why did you run away from me – at the temple?"

His face creased in puzzlement.

"The temple?"

I left him to his games, and rejoined my friends.

"Lovely specimen, that lad," Fiona pursued, mischievously. "Have you come across him before?"

"Yes and no," I sighed.

"Better luck," she smiled.

"Thank you," I said, laughing, wanting her wish to work.

THAT EVENING, I SET OFF, sans bicyclette, in search of the famous House. The portly gentleman, I learned, had already checked out.

Felt ridiculous taking so much trouble over my appearance, but could not help myself. You have to make *some* impression, on a star like that.

I was headed for the sleazy bars beyond the town harbor. Patronized by sailors and fishermen. Determined to locate the House, with inquiries discreet or direct.

Not necessary, as it turned out. I didn't even make it into town.

About a quarter of the way along the road, quite near the place where I had first seen him, the boy stepped nimbly out from behind a eucalyptus.

And waited for me.

He looked so fine, and so self-possessed at that moment. I became nervous, but concealed it.

"Hullo," I said, cheerily, holding out my hand. "I'm David."

He took my hand in a firm grip.

The touch of his palm igniting me.

"I am Achilles," he said.

Many echoes in that first announcement: pride, modesty, acceptance, patience, 'I am Achilles', – and it suited him. Every inch a young warrior-prince.

Our hands fell to our sides.

There was a small hiatus. My mind benumbed by his beauty. His closeness.

As he stood there easily, relaxed.

"Where is your House?" I finally mumbled. Awkward.

He turned and nodded over his left shoulder, raising his arm to point. In one graceful movement.

I took hold of his bare shoulder. To steady myself.

"Shall we go there, then?"

A pause.

"If you like," he said. "But perhaps," he barely suggested, "you will be more comfortable at your hotel."

"O.K.," I agreed. "If that's what you usually do."

"With foreign visitors, I think it is better. We shall have more privacy, and there will be no

disturbance."

"Any problem about getting you into the hotel?"

"No. The boys there are all friends of mine."

"The manager?"

"He won't notice me. After all, I spend more time at the hotel than he does."

That pulled me up for a moment, but I put it aside. It was really wonderful, bringing this god-like creature down to the level of small talk.

"You speak beautiful English," I said.

"Thank you. Your Greek is also very good."

We spent ten minutes being polite to each other, as we made our way up to the hotel. My hand resting on the back of his neck.

His bedroom manners were perfect, too. Quiet, discreet.

Slipping easily and provocatively out of his shorts, as if I had seen him undress a thousand times. And nothing could be more natural.

On the bed, he was superb.

Just to lie naked with him, close to his glowing form, was excitement enough. Only to touch, in awe of his beauty.

But we went much further. Much further than I had imagined.

Achilles was an accomplished partner in love-making.

The skilled courtesan, with a justified pride in his profession: knowing well how to please a man.

Passive at first, as I feasted on him. Observing my ways, the nourishment I sought. Then responding, adjusting. Assisting.

Later, suggesting variations. Enlightening me.

There was no love between us, strangers as we were. Fully aware of the nature of our transaction.

Still, he held nothing back, gave himself wholly to the task of pleasing.

Don't ask me how many wild climaxes we shared that night. I lost count.

When we awoke the next morning, it was as if we had only paused for breath. Aroused and ready, we went at it again.

Oh, Achilles, what a champion you were!

After drinking coffee in my room, we talked a little. I smoked while Achilles exercised on the floor. Returning to sit by me, on the bed.

"Were you born on Porytos, my friend?"

"No. But not far away. Another island. Very small."

"Did... they make you come here?"

"No one made me come here."

"You chose this yourself?"

"Of course. I had been to Porytos many times before I decided to stay."

"And you had your first... experiences with men here?"

"It was easier here. Away from home. Then Alexis agreed for me to join him."

Alexis, I learned, was the young man who managed the House, and looked after the boys. An ex-professional football player, who seemed to have Achilles' approval. They were well-fed, exercised, occupied with various sports.

Alexis did not own the house; he was paid by persons unknown. He took all the boys' earnings, some of which, however, was deposited for them in savings accounts at the local bank.

Achilles did not tell me much more than this, and try as I would with gentle hints, I could not coax a

complaint from him, about anything. He seemed perfectly satisfied with his life, as things stood.

To COVER MY EMBARRASSMENT WHILE paying for his services, I joked,

"And so inexpensive, too! I can't believe it."

"As long as I gave you pleasure," he responded proudly.

"Have no doubts about that, my boy."

As if he could have.

"How long will you stay on Porytos?" he asked casually. Completing his toilet at the mirror: Not hustling, so much as making polite conversation.

"It was to have been ten days. That is, until Saturday. But I may stay on, now, this place is so marvelous. And now that I have found you... I... hope you will have time free?"

Achilles turned to face me, groomed, smiling. Altogether stunning.

"Well, of course. I am at your disposal for as long as you may stay. Whenever you want me."

"Thank you, Achilles."

Walking down to the beach together, I remembered to ask him again,

"Listen, I *am* curious. Why didn't you speak to me, at the temple?"

He stopped, and turned to look at me, questioning.

"The Temple of Poseidon, my friend. Day before yesterday. Surely you haven't forgotten," I teased.

"Poseidon? I don't understand, David. I was not there. I have not been up there for years. Since I was a little boy."

He spoke so earnestly that I was baffled. What reason could he have for lying about this?

He didn't sound as if he were lying.

But I had seen him.

ON THE BEACH, I INTRODUCED Achilles to Michael and Fiona, and we sat down with them, under the old tree.

The boy made a good impression, with his unusual beauty and his impeccable manners.

Waiting to be addressed. Answering simply. Encouraged by Fiona, showing some wit, even sophistication. Switching easily to French, when she did.

My pleasure and satisfaction must have been obvious. Reflected in their faces as it was.

Achilles and I stripped off for a short swim.

Then a blissful half-hour on the rocks, sunning.

He excused himself, first to me, then to my friends, and slipped away.

Immediately, I began to discuss the possibility of prolonging our visit.

"Well, Michael –" murmured Fiona.

He picked it up.

"– has to go back to work, you know. Unfortunately. No reason why *you* shouldn't stay on, though. Long as you can find some company."

He barely winked.

"Oh, yes, *do*, David," Fiona urged. "It will be so good for you."

Agreed.

The first sour note sounded softly at first, midst all this goodwill.

When we gathered up our clothes to go and prepare for luncheon, I was unable to find my wrist watch. I thought nothing, a minor irritation, and scouted around the chair where my clothes hung, checking pockets.

Delay and irritation grew.

"What is it, David?"

"Damned nuisance. Sorry. Seem to have mislaid my watch. Shan't be a moment."

But further scuffling about failed to turn up the missing timer.

"You two go on up," I said. "I'll find it in a minute."

Their concern took shape before piine had a chance.

"Nonsense," Michael affirmed. "We'll help you, of course. Not a mere bauble, after all."

My watch was worth a bit. Gold. Swiss quality. A trophy of a former life, in another land.

But why had Michael mentioned it?

Our search continued, more carefully, thoroughly. The atmosphere had been struck.

Kicking over stones, moving chairs, shaking clothes and towels. A tiresome business. And fruitless.

We were alone at it. The air-hostesses having withdrawn before mealtime.

Only Costas the fisherman joined us briefly, to collect drachmas and inquire.

Michael filled him in, asked briskly about the watch.

A leisurely shrug, eyes rolling. No help. And a last glowering smile for me, faintly malicious, as he returned to the boat.

We were tired by our pickings and scrapings around the little beach, warming up in the midday sun like an unfriendly furnace. We collapsed back on to our plasto-metal chairs to smoke, and consider.

"You definitely wore the watch down to the beach, darling," Fiona pressed.

"Definitely. Matter of habit."

"And you didn't wear it in the water, while you were swimming?"

"No. Never. I'm conditioned against it. Waterproof or not. On the chair here, with my clothes, as always. Beside you two."

A silence grew. And nagged.

"You must report it, darling."

She was right. In another case, I should avoid the fuss. But it was a valuable watch. Apart from the Kawasaki, about my only tangible asset. It would be irresponsible to let it go.

The silence swelled with heat, changing color and tone. As my two friends gazed at me, intently.

It wasn't difficult to interpret.

"You think Achilles stole the watch."

Fiona demurred slightly, with a fluttering hand. As Michael shifted in his seat.

"Forgive me, darling David, but how much do you know about the boy?"

I squinted out across the salt glare of the bay.

"Next to nothing," I admitted.

The deep sigh which we all three produced in accidental unison, did something to lighten our humor.

O.K.," I said. "If you will be so kind as to report my watch missing to the manager – lest it be found or handed in – I shall go and confront Achilles."

"Done," Michael agreed. "Good man."

A SENSE OF DISAPPOINTMENT AND PERPLEXITY grew in me, as I cycled down to the house.

Parking the bicycle against a tree, I walked slowly, doubtfully toward the fence. A dozen or so boys were playing in the yard behind the building. Games of volleyball and basketball, on well-equipped courts. With seriousness and enthusiasm.

I watched them for a few minutes. A collective display of talent. And I don't mean sporting.

Energy and speed, muscular effort, brown bodies glistening with sweat. Skimpy gymshorts hiding

nothing. As young voices called for the ball, cried out in scoring.

But all this could only be a temporary distraction. I could not evade my mission for long.

Spotting Achilles at the volleyball net, I approached the fence and called him over. He came readily enough. Slightly surprised, perhaps, but quite calm.

"Sorry to interrupt the game," I began.

"It doesn't matter," he smiled. "It's almost over."

Indeed, the sun was now too high for ball-games.

"Achilles, I'd like to talk to you about something. May I come inside for a moment?"

A small pause. A flicker of curiosity.

"Yes, of course. Come on."

He led me round to the front gate, opened it for me, and took me up the short gravel path to the verandah. There was no one in sight. We passed into a cool, shadowy hall smelling of polished linoleum, then turned left into a sort of sitting room. Cane furniture, television, magazines, ashtrays. Very plain, but nice. I took a seat.

"Shall I close the door, David?" he asked.

"If you don't mind."

He went and shut the door. Then he came and stood easily before me, waiting.

I could think of no way to start. In the silence he wondered,

"Is it O.K. if I sit down, too? That game knocked me out."

"Of course, Achilles. Sit down, for godsake. After all, I'm the intruder."

"You're my guest," he corrected, mildly, "Would you like some coffee? Tea?"

"No, no, nothing, thanks."

"Someone will bring you a cool drink later."

"Very well. That's all right."

And, as I hesitated still,

"What do you want to speak to me about?"

I looked him straight in the eye.

"Achilles, I'm going to ask you a question. Whatever the answer is, I want you to know, it doesn't matter. I hold nothing against you. We'll work it out together.

"Yes?"

"Achilles, did you take my watch?"

His eyebrows rose a little, his lips parted slowly. Otherwise, he visibly relaxed.

"Your watch?"

"On the beach, this morning. Did you take it?"

"No, of course not."

He said it simply, like a statement of the obvious. Neither afraid nor indignant.

"You did see my watch, I suppose? You remember it?"

"Certainly. It's a gold Rolex. Very smart."

"But you didn't take it?"

"Is it missing, then?"

"Lost, missing, stolen...."

I believed him implicitly. Not a trace of guilt in his behavior.

Hurriedly, I explained the circumstances, described our search, my decision to come and face him with it.

Alert, he demanded,

"Did anybody actually say that it was me? I mean, did someone send you after me?"

"No. Nobody accused you. It was my notion entirely to come here."

He sat back in his chair. Smiled broadly. Chuckled a little.

"Oh, David! You thought I'd stolen your watch? Ask yourself, why should I?"

I was taken aback. But persuaded by his cheerful denial, I laughed in turn.

"I don't know," I said, "why would anyone?"

"It is a valuable watch, I'm sure."

"So?"

"I have a watch. I don't need another."

"You could sell it."

"Where? To whom? On Porytos, impossible."

"Perhaps," I conceded, enjoying the game. "But you could go away for a while. Even stay away."

"But I don't *want* to go away. I like it here. I want to stay. I want my life to go on just as it is. And the quickest way to stop all that, I'd say, would be to steal something. From a tourist, especially."

"How so?"

"What do you think? Police. Questions."

"I haven't reported it, Achilles."

"You will. You'll have to. Who else knows the watch is missing?"

"Michael and Fiona – you met them – Costas the fisherman, the hotel manager."

"*He'll* certainly report it, if you don't get it back soon."

"Wouldn't he rather keep it quiet?"

"No. That would only make you angry. Couldn't risk the name of his hotel. Not at the start of the season."

"Do you think I'd make a noise?"

"If you didn't *I* would, for you. To get your watch back."

"Or, to divert attention from yourself?"

"In fact, I'd be doing the opposite. Bad enough. Alexis doesn't want the police coming in here. He deals with them at the station. As for publicity. Well, I'm afraid I'd be out on my ear if I was even suspected of thieving. I don't want to upset Alexis. He's been good to me."

Ending on a wistful note.

"Then, surely he'd defend you, if you were unfairly accused."

"I wouldn't like to test that. Of course if I had stolen your watch I couldn't hide it for long. Someone would find it, sooner or later. In the meantime the rumpus could be enough to close the House."

"Really?"

"It has always thrived on discretion," he murmured, smiling.

"Yes, I see."

"I'm sure you do, David." He gave a small laugh of exasperation. "Gods! I know we've just met. But surely you can see I'm not a thief. A little cheat? I have a good and comfortable life. A very good income, for my age. And a profession, if you'll allow, that I've only just begun to learn."

"I wouldn't say that," I demurred.

He bowed his head modestly.

We sat in companionable silence. The sound of the other boys returning indoors, floating through the hall.

While I admired, once more, his beauty and dignity.

Finally, I drew myself up, to go.

"I'm afraid I owe you an apology, Achilles."

"It is forgotten. But why are you leaving?"

"Shouldn't I?"

"You want to find your watch, of course. But perhaps I can help you."

"How?" I asked, confused.

"Let's talk about it. If you wish."

"All right."

"May I ask questions?"

"Please do."

I sat down again.

"All right," he began briskly. "When did you last see the watch?"

"When I went swimming with you this morning. I took it off as usual, and left it on a chair with my clothes."

"Which was also the last time *I* saw it," he confirmed to himself. "Where was this chair?"

"What? Well, behind the beach, of course. Where we were. Under the tree."

"Yes, but was it at the table where your friends were sitting?"

"Ah... well, no, as I remember, it wasn't the one I'd been sitting on. It was a little further back, at another table."

"An empty table, I think."

"Yes, it was."

"What a pity you didn't leave your watch on the table with your friends."

"Yes, I suppose so. It just seemed nicer, somehow, not to dump all our stuff on them, while they were having drinks."

"Yes, I understand. I remember, now, where we left our things. It was some meters behind your friends, because when we undressed they were in front, looking out at the bay."

"The soul of discretion."

"The point is, that if they remained more or less in the same position, they couldn't have been watching our things, when we were in the water."

"Well, I didn't ask them to – oh! I see, yes. You mean, it was a chance for somebody to grab the watch unnoticed. Quite the young detective, aren't you?"

"I used to read a lot of Agatha Christie," he explained seriously.

"So. Any more questions?"

"Please. Who else was on the beach this morning?"

"Let's see. Michael and Fiona; that old couple from Geneva; the English girls – and ah – Costas."

"Did they all help you look for your watch, when you found that it was missing?"

"No. Only Michael and Fiona. The old people went up to the hotel just after we came down. The other two left while we were in swimming. And Costas, I'm afraid, just didn't seem interested."

"He wouldn't. Well. It's not so complicated, I think."

"You mean, you have a theory?"

"I do."

"Tell me."

"Let me test it first. It won't take long. If I'm right you'll have your watch back very soon."

I was amazed. This was either advanced ingenuity – or plain audacity.

"It would help now, I think, if you went back to your hotel. But first I want you to watch me go into the dining-room, where I shall be, with many witnesses, for the next hour, or until I hear from you."

"Very well."

"In the meantime, I ask you to think back and remember which path I took, when I left the beach this morning."

I remembered quite clearly, in fact: he had taken the wider, public path which led up to the roadway, in the opposite direction to the hotel. Since I sat with my back to the hotel, and since we were discussing him at the time, I was able to watch him with uninterrupted view proceeding down the road to town until he was out of sight. The implication: he had had no opportunity to steal my watch, even if he had wanted to. Why hadn't I thought of this before?

I apologized again and left him in the dining-room with his colleagues.

Returning to the hotel with my mind a weary blank. Pushing the bicycle uphill, in the midday heat.

Back in my room, I had not even had time to strip for a cold shower when there was a knock at the door.

It was Yannis, one of the boys who serviced the rooms. He didn't want to come in.

"I believe this is your watch, sir?"

He held out his hand.

It was my Rolex, all right.

I took it and slipped it over my wrist, relieved.

"Where did you find it?"

"Ask Achilles," he grinned. "He'll explain."

My face fell.

"So he had it, all the time!"

"He never touched it," the boy laughed.

Waiting neither for thanks nor reward.

I went to the phone and got an outside line. Dialed the number Achilles had given me. Alexis answered, and Achilles came to the phone immediately.

"Well?" he asked, sounding pleased with himself.

"Hullo, Achilles. I have my watch back, fortunately. Now, what's the explanation?"

"I had an idea where it would be, and I asked Yannis to check it for me."

"Well, and where was that?"

"In one of the rooms at the hotel," he teased.

"Which room?"

"Don't you know, really?"

"No idea."

"The English girls', of course."

"What? How did you deduce that?"

"It was simple. Firstly, the red-headed one was sweet on you. That I noticed at once, on the beach. The way she stared. Never took her eyes off you. Oh, she was so jealous!"

I couldn't argue with that part of it.

"Secondly, nobody else had the opportunity."

"What about Costas?"

Achilles laughed.

"He's sooner screw you than rob you!"

"You know all about everyone, don't you?"

"It's an island, David.... No, it was the girl, all right."

"But, why steal my watch?"

"What else could she do? She was frustrated, angry. Probably grabbed it on an impulse. Maybe she meant to return it to you later. Or else hide it, and hope that *I* got into trouble."

"Vengeance, eh? The bitch."

"You should feel sorry for her."

"I don't. But... wait a bit, perhaps she just found it somewhere."

"And didn't give it back? She certainly knew it was yours."

"But if she found it on the beach *later*..."

"She didn't go out again, after lunch. Check with the manager. From the beach, to the dining-room; up to her room; down to the bar. Where she is now."

"Well, what a stupid thing to do!"

"Maybe she was trying to get your attention. Didn't really know what she was doing."

"I still can't quite believe it."

"There's a way to check."

"How?"

"Go down to the bar, now. Buy her a drink. Make sure that she sees the watch. Then study her face."

We made a rendezvous, for the evening. Then I showered, dressed and went downstairs to follow instructions.

The results were dramatic and conclusive. I was convinced.

That face suddenly flushed crimson; eyes opening wide, with growing fear. That hasty withdrawal from the bar.

I enjoyed every minute of it, sadist that I am.

Impatient to describe the scene to Achilles.

She was one air hostess who would not bother me again.

Checked out, with her friend, within the hour.

I informed the manager that I had found my watch – and that was that.

A COOL EVENING BREEZE DISTURBED the curtains at the French windows, lifting them up like bridal veils, or the wispy wrappings of Dionysian revelers.

Drying, at the same time, the beads of sweat on our naked limbs, tangled loosely together in near-surfeit.

As Achilles licked the inside of my thigh, and I, fondling his swollen nipples, buried my exhausted tongue in his deep navel.

What a night of wanton coupling!

"Achilles," I realized, kissing down hard and wet atop his golden head, "I can't be without you."

His hands slid up to massage my chest and sides.

"So, you will linger awhile, on our dreamy island, eh?"

"I meant – yes, I will – but, I meant more than that."

He raised himself, straddling me. To crouch tenderly, provocatively upon me. Gripping my body with his knees and thighs. Grasping my shoulders with wicked fingers.

"What more, David?"

"I want you. I want to stay with you. Come away with me. Be my companion. I shall do everything to make you happy."

His sensual ministrations continued, and there was no sign nor word of reaction.

Perhaps I had put it badly.

Perhaps he'd heard it too often before?

This latter thought I buried, pressing on to new and more determined declarations.

"Achilles, my friend, you are the most beautiful, the most sexy, the finest, the most interesting boy I have ever encountered. You have given me new experiences I shall never forget.

"You have shown me glimpses of a person, hints, which I should love to pursue. And help to develop. So. This is it. Come with me to Athens. Live with me. Be my boy, my lover. I shall give you everything, everything that we agree is good. Any sacrifice. I am not rich, but I am far from poor. I am, mainly, lazy. With you by my side to live and work for, I should not be lazy. I should be inspired. You can travel, with me, and on your own. You can have what you want of clothes, books, whatever. Only, be with me. Succor me."

There was a long silence as he paid respect to my proposal.

"Have I not given you succor tonight, David?"

"Oh, yes!"

"And yesterday?"

"Yes, you did."

"And tomorrow?"

"If you will."

"Then, why do you seek to change me? To take me away?"

A note of boredom in this.

"Do you have so many invitations?" I challenged, confidently.

"Far too many."

Deflated, I fell to silent consideration.

"I do not seek them, you know, I am happy. I want only to do my job. And to learn."

"And can you learn, hidden away on an island like this?"

"Yes, I can. I have. Much, in a short time. You would be surprised to know what I have learned – from Greeks; from Arabs; from Japanese; from Persians; from – Australians."

This last was too tactful, for me.

"And, apart from sex and prostitution."

He paused for breath.

"Apart from these infinite subjects you name.... I continue to learn much. From conversation. Reading. And correspondence."

"But Achilles," I insisted, the image of the middle-aged bather in my mind – though I strove to banish from my imagination the fact of his coupling with my darling, "surely... sometimes, your task must be... irksome to you?"

Achilles regarded me calmly with his clever blue eyes. Seeming to read my thoughts, undismayed.

"Of course," he almost giggled, "it is not always so much fun for me as tonight."

"Be serious."

"I am. You see, that is not the point – *my* pleasure. I do not labor for that. Otherwise, why should I *be*?"

I stared at him, bemused.

"And, isn't that just – normal?" he shrugged, concluding. "All work includes some toil."

More he would not say.

My disappointment and hurt were giving way to the old admiration.

"What do you read?"

"At first, it was whatever I could get hold of – Greek, English, French..."

"To pass the time."

"I have many ways to pass the *time*. I do not rejoice in its passing," he assured me. "I read for pleasure, and enlightenment. Both of which are without ending, as it seems to me. At my age. Do you agree?"

At my age.

"I agree."

"According to my old teachers, I could have chosen many different roads with some success. I chose my own, my fated way. And now, it interests me, it *absorbs* me, not less, but more and more. As I begin to see the limitless peaks and ranges of my possibilities."

He did not say that I was not, was far from the best he might experience. I saw it, felt it. He was worthy of the best, all bests. His aspirations deserved richest rewards.

"I will come back, you know, to find you again," I declared at length.

"I hope so!" he replied. "After all, you will find me easily enough."

"And the Temple of Poseidon, Achilles. Will you explain that, too? Why did I think I saw you? When you were not there?"

I half-expected him to admit to a trick, now.

Instead, he became thoughtful.

"I do not understand these things very well, David. But I think, I have been led to believe, that some very curious things can happen to people when they are at the right place, at the right time. Ready, and – waiting, let's say."

I decided to chew that one over later, alone.

ONE THING, ACHILLES WAS RIGHT about himself. He did not belong in Athens. With me, or anyone else. He barely belonged in the modern world. But, had found a shady niche in which to flourish. Among the whispers of the Ancients.

ALL THE SEX I COULD HANDLE, and then some.

That had been Christopher's promise.

Inexpensive, even free, depending upon my care in choosing partners.

And my generosity.

An erotic binge, with the horniest boys in all of Greece at my disposal.

For at least a week all thoughts concerning work, responsibility, the future would be put firmly aside in favor of the flesh.

Thus had I been persuaded to join Christopher on his spring vacation, pleasantly surprised by the moderate hotel rates in this quiet seaside resort near the southern tip of the Peloponnese.

"So, when are you going to get *into* it, dear? I can tell from the way you hold your *body* that you're randy as *hell*."

Or by the screwed-up expression on my face, I added mentally.

He was right. It had been too long. I was burning with abstinence, and the body must be put down.

We lay side by side on the white sandy beach, soaking up the morning sun after a late indulgent breakfast. A light breeze played with the tops of the Norfolk pines planted along the corso some time last century.

The sea was a perfect mirror for the brilliant sky.

And we had the place to ourselves.

Too early in the year for Greeks to swim. Such is the power of provincial custom over dazzling Easter sunshine.

School holidays. Bicycles wheeling by beyond the trees from time to time. Informal boys' games decorating the rocky breakwater.

"For instance," Christopher persevered, "what about that *sweetheart* in the dining-room this morning?"

I made a puzzled face.

"Oh, don't tell me you didn't notice him eyeing you off, because I won't believe you!"

I concentrated.

"You mean the waiter?"

"Bravo, dear! The waiter, yes. All coming back to you, now, is it? Five foot seven, under twenty-five, pretty as sin, and 'available' written all over him."

I grunted noncommittally.

"Don't you fancy him? He certainly fancies you!"

"I dunno," I confessed, sinking further into the warm sand.

In point of fact, I *had* noticed Dimitri, the very good-looking waiter at breakfast that morning. But couldn't somehow imagine coupling with him. Nor believe in his being interested in me.

"Never mind, dear. If he's *not* your type. Plenty more where that came from."

Christopher spoke from experience. He had raced off several of the hotel staff during our first days there. Without apparent effort.

There was a nice friendly atmosphere in this town, if you see what I mean. A peace and a pace light-years removed from Athens.

Before Christopher could name examples of the ready supply of young men, he was interrupted by the

arrival of two of them. Not in swimming-costumes like us, just strolling on the beach, during their free hours.

The greetings and introductions were cheerful all round.

One of the boys, Costas, looked at Christopher meaningfully, perhaps becoming possessive. He exuded that mixture of the active and passive which roughly meant he expected something to continue between them.

Christopher was neither emotionally nor mentally involved.

But looked ready enough for the first romp of the day.

We were invited to try out the newly-installed sauna with them.

My friend stood up, shaking sand out of his towel, and prodded me with his foot.

"Come on, Beautiful. Fate has taken a hand."

I couldn't see it. Remained with my face in the sand.

This Vassili was pretty enough, all dark curls and pectorals. Friendly, in the low-key manner of the locals.

No hustling here. Though going to the sauna would certainly lead to sex. A healthy, casual frolic.

Aux vacances.

But, no, I couldn't get my mind into it. Let alone my body.

My skin now rejoicing in the first early burn of the sun.

A kind of inertia, pleasurable.

Christopher cast a shrewd glance towards the breakwater.

"Well, all right. Since we can't tempt you we shall leave you to your transcendental masturbation!

Come on, fellers."

They moved off, breaking into a regular trot; Christopher, head and shoulders over the others, keeping up a steady flow of wit. To their evident amusement.

Silence again.

Only the muted breaking of the waves, and the cries of boys over whirring bicycle wheels.

I got up, walked back to the pines, bought cigarettes and a newspaper at a kiosk; returned to my towel, preparing to singe the other half of holiday me.

Briefly, and not too ruefully, noting the physical deterioration in this personage, which five years' living, not wisely, but too well, had produced: flesh pale, and rather flabby. Flat stomach? – never no more. Hips in definite fatty existence. Om.

I was blase about these phenomena. Experience – that is, disappointment and conflict – had led me to believe that my body's perfection or imperfection was a tedious irrelevancy. Boys were available, and could be had, one way or another.

I may have been a man heading for middle age – as friendly letters from Australia tactfully reminded – and doing it ignorantly at that. But I didn't care.

Protecting only my eyes, for the luxury of spying behind dark glasses; and my genitals, for presumably imminent holiday activity. Given the circumstances. And all offers to hand, thus far.

"Are you English?"

The approach was so direct that my attention was instantly drawn from the breakwater, and elsewhere, to confront this new arrival.

The first moment with Nikos epitomizes our whole story.

I hesitated, gagged, stuttered.

Why?

Because I had watched him cycle back and forth? Noted his good looks. Been riveted, the second

time, by the spectacle of his perfect, round, denim-wrapped buttocks rising and falling over the saddle.

Astonished to catch his eye, the third time; fixed boldly and unmistakably on mine. Nodding at me, emphatically, as he paraded that propped paragon past me in slow motion.

Even then, after one gasping, lustful look, I had not thought to speak to him.

Didn't know how to start.

"No," I spluttered unimpressively. "Australian."

"Oh," he grunted, clearly unconvinced.

He squatted beside me. Faded blue jeans and a black T-shirt, sleeves roughly cut off at the shoulder. To reveal budding brown biceps. Slim, short, tough. Dark hair brushed back in the old rocker fashion.

Eyes attractive in laughter, but normally hooded, suspicious.

An appealing smoothness, a physical compactness about him.

His nose long and straining to hook. To sniff me out.

"How old are you?" he inquired genially.

"Thirty-five."

"Oh, yes," he doubted. "Didn't you see me?"

"I saw you."

"Why didn't you call me over?"

"Call you over?"

"You want me, don't you?" he countered.

"Kiddo," I cautioned.

"You have to give a signal, to let me know. Then I join you and we make a deal."

I gaped at him. Faintly distracted by his nipples straining the taut black cotton.

"A deal?" I played dumb.

"Sex. What you want. How much."

He was becoming impatient with explanations.

"Have you got a light?" he rasped, sticking a cigarette in his bold, sensuous mouth.

It was a transparent professional ploy.

"No, I'm sorry, I haven't," I answered innocently, not being much of a smoker. Instinctively holding him off at the same time.

It was as if I had voiced a refusal he had never heard before.

The cigarette dropped into his palm. His other hand clawed at failure. All the blazing brightness of his approach died in an ashy instant.

"Kiddo," I wondered softly, "how old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"Come on. I'm an expert."

"I bet you are! Fifteen."

Probably less.

Shrewd, and reckless – and delicious. Make that a capital 'D'.

He stretched out on the sand beside me, kicking off his rubber thongs. Then he pulled off his T-shirt and bundled it under his head.

Dark skin, for a Greek.

Much sun in his days.

"I don't believe you are thirty-five," he murmured, knowingly. "And I don't believe you are Australian."

"What do you think I am? How old am I, then?"

"About 26-27."

I smiled.

"Thank you very much. You know your job."

"I hope so!" he replied, seizing his crotch.

"What are you doing now?" I panicked.

"This is my job. Right here."

"What a thing to say!" I twittered.

"It's true. This is my fortune. My cock."

I was spurred to irony.

"Oh, yeah. Is it *that* good?"

"You can tell me after. Nobody's been disappointed so far."

I should have laughed at his callow boasting if it hadn't been so proud and sincere.

"You go with men, for money, do you?"

He brightened.

"What hotel are you staying at?"

"I can't take you *there!*" I expostulated. Thinking of Christopher, Dimitri and my, god help me, image.

I had no intention of taking him anywhere.

At the moment.

But, he had begun to fascinate me. His whole *modus operandi*. The Mystery of him.

"Do you want to come for a beer? I know a good pub. Belongs to a friend of mine."

"Too early for me, kiddo."

I wondered why I was calling him that ridiculous no-name. Never used it before. Or since.

His disappointment leaked into his reasoning.

"You don't like me, then?"

"Yes, I do," I assured him hurriedly. "When I first say you I thought, 'What a handsome boy!'"

He repeated it, turning the words over behind his oval eyes, relishing the compliment.

"The second time you went past," I ventured, emboldened by his pressing closeness, "I thought, 'God!

What an ass!'"

He grinned, unflinching.

"You like my ass?"

"What I've seen so far," I hinted.

He chuckled.

"Oh! You want to fuck my ass, eh? Usually, they want *me* to do that."

"I do *not* want you to do that," I stated lucidly.

There was a pause.

Then, in one quick, graceful movement which I came to know well, he slipped off his jeans, baring his ripe young body to the sun – except for a brief cotton slip which barely contained his erection.

"Wow!" I breathed. "Be careful, kiddo."

He turned his head to regard me coolly.

"No one cares here, man. It's spring."

After a time, I saw Christopher approaching slowly along the wet sand at the water's edge.

It had to be lunch time.

I sat up.

"Are you going now?" the boy demanded.

"Yeah," I sighed, adding as if by force of ventriloquism, "Do you want to meet me tonight?"

He also sat up, briskly pulling on his jeans.

"O.K.," he said. "At 'Dino's'. The outside tables. Seven."

"O.K."

Christopher and I shared a gluttonous lunch of lobster and shellfish. After, I retired for an afternoon nap. He, too, had need of rest.

'DINO'S WAS ONE OF MANY SMALL BARS, or 'pubs', ranged along the sea-front. Inside, a bar, a jukebox, dim, colored lights and video games. Outside, across the roadway, a dozen or so metal tables and chairs set out under the pines. The cool semi-darkness of evening.

I had left Christopher at a similar establishment, not far away, in the safe custody of Costas and Vassili. Dimitri was also in the bar, playing darts. I said I'd take a walk and be back shortly.

The local boys were out in all their glory at this hour, strolling up and down, smoking and chatting.

I approached 'Dino's', but couldn't see the kid anywhere, so I decided to sit outside and wait, before ordering.

The moment I sat down, he was there, pulling back the chair beside me.

"Hi!" he said, confidently. "What kept you?"

I laughed.

"What's your name, anyway?"

"David."

He received this information with his usual skepticism.

Pushing my passport across the table, I invited him to check.

Finally satisfied about my name, age and nationality – though still suspicious on principle – he stretched out his short legs and sat back to study me.

"And what's *your* name," I countered.

"Nikos."

I never did get used to it. It didn't suit him, somehow.

"Uh-huh. Nikos. Aged-?"

He looked at me for a moment from under greenish eyelids. Decided it wasn't worth fencing anymore.

"Fourteen."

"Fourteen," I mused. "And his cock is his profession."

"Right!" he brightened.

"Don't you go to school, Kiddo?"

"Sure I do. School holidays now, though. Hey, listen! I got kicked out last term for punching a teacher. I don't know if they'll let me back in after Easter. No, I suppose they'll *make* me go back, the bastards."

"Why did you hit a teacher?" I asked, interested.

"Because he hit *me!*" he explained. Indignation rising at the memory.

I could just see him punching the poor sod. Didn't think I'd risk provoking him, myself. Of course he was much shorter; I could handle him easily enough. But in a tight corner I guessed he would fight tooth and nail until the bitter end.

In any case there was no threat of violence for the present. He was pleased with himself, and saw that I was impressed.

I didn't bother to ask why the teacher had hit him.

In case I agreed with the teacher.

Besides, there was this *atmosphere*, let's say, settling between us, not quite a relationship.

I found myself in a position of authority, with the kid more or less at my mercy.

This feeling remained on future occasions, even when he was at his most unpleasant and aggressive. I didn't realize, however, until after, how skilfully he created that atmosphere.

Nikos himself never realized it, I'm sure.

The more I talked to this kid, and dealt with him, one way and another, the more I learned about him that was undesirable and dangerous. But it never worried me. I felt detached from all that. Amused by him, aroused, enraged by turns. But well in control.

Whether I liked it or not.

"You know," he declared, with some thought hidden behind those opaque eyes of his, "You're old enough to be my father. I'll be like your son. When I come to Athens to live with you."

"Here, steady on!"

"Of course, you don't look it. You don't look *nearly* so old. You're in pretty good shape."

"Thank you very much," I laughed, drily. "I hope I manage to live out my vacation, before I fade away."

"You'll live it out with *me*. I'll show you around. We can hire a car. I know some great deserted beaches."

"Wait, wait," I was thinking. "How old *is* your father, kiddo?"

"Haven't got one," he stated bluntly. "Only got a mother. Silly old bitch. And seven brothers."

"Seven! Are they all as handsome as you?"

"No, I'm the best."

"Oldest, or youngest?"

"I'm in the middle, fuck it."

Fortunately for my sanity, perhaps, I never got to meet the brothers, nor the mother, much abused. Nikos seemed to operate largely outside of his family.

Except at mealtimes, He seldom had any money.

Though in fact, as I soon learned, everyone in town knew he was a whore. He was sometimes used by the locals. His family must have known. Didn't his mother care?

Some casual remarks made by hotel staff, concerning Nikos – it seemed he was to come up shortly on a charge of robbery with assault – led me to think that his mother might be mentally defective.

Oh, kiddo, what a life.

"Well, David," he sat up briskly. "You want to walk?"

"O.K.," I agreed. "Let's walk."

Of course, if I had thought a moment I should have understood that 'walk', in local parlance, meant 'go and have sex together'. I wasn't thinking clearly, however: I was enjoying our little 'atmosphere'. Keyed up by his good spirits and winning ways.

After leading me through a series of dark, narrow streets, away from the seafront – making me conscious of my height and his short legs as he trotted along to keep up with me – we arrived at a wire fence, and the gate of a school.

"My school," he explained, with a mixture of scorn and bravado.

I stopped, looking doubtfully at the well-lit playground and the residential streets at back and front.

"Do you always bring your clients here?" I asked playfully.

"Sometimes."

"Is it safe?"

"Sure. Don't worry. There are dark places round the back. Keep your voice down, and we'll go in quickly."

He hustled me across the street, through the gate of the high school and towards the shadows beyond the main building.

Even at this point, I wasn't preparing for sex; I was thinking how audacious of him to bring his tricks to the place where authority had cast him out. Droll.

If there were no night-guards.

Once out of the glow of the street-lamps Nikos stopped for a long piss against a palm tree; I joined him.

"Make it grow," he quipped.

Then, in a flash, he was round the corner of a smaller building, close to the back fence and more houses.

"O.K. here, David?" he inquired in a low voice.

"O.K.," I said, abashed.

Then his jeans and slip were around his ankles, his T-shirt rolled up to his chest. I moved in to embrace him.

After a quick kiss, in which he opened his lips willingly enough but otherwise took no part – like the insensible vessel he emulated – he became tough and business-like.

"Right. What do you want?"

"Eh?"

"You've got to tell me what you want."

The question was abrupt and unanswerable. I had never been asked it before. My instinctive response was to ignore it, urge him to change the subject.

While I stood, speechless, he asked me again, urgently.

"Everything," I joked.

Irritating him. Mocking his profession, perhaps.

So, I knelt down, and began some preliminary licking, for his pleasure. As I thought.

"Come on, man," he whined. "Finish it!"

Finish it? I thought we'd just begun, but was too surprised to say.

He started to thrust his hips forward rapidly, bending his knees in excitement.

Or ennui.

The whole picture was wrong, and I tore it up.

Spitting out his cock and spinning him around to taste other territories.

What an ass. May I never forget.

Perfect buttocks.

Of which I made him, eventually, more gratefully aware.

Meanwhile he was groaning and tutting like a spinster over a dropped stitch.

Even loftily long-suffering, as I explored his anus with a tender Finger-tip.

This, too, became pointlessly dull.

I returned to his erection.

"Finish it, man!" he resumed, monotonously.

But. Thrust as he would, tug as I would, after trying, he could not, as he poetically put it, finish.

I gave up completely, interest exhausted.

"All right, kiddo, let's call it a night."

He dressed in a millisecond. Contrite, and watchful.

I headed briskly out of the schoolyard with the kid following at an uncertain, dusty trot. Three successive farewells, with emphasis mounting, were required to shake him off.

A waste of time.

I stomped my way back through the winding ways, thinking of Christopher, alcohol. Dimitri, even.

A disappointment, Nikos. Big come-on, leading to nought. Yawn.

I was overlooking his age, naturally.

Needlessly cheated by his tricks.

With pleasure and relief I turned back onto the corso, recognizing my surroundings once more.

Hoping only that I could locate my company.

At the same moment, only a few meters away, Nikos reappeared, hurtling out of the next lane-way and heading straight towards me, wearing that original come-on smile.

"Hi, David! Where you going?"

I had to hand it to him.

Headed off at the pass.

"How did you do that?" I laughed.

"I know this lousy town inside out," he growled.

We had a couple of beers.

"I suppose you're not going to give me any money tonight."

"Pardon?"

"Because I didn't come."

It was on my lips to say that I didn't care whether he'd come or not. But he was convinced.

My feelings took another turn.

"You kids!" I cried, exasperated. "You think everybody has to give you money! You all want money.

For nothing."

"Nothing!" He was dignified in his outrage.

"Well, I don't know what you're used to around here, kiddo, but it was certainly nothing for *me*."

He shut up, and I rose to go.

"Do you want to go to the disco?" he offered brightly. "The disc-jockey is a friend of mine. I can play whatever I – you like."

"No, thanks, kiddo. Another night, perhaps. 'Bye, now."

I strode off down the street, towards the other bar, carrying in my almost quiet mind the picture of a short, stocky figure, temporarily out of tricks.

THAT HIS PICTURE STAYED IN MY IMAGINATION, acquiring a tinge of pathos, was unfortunate for me, and suggests that the kid had been far from out of tricks.

And thus, after an impatient, lazy day of fantasy and delusion, I waited, a second time, outside 'Dino's'. In the balmy night air.

Christopher, safely occupied as usual, was all mistaken innuendo about my secret conquest. Was it Dimitri? I let him think so. Simpler all round.

"Hullo, David," the kid breezed, swinging that lovely bum into a seat beside me. "Drinking alone?"

"Waiting for you, kiddo."

He grinned knowingly, and I called for some beers.

Sprawling in his chair with an almost mocking sense of cool.

He knew he had me.

Though the special atmosphere remained.

Conversation fizzled out as we strained toward a showdown.

"You wanna walk, kiddo?"

He scrutinized my face, his shrewd eyes almost shut.

"You gonna pay me, David? Because I'm not going without money."

"Oh, come on, kiddo."

"I won't go without money," he insisted firmly.

"You really want to be a whore, at your age?" I pleaded.

"What would you do if you didn't have a father?"

"I don't. Haven't had since I was your age. I work for my money," I concluded, self-righteously.

"All right, you find me a job."

But we both knew that would take time.

His cool had frozen into indifference.

"All right, how much do you want?"

"That's up to you, David."

"How? If it were up to me, you wouldn't get a bean. Don't you have a fixed price?" I sneered.

"Up to you," he repeated, somewhat put down.

I pulled loose notes out of my pocket.

"Well, I haven't got much cash on me. What do you say to 500?"

"For the same as last night?"

"Last night was nothing."

"I'll come tonight, David. I had too much beer last night."

"As you like, kiddo, as long as *I* come. Understand?"

He nodded cold comprehension, and I held out the note.

"No, after," he said, and we began to walk into the maze again, heading for the old schoolyard.

Chatting brightly all the way. About the records I could send him from Athens. How he would come and live with me as my son.

He took me to a different corner of the playground this time – causing me to wonder how often he had come in here after dark, leading his clients, here and there, for variety.

Now we stood on the dusty wooden verandah of a portable classroom, almost in darkness. I put my cigarettes, lighter and wallet down on the boards, rising to look at him, with a sense of detachment, and some responsibility.

Already he had whipped down his jeans and slip, rolled up his T-shirt as before. Stood tensed, feet apart, as if I was going to hit him. Chin up, eyes remote.

I don't know why exactly, but amidst the prevailing unreality I felt touched by him. My hands gently grasped his bare shoulders.

"Oh, kiddo."

"Don't try to kiss me, man!" he spat, turning his face sharply aside.

"Why not?" I wondered.

"I don't kiss," he declared.

His body rigid and unfriendly.

I stepped back a pace.

"You can do anything you like – from here to here," he offered, indicating an area of flesh between neck and knee.

"Aw, shit!" I realized to myself. "How can I make love to a boy who doesn't even want to be kissed?"

As I was retrieving my wallet and fags, he pointed out:

"I could have taken those. I didn't try to steal them, did I?"

"No, you didn't."

I approached him again, and ugly words came out of my mouth, surprising me. Once more I had the sensation of being a ventriloquist's doll:

"Listen, kiddo, your head's full of shit. When it comes to sex, you know nothing. In fact I never knew anyone who knew less. My advice is – " I don't know why I thought it was my place to give advice, but I did feel the compulsion – "either learn, find out, and do it properly – otherwise, forget it. Right now, you're a waste of time."

I made that my exit-line, momentarily gratified by his crumpled face and hanging head. Before I reached the front gate of the high school I heard him pattering along briskly behind me, whistling, about as loudly as it is possible to whistle.

In the dark.

He stayed his distance, however. I made it back to my hotel without running into an ambush.

Feeling quite pleased with myself.

And already weaving fresh fantasies.

THE NEXT FEW DAYS WERE TAKEN UP in sight-seeing: Christopher, Costas, Dimitri and I motored about in a hired car, visiting nearby ruins.

We made a cheerful foursome, staying at small village inns, taking two double rooms.

After an initial skirmish for form's sake, it was clear that Dimitri and I were not going to get it on together. For one thing, we had too much in common. A chance remark about football set us off, and we continued for hours. He himself played in the local team which was quite highly rated. And he was knowledgeable about the first division championship.

The more we talked, the more 'butch' we became, in our talk and our behavior. Driving each other further and further back upon an ideal self which we both sometimes used. Enjoying it. We got on like a house on fire. Everything you could name – except sex. That is, together. He had made no bones about his availability at the start. And there was no doubt about it, we were strongly attracted to each other.

Which just goes to show, amongst other forgotten cliches, that there are more ways than one for two guys to get together.

We began a good friendship, in fact, while our two companions never found the time.

One day in our room I asked Dimitri about Nikos – casually, of course, claiming truthfully that I'd heard a bit of gossip. Dimitri treated it as a joke.

"That punk? Don't waste any sympathy on him. He's been in trouble since the day he was born. The cops are always hauling him in for something. Sooner or later he's gonna be put away for good."

"This latest charge sounds serious. Hear anything about it?"

"It was a tourist – a Swede, I think. Guy in his fifties. The story goes that the kid got him drunk, then led him off to some dark spot and beat him up. For his wallet, of course."

The old schoolyard.

THE DAY WE ARRIVED BACK AT OUR HOTEL by-the-sea, in high spirits, it happened that Nikos was walking past with another kid. With all the commotion of getting out and unloading the car, it was natural that we noticed each other. He was coming towards me, sizing up the situation, when Dimitri's hand fell on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze as he prepared to go off to his work.

I saw it register on the kid's face: a kind of fatalistic droop.

As he passed the hotel he greeted Dimitri with respect, and turning briefly to me with a face bright with sincerity, murmured:

"Life to you."

Half-hearing the wish, Christopher spoke up.

"Who was *that*, may I ask?"

"Who?" I repeated vaguely.

He was too convinced of my attachment to Dimitri to pursue it.

Knowing better, my mind acted otherwise. Once again I was left with the poignant image of one disappointed and, in this case, misled.

It stayed with me, stinging, through lunch and siesta.

THEN CAME OUR LAST NIGHT IN TOWN.

A pity not to see the kid again. So I did some organizing: I made a loose arrangement with Dimitri to meet me at the football club, and told Christopher we would all get together later.

Then I set out for 'Dino's', mellow with sunset and goodwill. Already nostalgic for my vacation which was not quite over.

Nikos was sitting outside the pub with some pals. I beckoned him over.

"Listen, kiddo, it's my last night. I'm leaving tomorrow morning. You wanna walk with me?"

I showed him a bank-note wrapped around my fingers.

He regarded me doubtfully for a moment or two, surprised by my fresh approach. Then he gave me a cool little nod, waved to his company and turned into the first side-street, with me at his side.

"So," he said, affecting a tough voice for the moment, "you still like my ass, eh, Mr. David?"

"Best thing you've got, kiddo."

"What, the ass?" he wondered. Almost turning to look.

"Yeah, your lovely ass."

And so saying, I gave it a good squeeze, as we made our way, yet again, to the hospitable high school.

This time we returned to the dark corner of our first encounter. By the back fence.

He stripped, and I followed suit. No restrictions were announced.

It was lovely to hold his smooth brown form, with his dark head way down on my chest.

Seemingly freed from haste.

We handled each other exploratively, and he commented on my size. I said I bet he told that to all the guys. But he didn't see the joke.

Instead, he stretched out on a low wooden bench, and waited for me to suck him off.

As I began to suck, he took my hand and, placing it between his thighs, guided my forefinger into his rectum. He managed this with amazing ease, considering his former coyness. Indeed, he was very comfortable and accommodating. Firmly erect, and, as he said, fairly dying to blow liters of sperm.

Didn't, though, in the event. That climax eluded him again.

I wondered briefly if he was carrying some debilitating infection – every pox under the sun! my mind screamed. Then forgot about it. He was too enticing to provoke prudence.

Resting back on my heels while he stood and pissed, I involuntarily remarked once more upon the perfection of his young buttocks.

Amid my pornography, let me be a witness to beauty. God created also buttocks.

Nikos was as susceptible to a compliment as I am to genuine beauty.

Bladder emptied, he swung half-around, rested his palms on his thighs and waggled his pride at me.

"You wanna fuck my ass, David?" he sweetly solicited.

I became as mindless as any rutting groundhog. Stumbling towards him in hobbling jeans.

Just as my foreskin brushed electrically on his anus, he stood up and stepped away.

I couldn't see his face.

"You see," he observed, "I go small when you try to get in me."

I could have insisted. It would have been simple to remonstrate, penetrate, consummate.

But I'd had enough.

"I want to come," I said quietly, "and then, if you like, I'll buy you a beer for goodbyes."

He began to masturbate me, obediently. But his technique was crude and unsatisfactory. Finally I took over the task.

Grabbing at his ass again.

He bent. Was he getting, as it seemed, excited? Why now?

My finger slid up him again. I palpated his buttocks.

I started to come in a moment of madness.

"Give me that ass!" I grossly groaned, and he thrust it once more blindingly towards me.

Holding onto his narrow hips, I reached my climax, scattering the good seed somewhat carelessly.

After, he craned his neck over his shoulder, to examine.

"You've come on my shirt," he muttered.

"Sorry," I gasped. Still reaching into the starry void for my absent self. "It'll wash out."

"It won't," he countered, sullenly. "Not with black. It stains."

I felt mean, as he squeezed and scraped the fabric. My best shirt, I could feel him protesting.

"Sorry, kiddo. I'll buy you a new one."

He waited until we were dressed and leaving.

"What kind of shirt?"

"Whatever you like."

"When?"

"Whenever. Tomorrow morning. Have to be early, though."

"Shops are open now," he reminded, without hope.

So they were.

I pushed some notes into the back pocket of his jeans and we went shopping.

He knew what he wanted, went straight to it: not an expensive garment, just another T-shirt with almost no sleeves, and two broad black stripes across the chest. Deciding to wear it, to show it off, he allowed the assistant to bundle the soiled black one into a plastic bag.

Back on the corso, Nikos' mates were still sitting outside 'Dino's'. We joined them. Nikos wanted a beer, and I found myself ordering for everyone. The other kids were friendly enough, surprised by my ability to speak their language. But cool, sitting comfortably on the edge of insolence. Until they had taken my measure.

Time passed pleasantly, with the smell of the sea blowing in to us.

Meanwhile, Nikos was inviting more and more kids to join us. Hailing them from across the street, from along the corso. Not friends. Just anyone.

I didn't notice this until, suddenly waking up, I found myself jammed in the center of a large, noisy group of youths, all drinking rather heavily. The atmosphere was now alienating. I was ready for bed.

Before saying farewell to the kid, I crossed the street to use the lavatory at the back of the bar.

When I returned, everybody had left, except Nikos.

"We're going to the disco, now, David. You wanna come?"

"No thanks, kiddo. I'm bushed."

He knew I'd had enough. Leave him in his element now. At least he'd been polite enough to ask me. We parted with a simple hand-shake and knowing smiles.

Immediately after, I was pounced upon by the waiter, who had been lurking anxiously among the deserted tables.

It was a very large bill. I asked him to explain it, and it seemed to be fair.

"Phew!" I whistled. "And I started off buying a quiet beer for a friend. Well, what the hell. My last night, eh?"

I was pretty drunk.

Reaching for my wallet, I dug my hand in philosophically.

Empty.

Instantly sober.

"I've been robbed," I cried indignantly.

Having left my wallet on the table when I went inside to piss. Thinking with alcoholic perversity that I would be insulting my company if I took it with me.

The waiter was tapping his foot, while I continued to expostulate wildly.

A voice beside me asked quietly, "What's wrong, David?"

The kid had come back. The others were disappearing in the distance.

I turned on him angrily.

"Someone's taken the money out of my wallet!"

He gazed at me stonily.

"Come on, David, it could've been anybody."

He cast his arm about, in a broad gesture of confirmation.

"You were *there*, you rat! It was in front of you on the table!"

He drew himself up with dignity. "I didn't touch your wallet. It could've been anybody."

Then he left to rejoin his mates.

I was spitting rage and impotence.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" the waiter demanded, flourishing the now more formidable bill.

"Well, *I* haven't got any money, as you can see."

I held out my wallet and he searched through it. My passport was still there.

The man threw his arms up in the air.

"What am I supposed to do? *I* can't pay this."

"Do what you like," I muttered, indifferent to *his* problem. "You can stick it up your ass for all I care! I'm going to the police."

I stomped off to find the police station.

My first time inside one, anywhere.

How removed from normal reality I had become, striding into that place, full of my rights. Annoyed by the casual response I met at the desk. Ranting imprudently, about Greeks and their habits.

But if you behave in this arrogant manner in Greece, quite likely people are going to accept your case. You might be somebody important. Better not upset you. Could mean more trouble.

It wasn't cunning on my part. I was just innocently raving, heedless of the circumstances, the possible risks to myself.

I saw a succession of detectives, until my giving Nikos' name and description set the machine in motion.

In moments I was sitting in the back of a police-car, two detectives in front with the driver, as we

cruised about the town.

Looking for kiddo.

Dared I suggest the schoolyard? Rather not.

After calling in at a few bars and discos, making discreet inquiries, treating me with the utmost courtesy throughout, they had unwittingly persuaded me to enjoy the whole experience. Fresh. Straight from television.

We also made a call at kiddo's home, a run-down duplex in a poor neighborhood, where mother eventually appeared at her door, haggard, toothless, and squawking plaintively: what had the little bastard done now? As to his present whereabouts, she was unhelpful.

After half an hour of leisurely cruising – during which we passed Costas and Christopher, who turned to gaze after me, white-faced – there would be some explaining to do there, but let him wait – we spotted kiddo and two of his pals, strolling innocently past 'Dino's'. We had already stopped there, to question the now subdued waiter.

The detectives piled the three kids into the back seat. With me. Nikos pressed immediately against my side, fragrant with fear and his new cotton T-shirt.

No, not fear, surely. Embarrassment.

It was a funny thing. As the police car squealed away from the curb, heading for the station with maximum drama, Nikos and I found ourselves instantly secure, together in our own special atmosphere. We became unaware of the others.

He pressed closer to me, and he was never so sweet and sexy as he was in those hectic, car-borne moments.

In the charge-room, the boys were roughly handled, positioned against the wall. While I was offered coffee, cigarettes, and a fresh ashtray.

One by one they were taken into another room and questioned. When it was Nikos' turn to be isolated, I heard the continual shouting of two voices, slaps, sharp blows, as from a metal ruler, or the like.

Then, there was a short period of calm, as the three boys stood once more against the wall. Blank-faced. And I finished my coffee.

I stared at Nikos, willing him to look up. When, finally, I caught his eye, I gave him a look rich with puzzlement and hurt feelings. For a moment, his face showed shame, then he averted his gaze and resumed his stony stare.

It was my turn for a private interview with the inspector. I was received with great courtesy. He listened to my circumspect story with patience. Of course, I made no mention of sex. Probably he read between my lines but gave no sign of it, in his face or tone of voice. He was sympathetic.

In his opinion, Nikos had indeed stolen my money. The boy had a long record. But there was no proof. He could charge him, and bring him to trial for theft, but then, naturally, I should have to come back and give evidence. Perhaps it would be inconvenient for me.

I agreed that it would.

My interest in legal proceedings draining away fast, now that I had enjoyed the heady pleasure of taking action.

I did not even consider who might be hurt more, in the event, by a detailed exposure of the kid's professional activities.

Sheepishly, I suggested to the gentleman that I simply thought I had had to report the theft.

He replied blandly that it was his duty to investigate it.

It rested with me.

"After all," I admitted, "it was not a large sum of money. Hardly worth dragging a young boy into

court for."

"If you think so, sir."

A FEW DAYS AFTER MY RETURN to Athens, my head still full of the adventure, I impulsively sent off a postcard to Nikos, addressed c/o 'Dino's':

Can't help wondering how you are, kiddo. Look after yourself.

Good Luck. David.

Within a week, I received a reply, written out in painstaking English. Explanations, excuses, apologies. A joke or two.

If I would arrange the bus fare for him, he would be delighted to come to Athens and live with me. He would be like my son.

The letter stood on the table by the telephone.

Phantasy raged.

But, frankly, I didn't know what to do about it.

6. Stelios

IT WAS MY SECOND TRIP to this quiet seaside resort on the southern Peloponnese. In midsummer, and alone.

Unsupported by Christopher, I ventured back for a second look at the remembered paradise – far too soon, and very much outside my budget.

Counting the drachs.

Why? To look for Nikos. The teenage hustler. With the perfect ass.

Tired of fantasy and indecision.

Three times he had written to me, always on the same theme. Marriage. Adoption? Merger, in Athens.

So I went back to find him. To talk it out. Must be terms satisfactory to us both.

Which we would find.

I remembered the diversion of his inexperienced hustling; the excitement of his nakedness dangerously offered in the schoolyard by night; the adventure, and conclusion to our association, petty theft, and police action.

Determined neither to hold the latter against him in any way, during negotiations, nor to allow myself to be so distracted by his sexual possibilities as to lose my sense of judgment.

We would work something out.

Perhaps, in the end, we would settle for a few days of satisfactory sex, fairly paid for, and some parting gifts.

First to find him, and ascertain whether our reunion, after two months, could create again that special atmosphere which had been so perceptible when we were together. Including the odd sense of strength it had given me. And the boy's inclination to play the role of my wayward son.

This time I had booked a room, with some trepidation, in the cheapest pension on the list. It turned out to be a beautiful old stone and timber building of two stories, with plain, clean rooms and a view of the beach.

The staff were a family, mother, grandmother, sons (father, backstage), and the welcome felt genuine.

The place was right for me – low-key and friendly. I wished I had stayed there the first time.

A handsome teenage boy showed me to my room, carried in my valise.

We chatted about the best places to swim. Later in the day I found that he had a twin brother, equally engaging. One of them offered to take me to their 'secret' swimming spot.

I relaxed, with a sense of comfort and succor.

Having unpacked and changed, I went straight down to the beach. Swam all morning, sunbathed until lunchtime, ate a gluttonous lunch, and slept through the afternoon.

In the evening, showered and spruce in my summer glad-rags, I took up a position at 'Dino's' cafe. Sitting outside under the pines, as I had when I first met Nikos.

Subtly different it all was, in July. With the heat affecting everyone and everything. Slowing the world down. 46 suffocating degrees it had been that day.

The groups of strolling boys and men seemingly swollen in number.

And the atmosphere – a touch aggressive.

I sat at my table, alternately staring at the dark sea and surveying the passing throng. Expectantly. I drank many cold beers. Smoked many cigarettes.

Nikos did not appear.

Others did, however.

Other boys his own age, and older. Amongst whom I thought I recognized friends of his. Though they responded to my greetings only with smirks. Or spitting aside onto the footpath. I could make no friendly inquiries. Others looked like the crowd who had bled me for free drinks at Nikos' urging. Had stolen my wallet, or watched it being stolen. Still, I wasn't sure. Drunk as I had been on that fateful night.

And now fast proceeding towards the same state. As darkness came, and Nikos didn't. I stared and waited, scanning faces.

Perhaps drawing too much attention to myself. In my solitary survey.

Overhearing a remark or two. Half a sentence, followed by youthful guffaws.

I was being discreetly mocked.

Nothing much I could do about it, beyond resentment.

Until I caught a word or two, more crudely offensive. Maybe they'd forgotten I spoke Greek.

Angry, I replied in kind.

Heads turned.

Too loud, was I?

Same words, though.

But the innocent faces of the youths I had shouted at made me wonder if I'd been mistaken.

This sort of thing happened several times.

Straining the nerves.

As I threw back the cold beers.

No cool breeze this evening. It was stifling.

Tension in the air.

The passing parade thinned out, as the pubs and cafes filled.

I had made my presence well and truly felt.

But, still no Nikos.

BACK TO THE HOTEL, WITHOUT EATING. Unpleasantly drunk, irritated, frustrated. A few cigarettes put me to sleep. With a headache which stayed on for breakfast.

Breakfast, however, and the fresh sea air that came with it, made a difference.

Served to the guests informally, as we emerged one by one from our cell-like rooms, and sat in armchairs placed along the walls of the broad corridor. Newspapers and magazines scattered about. One large window at the far end, opening wide to morning sun and sea-breeze. Glimpses of palm-fronds, Norfolk pines, and the alluring sea.

A generous pot of tea put me to rights again, and a stack of hot fresh rolls, with butter and honey, didn't hurt either.

Rather glibly I concluded that young Nikos must be languishing behind bars – recalling a charge of robbery with assault against him – and thus temporarily unavailable. I would inquire, but later. My interest dwindled, once I accepted the fact of his enforced absence.

Callous brute, I. He'd make no drachs out of me this time.

IT WAS HOT ON THE BEACH - but not too hot, if you took regular dips in the sea. Which, by contrast, was remarkably cold, for July.

I wandered along the sand, far away from the hotels and crowded tourist area. Found a spot which was deserted but for a few locals.

It was school holidays again, as on my first visit. I had seen bicycles and boys everywhere.

A group of these kids now chatting nearby, their bikes lying flat in the sand around them.

Stretched out on my towel, I felt too lazy even to look at them.

But was aware.

Being randy as a mountain goat in May-time. This midsummer season.

Needing the shock of the cold sea-water on my doubly burning body.

Swimming out and floating on my back; diving and rolling about like a seal gone wild in orgasm, finding liquid union with provocative nature.

With a touch of calculated thoughtlessness, perhaps exorcising the last demon echoes of insults from last evening's vigil, I emerged from the water directly in front of my neighbors. And strode towards them.

Boldly fondling my sex, under the thin guise of adjusting my clinging costume.

Holding their gaze the while. Until turning aside at the last minute to return to my towel.

I didn't even notice what they looked like. Except for their being young and male. I had no plan to seduce. Would have spoken to them if I had. Just had this urge to make a statement, to flaunt the masculine energy I felt.

A small gesture, a stupidity. Satisfying and quickly forgotten.

I opened the local newspaper, idly scanning the pages. Turning to the sports section for news of my old mate Dimitri, and his football team. Must look him up today, too, I thought.

A soft thud, as two brown knees hit the sand beside me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the boy sitting on his heels, hands resting on muscular thighs. Holding an unlit cigarette.

"Hey, you got a light?" he murmured.

"No, I'm sorry, I haven't," I replied absently. Having found a report of last Sunday's match. Dimitri starring, as usual.

The boy didn't move.

"You read Greek newspapers?" he squinted.

"No," I explained, the weight of sarcasm lightened somewhat by a quick laugh, "I just look at the pictures."

He grinned sheepishly.

Unruly dark brown curls. Soft eyes of the same color. A wide-open friendly face. Sagittarian, my guess. Just look at that mouth.

"Where you from, friend?" he went on quietly.

Relenting, I fished my lighter out of the beach-bag. Accepting a cigarette from him, without wanting it. But with a sudden urge to touch.

He held his big brown hands around mine as we both lit up, taking our time over it. Our strangers' eyes darting quick, inquiring glances.

"Athens," I exhaled, lying back on my towel, one hand behind my head.

For a moment we were both distracted by the sight of my erection.

Then, "Are you Greek?"

He knew I wasn't. But let the questions and answers drift along unhurried.

"How old are you?" I wondered, surveying his large adolescent frame.

"Fifteen, just."

That would be the truth.

"You look older."

"I know."

"Mix with older boys?"

"Mm. My brother's friends. I get on better with them."

"Spend much time with men?"

"Quite a bit," he admitted.

As I ran out of questions, he took up the thread, launching into a monologue.

The kind of boy who likes to talk to you, open up, using a lot of words. Doesn't need any encouragement. Naturally friendly.

Within half an hour, I had been made familiar with his sexual experience to date. Including one visit to a 'red-light' area. Which he dismissed as meaningless. But necessary. And was clearly proud of having done it.

Meanwhile, an intermittent affair with one of his high school teachers – male – whom I was to see later.

And, most piquant – and numerous – his sexual encounters with male tourists of various nationalities. Particularly yachtsmen.

All of this came out, at his own pace, in a matter-of-fact drawl. The constantly moving cigarette held between his fingers, suggesting a bland discussion of sports results, or small business problems.

Finally he petered out. Looking, all at once, oddly shy, after such frankness.

I felt called upon to respond.

"Do you want to have sex with me?" I asked him.

He shifted about, frowned, changed his tone of voice.

"Is that what you want, mate?"

Whether or not it was, it was essential that he leave the business of soliciting to me. That's the way it was.

I considered him, taking him in as best I could in the glare of sun on sand.

Not pretty, not handsome. Endearing. In a healthy, earthy sort of way. Large, fleshy, but not fat. Deeply tanned.

The energetic, sporting type.

Fun-loving.

I could imagine.

I could see by now that he was well-endowed.

The eyes asked for a more personal, or at least congenial basis for association than mere flesh-trading.

I liked him. Almost by surprise.

"It could be fun," I bantered, non-committally. My hand reaching out to massage his chest, with its superb pectoral development. Nipples hard and dark against my palm.

He didn't mind. Exposed as we were. His friends close by, following every move.

I shifted closer, became bolder in my fondling.

"What is your name?"

"Stelios."

"Stelios. I am David. Where shall we go?"

"Usually they take me to their houses."

He meant hotels.

"Bit awkward at this hour. They'll be cleaning the rooms."

"Where are you staying, my friend?"

"Just there. 'The Palms'."

"Ah, the old one."

It was enough for him to classify me and my income with some accuracy. I was glad of this.

"Shall we swim?" I suggested, feeling slightly at a loss, and fogged by the cigarette.

He let me take his hand, almost like a tame bear-cub, and we ran in together.

Shock! Cold. Breathlessness.

"Oh! It's cold, David."

"I know. Why is that, love?" I gasped.

"I don't know. It's like this sometimes in summer."

We stayed in the shallows, crouching.

My hands had already removed his costume, were squeezing his fine, full buttocks. Probing.

Stelios did not object. Only, stationary as we were in the placid waters, he began to shiver. And so did I.

"Not here, mate," he reasoned mildly.

Quite right. Cold, uncomfortable.

An unpaying audience all along the corso.

And anyway, our teeth were chattering.

We staggered out onto the sand, both blue with the cold. The sun beat down as fiercely as ever. But we were driven to towel ourselves, and then each other, with some vigor.

I could have taken him then and there. Under our carapace of towels. His dark curls wet on his forehead, eyes trusting. He wouldn't have stopped me.

But I didn't want to be arrested.

So, we pulled on shorts and T-shirts, collected his bicycle, and made our way up to the nearest beachfront cafe.

Finding that we had the tables all to ourselves. Sipping hot, thick coffee, and smoking.

Our now familiar legs tangling and unwinding under the table.

"You know, Stelios," I suddenly realized, with calming clarity, "I like you. I really do. Shall we be friends?"

The direct talker is always the most shaken by direct talk. Stelios shook.

"Of course. We are friends, David."

Doubts flickered behind his lashes.

"Do you believe that I like you?"

"Sure." He became worldly. Trying for cynicism. "It's only words, mate."

"But I *mean* the words. We haven't done anything yet. But I do, I really like you. As a person."

He thought a while. Preparing a fresh confession.

"People say a lot of things. It doesn't matter. It's only words. Men, they promise you everything, with sweet words, then they go away."

A disappointment? Bitterness. Worse?

I was about to ask him.

"One guy," he pressed on, "he said everything, he gave me everything for one week. Later, he was supposed to come and take me away, on his yacht. To America. Around the world. I didn't care about all that. But I liked him. He was real nice. And I did what he wanted. Then I waited for him to come back.

But he never did. He was going to write to me, too, He never did.... It's all words, in the end, my friend."

Naturally, I was moved by this sketch of trauma past.

"When was this, Stelios?"

"Long time ago, mate. Doesn't matter now."

From that moment I was dedicated to convincing him of my sincerity and reliability. I didn't care if we *never* had sex.

He did, though.

I invited him to come and have lunch with me. He said thanks, he had to get home. Perhaps shy about going into a restaurant. Being paid for.

"Want to meet later, then?"

"O.K."

I searched around in my mind for a way to do this pleasantly.

"What do you do at night, Stelios? Where do you like to go?"

"There's nothing much," he grumbled.

"There are cinemas, anyway. I've seen them. Shall we go to a movie?"

"O.K. Sure."

Pressed to choose for us, he told me the name of a cinema, where to find it.

"Eight o'clock."

"O.K., David. See you!"

"Don't forget," I called, as he cycled off. I knew he wouldn't.

I WAITED OUTSIDE THE FLOODLIT, stucco-front cinema, with its gilt statuettes and lurid posters.

Trying not to look like I was waiting for anyone. Taking in the scene with relish. The foyer and terrace swarming with boisterous teenagers. Smoking, buying paper buckets of popcorn. It was the once-a-week night, I learned, when tickets were half-price for schoolkids. They had taken over the place.

For me, the cinema had a potent feeling of the past. Saturday nights at the movies. When there was still magic.

I had just begun to wonder whether Stelios would in fact turn up, when I caught sight of him galloping across the street to meet me.

Taking my arm, apologetically.

"Sorry I'm late, my friend. I had some troubles to sort out for my sister."

"It's all right."

I didn't know if he was really late. Just that I arrived first. But we were both a little surprised by our pleasure in meeting the second time. With familiarity. Rested, showered, dressed up, sunburned, catching the excitement of the surrounding atmosphere.

On our way to the ticket office a dozen boys greeted him, with affection and respect. Nobody seemed to mind me being with him.

"Upstairs or downstairs?" I asked him.

"Upstairs is better, mate," he advised, seriously.

A little more expensive. What other difference, I wondered.

Having climbed the carpeted stairs, walls covered with gilt-framed blow-ups of old Hollywood stars and a few Greek stars, giving the tickets to a properly uniformed usher to tear, I began to understand.

The place was packed. Jumping with kids. Mostly boys – at least, upstairs.

And amidst all this faded plush, despite the distance of the ornately framed and curtained screen, "upstairs" did give you that feeling of extra privacy and comfort.

Just like the old days.

Stelios led me up to the very back row, out of range of the projection booth windows, and we sank into velvety armchairs.

"I'm burning, you know?" I said. "Cold as the sea was. The sun got me."

"And I!" he exclaimed. "I am burned, but not too much. It feels nice."

It did. Comfortably sunburned. Comfortably seated away from the others, in a delightful old cinema. To see – god knows what movie, I can't remember a single frame of it.

When the lights went down – cheers, stamping, paper-bags bursting, whistling. I loved it.

In the dark, Stelios and I snuggled into each other, discovering and avoiding each other's most sunburned spots. He scoffed happily at the movie, while I breathed him into my very self, cheerfully bemused.

Interval came, and we separated a little, to smoke. Friends came up to greet and meet. One or two staying to sit a while. Sharing the erotic afterglow of our first embraces.

As I learned sadly in childhood, every movie comes to an end. Finally we were obliged to extract ourselves from our luxurious eyrie and descend the stairs toward the harsher reality of electric light, and night.

"That was great!" I thanked him. "Do you want me to leave now?"

"No, mate," he smiled. Barely pressed. "Let's walk."

We walked.

Along the remembered tree-lined corso, balmy with summer and starlight.

Chatting easily, about nothing much.

Halfway along, I almost pulled up, broke the hypnotic rhythm we had found.

It was Nikos.

Lounging against the glass front of a pub. Near my pension. Dressed all in black. Hair glossed back. Tanned to the limit. Eyes wide with surprise and calculation.

A soft 'Oh!', as he saw us together.

Stelios greeted him, and Nikos responded conventionally, eyeing me. Showing no love for Stelios.

"Hullo, Nikos," I said. "How you doing, kiddo?"

"Hullo, David."

Then Stelios, or our joint momentum, carried us on, and away, while I caught Nikos' fatalistic murmur behind me:

"Life to you, mate."

He had shaken his dark, handsome head, when he saw me arm-in-arm with Stelios. As if he knew something.

"You know Nikos, mate?" Stelios asked.

"Yes. You could say that. I met him last time I was here."

A long silence, as our feet took us further away from the town.

"Did you go with Nikos, mate?"

Asked with barely a note of interest.

"Yes. We had a few tussles together," I laughed. "He took me to the schoolyard. At night, of course. Later, he stole my wallet, or else let one of his mates take it."

Stelios was shocked and embarrassed.

I was speaking too flippantly. And too directly. About what could matter.

The thing was, Nikos and my whole adventure with him had already faded. Since meeting Stelios, and enjoying his honest simplicity.

Nikos was the past, amusing and stimulating. Stelios was the present. Warm and promising.

And yet, perhaps just because of this shift in my interest, there was a poignancy in meeting Nikos like that. So full of fire, that boy, and also soft, somewhere. Vulnerable.

Though others might not think so. Like the teacher he punched; or the guy he was supposed to have

beaten up and robbed. (I gathered he had got off.)

"Fancy bumping into Nikos like that," I rambled. "It makes me feel –" I struggled to express the nostalgia which had gripped me.

"You mean you feel scorn for him now," Stelios said, helpfully.

"No! Nothing like that. I mean, I feel sorry... about things. I was hard on him. Gave him a hard time. I'm sorry now. I needn't have been hard on him."

Stelios showed signs of impatience.

"If he stole your wallet?"

"Maybe. Well, there wasn't much in it."

"How much?"

"Twenty pounds, say."

Again he looked shocked. Concerned for me.

"You need someone to look after you in this town," he said bitterly.

"Look after me, then," I smiled, squeezing his arm.

"I *will*, mate," he said earnestly. Sounding at least ten years older than I.

I loved it.

"Did Nikos want money for sex?" he pursued, voice trembling slightly.

"Yes, he wanted money."

"Did you give him any?"

"Once. The last time."

Remembering my long struggle.

Stelios spat, disgusted.

"It's not good, mate!" he asserted. "It's wrong. Taking money for sex."

"Probably."

He sounded angry with Nikos, now.

"I don't like it. Sex is one thing, money is another thing."

"I agree."

"Sex is – like a natural, friendly thing, for two guys. Not business."

"Absolutely."

We lit up cigarettes as we strolled. I sneaked a look at his face, wondering why he was so angry. What lay behind it?

"Do you know Nikos well, Stelios?"

"Sure, mate. We were born here. Grew up together. School, and everything."

The high school. From which Nikos had been expelled.

"But, I mean, are you close friends?"

"Not anymore."

"Why not?"

"We had too many fights. Before that, we used to go together."

I started.

"You were lovers, you and Nikos?"

"No," he laughed. "I meant that we went with the tourists together."

"You and he went with men," I absorbed.

"Yeah, sure. Always together. But Nikos, he got greedy. I mean, if some guy gives you a present when he leaves, O.K. A shirt or a pair of jeans or something, O.K. That's nice, natural! But Nikos, he wanted money. In advance, all business-like. I didn't like that, so we split up. We still fight sometimes,

because he makes me mad. What he does.... It's wrong. If he doesn't get the money one way, he gets it another."

Assault and battery.

The thought of his friend's descent into prostitution and crime filled his face with pain.

"Those must have been some fights," I joked.

"Oh, he's too small. I can't fight him properly. I might kill him."

"Well, don't do that."

"You'd care about it, mate?"

"A little bit, yes."

"You're crazy. He's bad." Then, after a long pause, he added, "Not that bad, maybe. He *can* be a good guy."

It was against his nature to hold on to bad feelings for long.

Now we had reached the far end of the corso, out of sight of all buildings. The road petered out into gravel, which sloped gently down to a small beach.

As we pulled up, two young men came up off the beach, adjusting their clothing. One a Greek, the other a tourist.

"They've been having sex," Stelios smirked, as they disappeared into a parked car.

As for us, we weren't having sex, and the subject seemed to have slipped off our agenda.

I was drawn by Stelios's friendliness. And put off by his moralizing. Though, basically, I agreed with him.

He stirred me, but only emotionally.

"Where to now?" I asked.

"Back again," he sighed. "Nowhere else."

Soon we were back among the bright lights of the entertainment area.

Our pace slowed, as we passed the numerous tiny pubs, with their jukeboxes and video-games. Stelios exchanged languid greetings with other boys.

Finally, he invited me into one of these places and paid for two large beers before I could stop him. We carried the beers, sucking at the froth, through an arched doorway, into a room at the back. Brightly lit, furnished with snooker tables, darts-boards and chess. And packed with boys. A clientele aged from 14 to 18.

Most of them Stelios' age. Schoolkids on holidays. Smoking, strutting, boasting.

The room was alive with boy-noise.

A hundred dark young eyes taking me in, in a flash. Grinning hallos.

Look what Stelios has caught.

At one of the tables, the handsome twins from my pension. Amiable, but restrained, having already a business relationship with me.

Stelios and I sat against the wall watching the various games.

Boys came over to sit with him, one at a time, making rapid inquiries.

On each occasion Stelios was obliged, embarrassed, to forestall:

"He speaks Greek, mate."

"Oh!"

"He hasn't got money." This to protect me.

But it didn't discourage many of them.

"They're all hungry for sex, mate," he smiled ruefully.

One kid, Lakis, a blonde, came back continually. Didn't care if I understood or not. Or maybe didn't

believe.

"Tell him to come with me now. I'll bring him back here.... Ask him what he'll do for me.... You take him first, then tell him to come back here, I'll be waiting."

I grew tired of Lakis, asked Stelios to get rid of him.

At this point, our acquaintance seemed to have reached a dead end.

Stelios was quiet. Bored, I suspected.

"Listen," I said, taking his elbow. "I'll leave you now, with your friends. I don't want to hold you. You've had enough of this."

He turned to me, alarmed.

"No, mate. We're together. You wanna walk again?"

A vague panic in his soft, brown eyes.

"Finish your beer," I temporized, "while I take a piss."

Then we were out in the fragrant summer night again, strolling.

"Where is your pension, mate?"

"We just passed it, Stelios."

He stopped, anxious.

"Wanna go in? Just to see your room."

"All right." I was surprised. "Do you think they'll mind?"

"No, mate. I know them all."

And, indeed, he greeted the manageress and her old mother like relatives.

As we slipped into my room. And I locked the door.

"Ah, a small one, eh," he said, looking around.

He meant the room, with its bare floor and Masonite paneling. He who had visited luxury hotels, and the steamy cabins of yachts. Feeling a bit sorry for me. Not understanding how much I enjoyed this room, this pension.

"The bed's big enough," I pointed out.

The springs shrieking as I drew him down with me.

Still not quite feeling that we were getting it together. But what else were we there for?

I took hold of his curls and pulled his head towards me. Kissing his full red lips. Caressing his arms.

"No, mate, sorry."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I just don't like kissing. Sorry."

Reminding me of Nikos again. The dark ghost in our love-nest.

A local convention, perhaps. Agreed on by boys in centuries past.

But the kiss had at least started something. He relaxed into my arms. Pressing against me. Our swelling cocks rubbing together through the denim.

So I carried on as if deaf to convention. Kissing him with tenderness and care. Moving from one ripe lip to the other. He got into it, and moved likewise.

Kissing for a long time.

Stelios was a boy very nice to kiss. His lizard's tongue battling playfully with mine.

We came up for air. To unzip, drag off our jeans and slippers.

"Sure you don't like kissing, mate?"

He grinned, as we reached for each other.

And lay back happily, as I went down to suck.

"You're good, mate," he sighed, after a time.

I was trying to be good. For him.

"You want me to finish it?" I asked, borrowing Nikos' jargon.

"No, mate. Make it last. It's good."

Bursting into wild laughter as, tickling, I licked his balls.

Causing me to stop and think of the other guests.

Well, I made it last.

"Kiss me, mate," he would murmur. "A kiss, mate, please."

And I would leave his heaving groin to return to his hungry lips.

I really seduced this boy. When it comes to kissing.

Until he blew, like a volcano in my mouth, almost choking me.

"You're good, mate," he said again, as we lit up cigarettes.

And thanked me for the orgasm.

We lay silent for a while, smoking.

Then, stubbing out, he rolled over companionably, spreading his dark thighs, and I mounted him with a great surge of desire. Rode on his handsome buttocks.

As the old bed creaked and rattled like a railway carriage.

And then, back into my arms, for more kissing.

Stelios, it was sweet, that night, in the little room. Remember?

Dressing, he thanked me again.

There was no ready way to repay this boy.

I came downstairs to the front door with him.

"You want to have a drink now, mate?"

It was a nice idea, but the hour was late, and I was worried about the pension people. Since the front door was locked. I couldn't come back and wake them up at 2:00 am.

Stelios understood.

We kissed goodnight in the shadows. He hugged me, made a date for the next day, and wandered off.

Upstairs in my room again, I couldn't sleep. Tingling with an emotive awareness long since strange to me.

Later on, I discovered that I had a key to the front door, anyway.

Curses. Too late to go after him, then.

But it didn't matter.

WE SPENT THE NEXT DAY ON THE BEACH. Cycling together to a perfect swimming spot. Only kids there. The roadside a gleaming metal lattice of bicycles.

Late in the afternoon Stelios led me confidently towards a disused boat shed. Indifferent to the eyes of the others. No one followed us in. Which was just as well. We were very hot for each other just then, and couldn't wait.

In the semi-darkness, midst the faint reek of old fishing nets, I entered him, standing up. As he leaned on a window-sill, groaning assent. Taking my hand and placing it on his throbbing sex. As I bounced against his ripeness. Tugging away at his demand, until we came together in one glorious climax. Shouting our heads off. Whew!

A ripple of applause from the beach.

We held on to each other, breathless. Kissing a tender road back to calm.

In the cool shade of the old boat shed.

WALKING ALONG THE CORSO THAT NIGHT, we were passing one of the smarter cafes when a man sitting inside beckoned to Stelios urgently. He excused himself and went in. I watched through the plate glass.

Not his father. Too young. Younger than me. Greek. Well-dressed, serious-looking. He was sitting with friends of a similar type. But was now giving full attention to Stelios.

Invited him to sit down, pressed him. Stelios declined, smiling politely around the table.

Then the guy took hold of Stelios' arm and spoke to him rapidly, his face intense. The boy shrugged. His captor continued, said more, made a gesture towards me – cut out of the scene but involved nonetheless. All too visible from that table. Looking ridiculous, perhaps. I decided to do nothing. Even turned away.

As Stelios shook off the man's arm, nodded farewells all round. And rejoined me.

Nonchalantly, he took my arm, walked me towards the pension.

I was silent. Not wanting to pry. Feeling no threat. But Stelios wasn't the secretive type.

"My maths teacher, mate. He thinks he owns me. I tell him he doesn't. I can do what I like"

"He's fond of you, though, I think."

"Sure. He isn't married. He only likes boys. Some men like girls, too, but he only wants boys."

"And you walk with him sometimes."

"Yeah, sometimes. He's not a bad guy. Except, he's always pressing me: next time, we'll try something new, and all that."

"Who were the others?"

"Teachers. That's their hangout. Half the staff's there."

"Bit embarrassing for you."

"Not really, mate. No problem."

"Do they know about... you and your maths teacher?"

"Sure. They know I go to his place. So what? I'm not the only one, does things like that. Girls do it, too."

I thought at this point I would rather not lift the lid off a seething can of provincial worms. I dropped the subject. Which was fine with Stelios.

We went up to my room, stripped off, and started early on our last, long night of love-making.

The next day I was to fly back. Cheap weekend ticket. Cash nearly exhausted.

Of course, I would write. I insisted, and promised.

"You write Greek, mate? 'Cause I'm not so good in English."

"O.K. We'll manage."

I wrote down his address and telephone number. Explained that I should be returning to him soon. Expressly to see him. And explore our friendship. With or without sex.

He only half-believed my promises, but was impressed. By my intensity.

We had good sex that night, more adventurous than before.

And later sat in the back of an empty bar, for last drinks.

"When does your plane leave, mate?"

"Ten o'clock."

"My father's got a taxi. He'll take you out there for nothing."

"Will you come out with me?"

"Sure, mate. If you want."

Time was running out, with cruel inevitability.

"Stelios, will you do me a favor, love?"

"Sure, mate. What?"

"Meet me on the beach, a bit earlier. I'd like to take some pictures of you."

"O.K.," he brightened. "And I can take some of you."

"Sure. I'll send them to you. Next week... Also, I have to see you in the morning, to give you something."

Understanding immediately, he discouraged the idea of presents.

"I don't want anything, mate. Listen, you don't have to. O.K.?"

But I wanted to.

Back in my room, in the small hours, I carefully counted out my remaining coins and notes. A free taxi to the airport, good. At Athens I could take a bus. Didn't need anything at the airport. Had to get a film for the camera, only. First thing in the morning. That left me enough to buy him a shirt – at least a T-shirt. I would see. It would be a rush.

I took out a ring, bought recently in Italy but never worn. It was good. He hadn't seen it. I should give him that, too. Another present, more personal. The box was still attractive. Perhaps I could find some gift-wrap.

IN THE MORNING I FOUND I had stacks of time, after rising at dawn, shaving, packing, settling my bill. Informing the congenial twins I should be returning soon. Breakfasting alone, nobody else up. And the twins' mother, who came to sit and chat with me, pouring my tea. Not in the least fazed by my two visits from Stelios. Knowing, surely – if indeed she had *heard* nothing of our rites – that I had been screwing him. Sweet, charming woman. Full of advice about my last-minute shopping.

First I got the film, fitted it in the camera. Next, to a small mercers', where a young lady helped me choose a fancy T-shirt of emerald green, which would match the ring, and, I thought, would suit Stelios very nicely. The girl wrapped the shirt, and the ring, with helpful artistry.

Down to the beach, then, to wait on its windswept emptiness at the cafe where we had drunk coffee, and would now say temporary farewells.

It would have been forlorn, drinking that coffee alone. Looking up and down the beach, in the bleak humidity of morning.

Except that I had known, instinctively, from the moment I awoke, that he wouldn't come. I went ahead with the shopping, because I could not feel that it mattered. My determination would overcome all temporary obstacles. I was allowing love to grow. And love is potent, blind or not.

Finally giving in to my wristwatch, I trudged back across the sand, collected my suitcase, and walked to the taxi-rank.

Half-way to the airport, on an inspiration, I asked the taxi-driver if he had a son called Stelios. He didn't.

I flew back to Athens in a romantic dream. My head buzzing with errands and plans. The failure of our final rendezvous merely feeding the flames. A mischance. Gazing out the window, I smiled at the vision of a bright, loving future.

Back in Athens, the glow stayed with me, impervious to noise and smog.

Smiling stupidly, half-there, I drove my friends to distraction.

I couldn't help myself.

Christopher first diagnosed my condition for me.

"My God, dear! You're in love, aren't you! Really in love."

I was, I realized. A serious case.

"Congratulations" Christopher pouted nicely. Patting my hand. "Now, do be careful. You know what

you're like."

"He's not a hustler, Christopher."

An echo of earlier misadventure caused him to look pained, then defensive.

"I'm glad to hear it."

"He's a really nice, a really good boy," I beamed, idiotically.

"Aren't they all."

"Stelios is different."

"Aren't they all."

I laughed.

"You'll see. He'll even defeat *your* cynicism."

"How nice. I look forward."

"Me too. That's what I'm doing all the time."

"You're nauseating. But predictable. All part of the syndrome. By the way, how old is this young god?"

Christopher had trained himself to ask this question.

"Fifteen," I murmured. Seeing him in my mind. On the beach. In the boat shed.

"God help us! When am I to meet him?"

"That I don't know yet."

I explained where Stelios was.

"You mean you've been *there*? Sneaky bugger! But what about Dimitri?"

Dimitri? I realized then that I had forgotten even to call him.

JULIANA WAS ONE OF MY GOOD FRIENDS in Athens. One of a small band of confidantes.

I had known her even longer than Christopher.

And she had been in Athens longer than any other foreigner I knew.

Juliana was British. Welsh, but not noticeably so. Her accent was Chelsea/BBC. The name was explained by an Italian branch of the family, recent, and vague.

When I first met her she was working, bored out of her mind, at the British Embassy. Later she found a job as private secretary/girl Friday to a Cypriot executive of a middle-sized company. Here she settled, spread her wings a little, and thrived. Fast became appreciated. Then indispensable.

I am very fond of Juliana. She has a winning personality. Generous, enthusiastic, vulnerable.

With her own share of traumatic Greek love affairs.

Addicted, like the rest of our little company, not only to Athens but to the Greek male.

To her cost.

Which, however, she paid willingly. And came back for more.

Romantic and resilient.

Tall, and rather large-boned, but not fat – I never saw her eat a full meal – dark-haired, dark-eyed, round-cheeked. And a Celt to the marrow.

The Celts and the Greeks have a well-established thing about one another.

Juliana is a young woman – some five years younger than I – who laughs a lot, spreading good cheer, and cries a lot – but always for good reason, and always discreetly.

She is a Gemini – which I note here only because she never fails to mention it to a new acquaintance.

In addition, she often refers to herself as a 'fag hag', a phrase she picked up from some American. The words, and the role, appear to give her pleasure.

She herself has certainly given much to me, and Christopher, and other friends. Pleasure, sympathy,

support.

Solid gold, as they say.

"I MUST SAY, HE SOUNDS VERY NICE, darling." Juliana was more sympathetic than Christopher. "I'm happy for you."

"Thank you. Oh, it's so long since I felt like this, Juliana."

"I know, darling. Good for you!"

"I'm so positive."

"And will he come to Athens?"

"Maybe. Otherwise," I laughed, "I'll just have to go there."

"But you can't go running down to the Peloponnese every weekend!"

"I mean, I'll move there. I'll get a job."

"David! Would you really go that far?"

"If needs be." I looked Juliana earnestly in the eyes. "It's that important, you see. I've found something that I'd given up looking for."

"Well, good luck, darling. Very *best* of luck."

"Thank you."

"Perhaps Stelios would rather come to Athens, though?" she murmured absently.

Perhaps he would, I thought. We should see.

That evening I called him on the phone.

It took some time to get through. And then he wasn't at home. Me making polite, explanatory chat to his sister, and his mother in turn. No warning signals there.

When I did get on to Stelios, he sounded breathless and excited. Obviously amazed that I had called.

The connection was not good. And the telephone seemed to amplify the dialect in his Greek. We didn't communicate too well, verbally. But the feeling was there. He was anxious to apologize and explain missing our meeting. Some complicated story about taking his sister for a test. Family obligations. I told him it didn't matter. But he went on explaining. Perhaps feeling that my opinion of him had fallen.

Not so. I was simply glad to hear him. And let him hear me. To show him that our temporary separation changed nothing.

After hanging up I began a careful letter to him, in Greek. Recalling our happy times together. Our first meeting, our love making. I used a lot of intimate, physical words, in order to stir his memory. And declared the strength of my feelings for him, my hopes. Virtually made a claim. Not omitting to dwell on those traits in his character which I admired most. And which made us so well suited to each other.

Next morning I posted the letter 'Express'. I also sent the shirt and the ring.

My friends continued to show various degrees of forbearance. The aftermath of a holiday romance being generally seen as a minor illness.

Juliana remained loyal.

But Christopher warned. Out of kindness, no doubt.

They were all forced to admit one thing: I, at least, was in deadly earnest.

Starting to wind up my affairs in Athens as best I could. Inquiring about accommodation and work in Stelios' town by the sea.

For I did not believe that he would want to leave before he finished high school. He was too bright to leave school early. His studies and future prospects were a prime concern for both of us.

On the other hand, I actually found two jobs I might take there. One teaching in a language-school –

which I did not relish, but could endure – another in one of the larger hotels, as some kind of recreation officer-cum-lifeguard. Droll. I sent letters of application, and arranged for interviews.

I was a little disappointed that Stelios' letter did not come in the first few days. But philosophized. Kept to myself. Daydreamed. And continued to lay plans.

I could have telephoned again any time. But felt that would be out of key.

AFTER FIVE WEEKS, I forced myself awake. The boy was not going to write. I had been suffering from a pleasant delusion.

Lot of it about.

He had already forgotten about me. I wasn't *there*. My letter had meant nothing to him.

I suffered awhile the aftertaste of sweetness. Thought bitter thoughts.

He had complained that men disappointed him. Cheated him with words.

Now he had met a man who would not cheat him. And he couldn't handle it.

Or was this a form of revenge? For past injuries.

Little moralizer. At least Nikos answered my letters.

Then I came further down to earth. And the old ego hardened.

One last gesture.

I sent off a postcard of the Acropolis. On the back, a terse message: 'So. You don't even bother to answer my letter. Bravo.' With a word of sexual abuse at the end, such as I had heard from his friends. Unsigned.

Two days later I received a letter from Stelios. Painstaking, indignant, righteous:

I do not think that that was a very nice way to tell me you did not get my letter. I wrote to you straight away. And sent you a small photograph of me, like you asked. It is not my fault if you did not receive it. Of course, I haven't forgotten you. I remember everything. I remember your letter, too. You talked about my navel. I don't think your postcard was very nice. Are you coming here again ?

Sincerely, Stelios

Think again, David, old boy.

But what to think? Should I believe this, or was it an elaborate face-saver?

Letters did go astray, of course.

I am still not certain whether he actually wrote that first letter.

All I know is that Stelios is a truth-teller.

I telephoned immediately. Told him I'd received his second. Apologized. He sounded abashed. Had already forgotten his resentment. We had a friendly chat. School would start again soon. Nikos was in jail, but would be out the following week. When was I coming again?

Peace.

I waited a couple of months, though, saved. After my violent see-saw from romantic ecstasy to angry disillusionment, I was settling into a sort of calm practicality.

Our next telephone conversation reflected this tone. Frank, friendly, no excesses.

I had booked my airline ticket.

Would I like to stay at his house?

I didn't like to give trouble.

But there would be none. And I would save money.

The old concern for my pocket-book touched me.

All right. Why not?

I ALWAYS STAY AT HIS HOUSE NOW, when I visit.

Twice a year. Or, less often now.

Sharing a room at the back of the house with Stelios. Where we have very satisfying sex. And, otherwise, enjoy each other's company without strain. A good understanding. Stelios likes things to be friendly, but no more. He stops at friendliness. Whether from his nature, or his experience.

No strain, either, on my first coming back, after those letters.

Water under the bridge.

Almost like meeting him for the first time.

I SUPPOSE, IN A WAY, that we both decided, after a second look, that we didn't interest each other all that deeply. Friends, sure.

My guess is that he will end up with that maths teacher of his.

Which is probably just where he intends to end up, when he's ready. He certainly sees a lot more of him than of me, in school and out.

I ALSO CONTINUE MY CORRESPONDENCE with Nikos. And see him, when I'm in town. Feeling a lingering sense of responsibility.

If he is out of jail at the time, and if I can afford it.

He usually takes me to the schoolyard. For old times' sake.

And the fire that never quite dies.

Stelios turning a blind eye.

Thanks, Stelios.

7. Stavros

IN MY LUCKY, LAZY LIFE, a visit to the dentist is a special pleasure. Something I look forward to with keen anticipation. And even connive at.

It was not always so. Only, in fact, since I have been in the hands of my present man.

May he outlive me, and flourish in eternity.

Not only is he outstanding in his profession, his is also strikingly handsome, and ineffably sexy.

And he has a beautiful son.

"BUT YOU NEED ADONIS, MY DEAR!" Christopher cried, discovering me languishing in my gloomy chamber.

Pain, guilt and desperation, weighing me down in turns.

"Do I?" I mumbled weakly through a cloud of ouzo and novalgin. Being of a nature to put off such things until the last turn of the screw. Needing to be pushed.

"Can there be a good dentist in Athens?" I wondered doubtfully.

"A good *dentist*?" Christopher was almost, mysteriously, crowing. "You are about to discover what that phrase means!"

Humming Bizet, he fished a worn card out of his wallet and dropped it triumphantly on the bedside table.

"Oh, to have a toothache," he murmured wistfully. "Call him Adonis, by the way – everybody does. He expects it."

"Why should I call him Adonis?" I responded irritably.

"Well, because that's his *name*, silly. I mean, his first name. No need to say 'Mr. Mavros', except on the phone, if you like."

"Very chummy," I winced, neuralgically.

AT THE DENTAL SURGERY I UNDERSTOOD.

Politely received by this tall, shining person, hand outstretched. My nervousness and pain dissolved.

"Good morning," I said shyly.

Held by piercing gray eyes and long blond hair brushed back and highlighted with a dramatic streak of gray. (Juliana says he has it done. Says she asked him, the bitch, and he admitted it, cheerfully.)

There's no getting away from it. His presence makes a sort of point. Before you notice anything else; the tasteful decor; the English-language novels and Cosmo magazines; the framed photograph of his wife; the impressively modern dental equipment; you notice, first, him: a slim, muscular, sexy man, all charm and friendliness.

In a white uniform cut with enough style to be called a chiton.

Stavros has inherited a lot from his dazzling dad.

Helplessly stretched out on that welcoming black lozenge of vinyl and foam, while Adonis, as Christopher had warned, bent over me and virtually took me in his sinewy arms. I assented to his professional skill. Feeling gratified to confirm that there were complications: I was quite right to have felt that it hurt.

Adonis glided about me quietly checking; tentatively touching; asking a hundred times if he was hurting me (he never did); gently reassuring; already beginning to relate enchanting tales of his past, when, young and single, he had gamboled naked on the golden beaches of Skopelos.

While the X-rays lay in liquid, preparing their verdict, I was granted an intermission in the waiting-room.

As Adonis whispered into the open mouth of a young female patient, whom he had greeted with arresting familiarity and tenderness.

I felt, already, a little jealous, cheated and let down.

Off the Honda and back into the old Morris, as it were.

And there was only one other person in the waiting-room, a schoolboy. Poring over an 'Asterix', and occasionally chuckling to himself.

Although the book was in English, and he about twelve or thirteen, he was getting a lot out of it, turning each page with satisfaction, and shifting his long legs about whenever his amusement became too strong to contain.

Black-haired Greek boy, with your beautiful hands. Ivory skin. Lips pushed forward in concentration; stretched in smiling. Such a quiet self-confidence about you. Your neatly combed hair almost blue when it catches the light.

Not afraid of the dentist's drill, it seems. Looks almost as if the drill might be afraid of *you*, the way you raise that profile.

"Excuse me, could you explain what 'sucking' is?"

I started at the unexpected question. His voice deep and assured; with just an edge of condescension.

"You do speak English, don't you?" he persisted, as I sat bewitched by the frank hazel eyes, sparkling with intelligence.

"Sucking," he repeated, helpfully.

I made grotesque movements with my lips and tongue. Emitted obscenely appropriate sounds.

He was interested, but not satisfied.

"Like you do with an ice-cream," I suggested. "Or a banana. To make it last."

"Well, I always make it *last*," he pointed out, practically. "Bananas are hard to get in Athens. I don't often get one myself. To suck. Is that right?"

"That's right," I confirmed.

He seemed inclined to talk, man-to-man.

"Actually, I thought it meant that, or something like that. But there's some joke, too. There always is, in 'Asterix', you know. Some double meaning. I like to find out all the meanings. Do you want to help me?"

No need for me to answer. It was an instruction.

Stavros has always treated me like a servant, albeit an honored one. His good manners keeping me firmly but comfortably in my place.

Willingly filling the bill.

He slid along the couch to sit very close to my side, spreading one half of the book over my knee. Where his exquisite hand also rested from time to time. Fingernails like little white almonds.

I felt the warmth of him, inhaled the subtle smell of him, saw his quality.

As we puzzled through the puns, giggling.

A fast maturing mind in that supple young body. Serious.

He would never be pretty, but was handsome, and grew more so.

We enjoyed each other. Reached a verdict of mutual approval.

"Sorry you had to wait so long."

Adonis smiling at me again, as he ushered out the other patient with Puccinic solicitude.

Back on the long, soft chair, with my savior bracing his legs for the clinch. After a brief, apologetic

tapping, he slid the X-rays into a viewer, set on the glass table before me.

"I see Stavros took you in charge," he winked. "I hope he did not annoy you."

"Not at all," I replied. "On the contrary. He *is* rather a remarkable boy?"

Adonis beamed.

"Thank you," he said softly, an added gleam in his eye.

I blinked confusion.

"My eldest son," he explained.

"Oh, I see."

Thinking how unlike they were. And that Adonis must be older than he looked.

Or did they marry young, on Skopelos?

I had hardly said two words about Stavros, but the effect had been to make his father happier. It was nice to do that.

Though that is a thing about Adonis, his great happiness.

"I am afraid," he went on ruefully, "I am not always able to keep him out of my waiting-room, and away from the patients."

"Or away from 'Asterix'," I joked.

"Oh-hoh, yes! And 'Asterix'," he agreed gratefully.

"Well," I said, "I don't imagine he gives you much trouble."

Adonis stood poised, pick in hand, regarding me intently.

"He does not. Stavros is a sensible boy. I don't worry about him. And – he has a good heart."

He said it in such a way as to suggest that the value of this characteristic was exceeded only by his appreciation of it.

"Well, my friend," he straightened, becoming businesslike – as much as he ever does. "Unfortunately, you have a little problem. I shall have to ask you to come back for a few more visits."

Root-canal therapy. Unpleasant business.

Adonis made it sound like a humble invitation to a feast.

"SO!" DEMANDED CHRISTOPHER, goggling over his fried squid, "what do you say about Adonis?"

"I say thank you," I responded promptly.

And, before I could stop myself –

"What do you say about Stavros?"

Christopher's face fell.

"Oh, *no*, dear! Not *again!*"

"Oh, shut up."

"He'll murder you," Christopher nodded wisely.

"Stavros will? That angel?"

"Adonis will, you fool! And he's no angel. The boy, that is."

"How do *you* know, Christopher?"

"Don't be disgusting."

"A question, merely."

We sipped away at the ouzo, picked at the seafood; preparing our positions.

"I don't see," I ventured, "that Adonis is the type – to murder."

"Think of the means," Christopher leered sadistically, "at his disposal!"

"Don't be absurd."

"Oh, very well, listen. Be serious a moment. The child is barely twelve."

"Thirteen," I corrected.

"Twelve – thirteen. You know how much that means in Greece."

"I do indeed," I smugly smiled.

"Incorrigible!" Christopher hissed, turning his face away.

THERE FOLLOWED SIX VISITS to the surgery, in as many weeks.

On the first occasion, Adonis performed the grueling initial treatment, and I went home in a taxi, feeling pious, sensitive and faintly martyred.

On the second visit, Stavros was ready for me in the waiting-room. We greeted each other with pleasure, if still somewhat formal.

His serious, contained manner created this slight distance. Physically, he was quite relaxed, and even intimate.

Snuggling up to me with a new 'Asterix'. His glossy hair newly-washed. Wearing a pullover of cobalt blue, with his faded jeans.

Those hazel eyes alive with wit.

Verbal humor fascinated him. He could discuss a single gag for ten minutes. I warned him against laboring the puns, and killing the humor in the process. But he was undeterred. Stavros liked to get right down into things and worry them out.

It was on this day also that we started telling each other jokes.

Racking our brains, breaking through language barriers. Watching hopefully, each, for a genuine burst of laughter from the other.

And afterwards, listening for good jokes everywhere, saving them up for next time. A custom which survives the years.

The root-canal therapy proceeded with gentle ministrations.

And Stavros and I became firm friends, in the natural way of things.

Adonis beamed, murmured apology; he was all gratitude.

But was he aware of the two helpless erections which rose and strained regularly in his waiting-room? Did he care, or would he?

I was never quite sure.

I merely accepted the inevitability of those tentative caresses and squeezes; those pressings and rubbings of amiable thighs; my wandering hands. All as spontaneous as kissing his lovely neck, as he bent over 'Asterix', and I over him. Kisses repeated in the lift, where he followed me down, after my therapy, on some slim pretext or other.

Offered first as a friendly joke. Lest he be alarmed.

Stavros was not alarmed. Soon I was kissing him in earnest, at every opportunity, and letting my hungry hands wander and rest where they would.

At home, alone, I could picture having sex with Stavros – but only just. It required some imagination, I found. Apart from his age and circumstances, there was his earnestness to consider, and his formidable will. If anything conclusive did happen between us, in the future, I knew that it would be *his* doing, when he was ready.

And then there would be no resisting him.

In the meantime, he remained a sweet fantasy, to fondle in my dreams when I felt like it.

But even fantasy needs nourishment.

As my dental treatment approached completion, I began to think, in mild alarm, no more Stavros!

I decided to discuss with Adonis the possibility of doing some bridge-work that I had been putting off

for years. He agreed that it was time, and an excellent idea – with flattering references to my looks.

He would be delighted to serve me. At minimum expense. Of course, the thing would require some time – what with taking impressions, and fittings, and adjustments, and so on.

I accepted all this, stoically.

Stavros and I got onto the subject of football. Or, rather, *into*, as he did with all his pursuits. I had neither played nor followed the game for some time, but soon caught fire from his enthusiasm, and remembered.

The team which he and his father supported, with Hellenic fervor, was introduced to me with fitting reverence, by means of photographs, personal data, statistics, results.

An attractive group of young men they were too, in the way of Greek footballers, with their trim bodies and hairy legs. But I could not help seeing them through Stavros' eyes – as beautiful, talented friends, supermen.

They quickly became *my* team too, and there I was, wearing the colors, studying the sports papers, going along to matches with my dentist and his son.

Yelling ourselves hoarse, amidst the volatile, all-male crowd. As the young gods performed in front of us.

They are still my team. Look, I'm a regular old fanatic: flags, scarves, the lot.

Stavros did that for me. A gift I appreciate.

And not the only one.

Music was another.

It sounds odd to say that I had forgotten music. But, to a large degree, that is what had happened to me since I first arrived in Greece. Don't blame Greece. The reasons were fortuitous.

Stavros, in the other hand, was discovering music.

Moving through the cycles along with other Greek kids; starting with ABBA, proceeding to the Beatles – during their fourth or fifth revival – on to hard rock; new wave and punk.

Learning a lot, as he built up a record collection; coming to rest on particular favorites, like Jethro Tull, and Frank Zappa.

Sharing all this with Stavros, as he brought records to show me, now, instead of 'Asterix', was largely remembering times past, re-meeting old friends. But my enthusiasm for music in its various modes – a thing I had lost – was rekindled.

When he brought and described some album which was completely new to me – as he was increasingly able to do – then his pleasure and mine took on a new dimension.

ONE AFTERNOON I FOUND HIM SITTING in a corner of the waiting-room, half a dozen albums around his feet, singing under his breath. The hazel eyes came up to greet me, as he groaned experimentally:

"You can come in my mouth!"

I stopped dead in my tracks.

Some announcement. Had he somehow tuned into my fantasies?

No. Only to Frank Zappa. Whose song he was now misquoting, getting it slightly wrong, in that enchanting way which made, say, the Beatles more irresistible than ever.

I sat down to study the album. Zappa. Words. Anagrams. Puzzles to solve, and then sing, in a Greek accent.

Coming in someone's mouth was, not surprisingly, a concept quite unknown to him. He appeared not to be too interested in the mechanics of the phenomenon, as I cautiously explained it – one eye on the surgery door – but was satisfied to know. And fully saw the humor of not having known.

It became a standing joke.

"You can come in my mouth!"

"You too!"

Thus we would mutter on meeting, or parting.

It was only words. We were, as yet, contained by the waiting room.

The way out, the next step, was to get into the apartment and play some discs on his stereo.

"When Dad's finished with your teeth. I'll wait for you."

I hesitated. Likely, Adonis would think this was going too far.

"You haven't got work to do, have you? We can close the door and have a real hot session together."

I mentioned the invitation to Adonis lightly, ready to laugh it off. No problem. He was concerned only for my personal comfort, as a guest in his house, and his own shortcomings as a host, since he could not leave the surgery. He whispered urgent instructions to Stavros, who nodded wisely, and led me away.

Across the hallway, pressing the other bell, greeting his mother whom I had already met. Adjourning to Stavros' room to admire the stereo, the football posters, his guitar.

Mother brought coffee and cakes, and Stavros dismissed her, closing the door on us.

STAVROS' ROOM.

It became a very special place to me. A rather unreal place, softly sealed from the realities of the everyday world. Intimacy, conversation, confession. Warmth and beauty and humor. Music. And always words. Sometimes the stereo, at full blast, other times just Stavros and his guitar, singing to me, old Greek songs.

While I tried to put down my growing response to his physical charms, in order not to miss the sweetness of his music. Clearly offered to me.

In those lovely, sun-blessed autumn months, he was growing fast, and showing it. Tall for his age, he acquired the leanness of adolescence, energy without muscle, and delicacy without weakness.

At the same time, he allowed his lustrous black hair to go its own way – wavy and lush, with poetic curls at his temples and nape. The dusky eyelashes lengthened, the voice deepened, the denim tightened about the crotch and, in short, he bloomed.

I was totally infatuated.

Which, from his response, was what he had been aiming at all along.

We were in it up to our necks. Whenever we might choose to admit it to each other.

Occasionally he would switch off the lights as he closed the bedroom door on us. Waiting for me to act.

I think he really did not know what I would do, given the chance. And he was never really off guard.

Ready to repel.

So I did nothing.

Preferring our rarefied sanctuary of signals and sighs to a painful rejection of untimely advances.

"You know, I could come over to your place, some day," he ultimately ventured.

It was miles beyond walking distance.

"You would be very welcome," I intoned.

"Man, we could really have a great time! Couldn't we? We could really –"

Then it became vague. In keeping with a fantasy world.

Words. Stavros would never come to my place. How could that possibly happen?

AT THE PEAK OF HIS DARK RIPENESS, it chanced that the old American movie, 'Easy Rider', song of the sixties, was revived in Athenian cinemas. Having been banned during the years of the Junta.

Stavros was attracted: by the title; the music; the era.

It was almost a pity to tell him that I had seen the film ten years before; and to restrict his vivid imagination with descriptions. Still, he was avid.

"Well," he decided, earnestly, "it must be a *great* movie."

He had already listened to the sound-track music.

"We should see it together. That would be perfect."

"Yes," I agreed. "Why not?"

Again, it was only a word game. We were not actually making a rendezvous.

Doubly unfortunate, since my bridge-work was now finished and I faced separation once more. Just at a time when I could least endure it.

No more visits to Stavros's room?

My mind set to work, in the service of my passion.

In childhood I was taught that one should have a dental checkup at least every three months. Very sensible advice. I should adhere strictly to the rule in future.

But it was still too long to wait.

I was yearning for those hazel eyes, those loganberry lips; that hot petting.

Three months? He would forget me!

I began to plot presents: a record, something new and special from abroad. Music magazines? Given in appreciation. And to remind him. But would it be correct to deliver a gift in person? Tricky.

Start with Adonis. Football. Ask him to get tickets for a match. He'd be delighted. And, if Stavros didn't come too – ask after him, show an interest.

Before I had managed to nudge any of this petty scheming towards reality, I received a telephone call, at the studio.

"Hullo. You can come in my mouth."

"You too, Hullo Stavros."

"Sorry to disturb you, but you're never at home."

It was true. Work and social life being ready means of distraction. From the passion at hand.

"That's all right. How did you find the number?"

"Dad told me."

Of course. Hullo, Adonis, I prayed.

No secrets, at least. Om.

"Listen," he said, rather boisterously. "What about 'Easy Rider'?"

"Yeah? What about it?"

"You forgot! We were supposed to be going together."

"I didn't forget. I –"

"Tonight's the last night. Can you come?" he pleaded.

"Tonight? You mean now? Well, yes, I guess I can slip away. Where shall I – I mean, when does it

–"

"Look. Why don't you come over here now, and then we'll be able to make the early show."

I made rapid mental calculations concerning the distance in peak-hour traffic.

"Where is it showing, Stavros?"

He named a cinema even further away than his apartment.

"Can I meet you there? Outside the cinema? It would be easier."

"O.K., I'll wait for you. Twenty minutes?"

"Half an hour."

Traffic? Nothing. I just couldn't face picking him up at home. For our first date. Hi, Adonis. Hi, Mrs. Mavros. Can Stavros come out and play? Ha, ha.

My heart was pumping like an oil-well. I was exhilarated and grateful as a child.

And fearful. Part of me didn't want to go at all.

"I was afraid you wouldn't come," he had said quietly, seriously, before we hung up.

As I threaded the Kawasaki through the endless lanes of cars and buses, I thought: what *is* this? What am I doing?

Taking the next step, out of Stavros's room, that's what. Smack into reality.

Approaching the cinema now at an agonizing crawl, I wondered if I was ready; if this was what I really wanted.

Then I saw him; and I knew I was ready.

He was standing way out front near the curb, a hundred parked motor-cycles between him and the foyer.

Lights. Action.

Wearing a black jacket and boots. His hair shooting up over his brow in a perfect pompadour.

He'd seen me first. Waved excitedly, shouting across the lanes of traffic.

I was on the wrong side of the road for the cinema, and would have to go on to the next traffic lights to make a U-turn. But the road was jammed both ways.

I groaned with frustration as Stavros jumped up and down, shouting something.

Then I wheeled the cycle around between two buses, and rode up on to the median strip. Stavros cheered. Now I had to wait again, as the traffic on his side had started to move.

It was then that I saw Adonis.

The change in my expression must have been visible a block away. Stranded as I felt, exposed in my schemings.

Hoist on my own pet hard-on.

Adonis stood back a little from his son, waiting for me to get across. For a while it seemed that the cars would never let me through.

Then at last I made it. In a frantic burst of revs, I had crossed the Rubicon, was stacking the Kawa with the mass of other bikes. Taking some time over the lock. In order to prepare my defense.

Adonis, a dashing off-white trench coat swinging about him, strode forward and took my hand. He looked sheepish and worried. There was no doubt that he had registered my alarm, when I first noticed his presence. We were both so concerned to deal with our embarrassment that Stavros hardly got in a word of greeting. But his eyes were full of the Kawasaki (cheating!) and he himself looked terrific.

I was opening my mouth to say something feeble, but Adonis laid a hand on my arm.

"My dear friend, excuse this intrusion, please. I only came to fix the tickets."

He was, in fact, apologetic. But what did he mean?

"It seems the film is X-rated. There might be some trouble getting Stavros in."

"Oh," I said, with a fresh surge of guilt. "I didn't know."

I hadn't thought of it, and now studied the posters to confirm. While Adonis ushered us towards the entrance flourishing three tickets.

"Oh, it is some silly thing. In Greece there is no sense at all!"

He dismissed the classification with a wry grin, and thus we passed into the foyer all together, with Stavros between us. No one stopped him, since he was with us. And Adonis, having slipped briefly

beyond the curtain to check that we should find seats, gave me that dazzling, happy smile of his, and prepared to depart.

"Enjoy yourselves," he urged.

"But, aren't you coming in with us?" I asked, glad of him now in my relief, and understanding. "Oh, do, Adonis, you'll love it."

He hesitated for a moment, glittering with temptation, then shook his head.

"My wife is waiting for me at home. She is alone, and will worry. I told her I was only dropping the boy at the cinema. You see?"

We said our good-nights. Stavros not omitting to thank his father for his help.

And then he grabbed me urgently by the arm and pulled me into the darkened auditorium. Taking possession of me once more!

This cinema, bursting with bikies.

Row upon row of leather and denim, single ear-rings glinting here and there.

An atmosphere crackling with excitement, as the titles rolled up on the screen.

"Listen! It's Steppenwolf!" Stavros whispered as he made a dash for two empty seats, dragging me after him.

I took a sidelong look at his glowing face and staring eyes: probably the most excited person in the cinema. I loved his excitement, reached for his hand, stroking his small fingers.

Firmly, he removed my hand for his lap, coughing disapproval. But placed it on his knee, rather than my own. Lines to be drawn, new ones in public places, naturally. Remembering what we were there for.

Quite right. Why waste a minute of the movie and its music in petting? Which we could do some other place, later, anyway.

So, we sank down in the plush seats and lapped it up.

STAVROS AND I HAVE BEEN TO the cinema together on countless occasions since then, not to mention football, and rock concerts.

His mother encourages my attentions, reminds me to telephone him during the week.

But I don't think that I'll ever forget that first magic night, when we went to 'Easy Rider'. It was a magic event, for both of us.

When I single it out in my memory now, that first night with Stavros, isolated from all the other nights that followed, and the many surprising ways in which our friendship has developed – I feel a great surge of nostalgia, for youth and innocence and energy lost.

The memory hurts. And I want to weep, for those unique moments in young boys' lives which we are sometimes lucky enough to share, and which are all too quickly past and gone.

I took him home on the bike, words failing us for once. His mind was bursting, with the movie, but a full discussion would have to wait for another day. We fixed that day. Another session in Stavros' room, to relive it, verbally.

I stood with him in the hall of his apartment building, my arm about his shoulders, my heart singing gently, out of a great fondness.

I like going to the cinema with you, Stavros," I said simply. "I really enjoy your company."

"And I enjoy your company," he responded earnestly.

But there was a new softness in his face. A cobwebbed look about his eyes.

"Well. We can go to the movies, any time. If you want to."

"I want to," I assured him.

May the gods bless our friendship, I prayed. Perhaps he did the same.

He was alive with that sensitive stillness which marks discovery. Knowing that something important had begun. Without knowing exactly what it was.

I wasn't sure, either. And, at that point, didn't care.

We knew *something* was born. And we had become almost solemn about it.

Our farewells dragged on sleepily. Kisses and squeezes distracting us from something else.

They were almost an irritation.

I saw him into the lift. Then he followed me out to the bike again.

We competed for the last wave.

Not making any promises.

The air around us being rich with them.

8. Spiros

Listen. If you know Athens at all, even as a tourist, you know you don't sit down in Syntagma Square unless you want to be hustled. One way or another. It's that kind of place, especially in the summer. Everyone from the waiter to the shoe-shine boy is getting at you, the most tempting offers falling somewhere in between. I don't go for it at all.

At three o'clock on a Sunday morning, it's pretty quiet.

The frenetic daytime traffic reduced to one or two taxis cruising past. Lights few and scattered, just enough to catch the improbable green of the leaf-laden trees, and to make it feel like a greener, cooler place than it normally is.

One or two cafes are still open. The tourist hordes are all abed.

Row upon row of empty chairs.

Here and there, a boy lounging in the shadows.

The close, expectant stillness of night-watch.

I hardly believe that I am here at all. But Christopher is with me, to remind and prod.

"You didn't know about this? You're joking. The all-night boys of Syntagma? Look, there's a whole *thing* here, from two a.m. right through to late breakfast."

Limbs shift hopefully in the darkness; smoke is exhaled. Keys jingle softly.

We stroll, nonchalant, among the clues, and Christopher offers greetings to some of the boys. They respond, politely, it seems.

"Downstairs now. Come on, dear. Coffee and strategy."

Why am I here? Because I have put myself in Christopher's hands.

He has been enchanted by my confession that I am bored and randy and determined to mate.

Leave it to him. He will not *leave* me until I am fixed.

Hours of subtlety in the bars of Plaka have produced no result. I remain randy and un-mated, if no longer bored. Christopher's conversation is too amusing for that. It is also the reason I have made no contact. A distraction from the business at hand.

At the start he said, "Are you willing to pay? To get what you want?"

I said I was, I had money in my pocket; it didn't seem to matter.

Now, I'm not so sure.

We have taken up our post amid the sudden, unhelpful glare of fluorescent lighting and laminex tables.

"I'm the best-looking man in the room!" Christopher announces.

I am inclined to agree. It's getting very late, I've had too many drinks, and I'm feeling a bit off the track. But I am still randy. In theory at least.

"Don't get up-tight about the money thing," my friend soothes. "It's only a hang-up. They want something you've got, you want something they've got. A quick discussion, my dear, a little agreement, and then, mutual satisfaction. Very civilized."

It sounds right. But something is nagging at me. Have I lost my desire in the course of the odyssey? – or am I being diverted?

Pause for thought: I have seldom given a boy money before. But, this has been neither policy nor principle.

A hang-up? Or sheer, bloody meanness?

I see that the question has never come to the crunch.

Pride, perhaps.

Before a fall.

"They'll be down soon," Christopher croons. "Those three. You noticed them. Go with Spiros. He's a nice kid. I think he's gay. Anyway, I don't think he'll want money. Just a bed for the night."

Christopher is recounting his past experience of Spiros, and I am trying to think if I have noticed him or his friends upstairs, when chairs scrape the floor, and three youths have gathered around our table.

A glance tells me that the boy who is threatening my left flank is Spiros. He is not my type. I am disappointed, and unaroused.

Christopher's type, I suppose.

I despair.

They hold a quick discussion across me in Greek. Christopher is animated. He remarks to one of the other boys, "He looks like De Niro."

They agree warmly.

I see the shock of black curls, the challenging eyes, the shirt open to the navel. I hear the soft, slow voice. But I do not see Robert De Niro.

Christopher is excited for me. It is all right. Spiros doesn't want money. Only, as promised, a bed for the night. He will take me to a hotel which is cheap, but nice. And he likes me.

"But I don't like him."

Christopher is incredulous and scornful.

"The old story," he crows. "Now you've got it, you don't want it!"

I feel exhausted and remote.

"I think I'll go home."

Spiros murmurs something and takes my forearm.

"He asked me if you're frightened. I told him you're not."

Nettled, I decide to fly with the wind.

"O.K., O.K., let's go, then. Before I fall asleep."

We leave Christopher to entertain the cohorts and climb back into the green, humid night.

We are awkward, but make what we can of it.

Spiros admires my Kawasaki and wants to take the bars. Sorry. He swings on behind me, gripping me close, and we wheel off toward Omonia to find the amenable hotel.

There, I become apprehensive. I don't like the way the desk-clerk eyes me. But I am too tired to comment.

Soon we are sharing the narrow bed and Spiros is telling me half-heartedly how strong I am and how much he likes me, while I try not to chuckle.

The shabby, stifling room hums with error.

The boy's muscular body rigid beside me.

"You are rough," he murmurs. "You should be nice to me."

Again I want to laugh; we are an improbable coupling. And there is a kind of hysteria building.

Spiros now forcing himself to stay awake.

The tension is quickly dissolved. What follows is dull, incomplete, unsatisfactory. Punctuated by halting exchanges, like this:

"Please, I don't do that."

"What? Oh, come on, Spiros."

"No."

"What *do* you do?"

"I like this."

"O.K., what about me?"

"You can do this if you like."

"Thanks. You're not very sexy, Spiros."

"I am *very* sexy."

And so on. At five in the smokey morning, the impasse drifts beyond resentment.

Finally he sleeps like a baby in my arms, and I at last find some joy in his company. This, after all, is what he is wanting, and, perhaps what I want, too.

At mid-morning, philosophically, I disengage myself and bid him adieu, no hard feelings.

Struggling to the surface, he asserts that we will meet later in the day. I am baffled but, touched by his muzzy insistence, I kiss his cheek and leave him to his not too hard-earned rest.

Outside, in the pitiless sunlight, facing the teeming, aromatic byways of Athens, I feel unaccountably elated.

"However, in the event, he didn't show up," I inform Christopher wryly. Over the scattered debris of our meal.

"He told me he did. He was very upset, dear."

"Well, he must have been late. I don't have the patience. Anyway, it was a pointless interview."

"If you say so. I wouldn't tell him your address."

"Is Spiros a hustler, Christopher?"

"Of *course*, he's a hustler. Did I lie to you?"

"No. But, somehow he didn't seem..."

"Careful, dear. Alarm bells. Never, never fall in love with a hustler."

This is fantastic, and I ignore it.

"You can give him my address if he asks again. He interests me. You know I'm rather at a loose end."

"Dangerously loose, I venture to suggest."

TWO DAYS LATER. Spiros appears at the door of my apartment, groomed, taut, elevated in spirit.

The lovely Juliana is with me. They chat amicably, and I am impressed by his natural charm.

All a-flutter with diplomacy, Juliana slips away, leaving us to draw it together.

His words come softly, bluntly.

"I like you *very* much. We will live together. I will stay with you for five years. No more will I run around. I'm gonna get a job, and at night we gonna stay home together, just us."

Breathtaking.

"I like you *very* much. We will travel together. You like to go to Germany? O.K. When you are ready."

He is tender, but restrained.

We do not begin to make love, nor will we on any future occasion.

Abruptly, Spiros tells me a story: he will soon be going into jail, for a debt incurred by an unreliable friend whom he has guaranteed.

It is all very vague, confused, and sadly familiar.

I am embarrassed.

He presses me until I run out of words.

Then, joking, I ask if I can trust him.

He feigns anger, formidable now, and makes as if to leave. But I can't have this, and neither can he.

A delicate moment, the air loaded with jostling thoughts and purposes, a loose carton of sliding

wafers.

My reaction to the story does not change, but I give him what money I have at the moment. For I cannot endure the sense of meanness he inspires in me. And, despite the apparent deception, there remains something about him which is unprotected.

He leaves. The idea of physical contact between us has become an obscenity.

Other visits follow, with similar exchanges, and again I give him money, for my own relief. Not enough to cancel the supposed debt, which is well beyond my means.

We see a movie together, dine out once or twice.

It is threadbare and absurd. But in our mutual discomfort a part of each of our circling selves is drawn and nourished.

Reflecting on this, I cannot understand why I am involved, if not infatuated.

"I warned you, dear," Christopher sighs. "Never trust a hustler."

"We don't do anything. He was hopeless that first night. Like a corpse. But you'd know."

"Not *me*, dear. Talk to them is one thing. I never have the drachs."

"But – if you did have?"

"Out of the question. If they want my money they don't want me.

I am becoming angry – and nauseous.

"I wasn't prepared for this. I've never had experience of this type of – of this element of –"

"Oh, don't go moral on it, dear. A delusion. We're all hustlers. That's survival."

I am skeptical.

"Who do *you* know," he presses, "who lives on what he believes in?"

The same day Juliana visits; not a gossip, she is nonetheless concerned. Spiros and she have met in Syntagma. He has been buying a pair of expensive Italian boots. Displaying them to his friends in the square.

The door in my mind snaps shut.

When he telephones to say that he is going to prison immediately unless I can help him, I hang up.

AUTUMN MONTHS PASS, and, without searching, I see Spiros nowhere. It occurs to me that he is in fact in prison; and that I have abandoned him to it. I am not disturbed.

At the same time I hear a report that he has gone on a trip to Amsterdam. But I am unable to trace the source.

It is soon easy, and natural, to put him on a shelf and forget.

A NEW YEAR.

I am sitting alone in Syntagma, enjoying the bright ache of the winter sun. Ripe oranges hang from dusty branches. The scent of roasting chestnuts wafts across the browning lawns.

I leaf through a magazine, grateful and content. I have completed my contract, I have money again. I shall travel. I shall dream and scheme. I shall—

"Why do you read so much?"

The voice is the same soft murmur, but it is an unkempt, underfed Spiros standing at attention there; giving me the best smile he can muster, with bitterness shining through like a beacon.

"Hullo," he says.

His shaggy head nodding and nodding as if to assure me he is aware of all the implications.

My good mood evaporates. I look at him, but I can't find anything to say.

"I thought you were my friend, and you leave me alone."

There is no answer to this.

"You think I cheat you. You are wrong."

He turns, shrugging, and walks away.

No ILLUSIONS, ABOUT SPIROS and his comrades. But I find in me some envy for his life and philosophy.

Christopher says I am romantic.

Wrong. The thing I feel right now is not romantic.

It is only the darkness you always feel at the death of a friendship.

Which you yourself have killed.

9. Reaping

FIRST, I'D BETTER TELL YOU the dog story.

Not that it's very interesting in itself.

But may shed light. On what follows.

And help to remove traces of cynical macabre humor from the main story I want to tell. Otherwise that might sound too fantastic. Though I'll tell it as it happened.

The dog story is another thing. I don't know whether that is true or not.

I read it in a newspaper. (Does it, perhaps, make a difference that it was an *English* newspaper? It could be said, I think, that the English do not lie about dogs.)

The newspaper cutting is in front of me, on the table. The paper yellow, creased from many foldings.

When I look at it I see not the words, but the time it recalls.

Like a pungent wafer of film screened on a micro-reader: three and a half years ago, when the world and I were different. A great deal has happened since then. Just seeing the clipping again generates shock-waves of nostalgia.

Three and a half years ago, when I barely knew Vassili.

This story is not, I was going to say, about Vassili. I do not want to write about him, lest I destroy our reality with words. And yet, what story, for me, is not about Vassili?

The dog story made a great impression on him, as a twelve-year-old. When I was struggling to interest him in the English Language. Without much success.

Behind that shy, tough exterior I'd never before seen a spark of genuine response. Only patience – and parental discipline.

But the dog story got to him, somehow. I didn't even notice, at first. But he harked back to it, again and again. With many questions.

Well. This, more or less, is how the story went:

In a provincial town in England, a springer spaniel, named Arthur, five years old, had been found in a coma. By the fellow looking after him. Since the sudden death of his young master, in a boating accident.

At first the dog had merely pined, and mourned, as dogs do; looking about for the lost loved one; whimpering hopelessly; tagging along to the funeral, to skulk around damp gravestones.

Later, this cousin or someone had undertaken to look after the animal. Had led it to his home, not far from its master's. Fed it, cared for it. And the dog had seemed to accept fate and adjust to its new keeper. Could have been less lucky, after all.

Then, suddenly, ten days after the funeral, Arthur collapsed. His new master thought he had died, at first. But discovered him to be breathing, warm, healthy. As if sleeping.

He left him alone.

But after two days, felt obliged to call in the vet.

The vet found nothing organically wrong with the dog, even after taking him into his clinic for tests.

Arthur was asleep, and refusing to wake up.

Dog-lovers divined and spread the truth: Arthur, denied suicide by instinct, had refused to live on, separated from the beloved center of his life.

In a coma, some claimed, he could at least dream. And be consoled.

Arthur's new master sought the vet's advice. He was told that the dog should be put down. A painless solution.

But some of the locals got wind of it. And objected.

A faithful animal to be killed, for its devotion? Unjust, they said.

And thus a small national controversy grew, as to whether the dog should be destroyed or not. The arguments and counterarguments were subtle, and legion.

Unfortunately, I don't know the ending to this story. Although I tried to find out what happened to Arthur. Pressed by Vassili. And reflections of my own. The newspaper printed no follow-up. Nor did any other, that I know of.

Perhaps Vassili, at twelve years old, never having owned a dog in his life, was a little eccentric in his interest.

On the other hand, try telling the story to any dog-loving friends of yours. And seeking their opinions. Should Arthur be put down? I think you'll end up with a lively discussion.

Love and death. Retribution.

And all that. Who pays, Vassili? I am asking.

IT WAS A NERVOUS, DEPRESSED company whom I joined at 'Apotsos' that night.

Juliana had called me up with the news. Dramatically. So that I did not at first believe. But had to, in the end. Faced with the facts.

Christopher looking suitably grim, righteous and ready to squawk 'I told you so!' at the drop of an olive.

We sat together in silence, for a while.. Supersensitive about our very presence in this familiar place. Not wanting to draw attention, in any way.

As if it helped. As if our odd behavior would make any difference to Tony.

"Poor Tony!" Juliana finally brought out.

"Silly, bloody fool!" Christopher corrected. But betrayed a grain of sympathy himself. Tony being our friend, after all.

Both attitudes were reasonable.

Otherwise I did not know what to say. For the present I settled for absorbing the facts. At that moment any comment of mine might have sounded a false note. Given my known liaison with Vassili. And memory of his predecessors.

In such matters Christopher had total recall.

And though I could, superficially, charge Juliana with having first put me in temptation's way, I knew it would not cut much ice.

Nor help Tony.

And probably provoke a useless argument, about boys and their lovers.

Which, I was half-afraid, we were going to have in any case, whatever was said in preface.

Look, that's why we were there, really.

Tony had a lawyer. The Due Process was indifferent to us.

Only, we had to thrash out our positions.

Preparing for this was making us nervous. None of us wanted it to be bitter or divisive. Hoping for tolerance and mutual concern to draw us together.

I absorbed the facts mainly from Christopher. Who was crisp, impatient and dying to accuse. But had actually spoken a few words to Tony on the phone. And personally engaged his lawyer.

The facts appeared to be these: Tony (an American teacher, giving private English lessons in Athens for some years past) had been arrested and was being held in custody for having allegedly molested one of his students – a thirteen-year-old boy. The boy's mother had come into the room unexpectedly during a

lesson. Found Tony kissing her son. And handling his genitals. The good lady screamed bloody murder. Called the police.

Tony had sat back and awaited their arrival. Whether paralyzed with fear, or simply fatalistic, I had yet to discover. He was being held in the city lock-up. Awaiting the preliminary hearing. And the trial, which was certain to follow.

It was no news to any of us that Tony was a paedophile. He had admitted this early in our acquaintance. Though Christopher had attempted to divert his sexual drive into safer, if more expensive, channels.

But Tony had never been one to talk of his love affairs in company. At parties and dinners he was simply one of the crowd.

Rather younger than most of us, pleasantly good-looking, athletic, a cheerful disposition, on the quiet side, by Athenian standards. In short, a nice guy.

Poor Tony, my mind echoed.

I had never met the young Michalis involved. But remembered hearing his name in conversation. Discreetly, from time to time. But surely that had been some time in the past, not recently?

The newspapers, I realized with sinking spirits, would not be discreet. Any time now, we could expect the worst – lurid, condemnatory. Hypocritical.

A paradox, that in a county of this size, one reads almost daily of the arrests of men who have had sex with boys. Which suggests a widespread, if minority, practice. While the papers continue to report these cases with hostility, and lashings of moral outrage. On behalf of the 'victims'. Even when the victims, and their parents, refuse to testify against their alleged assailants.

A recent case involved a whole village. Startlingly uncovered, after dogged investigation. A virtual Sodom of our times. Dozens of men and boys involved. Parents in the know. And a general unwillingness to testify against the accused.

Didn't stop four young men being jailed, of course.

Let's face it, boy-love, expressed in sexual terms, is illegal almost everywhere. And the Law comes down hard on the unfortunate lovers who are caught.

Regardless of how common it all is. A tradition which has continued quietly to thrive for thousands of years. Since a time when such love was recognized and honored far beyond mere tolerance.

Perhaps all these 'anti-social' parents who turn a blind eye – or even push their sons into their lovers' hesitant arms, as I have seen happen – are only re-expressing something which is located deep in their ancestral roots.

"How did he sound, when you spoke to him?" I inquired.

"I couldn't tell. He only asked me to get him a lawyer."

"What does the lawyer say?"

"It's not *my* case, dear. He will interview his client, in due course."

"Then he gave you no indication..."

"Just that Tony would plead guilty, of course. And he would ask for the lightest sentence."

"How nice," I commented. Feeling my cheeks redden. "I wonder how much he'll charge for *that* advice."

Christopher lost patience.

"Well, what do you expect? He's done a bloody stupid thing. The kid and his mother will testify. No point in Tony denying facts."

"If those are the facts."

"Even if they aren't! Mother and son. Respectable Greeks. Against the word of a filthy foreigner."

I recognized the hard truth of this. And it made me even angrier.

"You sound almost as if you're pleased about it, Christopher."

He reddened, in his turn. Losing self-control for once.

"How dare you. Listen, *I* didn't interfere with the child. And I've certainly never encouraged anything of the sort. As you damn well know."

"You know *Tony* too, Christopher," I said, trying to stop my voice from trembling. "I doubt if Tony actually seduced this boy. They have been friends for years."

"*Friends!*" Christopher blew it away with scorn. "What are you talking about? The man is paid to teach English. Not to give sexual instruction."

This was rather striking at the heart of things, and I prepared myself to respond calmly and logically.

But Juliana intervened.

"Come on, you two. Cut it out. We don't want a fight, do we?"

"Wait," I insisted loftily. "Let's go on with this. Since Christopher is such an expert on genuine friendship, as opposed to seduction and perversion."

"Don't twist my words," he hissed.

"At least," Juliana pleaded, "do lower your voices. People are looking."

And they were.

"Your words, Christopher," I went on more quietly, "are already twisted. As, I'm afraid, they always are when you attempt to discuss this subject."

"What subject?" he snorted. Cool again.

It was at this point that Juliana, fed up, rose silently and slipped out of the ouzerie.

Her exit generated a pause. Tense, and nasty.

Christopher re-filling our glasses with studied aplomb.

Quite himself again. With that minimal smile stamped into the corners of his mouth. Which indicates confidence in a morally superior position.

I was tired of the argument. But still angry. With no intention of filling the role of guilty penitent.

Never having felt apologetic concerning the shared joys of love.

Thinking fondly, indignantly of Vassili.

Has it ever occurred to you," Christopher inquired complacently, "that you seduce young boys because you find grown men too threatening?"

This was unworthy of him. Implying as it did so many misconceptions.

The absurdity of it made me, in turn, calm down.

"Not that I recall, Christopher, no. But then, I don't take the 'Reader's Digest'. I wish you'd give it up."

Fury returned to his face. Words waited, somewhere back in the turmoil.

"I don't feel threatened by you, Christopher," I smiled. "You big, grown man. Nor by any other grown men, as a rule."

He seemed to find multiple inferences in this last, from his rapidly changing color. He sat mute, hoping thus to discourage further declarations.

I agreed that silence was best preserved.

As I slipped into my leather jacket I murmured mischievously, "Christopher, has it ever occurred to you that you have sex with men because you find German Shepherd dogs too threatening?"

I SUPPOSE, IN A WAY, Vassili and I found each other threatening for quite a while. It was the strangeness of it. For I'm afraid I entered his life with a bad grace.

Most reluctantly, I went to his house the first time. To give him English conversation practice. Whatever that meant.

Juliana talked me into it, don't ask me how. For the son of a woman who worked in her office. Christopher was not available, already overloaded with lessons.

I do not give lessons, and tried to wriggle out.

Juliana can be very forceful. Maybe I owed her a favor. Certainly I was broke, and needed a job.

The grateful mother received me with effusive courtesy. Shut me in a small, bright room, with a table and two chairs, lots of school books – and the boy. Twelve years old. Silent. Awaiting his doom.

We sat down together, smiling nervously. I am always shy with new people. And Vassili, as I learned, is shy by nature. Only I've had more years to hide it and find strategies.

It was a hot, sticky day. I'm sure the boy could feel my resentment at being there.

And every week thereafter, omigod.

He resented it, too, to a lesser extent. This new limitation on his freedom. Keeping him indoors, when he thrived on the streets.

But he had no choice. Bound to be polite, being well under control.

A second son.

I also met his brother, two years older, who was enrolled at some Public School in England. We disliked each other at first sight.

Vassili, being the younger, suffered the normal bullying, lack of prestige, and secondary parental interest. He did not mind this. Appeared to love his unpleasant, alien brother. Who was different in every way. And turned his position in the family to his own advantage. Doing more of what he liked, when he liked. And, without actually lying, revealing as little as possible about his private life to anybody in his home.

I would be the first to hear more. But not yet.

We were uncomfortable together, that first day.

But we tried. One hour had to pass. His mother, doubtless, listening on the other side of the door.

We had been told, 'No Greek'. The boy had learned English for a few years, but had never conversed. And wasn't quite at the stage where he reasonably could.

So we offered words and phrases to each other. Explaining with gestures, pointing at things around us. It was not easy, nor pleasant. To keep this up for an hour. And what, I wondered in despair, about next week?

"What?" the kid would bark, at regular intervals. In that irritating Greek fashion. Most of the time, he had no idea what I was saying.

Did I even look at him, that day?

Not properly. Not with sympathy, or interest.

I was too much in love with Stavros at the time. Hopelessly, happily in love. No chance of my making eyes at a kid two years younger, who couldn't talk to me, let alone share my interests and enjoy my heart's secrets.

And yet, strangely, what a dead-end my affair with Stavros drifted into. And what a revelation Vassili soon became. A light and force in my life, which grew and grows and surprises me still.

What clue to our future joys could I have found in that inert, conventional boy, if I had paid more attention?

His thick black hair unattractively cut, brushed forward and across his forehead; a large clump standing up on the crown of his head. His face impassive; closed against the unreal world which I represented.

Braces on his teeth.

Vassili has never seen the point of learning English. So, clever as he is, he has never been very good at it. Yet he invariably uses English when talking to me, even on the telephone.

If I had not been in love, if I had been free to wander and dream, I might have noticed something in his eyes.

The blackest I have ever seen.

Quite impenetrable. As he sat at the table, back straight, hands laid neatly in front of him, they pressed out messages of hidden energy. I did not like to look at them. They only reminded me of his strangeness, and of our dreary talk.

They were the eyes of one whose tongue is trapped in an alien language. With many things to say. Important or not.

I did not want to know.

Probably I attracted him a little in the beginning – at least caught his fancy. A foreigner, with a big motor-cycle. And so on.

Albeit fast approaching forty, graying at the temples, and hiding the beginnings of a paunch under his pullover. The smoothness of the boy's face pointing up the wrinkles in my own. The bags under my eyes signaling no nights of recent revelry, but simply my age.

He may have enjoyed talking to me in Greek, getting to know me. I never gave him the chance.

I sometimes think this is behind his insistent and erratic use of English, now. He is punishing me for that initial betrayal. When I managed, without effort, to ignore him.

There followed weeks of similar sessions, where I continued to ignore him, under the guise of conversation.

I found some books and games, comics and magazines, anything to pass the time. One eye on my watch, I was in constant dread of running out of tricks. Coming to a dead stop, before the hour was up. What then?

I could imagine the kid continuing to sit up at the table, lips pressed together, eyes unchallenging. He would simply wait, until he was allowed to leave the room.

I discussed the job with Christopher, the expert. Tactfully, he praised my efforts, and made some helpful suggestions.

Still, my weekly session with Vassili remained a chore, and a boring one at that. Often, I had to psyche myself for hours before I could go and face it.

In the meantime the inevitable occurred: Vassili got used to me. Got over his shyness. No longer sat up straight and paid attention. Left his chair, or the room, on any number of pretexts. Showed his boredom when I attempted to enforce discipline. Yawned without shame – which I envied him. Sang under his breath. Tapped his fingers on the table, his feet on the floor, in irregular rhythms.

He was never deliberately rude. I think he liked me, up to a point. He was just slipping out of my control.

Look, it was a bit of a game, really. I was still an unknown quantity to him, and could easily frighten him if I chose to. But I was poorly motivated.

So, he was moved to test me.

In a natural bid for attention. Which I still, in effect, denied him.

In this way, our conversation sessions ceased to be boring and became downright irritating – to me.

At the same time, Vassili was exhibiting a sudden surge of growth. He had turned thirteen and was shooting up, slim but strong. Losing his former pudginess. His hair and lashes growing longer, giving his face more definition. And the first small signs of male aggression. His voice deepened, and he

exaggerated the effect, booming boisterously in response whenever I spoke to him. Restless and noisy, he became even less attractive to me.

We seemed to find nothing in common. His interests were shallow: the street, his gang of friends, television, television commercials.

The latter was the straw which broke this camel's back.

Having discovered its effect on my nerves, he would continue to pipe these advertising jingles, either under his breath, or bawling them out with glee. Favoring the more inane libretti.

This at a time when I was busy again at the studio, and could hardly spare the boy a thought. I had long looked for a way to terminate the arrangement, ready to find a substitute. But had not yet broached the subject with his mother. Who had been very nice to me.

One prickly, dark afternoon, with rain threatening and my body aching for the sleep it had been missing, the boy drove me to decision.

After a solid, nerve-tearing half-hour of a single chewing-gum commercial, a two-line jingle endlessly repeated, I put down my book, folded my hands, and quietly gave Vassili an ultimatum. After a moment's pause he decided I was bluffing, and continued the fateful jingle.

Enjoying the anger I could now express, needing an outburst, I slammed books and pencils into my briefcase and made for the door. Bidding farewell with satisfaction.

The shock on his face. Instant repentance. Before I reached the door, he was already pleading, "Oh, no, David. Please. Oh, no! *Please.*"

And as I left the room, just my name repeated, in tones of misery.

I protected myself from his distress with the certainty that it was the punishment he would face later which stirred him.

I went inside and called his mother away from her domestic pursuits – unprecedented behavior. Vassili hung back in the shadows. Groaning.

Mother emerged, startled, but quickly sized up the situation.

"Bravo, Vassili, so now you annoy your teacher, who comes to help you. Aren't you ashamed?"

I continued to bathe in the secondary symptoms of anger. Briefly, I explained my reasons for stopping the lessons.

"The boy is not interested. He doesn't want the lessons, he has the language school. Let that be enough. To go on would be a waste of my time and your money."

"Was he very naughty today?"

"He was. Very. And not the first time. I prefer to stop. I'm too busy."

"Well," she said solemnly, "I am sorry. Very sorry. But if you say you can't do it..."

"I don't *want* to. And neither does the boy. I shall go now. Good-bye."

"Wait! I must pay you for the month, at least."

"It doesn't matter."

She insisted.

"I shall go for a walk, and come back later. I have lost my temper."

"Yes," she smiled. "A good idea. Go for a walk. We shall wait for you. Vassili!" I heard her call, as I ran down the stairs.

Outside it was cold, windy and beginning to rain. Not walking weather. After a few blocks I was wet and freezing. And felt ridiculous.

Finally the cold forced me back inside.

Vassili's mother is no fool. She'd got me out of the way temporarily, and had a chance to talk to the boy. Knew I'd cool down. And now she had me back in her living-room. Where we sat in deep

armchairs and sipped brandy. She was all smiles. We had always liked each other, anyway. Pointing at the wall with a little pantomime, she whispered,

"There is Vassili. In there, like the weeping willow."

She beamed at me.

Listening, I could, indeed, hear muffled sounds of sobbing and sniffing. The thought of that lanky, boisterous brat crying in the next room amazed me. I also found it disturbing.

"Crying his heart out," his mother elaborated. "He's a silly boy. But he has a very soft heart."

I accepted this description without comment.

It proved to be remarkably accurate.

Well, his mother ought to know.

"Please, Mr. David," the woman continued, quickly and softly, "do not think you have to discontinue. All will be well."

In a panic, I realized that I was being taken in. Calmly, precisely, I repeated the reasons why I considered it best to stop the lessons.

She listened politely, But might not have heard.

"You're afraid that Vassili doesn't like you. He does, I know. Don't be upset by his ugly manners. You did well today. Now he will be better."

"But –" I protested feebly, "if the boy doesn't want..."

"Vassili!" his mother commanded. "Come in here."

In slunk Vassili. Cowed. Unhappy. Still blubbering, his dark face streaked with tears. If I had suspected a performance until this, I dropped the idea. The boy had cried. But why? Wasn't I freeing him? I was sure that he had not been punished. That was Father's job. Mother was all tender amusement.

"Mr. David," she said, taking the boy's hand, "is a busy man. He does not wish to waste time with you, if you are not interested. Now tell us, do you wish to continue the lessons or not?"

"Yes," he whimpered.

His mother turned to me with an air of quiet triumph.

I forced myself to speak.

"Do you really, Vassili?" I did not believe it. "You don't have to, you know. You have your language school."

He looked at me directly then. Sheepish. Ashamed of his tears, of his mother's strength. But answered clearly,

"I'm sorry, David. Yes, I want."

I believed him, then. Standing there, weeping, the human being I had overlooked.

Unsure only as to what he wanted from me.

For his mother a minor crisis had been overcome.

For Vassili and me a new era had opened.

His black-onyx eyes, awash with tears, had never looked so intense. Nor so penetrable.

I walked home in the rain, clutching a borrowed umbrella. With a growing feeling of shame. I had neglected the boy for months, that was the crux of it. He could endure it no longer. In a desperate effort to reach me, he had driven me to my outburst. And now I was bound to him.

THE NEWSPAPERS WERE EVERY BIT as bad as I had feared.

The day following Tony's arrest I bought all the afternoon editions. Most of them featured the story prominently. No front page headlines; and no photographs – except in one paper which reproduced a

picture of the boy, obviously taken years ago. For small mercies, gratitude. But it was pretty sickening.

AMERICAN SATYR PREYS ON HIS STUDENTS

FOREIGN PERVERT MAIMS OUR LITTLE BOYS

And more of the same, with devilish variations.

One had read it all before. But always with cynicism, or detached amusement.

When it concerned a friend the reaction was utterly different: shock, nausea, deep anxiety. Silly as they were, the papers were effective in their way. Conjuring up violent images of danger and depravity. Leaving one with a palpable sense of threat.

I refused to discuss them with anybody, even Juliana. Into the rubbish-bag they went, and I swore off Greek papers for the duration. Certainly, I would carry no hint of them to Tony.

To whom threats were now reality.

In his place, I could imagine the humiliation and despair.

Whatever happened now, he was finished in Greece. His students, and their parents, well-informed by the press. Reacting in their various ways. United by a sense of relief. It wasn't *their* son who... Or had he?...

The interrogations already under way. Behind closed doors. Voices lowered. And raised. Within the slightly shaken castles of the bourgeoisie.

Having read the newspapers did not, however, help me at all, to prepare for my visit to the city lock-up. A confrontation with law officers on their own ground.

There was no doubt in my mind that I had to see Tony. And talk to him. He had to know, in the middle of this crisis, that he had friends. Including Christopher, who could mislead, with his manner. Born of insecurity.

Armed with the required paper, duly stamped, from the Aliens' Bureau, I presented myself at the desk of the police station. Ready for delays and bureaucratic complications.

Fortunately my feelings of guilt failed to transmit themselves to the bored officers on duty. I was treated with something like courtesy. Told to wait. Of course. Waited for almost two hours, with conditioned patience. Was eventually led down a series of corridors and into a small room, bare except for table, chairs and a naked light bulb.

Tony was brought through the inner door – which was actually an iron grille – and we were locked in together.

I was shocked by his appearance. He was dirty, unshaven, unkempt. Might not have eaten nor slept for days.

Hollow-eyed, he lurched towards me and fell into my arms. I held him, until the sobbing ceased. A long time. During which this casual friend bit more deeply into my consciousness.

Horrible though the circumstances were, we should be closer to each other henceforth.

I inquired about the conditions, his treatment. In a dull voice he told me that there were about fifty men in one big room, with a hard dirt floor. There was no light, except from windows high on one wall.

Cockroaches and rats kept them company. Tony had rejected repeated sexual overtures, but there had been no violence. Food and water were brought at intervals. The food was rotten, and stank; he had not eaten any.

I could easily believe it. He carried the mordant smell of the place on his person.

Having described the situation, he dismissed it. While I mentally resolved to bring him some decent food. Which I thought would be allowed. Perhaps after bribery.

"What about the lawyer?" Tony demanded.

"Don't worry, love. Christopher has fixed all that."

"Bless him!"

I recounted Christopher's dealings with the lawyer. My resentment returning. But I provoked none in Tony.

"Yeah, I guess that's the way it would be."

"I think it's lousy."

Tony shrugged.

"If I can buy off the prison sentence. It'll only be deportation."

"The lawyer will be in to see you today," I promised, biting my lip.

"Right."

His eyes, unaccustomed to the glare of the electric bulb, stared vaguely over my shoulder.

Intermittently he came out with other questions concerning practical matters – his apartment, his car, legal expenses.

Perhaps it was romantic of me, but, with a growing impatience, I was aware that he had not mentioned the boy, Michalis. Not the hint of an inquiry.

"This is a hell of a thing for Michalis," I prodded.

Tony looked at me, half smiling.

"I'd say he had the better end of the stick, at this stage."

"Of course, only... the trauma. All so unnecessary."

"Trauma? Not that one. He'll be all right. Will of iron, you know? The original Greek egotist."

I was faintly shocked. And confused.

"Don't you... love him, then, Tony?"

A rueful pause.

"Did. For a while. But that was years ago."

I had thought so.

"Ironic, then," I murmured.

"Very ironic, David. To find myself in *this* situation, on account of *that* boy. The boring little prick!"

"What actually happened, then? If you feel like telling me."

"I think I'd better. Oh, David, don't look like that, man. It's not a massacre, it's just a bloody grim mistake!"

He tried to laugh. Didn't quite make it.

"Sprung, by an old flame!" he croaked.

"Did you ever have sex with him?"

"Oh, yes. He saw to that. Made it quite plain. I had to help him through the first moves. I've never been seduced so quickly.

"Of course, there was mutual attraction. Michalis used to be a bit of a darling. In that dark, sweet-eyed way. Had me on a string in no time. Ten and a half.

"My, how they change, though. After the first summer break I hardly recognized him.

"He must have noticed my loss of interest. But I thought he felt the same way.

"Anyway, his behavior had become generally obnoxious. I had to devise all sorts of stratagems. Just to be able to put up with him."

Like me and Vassili, I thought, automatically. Who also grew and changed. In a series of rapid, and usually pleasant, surprises.

"So you had no more sex with him? "

"No. The subject lapsed. Lately he's been coming out with the broad hints again. I pretended not to catch on. But I started to feel a bit sorry for him. I mean, he quietened down a lot. Seemed to get a crush

on me."

"So what did his mother actually see, when she came in on you?"

Tony laughed again. Bitterly. Coughed a bit.

"She saw randy old Michalis stroking my cock. Which he had been working on for half an hour. Before he unzipped me. I let him, because, well, it didn't matter. As I said, I felt sorry for him."

"I see. I'd half-guessed that already. And, did you kiss him?"

"Sure. I often do. I kiss all the boys. In greeting, or leaving. And they kiss me. This time I was kissing Michalis on the top of his head, out of fondness and nostalgia. And because I could see that he was desperate to start up a new sexual thing with me. And I knew that there was just *no way*."

There was no doubting Tony's story, with his soft drawl, and his resigned expression.

"Tough, to be arrested for an act of kindness, my friend," I offered, gripping his shoulder.

"Yeah," he chuckled. "And tough to leave Alexandros. Without a word. He'll read about it in the papers, I guess."

"Alexandros?"

"Best thing I ever had, David. Beautiful. Complete understanding. Total satisfaction on both sides. A dream. With a future... but not now. I guess I'll never see him again. That'll hurt both of us. You know?"

For the second time, tears came into his eyes. Tears of love, now.

But not for Michalis.

TONY WAS RIGHT: MY, HOW THEY CHANGE: boys, men, and their feelings for each other.

For the thousandth time I wondered whether this transitory element was an unavoidable part of boy-love. To be faced, and dealt with.

I had believed so, until Vassili.

As I rode back home my thoughts roamed bleakly over memories of past relationships. Love, sex, fun.

End. Good-bye.

In every case, one of us had got sick of the other. And broken away. Never both together, in mutual boredom. One party, it seemed, always suffered.

I thought first of Stavros, whom I had loved with absorption for over two years. We were so involved with each other, in so many areas, that I could not imagine us growing apart.

We did, though.

During one summer break – those somnolent, destructive months, when visions alter and dreams die – I simply lost my passion for him.

He had not changed, when we met again in the autumn – except to grow older and sexier. And yet it was quickly apparent to both of us that our magic affair had ended.

Though we continued to do many of the same things together socially, there was a flatness about it, which caused us embarrassment, and a longing for the winter past.

His final years at high school increased his burden of study. And limited our chances of meeting.

I left him to it.

With my prayers.

I respected him, was fond of him, but... I was free of him, is that the thing?

Before, he was always in control. And I loved it. I was devoted to him. But. I changed.

I took care not to lose touch. Having a long connection with his family. I called him up regularly: to check on his progress at school, discuss the football. But I confess it became rather mechanical.

In the end his mother, gently pleading, had to remind me to call him, talk to him. When I happened to be visiting Adonis.

I should have felt guilty. But that I knew Stavros, his strength and resilience.

He adjusted. But at the least, his emotional life was confused by my perfidy. His zeal for sexual experiment went unanswered.

I, too, was confused.

How could I be so evasive, when he rang and asked me to go to the cinema with him? How was it I was so bored when I did go?

I became expert at making excuses. When he caught me at his home we enjoyed each other's company. Our minds met easily, sliding together like fingers into old gloves.

But I would not stay long. Finding a reason, always, to take myself off. Which he accepted.

But must have wondered, in the beginning.

For a while, I even found him oppressive. And gross. All in my mind.

A handsome, clever, sensitive boy.

SINCE I WROTE THE ABOVE PARAGRAPHS, I have been chastised by fate, a little. Meeting Stavros by chance, once or twice. Delighting in his seventeen-year-old beauty. Falling upon his strapping young body with kisses, fondly received, and answered. An easy camaraderie binding us yet.

Then there is his habit, lately revived, of calling me late at night, when I am in bed. Teasing me with his husky jokes.

Who knows what we shall do to each other next?

Stavros is an unusual boy. I could never forget him.

Whatever might start between us now, however, would be quite new, and different.

As if Vassili would allow it.

Or I could forget Vassili, for long enough.

BACK HOME, SHOES OFF, relaxing with a glass of iced retsina, I went on to recall another past experience. I thought about Alexi.

Alexi, gods!

The other side of the coin.

Good for me, to have turned that coin over.

Otherwise, I might not even have spared Stavros a kind thought. After I ceased to be infatuated.

A MESSAGE CAME TO ME, the day after my visit to Tony in the lock-up, that Christopher had heard from the lawyer.

And found himself in an embarrassing position.

Bail had been refused. Now it seemed that Tony wanted the lawyer to visit Michalis' parents. Explain the truth of things to them. Express good will and his readiness to leave.

The lawyer was opposed. Saw no point. A waste of time, to him, knowing the courts. And parents.

Tony, with stubborn insistence, wanted *someone* to make the visit.

Christopher felt obliged to refuse. Having a name and position. Amongst the bourgeoisie and its brood.

I, on the other hand, a stranger except to the accused, might perhaps be persuaded to fulfill this awkward function?

I accepted the task. Moved by Tony's plight. Knowing myself bonded to him.

Half-admitting that he was a hostage for us all. Us lucky ones.

Besides, as a matter of fact, I was curious about Michalis. About his state of mind. His home, and parents.

Thus, I prepared myself for an intrusion into their troubled home. (I may have thrown away those newspapers, but I had not forgotten.)

My approach was to make an appointment with the good doctor, Michalis' father, with vague and suggestive explanations. I think he got the drift.

And was by no means unwilling to receive me. Perhaps, I felt, wanted the chance. To discuss.

The boy would be suffering, I knew. Tony was a good-looking young guy, with a sweet personality. And athletic. I could easily imagine a thirteen-year-old falling for him.

And having great pangs of guilt after the arrest.

But the worst part would be losing him, just when he wanted him. And not understanding exactly why.

As I had lost Alexi, so soon after he had seduced me.

A very brief affair. But long enough for me to fall desperately in love.

ALEXI WAS A VERY ATTRACTIVE boy. Pretty, sexy, and energetic.

He had become oddly interested in me, at our first chance meeting. When I had gone to buy flowers for Juliana, at his brother's shop. Pressed for a rendezvous. Received me in his home.

A fatherless boy, Alexi, with an absentee mother.

Later he suggested the mad midnight ride to the sea. Where he gave me perfect kisses. And led me on to sexual combat.

Sleeping in my arms on the sand.

Visiting my apartment for more. Staying the night.

It was fantastic, perfect. I had, in truth, found my heart's desire. It seemed to me that we could never separate. We could only go on, to develop a more richly rewarding bond.

I never doubted.

But I was in love. Wildly infatuated.

And all of this had happened within days.

At the end of the week Alexi showed signs of restlessness.

He had had a change of heart. No longer finding in me what he thought he had seen.

So he left me. Withdrew. Disappeared, as suddenly as he had appeared.

Leaving me a total wreck.

After one very unpleasant phone call I made no further attempt to see him.

It was over. I knew it, and I faced up to it stoically. Tried to put him right out of my thoughts. Stranger that he was.

However, knowing that it was finished, that I had made a bad mistake, had no effect on my emotions. I suffered. I can say that, because I never had before, not like that. I was in pain. I missed him. His voice, his face, his kisses. I even missed the sex.

He continued to fill my heart and mind.

Strange. For one week only, we were together. United in passion.

And for many cruel months after I suffered from his absence. Sick, distracted. Immune to common sense, good advice, to all healthy philosophy.

Alexi went other ways. As far as I know he never regretted the break. Had not the smallest *notion* of its effect on me. Did not, finally, return to beg forgiveness and seek my love again.

All that happened to me – like something malignant touching my life – years ago. And even now I feel *safe*, and free from Alexi, only because of Vassili. If I lost Vassili, and Alexi re-appeared...

Too late. We are both older, different.

The degree of pain was related to the beauty and intensity of our union.

Brief though it was, it was the best I ever knew.

Alexi was the best.

DOCTOR ROUKIS, FATHER OF young Michalis, received me personally at the door of his clinic. It was here that we should have our talk, rather than in the apartment, above. Where, allegedly, sexual atrocities had occurred.

For a moment or two I wondered if he were considering me as a patient. Another 'case', like Tony. The brass plate beside the door had stated 'Neurologist and Psychologist'. It was the latter field which occupied him more. He told me so.

We settled into deep leather armchairs. In this surgery discreetly decorated with diplomas, framed prints and status symbols of various kinds.

A civilized man, the doctor. Well – to have received me at all. Knowing. But in addition, quietly spoken, urbane, courteous. A gray-haired patrician. In his sixties, surely.

"Thank you for seeing me," I began. "I am most grateful."

"Not at all," he demurred. "It is natural."

What did that mean?

"I came, you understand, at the request of Mr. Marriott. Who is a friend of mine. Not on my own account"

Disguising thus my strong curiosity concerning Michalis.

Striving for cold formality. In order to overcome my fear.

"Very well, then. I understand," the doctor assented, mildly.

"Tony – Mr. Marriott – was anxious that I discharge two duties: first, he wishes to express his interest and concern regarding your son's welfare. Second, he wants you to hear from me what actually happened in your son's room."

"If you will," he agreed, more quietly. Looking impressed, if not in fact slightly shaken by my earnestness.

Nervous and embarrassed as I was.

I then proceeded to express Tony's sincere concern for Michalis, both as teacher and friend. Adding an assurance of goodwill in terms of Tony's readiness to go away, and never disturb the boy or his family again.

"Michalis will be disappointed to hear that," murmured his father. "I happen to know that he is very fond of your friend. At one time I believe that Mr. Marriott was also fond of Michalis. But not so much of late."

I knew all this to be true, but had not expected to hear it from these lips. With a hint of reproach.

Shrewd, observant. How tolerant, I did not know.

I felt unable to comment on his remarks.

"As for your wife's accusations...."

"My wife is a zealous mother. Michalis is our only child. And she... is inclined to hysteria."

"If you had not brought the police in!" I blurted out, inconsistently. Expressing a continual inner lament.

"I did not. I was absent. My wife called the police. By the time I arrived on the scene, and had dealt

first with my wife's nervous state, and second, my son's fright, I'm afraid it was too late to halt the legal process."

I felt encouraged by his tone, and the terms he employed.

"Then you admit that there has been a mistake – a wrongful arrest?"

Doctor Roukis blew out a noisy breath, raised his brows, and tut-tutted.

"Come now, sir. That is going too fast, surely. I am in no hurry to call my wife a liar. Even after thirty years of marriage. Ha-ha. The matter rests with the courts now."

"Unfortunately," I mumbled.

"You have no faith in our courts?"

"Frankly, in such cases, no. At lot," I ventured boldly, "may depend upon you."

"Really? How so?"

"Two lives are directly concerned here," I began, dramatically. "Your son's and my friend's. Both stand to be affected radically in many ways. Need I enumerate?"

"No, I don't think so," he smiled, patronizingly.

To a degree, this last exchange was a kind of ritual. Fencing, we were, testing each other. Aware that I was the more vulnerable.

However, he had caught my earlier expression. (Thirty years' marriage!)

"For my wife, Michalis was a late pregnancy. A tremendous surprise. Sadly, our joy and gratitude have not always managed to bridge the age-gap. But we love him, without limit."

I flushed, embarrassed.

"I would not doubt it."

"Don't, sir. And reflect," he smiled. "The disadvantages of our age gives us at times a distance, a perspective, let us say, which other parents – and friends – do not enjoy."

"Yes, I daresay," I said politely. Harboring reservations.

"Well, then, and your second mission?" he prompted, beginning to look tired. Who knows what strain this whole business had put him under. What with an hysteric for a wife.

I proceeded to recount succinctly Tony's description of events on the fateful day. Omitting any reference to earlier periods. Of sexual gratification. Which might, however, easily be inferred.

The doctor listened attentively, perfectly still, his fingertips pressed together, in a parody of the typical analyst.

"Yes," he nodded, when I had concluded, "that sounds straight-forward enough. Perfectly probable."

"Do you believe it, though?"

"Oh, you must give me time, sir. I must talk to my wife once more. And with my son, of course. Both of them delicate tasks, you will admit?"

"Then, as a last, personal request, may I beg you to do this as soon as possible? For the sake of truth and justice. And two human lives."

He studied my straining features, speculatively.

"It seems to me that Mr. Mariott is fortunate in his friends. As for your petition – as soon as possible, yes, certainly. However, I cannot, just now, tell you exactly when. Both my wife and my son are absent.

She took him away to her mother's village, to rest and recover, soon after the unhappy – er – confrontation."

AFTER MY LITTLE ROW WITH VASSILI, if you can call it that, walking out and then crawling back in to witness his tearful humiliation, we had no further problems. His mother had been right on that point. I had done well. Discipline had had its effect. Conditioned as the boy was, a show of strength was something he

understood.

From that day, our conversation lessons were peaceful affairs. He was wary at first, subdued. After, just quieter and more pleasant.

It has always seemed mean to me to get control of another person by threatening withdrawal. And that is what I had done. Having virtually insulted the kid from the start.

But, in the end, I was glad that I had employed this low trick.

Slowly, to my surprise, I began to enjoy Vassili's company, and even to look forward to it.

He continued to grow, of course, in body and mind.

But I had no sexual or romantic designs on him, then.

He was a new kind of stimulus.

The first thing I noticed, and it was touching, often moving to me in its simplicity, was Vassili's earnest effort to talk to me in English. The only way he knew to please me. And our appointed task, after all.

It was difficult for him: he was not well-prepared, nor intellectually motivated. But he wanted to talk to me. To make me see him as he was, listen to his thoughts. Of which he held an abundance.

And so, with great effort, and many hesitations, it began to flow from him. Spastic, bizarre English, assisted by television-viewing.

Encouraged by my attention, and nascent interest. And I could not help but praise him. When a sentence would come out, almost intact.

I always understood him. Mistakes didn't matter. And a word could be given when needed.

Listening to him became a pleasure for me.

And what surprised satisfaction from Mama, hearing this torrent of foreign sounds pouring forth from her second son, in the little room next door!

The second thing I became aware of was Vassili's smile.

Orthodontic braces off, and all hostilities ceased, a beautiful surprise awaited me. An aesthetic bonbon.

This wide expanse of sparking pearls, framed by luxuriant purple lips. A smile he could barely, if ever, control. When opening the door to me, praised, encouraged, teased, flattered by me.

I suspect it is a special treasure of Sagittarians, this sweetness.

He would even turn it on, when I asked him to.

Needing a little sunshine on some gloomy afternoon. Grateful for it.

I may well forget the adventures, and the fires of passion that followed.

May the gods forbid me to forget Vassili's smile.

In this over-known world, of telenews, and 'Time', something ineffable ought to remain, some grain beyond expression. I offer this candidate.

CHRISTOPHER HAD LEFT AN URGENT message with a neighbor to contact him. When I received it, I was unable to locate him. Later I was directed to the office of Tony's lawyer. Here the telephones were long engaged, and then not answered. Ultimately I roused some secretary, who informed me that her employer and Christopher had left, with the purpose of visiting Tony.

Now in a regular cell. Following the preliminary inquiry.

Without much hope, I asked for news of developments in the case. To my surprise, the secretary was forthcoming. With news she was obviously eager to spread. Which the newspapers would carry that evening.

When I heard what had happened, at first I could not tell if it was good, or bad.

THE CHRISTMAS AFTER I BEGAN with Vassili I went to Venice, for a self-indulgent holiday. In my wallet, however, I carried a photograph of my young student. Which I looked at quite often.

A photo taken on impulse one day with my camera in my bag and a film to finish. He had stood up and posed obediently, in his now accustomed manner: willing, docile. One hand on his hip.

When I got the prints back I was charmed with the result.

I'm looking at this photograph now, and I am charmed all over again.

Only, baffled by how little its subject resembles my present sweetheart. Gods, look at those lashes, that sweet, round, innocent face. The smile tucked into control, for once, causing dimples to appear. The thin, vulnerable arms.

A self-conscious model. Patiently aware, and happily, of my interest.

Did I destroy that innocence?

I suspect that it was simply the years passing.

Sitting in the Piazza San Marco, amongst the clattering pigeons, or wandering through the Galleria dell'Accademia gobbling up the treasures of centuries, I found that I missed Vassili. Would have enjoyed his company. Began to see everything through his eyes. Imagining his reactions.

All this was a new development, certainly. I had realized that our rapport was growing. Not that I had become fond of him.

He had given me a beautiful leather wallet for Christmas. And I had given him a key-ring, with the sign of Sagittarius on a silver disc. We exchanged these gifts with some tenderness. Feeling the emotional weight of the months behind us, our experience.

We found pleasure in the giving and the receiving.

Vassili's mother witnessed the unwrappings, delighted with the way things had turned out.

Returning to Athens from Italy, in the New Year, I was conscious that in some large measure I was going not only back home but back to Vassili.

The small voice inside me said, 'Take care'. But I barely listened.

Vassili is an optimist. He had passed on some of his optimism to me.

It proved to be warranted.

We greeted each other with spontaneous pleasure. And some relief, on his part: having half-believed that I would not return from Italy at all.

Our conversations got off to a fine start.

What is Italy? What is Venice? And so forth. Painting pictures in his mind of faraway places.

My holiday had done me a lot of good, and he saw it. Enjoyed it.

Our temporary separation had done him good, and I saw that. He had thought about me.

We had thought about each other.

So, here we were together for the long, hard winter. Warmed by each other's company.

Thirteen years old. And beginning to develop an unusual beauty.

Sex victim in coma, the headline screamed. And others, in similar vein. Splashed across the newspaper kiosk.

That was Michalis. Victim of Tony, the satyr.

I didn't have to buy a paper to know. I knew already, from the lawyer's secretary. The boy had fallen into a coma, the morning after I had visited his father. He was rushed back to Athens with his distraught mother. Thence to hospital. Where he was under the intensive care of his father, and a senior resident. Details of his condition were not yet available to the public.

It was sensational. As afternoon news.

But what did it mean?

To Tony, for one.

If the boy was in a coma, then he was. But, a connection with the original accusations? This seemed impossible to believe. Especially bearing in mind Tony's account of things.

And yet, it was just what the headlines aimed to suggest.

More hypocrisy, hysteria, panic.

The darkness of ignorance.

Loving a boy loving a man: fearful perversion, beyond the boy's comprehension: dire psychological consequences.

The legal consequences, however, were rather positive: the trial was indefinitely postponed. For lack of a victim's testimony.

Tony was, for the time being, off the hook.

Inactivity, in turn, caused the papers to cool off, and forget.

Along with their readers.

Bail was again applied for by Tony's lawyer, and refused.

Then, startlingly, Dr. Roukis himself intervened. Confronting the bench with who knows what expert, and 'interested' evidence.

The result, after a delay of weeks: Tony was released, pending immediate deportation. He was anxious to leave the country anyway.

At the same time, absurdly, six persons, myself included, went guarantors of his appearance at the eventual trial. Should it ever occur. It had become that vague.

To some minor and intermediate officials, getting Tony out of the country was possibly the best solution.

Under the extraordinary circumstances.

Tony, perhaps wishing to mitigate against the impression of escaping justice, chose to go only as far as London. To stay quietly with a sister. Until he might be called back.

He was ready to come back. Ready to testify. Nobody was going to hang *him* on the strength of conventional reflexes.

His position was, typically Greek, paradoxical: he had to leave the country to satisfy the court; and he had to come back immediately, if they required him to. Though the feeling now, voiced by Tony's solicitor at their final conference, was that he would never be called. Perhaps the paradox was simply a sign that two different departments were involved.

Meanwhile, we were able to learn more about Michalis' 'coma', following discreet inquiries made by the lawyer.

The newspaper account proved to be worse than sensational. The facts were: Michalis had swallowed some of his mother's tranquillizer pills. He had consequently become ill, and possibly unconscious for a short period. The stomach pump was not administered. He was never hospitalized, but rather went straight home with his mother. To his father's care and attention. When we made these inquiries, Michalis had already recovered, and was suffering no physical after-effects. Dr. Roukis described his condition as 'emotionally and psychologically delicate'. Hence his inability to appear in court.

Had it been a suicide attempt, or merely a plea for sympathy and attention? Personally, I plumped for the former explanation.

Certainly the boy was kept out of the limelight, after that. And remained under the keen perceptive eye of his father.

IN THAT FIRST WINTER OF OURS, it was music which helped to draw Vassili and me together. And motivate him to extend his English vocabulary.

He was at that age when boys first become enthusiastic about pop and rock. Listening to each other's records, exchanging gossip and legends, seeking after the new, and the old. Impatient for the ultimate.

His family possessed the usual status-stereo, largely a piece of furniture. Until Vassili's imagination began to work on it.

Then, how that admirable machine was transformed! Along with the household. And Vassili, too, And our relationship.

The boy flourished – in a gay, unfettered, scatty sort of way.

Not at all like Stavros, with his earnest, systematic approach to music.

With Vassili, it was all a game, full of caprice, and discovery. He would jump from one thing to another, wallowing in abundance and variety. Often enjoying the covers more than the music.

Beginning to listen to the words, and straining to understand.

Hard enough for anyone. But it was a challenge to him. How many hours we sprawled around the speakers, trying to catch the lyrics of some rock band! To repeat them, explain, translate.

Very soon, Vassili became a devotee of Heavy Metal. It was a fashion of his age-group. Nonetheless, in no time he had converted me, too.

Then came the new game of recording cassettes for me, from records of his own, and his friends.

Carefully printing the names of the songs on the cardboard flap. With occasional errors in spelling.

I gave him new records on his birthday, name-day, Christmas, and any other occasion for which I found a pretext. These, too, he copied on to cassettes for me.

Records, cassettes, pop magazines, music gossip. That was our year of Heavy Metal.

Culminating in The Concert.

There had not been a big rock concert in Athens for years. The last time round, violent incidents between the police and fans had resulted in a ban.

Now, Steppenwolf were coming. A little passé, but good. Reminding me of Stavros, and 'Easy Rider'. Then, of an earlier time, when we were all much younger. (Stavros, by this time, had no interest in groups like Steppenwolf.)

Steppenwolf! The word passed around. Vassili was wild to go. It was unlikely that his parents would allow it. Especially after the new incidents which followed the concerts in Thessaloniki. But, he knew so many kids who were going. It built up inside him, like a grand passion. Everyone was going, except *him!*

His first move was to persuade *me* to go. So that I could come and tell him about it. Steppenwolf records he had. When I agreed, he was satisfied, for the both of us. Vicariously excited, ready to live it all through me.

But in the end this wasn't enough. And his ingenious mind went to work.

First, he found a friend who wanted to go to the concert, but had the same parent problem. Then he asked me if I could get tickets for all of us. He would persuade his parents.

Doubting, but unconcerned, I got the tickets.

Next day, I went to his house for our conversation lesson. His father, whom I rarely saw, confronted me:

"So you want to take our Vassili to a rock concert!"

Vassili out of sight.

I understood all.

"Whatever you think," I answered mildly. "Do you think it's a good idea?"

As if I had instigated the whole thing.

"They had trouble in Thessaloniki," his mother put in anxiously, frowning over her husband's shoulder.

"I don't think there'll be any trouble," I assured them, groundlessly. "We shall be very careful, and keep right away from any arguments."

Having done his duty, father lost interest, and withdrew. Mother conceded to my supposed initiative. How kind of me to invite Vassili out!

Closed in our little room together, we celebrated. Vassili was ecstatic in victory.

"Cunning little devil!" I grinned.

"Oh, David! Listen. Steppenwolf! It will be fantastic!"

It was, too.

OUR TAXI-DRIVER HAD A BIT of trouble finding the basketball courts out in the suburbs where the concert was to take place. When at length we found them, the police had cordoned off two blocks. We flashed our tickets at the cops and ran the rest of the way.

To find the stadium packed, and seething with excitement. Every seat taken. The floor-space in front of the stage jammed.

Along with hundreds of others, we climbed the steep, narrow stairway to the very top of the tiers, and squeezed into a small space between the back row and the windows. Barely able to stay on our feet in the swaying mob.

I pushed the boys in front of me and held on to them. Gradually we established a beachhead.

Lights out. Pandemonium. Darkness dense with cigarette smoke and wildly excited teenagers. In their thousands.

The warm-up acts proved the poor quality of the sound equipment. And the inexperience of its operators. Their only solution was to raise the volume at regular intervals. By the time Steppenwolf galloped on stage, the amplification had passed pain-level. The crowd was beyond hysteria. Nonetheless, Steppenwolf were very good. Generous, exciting performers.

The kids pressed into me, and I tried not to break the windows behind my back. Which were throbbing alarmingly, both from the sound and from the uncontrolled thumping of the fans.

I looked around. Only two small exits were visible. Both inaccessible but from the one narrow stairway. If there were a fire, an accident, a fight, a stampede? Thoughts of mass tragedy swarmed in my mind.

Thinking of Vassili's dad.

Vassili himself couldn't have told you his own name at that stage.

Lost in rapt participation. Transported. You could almost see his mind expanding.

With the opening bars of 'Born to be Wild', physical abandonment was general, and I could feel the building moving in several different directions.

What the hell. If we were all going to die, the musical accompaniment was magnificent.

But the concert eventually came to its anti-climactic end. Lights on. Sound off. Smoke. And ears ringing.

I made the boys wait where we were as long as possible. Allowing the press to subside. Then we picked our shaky way down to floor-level, out into the real world. The night cold, and our voices sounding strange. Our hearing still on strike. But what satisfaction we felt! Shared, in stumbling, broken phrases.

We dropped off his friend first, then Vassili and I went for a souvlaki and Coke. Lingered. Feeling that magic aura about us, of people who have participated in some extraordinary event.

Walking him home – I had promised to deliver him to the door – an impulse of joy and gratitude seized me. I took him by the shoulders and kissed him fondly on the top of the head. Stroking his back, until we pressed the bell.

BEFORE WE TOOK TONY OUT to the airport, to catch his flight to London, Christopher, Juliana and I met him at 'Apotsos' for a farewell bash. Tony is one of those people who like to board planes as drunk as possible.

It ought to have been a melancholy affair, but wasn't at all.

I think we were all feeling relieved. Since the worse had not happened.

As yet.

On his side, Tony was not the type to brood. Regretted only having to leave his beloved Alexandros.

"Why not lie low for a while, and cash in your ticket?" Christopher asked.

"Can't. They'd expect that. I collect my passport at the airport, when I check in. If I fail to check in, I'll simply be re-arrested. Nothing surer."

"Well, at least you won't be too far away, darling," Juliana hastened to cheer. "Don't forget my phone number, and feel free to call 'collect'."

"Thanks, lovely."

"In any case," Christopher reminded, "you'll see *me* in London at Christmas. I expect lots of long pub sessions, and tickets for all the best shows."

"Done!"

"I suppose you will stay on there?" I wondered. "Any other plans?"

"No, David. London'll do me for a while. I've got a job lined up, at least. And a few old pals there."

"Good. Just stay in touch."

"You can count on it."

We ordered lavishly, pressed by a sense of occasion. Soon our table was over-loaded with food, and we were throwing back the ouzo.

Almost carefree, in our revelry. Certainly noisy.

Then Tony started to talk about his young lover, Alexandros. He didn't say much, but was getting a bit under the weather. And threatened to wax poetic.

I didn't mind in the least, nor Juliana, of course. But for Christopher, it was difficult. Believing as he did that Tony had had a very lucky escape. And indeed he had. Christopher did not want to hear, at this stage, about new partners in boy-love. Definitely not.

He was too full of goodwill, at this final get-together, to make any sharp remarks. But did show signs of discomfort.

I whispered to Juliana.

"Right!" she responded admirably. "Come along, Chris darling, you and I have a little job to do."

"What?"

Deftly, gracefully, she whisked him away. To shop for presents. For our departing friend. We hadn't really had the time, before.

Tony and I drew our chairs together. Re-filled our glasses.

"Here's to pederasty!" he murmured, clinking my glass. "Long may it flourish!"

"How about pedophilia?" I suggested.

"Sure. Here's to both, damn you," he grinned. "And let's not argue about words, not tonight. Let's just be two old peds together."

"Let's," I agreed. "Why don't you tell me about Alexandros?"

Tony lay back in his chair and closed his eyes.

"I thought you'd never ask," he sighed, gratefully.

Well, I knew he wanted to tell someone.

"God, he's a darling, David! He really is. Just thinking about him turns me on."

"What's he like? Describe him."

"We-e-ell," Tony smiled broadly, his eyes awash with dreaming. "He's turned fifteen. Short for his age, but sturdy, broad-shouldered and muscly – which we've worked on. A handsome head covered with classic black curls. Little dark eyes hiding long lashes. He's shy, sexy, simple. Very faithful, and straightforward. I love him. God, I've been in love with him – almost two years! He knows all about me. He supports me. The most solid thing in my life. And I give him everything I can. Including English lessons. And tennis, and squash, and windsurfing lessons. Buckets of tender affection. And sex, when we both want it. But... better make all that past tense," he groaned.

I was struck. So many echoes. I kept thinking of Vassili. Not the physical details so much as the general aura.

"He's not Sagittarian, is he?" I frivolled.

"Yes, as a matter of fact he is," Tony confirmed. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, because Vassili is too, you know?"

"Yes, I remember, you told me."

"Have you met Vassili, Tony? I think you have, once."

"Yes, yes. I remember. Once or twice. Young Vassili, hanging behind David, with this very sneaky, dazzling smile. All unawares."

I felt a pang of jealousy.

"That was him. He's fifteen, now. Tall, strong, handsome as daydreams."

"Yes? Fifteen. Like Alexandros, eh?"

Tony and I smiled at each other in a very special way, which, despite the ouzo, compensated in large part for years of isolation and closed lips. We understood each other. And this was something. We would correspond while he was away, no doubting it.

We both felt the wish that Juliana and Christopher should spend as long as possible on their errands.

For, beyond sharing love with a boy, what more satisfying, sustaining thing than to exchange secrets with a fellow pedophile?

I became eager for the exchange. Thirsty for comparison.

Society being unforthcoming, in our direction, with the myriad conventional supports which most people take for granted.

"Is he – terribly innocent, for his age? Alexandros?"

"In some ways, yes," Tony reflected. "This often surprises me, still. I mean, he has nothing like a 'dirty mind', for instance. He enjoys sex, but gets embarrassed if I talk about it – especially while we're at it. Doesn't mind variety, but gets uneasy if I become too fancy, or passionate. He knows I love him. I know he loves me. But he can't really handle that kind of *talk*, without wincing and squirming."

"Not that it's necessary," I put in, thinking of Vassili.

"Quite so. He's also a truth-teller. As a liar, he's a non-starter. His face won't allow it, and he rarely tries. I think he feels a betrayal of himself if he doesn't tell the whole truth – even when it's tactless and unflattering, and it often is. At least you always know where you are with him."

"Which is a great boon."

"Yes, indeed. For you and me, David, in our precarious, half-secret affairs, it is very reassuring.

Apart from that basic honesty, which doesn't seem to inhibit a kind of jealous privacy about his own affairs – he has dark secrets from his parents, and from me. His deepest dreams, and cherished plans. I don't pry into this area at all. He needs it to remain sacrosanct. Though some glimmerings burst out in his conversation at odd moments.

"I think of it as Alexandros' enchanted forest. Only he knows the password.

"I'm not being soppy, David. He *is* fifteen, after all. Anyway, sometimes I think he lets these little jewels slip out because he needs some practical advice – indirect, of course – concerning some cherished scheme. Really, I don't know half of what is going on in his head. I'd hate to get possessive enough to want to know. I don't think I could bear his refusal. For I know he'd hold on to the key."

"Probably," I assented glumly. Recalling one or two of my major errors with Vassili. Trying to press him. Push him. Bend him to my will.

Better to yield.

MY MIND FLASHED BACK TO A bitter summer's night. Of strength and victory. And failure.

I had called Vassili on the telephone.

"Listen, sweet, I have to see you. This afternoon, or tonight. I have to talk to you."

"What time?"

"I finish work at seven. Let me meet you somewhere."

"No. Tomorrow, David."

"Why? Listen, Vassili, this is important. I have to talk to you. It won't take long. Now, *when?*"

"Tomorrow."

Losing my temper. From anxiety. The cause of which he did not know.

"Tonight, Vassili!"

"I can't!"

"Why not?"

"I'm going out!"

"Where are you going?"

"Out!"

"Where?"

"Out!"

I didn't believe him. I was furious.

"Very well. What time will you be home?"

"I don't know."

"*About* what time?"

"I don't know."

His entire response was instinctive. He felt the threat of a trap. He wasn't being mean, just cunning.

"All right, Vassili, listen. I shall come to your house tonight, a little after midnight. If you are not there, it doesn't matter, I shall talk to your father. O.K.?"

Silence. Panic.

We had too many secrets from his father. Who did not enter easily into the dreams of his second son.

"No," said Vassili, dully.

"What, then?"

"Tomorrow."

"I'm coming now." I hung up.

When I reached his house, Vassili had gone. His mother told me that I would find him somewhere

about the streets, with his gang.

I soon found him.

The scene which followed was ugly, destructive, fateful.

I cannot bear to describe it now.

If only he had agreed to meet me that night.

If only I had told him why it was important. So many things may have happened differently.

But he had to do as he did. I understand that.

The things I said to him, in the street, in front of his mates. How could he ever forgive?

Yet he did, thankfully.

And very soon. The next week, in fact, as we prepared to converse at his house.

Smirking away our tender wounds in sunlit shyness. Whispering our painful 'sorrysts'. Exchanging the material tokens of our peace-making. Bruised and smarting together. In the unlooked-for joy of reconciliation.

Oh, Vassili!

We went on to bigger, better things, wilder things, after that!

But we were never the same again.

I do not know what I made you suffer.

And you will never tell.

In our verbal commerce, it is all long forgotten. But I hope you will never forget that shameful assault upon your privacy. I regret it still.

"WILL YOU AND ALEXANDROS CORRESPOND?" I asked Tony.

Tony's face showed pain.

"I truly don't know if that is wise... what with the newspapers. You understand?"

"I do. Look, Tony, if it happens that I could get a message to Alexandros, *very* discreetly, could you use me?"

"David!" he shone. "You're a prince."

"Think of me as Juliet's nurse."

At once he began to scribble a note to Alexandros, on the paper I provided from my notebook. He wrote with all the furious concentration of a deprived soul.

"If this works out all right," I offered, "we can do it again, you know. A sort of indirect mailing service. I promise not to open anything."

"Open! Read! Publish, if you like," he exclaimed, still writing. "Just keep the mail going through!"

I saluted, cavalry fashion.

I folded the letter and slipped it into my pocket, as Juliana and Christopher returned, hands full of small packages.

WE Poured Tony into the back seat of a cab, and he sat, slumped, between Juliana and me. We held a hand each. Christopher up front, making bright chat to the driver. To cover any offense. From foreigners.

I glanced at Tony from time to time. His head drooped on his chest, his eyes wide open. The words 'Alexandros' and 'love' fell continually from his lips, in a dismal whisper.

At the airport, he checked in, and received his passport without fuss.

On his feet, under the fluorescent glare, he seemed to have sobered up. We moved towards the bar for a last.

Tony walked between us, taking our arms in his. An aura hung over us. People turned to look. What kind of musketeers were these?

Before we reached the bar I felt something was wrong. Tony's hand lost its grip, went sliding down my forearm. His feet dragged. Juliana turned to question.

Then he was on the floor, a sprawling mass of trenchcoat and shoulder-bag.

"Oh, no," I muttered. "You're not supposed to pass out until you're on the plane, baby. Bad timing."

Juliana ran for coffee, while Christopher and I propped him up on a seat, his head back against a column. Someone brought water, and I splashed it in his face, shaking him gently.

When the coffee arrived, a strange voice intervened, with a note of authority.

"I shouldn't do that," it warned. "It might do the trick, then again it might not."

I stared at this well-dressed – German? A doctor, perhaps. Or just a person who liked to butt in. I said nothing.

"Can't you see," the man went on crisply, "that your friend has suffered a heart attack?"

We were aghast.

So preoccupied had I been with avoiding a scene, with getting Tony on to the plane on time, that I hadn't looked too closely at his condition. Assuming that he was simply dead drunk.

But I remembered now that he had drunk no more ouzo than I.

Now his face had turned an odd gray-blue color. His mouth hung open in a ugly manner.

"A mild heart attack, I should say," the stranger concluded. "Shall I arrange for an ambulance?"

Minutes later, we were speeding back towards the city, sirens howling.

At the hospital it took an age to get anyone to look at Tony, and even longer to secure a bed for him. When a doctor finally did appear, Tony was beginning to look better. That is, his face had regained its normal coloring, his lips were calmly closed, and his body seemed relaxed. However, he was still unconscious, and had shown no signs of coming to. While the doctor made an examination, Christopher and I filled in a card with the usual endless questions. I made out a check to the hospital as a guarantee deposit.

The doctor had a further question for us: had Tony ever had such a turn before? We shook our heads. Certainly not to our knowledge. He'd always been the healthiest boy in the bunch

Then we were informed that there appeared to be nothing whatever wrong with Tony's heart.

"Then... what is it? What... happened to him?" Juliana asked fearfully, for all of us.

"That remains to be seen. He'll be under observation. We'll run some tests."

"How long will that take?"

The doctor looked tired.

"Depends on what we find. If we run all the tests – two or three weeks."

He told us to come back next day, but to check by telephone first. Then he hurried away to other patients.

Two or three weeks? By which time Tony would be conscious again, and, hopefully, smiling at the world. If not indeed, home again much sooner.

We were baffled. But would just have to wait.

Our conversation, as we shared a taxi to our respective apartments, did not get us much further.

"Did Tony use any kind of drugs?" Christopher wondered.

"No, never. He despised the whole notion. Apart from the grog, he was always a bit of a health fiend."

"But... I mean, he could have gotten hold of something. If he'd decided."

"Where? In prison?"

"How should I know? Perhaps one of his American friends, from the base."

"He doesn't have many of them, as far as I know."

"Even so. In desperation."

"You mean," trembled Juliana, "that he tried to kill himself? It doesn't sound like Tony to me. What do you think, David?"

"I agree with you. Anyway, he was safely off to London. Why choose to end it at that point?"

I was remembering his anguish at our meeting in the lock-up. His distress at leaving Alexandros. Hurting them both. The letter, which I had not read, nor yet delivered.

"Well," Christopher concluded, "if it was a suicide attempt, it appears to have failed. Thank god."

Amen from us two, ignorant as he.

Next day, I visited Tony at the hospital alone. There he was, tucked up in his neat white bed, arms lying straight on the cover, his face peaceful, almost cheerful. But his eyes closed. Unconscious. Comatose? His breathing was regular and shallow. It seemed to me much slower than normal. Several charts hung at the foot of his bed.

As I sat and gazed at him it came to me that he looked quite beautiful. Rarefied. There was a kind of faint glow about him – nothing dramatic or blinding, but, nonetheless, there.

Where was he? I wanted desperately to know where he had gone.

The doctor responsible was unavailable. I made out the word 'coma' written on one of the charts, but little else. What did that tell you?"

Eventually, I was able to pin down a nursing sister for a minute. She informed me that tests had been made, and others would be made the next day. Results so far were negative. Not even a trace of drugs, nor any kind of poison.

There was nothing I could do but leave Tony in his unexpected dream-state, and go my puzzled way. I should be in touch with that doctor, needless to say. We all should, Tony's friends.

THE SUMMER VACATION WHICH followed Steppenwolf I spent mostly on the island of Kerkura, involved in a chaotic Greek-Italian movie production. At the same time, Vassili, away in his village, broke his front teeth. Not for the first time, nor the last. Vassili is always breaking something. I don't think that he is thoughtless, or even unlucky. Accident-prone is all I can say. Shortly after his teeth were expensively capped.

When we re-met in September, it was all he could do to keep his lips closed. As he had learned to do, in order to hide the ugly, triangular gap in his teeth. Both ruining his famous smile and making speech extremely difficult to follow. However, nature won through on this occasion, as, throwing pride to the winds, the lips parted and stretched towards his ears.

So happy to see each other, we were.

As soon as he had closed the door, I took hold of him playfully, hugged him. Kissed his cheek. This surprised him, but he wasn't displeased.

We settled down to discuss our summer adventures.

Vassili sitting almost on top of me.

After this, no matter how his mother placed the chairs, to catch the best light and so on, Vassili would always move his very close to mine, so that our legs and arms were touching.

This was the time when we became aware of physical attraction.

On that first day of rainy autumn, we had a lot of fun scuffling, venturing. Nothing overtly sexual. We were like two puppies, playing.

Comfortable together, in our small intimacies.

And, Vassili was so completely acquiescent that I began to realize the power of my position.

Hence began my doubts about seduction.

So, when a whim struck me, say, to kiss his neck, all honeyed in the glow from the window behind him, then, I would ask him directly, frankly, 'Vassili, let me kiss your lovely neck'. And he would smirk a little and turn his head. While I touched my lips to his golden warmth. Whispering, 'I adore you'.

So that he would *know*. And have no illusions.

If I said 'let me' – and it was something he did not fancy, he would wince and moan politely, "Please, no, David," and I wouldn't. Losing interest at once.

Though often making the same request later, and having it granted.

Was this seduction? Was I breaking down his weak resistance, or leading him along a path which interested him? Where he need encouragement to proceed.

Anyway, we did not hurry about it.

Vassili quickly forgave anything he did not like. Any excess.

After these games, we returned to our mutual joy, our bond.

Alone, I wondered if I were developing a passion. But, as I meditated on this danger, my soul felt no threat – only enrichment.

There followed an enchanting time, most of that misty autumn, when Vassili took to mimicking my caresses. Reaching out to touch my face, after I had touched his, in wonder. (How his beauty grew!) Stroking my forearm, as I did his; gripping my bicep, my thigh, my calf. I think he wanted to find out why I enjoyed these things so much, why I sought them. He had a lot of fun finding out.

And, when, in some access of guilt or bad temper, I would cease my fondlings altogether. Striving to leave him be. Free.

Then he would provoke me, hesitating but a moment once he saw how I was. Teasing me with his languorous smiles and sliding thighs. Scratching at my shins with his toes. Gently persuasive.

I was a pushover. Capitulated in a matter of moments.

In those days Vassili was cheeky, and charming, sentimental, and blasé. Energetic, roughly humorous, challenging me to frown; honest, beautiful.

I became so possessed by his basic sweetness – a word I had always eschewed – that I started to address him in like fashion: 'Sweet. Sweetheart.' Because, it was exactly right. He accepted it without a thought.

I still call him 'Sweet'. Months, years of trauma and change later. No other name will do better, even for my hulking fifteen-year-old with his bulging, sperm-stained jeans. No person ever merited the description more.

Eh, Sweet?

Stop blushing.

In the meantime, I was talking about Vassili to my friends, to anybody who would listen. I couldn't stop. Those who knew me best, and were used to me, were tolerant. But everyone must have been sick to death of hearing about Vassili's 'sweetness'.

I started taking photographs of him more regularly. It became a custom with us, smiled upon by mother. We took photographs to mark various events, milestones, triumphs – there are so many in a boy's life.

Every time I looked at a new set of prints I marveled at the difference in him, in a few short months, or less. Indeed, he developed very quickly that year – physically, mentally and, of course, sexually.

We no longer hid our interest in each other's body. And though he knew my interest was (probably) greater than his, that was all right. He was the one with the burgeoning beauty, after all.

I was the devotee. But we were both celebrants.

Boys are such an enticing mystery. You never know just what is coming out of the chrysalis. And, even at this stage, I had no idea how beautiful Vassili would become. He outstripped all my expectations, surprising me, in a series of pleasurable shocks.

For some time he had no notion of his own beauty. Then, slowly, he began to respond to my praise. Wondering about my tributes, shaken awake by my excitement and pleasure in him.

He was driven increasingly to the mirror.

Where he would stand and gaze. Pose. Move his hair about. Tug at his clothing.

A new interest in clothes naturally came along with this.

He stuck to that mirror for years, but with such innocence, mocked by his mother and his brother, that I felt it had more to do with my loving appreciation than with any streak of vanity in his character.

I knew his beauty much better than he did, having studied it, cherished it. But he began to know, too. For the first time. If I had never told him, I wonder how long he would have waited, to learn this vital thing about himself.

I taught Vassili his own beauty. Which could be a disservice.

While we sat together with our books, I would kiss him, stroke him.

Tasting his lips the first time gave me one of those many shocks: the exquisite, the unexpected and strangely familiar flavor of paradise.

That happened twice. Kissing him on the mouth gave him an instant erection. It unnerved him. And I withdrew.

If he was bored, or restless, or over-excited, I would stroke the insides of his thighs, which never failed to leave him calm, and content.

In his thin U.S. Army trousers, or cotton cords.

My fingers often moving towards his crotch. Coaxing.

His face showed his pleasure.

In weeks to come, I sought the center of his awakening, and added tenderly to his knowledge. Minor sexual explorations followed.

Winter set in. It became a romantic period for us rather than a sensual one.

These romantic winters lie potently in the memory.

Sentiment, warmth. Growing trust.

On the morning of Christmas Eve Vassili and a friend arrived at my door. Triangles in hand, to sing the 'Callanda'. Standing side by side in their woolies, banging and singing away. For me. Their eyes heavy with fatigue. Having risen very early to ride the trolleys, like latter-day Judy Garlands, with their festive triangles.

Tired as they were, they put on a special show for me. I can't comment on the quality of the performance, I was too much moved by the gesture, the gift.

As I am moved by the memory. A very special Christmas Eve.

I loaded them with chocolates, drachmas, kisses.

Spent the rest of the day alone, secure in a glow of grateful love.

The next day I flew to Paris.

While I was there, Vassili broke his arm. Some vague, improbable accident.

MY THIRD VISIT TO THE HOSPITAL, with Juliana clinging to my arm, revealed no change in Tony's condition. He was being fed intravenously. His breathing continued to be regular. There remained an aura of peace and harmony about him.

Juliana was particularly struck. Laying down her flowers and fruit. She leaned forward, mouth open.

"Isn't he a *darling!*" she whispered. "Such a pet. And he looks so healthy! Surely he must come out of it soon?"

"Hopefully. Maybe while we're here. Then he can tell us all about it."

Juliana hesitated.

"What do you mean, David?"

"Well, no one else here seems to know anything," I complained. "Whereas, look at old Tony there: he has the definite look of a man who knows what he's doing. Unconscious or not."

"But how could he? I don't understand."

"I don't either, darling. I don't either. It maddens me."

"Well, but the doctors..."

"Are invisible, as usual, Look, you hang on here for a bit, and I'll see if I can rustle up some news."

This time I was unable to find even a nursing sister. I strode about the corridors, making a lot of blustering noise. Disturbing the personnel at the reception desk. Giving full expression to the sense of comic opera which had been lying dormant in my mind since Tony's collapse at the airport. Repressed by anxiety and ignorance.

Possibly my antics had some effect on hospital communications, or possibly routine took its natural course. When I returned to Tony's ward a doctor was present. Bent over Tony's inert form, prodding, palpating. Chatting amiably to Juliana. Who seemed charmed.

As I entered the doctor turned.

"Ah! Mr. Marriott's good friend!"

Pulled up in my tracks. By the sight of Roukis, Michalis' father. What was going on here? I tried to tune down my suspicion to natural caution.

"Good morning," I said blandly, accepting his proffered hand.

"You are not pleased to see me," he induced, with a quizzical smile. "A pity. Personally, I found our last meeting most stimulating. And instructive."

I didn't like that, either.

"What exactly are you doing here, Doctor Roukis," I demanded softly.

"David, *please*" Juliana murmured.

"It's all right," the sensitive doctor reassured her, with a pat on the hand. "The question is natural."

I waited for him to answer it.

"I am a regular consultant here, you see," he explained broadly, placing a presumptuous arm around both our shoulders. "Naturally, I take a special interest in cases of psycho-pathological nature. And I want you to feel at peace in your minds that Mr. Marriott is and will be receiving the very closest attention.

Juliana relaxed, smiling vaguely.

I still did not like the sound of it. We had been told nothing.

"Am I to infer, then," I pressed, "that you see Tony as a case of psycho-pathology? "

"Not quite the right term here, I think. Another category." He was becoming animated, by professional interest. "Perhaps we could speak – tentatively of course – of a psychologically induced condition."

"Like shock, you mean?" faltered Juliana.

Not... quite, no. The symptoms of shock are physical, and generally short-lived. Mr. Marriott does not exhibit them."

"Like what, then?" I wondered.

"Shall we say, something self-induced." He hurried on, as he saw our expressions. "Some condition of rest, which part of the mind, under extreme pressure, has decreed for the body, and itself."

He smiled happily. We were silent.

I was jolted toward the social amenities.

"How is Michalis now, doctor?"

"Making progress," he smiled, cryptically, gesturing slightly toward the bed. "Two patients. Two mysteries. It is very, very interesting. Potentially exciting."

"You don't sound very concerned," I said meanly, "for your only child."

The doctor paused a moment, observing me.

"Oh, but I am, of course. As a father. And as a doctor – for *both* our patients. Have no doubts about that. Mr. Marriott will suffer no conceivable neglect."

I am glad to hear it," I commented drily.

"You may rest assured," he insisted, "that everything is being done."

A silence fell, as we all three observed the sleeping beauty before us.

"And the law?" I prodded. "Have the police been in here, nosing around?"

Juliana looked alarmed.

But Dr. Roukis merely smiled that condescending smile of his.

"Put it out of your minds. It cannot, and will not happen. Mr. Marriott is under strict medical supervision."

"When will he regain consciousness?" Juliana asked.

"Who knows? Who knows, in such cases? If the subconscious mind has gained control of the organism..."

"You mean to suggest," I queried impatiently, "that a person can induce a state of coma at his own convenience?"

"You over-simplify, of course. I am guilty of the same fault. But only seek to offer what explanations I can, at this point."

"But," I expostulated, "it sounds like black magic! Surely you don't suggest..."

"There is a mechanism, there are many mechanisms within the human brain which operate outside of our understanding. The textbooks are full of cases. Data. Theory. But no explanations. All I can say, with some certainty, is that such mechanisms are not freely available to the individual, under normal circumstances. Indeed, it may be said they operate under conditions of unusual stress. But they are not unknown to us."

"All very interesting," I muttered. "If you happen to believe in the existence of the subconscious mind at all. A solid convention, since Freud. But, by its very nature, unexaminable. And so convenient, Doctor, inaccessible as it is, to support any theory at all!"

I was on a hobby-horse. Juliana squirmed, but the doctor was stimulated.

"Perhaps not *totally* inaccessible, perhaps not. Let us keep our minds open. In the hope" – his tone became light and dismissive – "of helping your friend. Really it is very interesting, very interesting," he twittered, as he made his excuses and withdrew.

I must state that I regarded Dr. Roukis' profession and his theories with the deepest suspicion. And continue to do so. I quote his remarks only for the record.

"Pompous old goat," I sniffed.

"Don't be so sure," Juliana demurred.

Juliana is susceptible to gray-haired charmers.

VASSILI MANAGED TO LOOK QUITE FETCHING with his arm in a cast. Decorated colorfully by his mates. I was urged to add to his graffiti.

The cast rested in a black sling fashioned by his grandmother.

He had begun to favor black clothes – to his mother's despair. Black shirts, black jeans, black jackets. It suited him. It still does. There have been brief detours into punk and disco; he has always come back to basic black.

Also at this time he began to make rings and bracelets out of sheet copper. He made me a bracelet, which was so attractive and comfortable to wear I insisted on paying him for it.

The cast disappeared in due course, but the black and copper remained.

As he continued to grow and change, I felt an infinite preciousness in him. A rough jewel, being slowly and carefully cut by time.

My angel-prince.

Our sexual games continued.

But became almost incidental to my feelings for him.

I made my declarations of love plain, matter-of-fact, infrequent. So that he would understand, and believe. Fortunately, he did.

When his shyness overwhelmed his pleasure in my adoration, I would reason with him, urge him to exploit.

"Look. I love you, Sweet. You know that. I would do anything for you. That is what my love is like. I would give you anything. You're in a strong position, now. You have power over me," I grinned. "Use it. Take advantage. Get what you can out of me!"

"I don't want anything," he said.

"Think about it, Sweet."

Privately, I was gratified to think of Vassili's new 'power'. In a sense it offset my own power to influence him. To seduce. Or even pervert.

Vassili being the boy he is, took me quite literally. Thought about it, decided what he wanted, and then proceeded to take advantage.

It was a while before I understood that he was doing this. Even after he had done it I did not realize that he had simply taken my advice.

For like everything else he did it so sweetly.

"David," he said one day, looking up at me with his shyest smile, his voice faltering a little, "do you want to buy a moped with me?"

"Yes," I said, enchanted. "What do you mean, Sweet?"

"Together. Partners. A moped, David."

For months we had talked of bikes. Records and other gifts had given way to motorcycle magazines. Most of which were in English. Giving a respectable excuse.

Vassili devoured them. Couldn't get enough. Pored over the photographs of gleaming machines. Totally absorbed.

While I caressed his shoulders, his neck, kissed him. Stroked his erection.

Some of the local kids had little bikes, mostly mopeds. Vassili was dying to possess one. To ride, race, do wheel-stands, the lot. I indulged this dream, judging its realization to be far ahead in the future.

But he was just on the legal age.

And had saved money.

Vassili is a whiz at saving money – from relatives, birthdays, Christmas, from vacation jobs. He counts and hoards, dreaming. And never breaks into the bank until he is ready to buy something that he

really wants.

No spendthrift, he will one day be an accountant, and inherit his dad's business. It is written.

Well. Vassili had calculated that he had saved enough, at this point, to buy a half-share in a moped – or maybe even a secondhand bike.

And, since I had urged him to take advantage of my love...

I didn't see it like that, of course. I was frankly charmed and delighted. We had found no other pastime to share, since the rock concert. Movies and other suggestions fell flat. Vassili preferred to see movies with his gang. And he was quite right.

But now, here he was proposing a joint purchase, a sharing of his most longed-for possession. I was flattered. Felt his trust in me. Was warmed.

So, we sat down and talked about mopeds. Until Vassili, I had never *heard* of mopeds. I had had a series of bikes, working up to the Kawasaki. Which was currently on pawn to friends, biking it to Copenhagen, and saving my economic neck. The plan being to buy it back in the summer. I had learned to get on without it.

Looking back, I wonder now what was my real reason for letting it slip out of my hands. The big machine had been like a symbol of youth and freedom. Possibly my inner voice was telling me that it was Time. Young no more. Carefree no more. All that is finished.

I could have got the Kawa back by then, if I had really wanted it. A small effort of economy, and a little organization. I am pressed to conclude that, deep down (pace Vassili) I did not really want to anymore. That I would not enjoy riding it. And possibly, would no longer be able to handle it.

In any case, I did not have it, nor look like making any move to retrieve it.

Not long after – following the purchase and joy and conflict and disaster – I came to see the humble moped, with wry humor, as a suitable mount, and even a warning symbol, for the aging pedophile.

In Europe these mopeds, economic little machines, are very popular, ideal in mad city traffic like Athens', or Rome's.

We pored over catalogs. The range was dazzling.

Vassili particularly enjoyed working through the details – weighing up the advantages and the disadvantages of each model. Endless decisions. He was not in a hurry to buy – within limits. This process of careful selection was heaven to him. And scintillating to me.

Clandestine rendezvous on street corners, after which we would walk and walk, along those enticing avenues which every city boasts, of numberless motorcycle showrooms.

Holding on to an umbrella together, in the driving wind and rain.

Darting backwards and forwards between one shop and another. Making choices, then canceling them.

Until we came to rest outside one particular showroom, brightly lit, and crammed with rows of gleaming Italian mopeds. There was one here which was unique to us: we'd never seen one on the road, and there was no other in the shop. An iridescent, electric blue. Solid frame and suspension, small chunky wheels. 49cc of bliss.

We decided that we would definitely buy this one, if we bought a new one. Having decided, we remained crouched on the wet pavement, staring in at our choice. My arm around Vassili's shoulders. My lips nuzzling his hair. It was a happy moment, together in the rain.

After this I began to wonder just how far I could allow the game to go. It was true that I could use a vehicle. But Vassili could not be my partner without parental consent. And he knew they'd never allow it. Not a chance.

I thought it through, meditated on the problem, surrendered to reality. I should have to tell Vassili no,

not yet. Later, perhaps, when his parents agreed.

I dreaded his disappointment.

Silly me. Meditation is one thing, Vassili's presence was another. It went beyond persuasion. He never took my 'no' seriously for a moment. I simply needed some understanding, some kindly boy-reasoning.

"But Vassili," I said, "behind your parents back? We can't."

"Why not?" he laughed. "It doesn't matter. Lots of boys have mopeds without telling their parents."

My appeal to morality was a dead loss. Teenage convention made more impression on his conscience.

Another tack.

"Vassili. They will find out. And then we're both in trouble."

"How will they find out?"

"Well – they'll see you riding it."

"No they won't. I'll be careful where and when I ride it."

"One of them will catch you, sooner or later."

"Look, David," he explained patiently, stroking my arms. Always affectionate during these discussions. "If my mother or father happens to see me riding a moped – so what? I'll just say it belongs to a friend. They won't make a big noise."

"And where will you keep it?"

"We'll keep it at your place, of course. Inside. For safety. Because there are a lot thieves."

He would come down to my place and take it, when it was his 'turn'.

"And the registration?"

I wanted the papers in his name, so that when I was traveling abroad, or if I had to be away for a long time, he would have no problem. My idea was that the moped would be his. My share of the cash as a gift of love. I should use it only when he was at school, or otherwise busy. I also saw this as a chance of reconciling his parents to the thing, by means of a *fait accompli*. This was naive on my part.

"I will take the registration."

"You need your father's signature."

"No, David, not for a moped. I am old enough. Other boys told me."

It proved to be true.

"But you haven't got an I.D. card yet."

"I will get one. Soon. I have the photographs. My mother promised."

"It all takes time, Vassili. And while we're waiting for your I.D. card to come through?"

"It doesn't matter. We can ride it a little while without a number-plate."

"And if a cop stops you?"

"They don't worry about mopeds."

"But if one *does*?"

"O.K. I'll say it's a new bike, and I'm getting the number tomorrow. No problem."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"David. It'll be O.K. *Really*. Oh... our beautiful moped!"

I didn't like the sound of my voice, either: partly because I sounded too much like a parent; and partly because I could hear myself wavering. Feel myself falling.

Vassili listened, watched me hedge about. But never really doubted. Look, we had chosen our moped already!

In fact, when I was with him, I hardly doubted it myself. I had told him, teasing, that he must talk me

into it. And he was. His arguments were many, and good. Besides, it was so healthy for my heart to build this dream with him. I loved him more every day.

Predictably, perhaps, he became very liberal with his favors.

Away from him, I doubted. Worried, feared, imagined dire consequences.

These fell into three powerful categories:

One: Vassili's parents find out. Shock and disillusionment. Dismissal.

Two: Trouble with the police. Always to be avoided.

Three: An accident, in which Vassili is hurt, or even killed.

Any one of these notions was enough to give me nightmares.

It says a lot for Vassili's powers over me that, in spite of all these anxieties, I went ahead and did what he wanted.

Successfully seduced.

Does every boy-lover have a shade of immaturity lurking in his make-up, causing him sometimes to act against his better judgment? I don't know.

I held Vassili off for a few more weeks, by diverting his attention to the classified advertisements. This pastime gave him a new burst of interest. The trouble was, he wouldn't answer any of them himself. Instead, he would call me, excited, certain he'd discovered a gem, and instruct me to call up and inquire. Which I sometimes did. With little result.

We both grew tired of it.

Then, one morning early, he called me up, animated but under control, sounding very strong.

"David, You like the new moped? The blue one?"

"Yes, Sweet."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Let's buy it."

"You want to buy it, David?"

"Yes, do you?"

"Yes, I want."

At least it was simpler and safer to buy something new.

I met Vassili on a street corner and he pushed his roll of banknotes into my hand – with momentary regret at giving up his hoard – then dashed off to school.

I caught a taxi to the showroom. Where I amazed the salesman with my immediate purchase. No doubts in my mind. Filled in some papers. Waited for the bike to be checked and filled up with gas.

Rode off cautiously, with the strangest, sunniest feeling of unreality. Purring along, astride this spunky little machine. Getting used to its ways and enjoying them. What fun.

When I arrived home, Vassili and half a dozen of his mates were waiting outside on the steps. To greet the beast.

Touching, appraising. Approving.

Vassili in seventh heaven.

We carried the bike into my apartment. Where it was to live, having been captured.

The other boys left, and Vassili and I joined in private enjoyment of our acquisition.

Silently gazing. Discovering details we had missed before.

Completely happy.

A final hug and a kiss, and he left, with countless instructions concerning locks, fuel, and the like.

While I was thinking: *You* made us partners this time, Sweet. Let's believe in it, then. Let's live it out. Let's see what two wheels and one helmet shared can do to us.

THE FIRST NEWS ABOUT TONY CAME to me from Christopher, via Tony's lawyer.

It did not concern Tony's physical condition.

But could, all things considered, be received as good news.

Michalis' father, and *his* lawyers, had consulted at length with the state prosecutor, and as a result the charges against Tony were formally dropped.

Wonderful what you can do, when you know people: Roukis and this prosecutor were old school friends. Had been at Harvard together!

A welcome release, from one source of stress.

But with it came a rider. Doesn't there always?

Dr. Roukis requested permission – *our* permission, as Tony's guardians – to receive Tony at his own clinic, for observation and treatment.

I was opposed. Immediately. Instinctively.

The cold, bourgeois poseur, I thundered, trying to suck Tony into the self-serving sewer of psychoanalysis.

"I thought you said he was a patrician," Juliana objected.

"He meant the silver side-burns, darling," Christopher explained. Helpful for once.

"Well, I don't see what harm it can do," Juliana pursued. "After all, the man's got Tony off the hook, for good. And a private clinic means – out of the public eye."

"And beyond public scrutiny," I added.

"You don't think you're being a bit alarmist?" Christopher teased. "After all, the man *is* a professional."

"Yes, but a psychoanalyst! Christopher, in an irregular situation like this, he can say just what he bloody well likes!"

"Oh, come on, David. We're all aware of your phobia about psychology – I wonder why you're *like* that – which I for one do not happen to share. Besides, Tony won't be spirited away and locked up anywhere. Dr. Roukis made it perfectly clear that we *and* Tony's lawyer would be free to visit him at any time. So, he'd still be under our eyes, so to speak."

"I don't like it," I muttered. "I have a bad feeling about it."

"Do you have a better suggestion – for Tony's good, and the prosecutor's approval?"

I didn't, of course.

"What do you think," Juliana pondered, "that Roukis wants to take Tony for? I mean, why, *really*? Apart from all the 'professional interest' crap? What's his motive?"

We considered this a few moments in silence.

"I imagine," I finally declared, that he's planning to set up some kind of controlled situation, in which he can reconstruct, as those bastards say, a relationship between Tony and the boy. Which is deemed fit by the doctor."

"What kind of relationship? "

"I should think – some kind of friendship, with Michalis pulling the strings. Look, the whole idea is just a way of indulging his son, don't you see?"

"But I thought that's what caused the trouble in the first place." Juliana was baffled.

"It was, in effect. But Mama blew the whistle and brought on a disaster," I finished with an ironic laugh.

"What will she foresee, now?"

"Forgiveness. Tender reconciliation. Holding on to Tony for just as long as he's useful, and no

longer. And remember, all this under the control of her brilliant husband."

"Perhaps she's right, too," Juliana dared.

"What about the notion," Christopher probed, "of Tony and the kid patching it up? You know Tony best. What's he going to feel about it? I take it he's fond of the boy."

"Was. All finished long ago. No, Christopher, I'm afraid that one's not on."

Not as long as *Alexandros* was breathing.

"Well," I began to concede, "we can at least save Tony a whopping hospital bill. Old Roukis is treating."

"Not to be sneezed at," Juliana said.

But I was thinking now of Tony, in earnest. Seeing his face when he woke up and found that the boy in the other bed was Michalis, not Alexandros.

It wasn't funny, really.

THE FIRST DAYS OF SHARING our shiny blue moped, that genial June, were hectic and stimulating. I never knew when Vassili was going to call me on the telephone – 'David. I come now. O.K.?' – or ring the front door bell. Often finding me lying late in bed. All unprepared. When he was all 'go'. Arousing me, with his impatience.

Sometimes alone, sometimes with a friend, he would burst in upon me, all business-like. Became a regular visitor at last.

In those days, young as he was, Vassili was anxious to convince me. Of his unselfishness and reliability, as a partner. Much more than to impress his friends.

I should have seen that. Ought to have reinforced him.

Instead, I drifted on toward the disaster which I helped to bring about. By undercutting him. Weakening him in ways I should never have done consciously. Mocking him gently in front of his friends, as a means of controlling my lust.

But I was so in love with him, and thought only to gratify him, where others deprived. Translating this vague sentiment into the act of giving him the moped. Which he rode far more often than I.

I could have pleased him more, if I had taken him more seriously. As a fourteen-year-old trying to do things right. Fortunately, his friends did. Vassili has a lot of friends.

Life, as it so often does, gave its return to his insouciance, and my irresponsibility. But much later. Long after both of us had ceased to care about the moped.

In the first magic time of partnership the specter of police, arrest, courts, never loomed before either of us as a real possibility. When these horrors actually threatened to eventuate it was so late in the game, so irrelevant to our current reality, that it was more wearisome than anything else.

In the beginning, all was movement and fun and surprise.

Often I would discover small damages to the moped after he had returned it: scratched paintwork, broken lights, loose foot-rests. Nothing serious.

But it seemed a pity to me to tarnish a dream so early. To me, who had always looked after my bikes. Vassili would never be that way, I saw.

His mean-minded brother once remarked, "You know, Vassili is a destroyer – he ruins everything he touches." I hated the speaker for that remark. Feeling that I had a deeper appreciation of Vassili's free spirit.

Later I grudgingly admitted there was some truth in it.

Once, to my eternal mortification, I even quoted it. To Vassili.

Laugh it off as he would, he could not conceal his dismay. I shall never forget that day. His face. I

ought not to forget. How I hurt him.

For all his beauty, energy, bravado – how easy, after all, it is to hurt a boy.

The minor damages I accepted philosophically, with the mildest remonstrance. Financially, such things were a flea-bite to me. I adjusted to my partner's ways.

However, the problem of taking out registration dragged on. Vassili had not got his I.D. card. He wanted to apply for it, but could not tell his parents why he was in a hurry. So, he had to wait.

The weeks passed, became months, and I grew alarmed at the continual risk of riding a bike with no number-plate. Vassili was blasé. I worried for both of us. It got on my nerves.

A symptom of my general insecurity. An alien in a volatile country.

No longer ambitious in any way, accepting myself as a third-rate plodder. Hanging on in fields of labor like dubbing and acting, which were unpredictable. My life a series of maddening extremes: rags to riches, and back to rags, with sickening frequency. And yet I became no more prudent, no less extravagant in the good times.

While, in fact, the situation was changing for the worse: film-dubbing in English had all but died out in Athens in the previous five years. Economics and management had defeated the Greeks, and only one studio out of dozens hung on. For similar reasons, plus union activity, work in foreign films had also dwindled.

I was a man with no bright prospects before me. I didn't feel middle-aged, nor think of my situation often, in a conscious, rational way. But there was an undercurrent of nerves running in me. I knew, without the occasional remark from Christopher, that I was no longer the good-humored, easy-going fellow who had drifted into Greece almost ten years before.

Vassili's unconcern about the registration made me take it out on him more and more. I didn't believe that he was really trying to get his I.D. (This was silly.)

"You say next week. Then you say next month. Then you say Easter. When are you going to *do* something, Vassili?"

"Don't worry. I'll get it. I *told* you. I promise."

Of course, the delay was not his fault. He was my scapegoat.

When he finally did take the wretched I.D., it was a bitter victory. And much too late.

I could have got right off the boy's back and registered the moped myself. But it would have been more complicated – more papers, queues, patience.

Besides, it would have changed the whole concept of our partnership. I wanted it to be Vassili's bike, to take home and keep as soon as possible.

The crunch came one day when I was riding the beast and a cop-car pulled me up, indicating the absence of a number plate.

Thinking fast, I smiled, and asked idiotically,

"Do you speak English?"

They didn't, fortunately, and their whole attitude relaxed.

"Tourist?" they demanded, grinning and pointing at me.

"Yes, yes," I confirmed gratefully. "Tourist."

"O.K." They waved me on.

A lucky escape. But things could go on no longer as they were. Something had to give.

I went home and called Vassili. Telling him I must see him, and talk to him.

This is the conversation I referred to earlier. When he refused to meet me, or tell me why not.

Because he was feeling the full freedom of summer's beginning. And did not like my tone.

His instinct told him that I was about to push him too far.

Well, he refused.

And I was furious.

Stormed up to his house then and there. Found him in the street with a bunch of friends.

They saw me coming. All agog. Vassili looking slightly sick. But determined to hold out. He did, too.

"All right, you little bastard!" I shouted in his face. "Where are you going tonight, that you can't see me?"

"Out," he repeated dully.

None of them had seen me angry like this before. It made an impression.

Think how it felt to Vassili.

Why was I so angry, anyway? My frustration had accumulated over the weeks. It was a very hot day. And I simply couldn't understand why Vassili would not meet and talk to me. About the policeman. He had to know.

"All right," I barked, "come on!"

I grabbed him roughly by the shoulder and dragged him off the footpath, he shook off my hand, but followed me, a little afraid. I was shaming him publicly. Again.

"Hurry up, you fuck-wit!" I shouted over my shoulder. "I've got a job. But first, I'll take the keys and the papers, thank you."

He slouched after me, towards his house. My profanities continued, loud and ugly. Whether or not he understood it all, he felt the lash.

"Christ! I am sick of you!" I raved. "*Sick of you.*" And so on.

At the corner he said, "Wait here, David, please."

Not wanting his parents to see too much of the circus.

"Well, hurry up, fuck you!"

He deliberately strolled away. Trying for nonchalance. But shaken.

Returning shortly with the keys and papers for the moped.

As I snatched them away, he tried to reason with me, his voice quavering.

"Look, David, *what* you want?"

He meant, what did I want to do about the moped. About him. About us.

He had no idea why I was behaving so wildly.

"Nothing from you, you little rat! Nothing! And save your fucking lies for someone else. Because I'm not interested!"

I stomped off to my business appointment, without looking back at him.

I had done something. And the moped problem was now solved. Finis.

Very soon I cooled down, and realized how cruelly I had done it. What I had had to do, to keep Vassili out of trouble.

The fact is I had known somewhere in my mind for weeks that I had to take the moped away from him. But it was difficult for me – almost impossible. To ignore his feelings. So I had to manufacture that antic rage. As armor against his sweet influence. I should never have done it otherwise.

Next morning Vassili called me.

"David. *Why* were you so angry with me yesterday? I don't understand."

His last pitch.

"I can't talk to you now. I'm busy," I replied rapidly. "Tuesday."

And hung up. Taking a cheap revenge on him for refusing to meet me.

And guarding against my own weakness. Not wishing to crumble.

Almost a week of silence followed. A weary, pious week. Long days of agony, while I waited for Vassili's reaction. Dreading another phone call.

A surprise visit. Imagining his protests, his scorn. For my loss of self-control and for my attitude to the police.

Feeling, at the same time, perversely virtuous. Having done the Right Thing. And freed myself. Of legal entanglements. And others.

But, oh, how I missed my sweetheart's smile, his cheery greetings.

Almost as if I had performed the surgery upon myself.

I had it all wrong, of course.

None of the attitudes I ascribed to my absent lover were in fact his. All in my mind.

I should have known his nature better by then. But didn't think.

I dreaded our next meeting, as the day for English Conversation approached.

But could not avoid it, neither professionally nor morally. The transaction had to be completed.

I rang Vassili's doorbell, ready for anything. From savage recrimination to deliberate absence.

When he opened the door to me, after the first shock, which we shared in confronting one another, it was *deja vu*. In the quiet, empty house he stood shyly smiling, penitent and passive. As on that other day, long ago, when I had stormed out into the rain.

Perhaps we both felt it, the recreation of that past moment. Delicate, uncomfortable, tender. But, already showing our happiness.

Oh, Vassili! How superbly you behaved. I was proud of you. You brought lumps of weakening love to my throat.

You came through our crisis bravely.

But it wasn't as simple as that.

He led me into our private room, awash with afternoon sun and cooled by a breeze from the mountains. My hands shook as I unpacked my things. My voice trembled. Before I even sat down, I began it. (So differently from how I had imagined.) There was no struggle, no resistance.

"Well, Vassili," I mumbled nervously, "it seems as if we must end our partnership."

"Yes," he said, unexpectedly. Plainly. As he sat down with me.

I darted a glance in his direction, and found his eyes clear and accepting. And caught a glimpse of something else, which I could not face, not yet.

"Well," I repeated, "I have some money for you." Handing him an envelope containing an amount equal to his share in the moped.

"Oh!" he grinned, surprised. Delighted. "Thank you, David."

"Count it, Sweet."

He did.

"Yes, it's right."

"Good. Now, put it away before your mother comes in and sees it."

"Everybody's out," he murmured, distractedly. The sight and feel of the money had helped a lot. Back into his hoard. Security. New plans. (Little did I know.)

And then we drew closer together and talked. Making various, awkward apologies to each other. Glad to get them over.

Vassili so sweet and golden that afternoon. As on earlier days, when I had first caught his beauty.

I touched him gently, kissed him sparingly, with infinite gratitude.

We were feeling emotional, and fragile. Tears were building in us, and threatening to spill.

Our conversation was simple. Nostalgia. Words of our past, our story. Our adventure. Remembering

the special moments of joy, in choosing, buying, claiming our little blue beast.

An intimate talk, full of secrets.

And tinged with melancholy.

When I left, and found myself alone, the melancholy turned to an ache in my chest, and the tears came.

I wept for our winter, lost.

He had been good about it. Quiet, agreeable. A touch of bravado. But, knowing him, loving him as I did, I had caught the undercurrent. Seen the flicker of pain in his face, the shock of betrayal.

He had accepted everything, and it was past. And what he couldn't and wouldn't say was still clear.

We were partners, David. It was good. And then you stopped it. You decided I wasn't good enough.

That was the message I had received most poignantly from his behavior.

That I had said he wasn't good enough to be my partner. And that had surprised him, and hurt, and humiliated.

I suppose only a young boy would have that sort of reaction.

I suppose only a lover of boys can understand the pain and sadness which assailed us, as a result.

For days I walked in a dark world of depression.

We were still together, Vassili and I. Bound in friendship, and future obligations.

But neither of us would forget the dead partnership.

Thankfully, summer came on soon, and Vassili's family went on their annual vacation. We two parted on the best of terms, ready to lick our wounds, pick up our pieces, in separate places.

The seasons change, and we grow older. Things come to an end. Life prepares us, with a tender ache, to be apart a while. Time passes, and we grow older, and look on one another with wonder.

This period of separation seemed to go ahead of its own accord, like summer itself. We had already known many. Old in our trials. Rich in the surprises we had always brought to each other.

I began to use the moped, guiltily. Until it became mine in fact and feeling and I enjoyed its possession. Buzzing off to the sea every second day. On my own chunky little wheels.

Otherwise absorbed in writing a novel.

A summer which passed too quickly. With hardly a ghost of the usual lazy relaxation. A summer oddly free of sex.

Before I knew it, it was September, and everyone was back in town. The telephone started ringing.

New films to be dubbed. A scenario to translate. A cologne commercial. (At my age? OM)

I wasn't at all ready to give up my quiet, solitary routine. But felt pressed to. Moved by the seasons.

And threw myself into it.

A period of stress and fatigue followed. Interspersed with boredom and depression. I lost my bearings, in the hurly-burly. No longer knew why I was here. In this particularly nasty September, hot, sticky, showery. Wasn't it time to leave Greece? I had a tremendous urge to extract myself and escape.

Fly, flee, anywhere.

IT WAS JULIANA WHO LIVED THE GREAT MOMENT.

"He's back!" she cried jubilantly into the telephone. "He's come to, and he's just fine!"

"What does Dr. Roukis say?"

"Didn't stop to hear. I left him to examine him."

"You mean he wasn't there, at the time?"

"No. Nobody. Just little old me."

"He'll never forgive you for that," I laughed.

"Screw him! Tony's back."

"Did he talk?"

"He certainly did. First to me. Then to Michalis. Then we all chatted together."

"How were they? I mean, how did they handle each other?"

"I don't know. Warily at first, I suppose. But friendly. I left them together for ten minutes or so, before I said good-bye."

"Did they talk then?"

"Yes. I could hear them from the balcony. But not overhear, if you see."

"Good girl."

I felt a misgiving. What had Tony said to the boy? Would it be all right?

"I wonder if Tony's still planning on London. Did he say?"

"All fixed up, darling. As soon as the doctor clears him – in the next day or two – he's moving in with me, and I am devoting myself to his complete recovery!"

"You bitch," I bantered.

"You and Christopher are welcome to come and help, any time."

"Thank you."

"Anyway... great news, eh, David?"

"Great news, Juliana. 'Bye, love."

VASSILI AND I RESUMED OUR conversation lessons in the autumn, when I was already loaded with work.

And constantly moved to pack up and leave.

Distracted, as I had been when we first met.

Still, it was lovely to see him again, tanned, taller, voice deeper. Smiling his shy welcome. Inspiring, to see that smile again.

And so we began, with his mother requesting more formal work, and preparation for exams. We fell to it.

Feeling our way, like two strangers. Or rather, two people who knew each other at another time, and have changed. It was a peaceful exploration.

"David. How is the moped?" he would ask, politely.

"Great, Sweet. I had a lot of fun with it, in the summer. Going to the sea. Sure beats the bus."

"You went on the moped to the *sea*?"

It was a long ride.

"Yep. Every second day. And the little beast performed perfectly."

"Oh," Vassili breathed. A little envious. But interested, enjoying the thought of my biking.

He could always do this: derive pleasure from the things I did alone. Or, his perception of them.

I took his hand.

"You know, Vassili... if you are careful, you can take the moped. Sometimes. Have a ride."

"No," he said politely. A withdrawal in his face. He had clearly made a decision about this. And I didn't want to rake up old disputes.

"O.K., Sweet."

So it was my moped now. Though Vassili continued to take an interest in it, for my sake. Making various good suggestions. Helping me occasionally with repairs and adjustments.

How we enjoyed those hours. Crouched in the gutter with the tools spread around us. Tinkering. I think, sometimes, I have never come closer to him than I was then.

Thus, in a period of stress and confusion for me, I became once again very grateful for Vassili. The few hours we spent together. For the various forms of succor he gave me.

One windy night in November I arrived at his house tired and nervy, and spent the first ten minutes complaining, swearing, pouring out the grievances of a difficult day. Vassili sat and listened, patiently. Making sympathetic sounds. Until I finally ran down.

Then I looked at him, so sweetly companionable, smiling his understanding.

"I love you, Vassili. You know that? I really do."

"Yes," he said, in a quiet voice. Unembarrassed.

It was very nice to find that I could say those words, meaning them with all my heart, without disturbing either of us.

It wasn't his beauty, this time. In fact he looked a bit ratty: growing, not at all at his best. I loved him despite and beyond his envelope of accidental flesh.

There was no erotic flame burning. I felt emotional. He was subdued.

I loved him for accepting me, being used to me. Listening, waiting, growing up with me. In the same sad, surprising world.

Vassili saved me, that night. From any number of rash decisions. I left his house feeling like a man who had been pulled out of the treacherous gray mud of despair – just in time.

I FIRST SAW TONY, CONSCIOUS ONCE MORE, at Juliana's apartment. Eager to welcome him back. Fascinated to see whether or not he remained the same person, after his experience. Wondering how he would explain it.

Juliana ushered me in, beaming with pleasure and pride. As if about to exhibit a prize rose. But she was, and is, all heart.

She left me to it, gesturing toward the balcony.

I found Tony stretched out on a banana-chair. Sun-glasses and a bikini were all he wore. Apart from a bracelet Alexandros had given him.

He had lost weight. This showed especially in his face. But he seemed in good shape. His body glowed with sun and oil, already boasting a respectable tan. Altogether, he looked younger, more boyish than ever. Not having heard my approach, he lay still, eyes shut, vulnerable and endearing.

"Hullo, Tony," I said with emotion. "Good to have you with us again."

He took off his glasses, sat up and embraced me.

"David! Hello, old friend. Oh, it's good to be with you, too."

Then we just sat for a while, holding on to each other's shoulders.

Memories of a tough experience shuddered through us gently.

"David. Thank you, for your help, and support, and... everything."

"Forget it."

"And thank you for giving my letter to Alexandros. That meant a lot. To both of us."

"Then you know he received it."

"He told me, yes."

"I... wasn't sure what to do about it, after what happened at the airport. And later. In the end, I decided that some word from you would be better than nothing."

"How right you were. Thanks again."

"Did Alexandros know anything of your... illness?"

"Not a word, until I told him myself. He thought I was in England, safe and sound. Making plans for us."

"And now?"

"Well, he's very pleased that I'm not in England. And as for me, I am *now* making plans."

"You have already seen Alexandros?"

"Yes. Twice. Juliana has been terrific about everything."

"Was it difficult?"

"Yes, and a bit dangerous. But worth it, man. Oh, how we needed each other."

"All done in secret, eh?"

"Yeah, I decided it was better. To be on the safe side. Alexandros agrees. His parents' reaction to me now would probably be negative."

"So. How was the reunion?"

"Fantastic, David! It confirmed everything. We're quite sure, now. And we're in no hurry about things. Alexandros is ready to do whatever I decide. We decide, I mean, of course."

"What are the possibilities?"

"Well, as soon as I am really fit – very soon, but Juliana will decide, that's our agreement! –" he laughed, "I shall go to London, and take up the job I had in mind before. It's in a school which specializes in preparing foreign students. And also runs summer schools. Alexandros' parents have been planning to send him to one such, this summer."

"We shall manage it. It's live-in, for both of us. So, for a start, four weeks together, in England. During which time, if he likes it there, and if he has no change of heart, we shall look into ways of continuing his education in Britain. I shall remain in the background, of course. For the time being. As far as his parents are concerned. But, damnit, if it all works out as we hope, they'll have to get used to me, in the end. We both prefer to live in Greece, in the long term. And I *like* his family. I guess I am relying on time to heal all wounds."

"Why not?" I encouraged, inspired by his easy talk. "But, do they know about... the case?"

"Michalis and all that? We're not sure. One of them must have read something in the papers, at some stage. But now? Who knows? It may not have any importance in their eyes. But, just in case, we are going to wait."

"Good for you. Life to you both!"

"Thanks, David. How's Vassili, anyway?"

A pleasurable shiver disturbed my limbs at the mention of his name. And at the unaccustomed inquiry.

"He's fine," I sighed.

"Luscious as ever?"

"Even more luscious."

"Mm! Life to you both!"

"Thanks, Tony."

WE CHATTED AWAY COMPANIONABLY FOR AN HOUR OR TWO. Rising once or twice to fetch beer and snacks, and returning to the balcony.

Part of my mind rested easily on the thought of Vassili. Who was, these days, luscious indeed. Exciting. We had become quite open about sex. Gave each other pleasure and satisfaction every Tuesday. Along with English conversation. It was an accepted part of our routine, and one way or another, we both expected it. I myself looked forward to it. Sometimes, could barely wait out the week.

Vassili rarely visited my apartment, now. Since we were no longer partners in the moped. When he did he would become unnerved by the force of my passion, unable as I was to keep my hands, my lips off him. Later, I would apologize, and feel bad about it. He forgot it in a moment, once I stopped.

He didn't want to have sex at my place, although it was safer and more comfortable. I don't know why

not. Perhaps he had a vague fear about the extremes to which we might be driven, if we lay naked together on the bed.

So we continued to risk discovery at his house. Daring his mother or brother to enter the room unexpectedly. And find us all unzipped and aroused. Sucking. Coming. Only on those blessed days when everyone else was out could we indulge ourselves to the full. That tube of lubricant lasted a very long time.

It would have been a ghastly situation to be caught together. I don't know why I didn't worry about it more. Vassili didn't worry at all. Even though our hot couplings were usually exposed to a dozen neighboring apartments, through the window.

That was the way he preferred things to be. Perhaps the danger added relish.

And so we drifted on. Happy, used to each other, and seemingly in a settled state.

But Vassili's life seldom stays settled for long. He is full of surprises, and I love him for it.

Early one evening of that November, my door-bell rang insistently, and Vassili galloped in, highly excited. He had a friend with him, and, outside, his latest acquisition. Bursting with pride, he dragged me to the front stairs where it stood: a second-hand Honda Z50 mini-bike. On which he had just spent his entire savings. Answering an ad in a bike magazine. Without a word to his parents.

Together, we carried it into my apartment. As once we had carried our moped.

Vassili waited anxiously for my approval. I was stunned, but impressed.

"With joy, Vassili! It's just what you've always wanted, isn't it?"

"Yes," he whispered. Unable to take his eyes off the bike. His first. All his own. Which he had to show me immediately, and would leave – please? – at my place for the time being.

Gutsy little devils, these Z50s. Very small, very low, Light and fast. Speed machines. Dangerous, I'd always thought, but the kids loved them. I couldn't even sit on it, my legs were too long. So, very nearly, were Vassili's. But he would contrive.

Christopher once remarked apropos, as a kid roared past us on a pedestrian crossing, just missing our toes, "If I ever sat on one of *those* things, it would disappear up my asshole!"

Crude, but descriptive.

Vassili and his friend crouched beside the bike, tinkering. While I stood back and attempted to appraise it more coolly.

If it had not been for their enthusiasm I should have condemned it out of hand: no exhaust, no starting lever, no battery, no headlight. Everything loose, leaking and patched up. Someone had obviously ridden it like hell, until it was almost ready to expire, and then stuck it together with chewing-gum, for a quick sale.

But I couldn't let any of that come to the fore, not on this day of celebration. Vassili was very proud. He had his own bike and it was – potentially – a lot faster than my moped. He wanted me to enjoy it, too. And I did. It would bring him considerable status amongst his peers, owning a Z50.

Meanwhile, petrol leaked onto the floor, small pieces came loose, and fell off. He was undeterred. Along with the bike he had brought a plastic bag full of spare parts, hastily purchased at various bargain-spots around town: pipes, lamps, god knows what. He was confident that he could fix it up fine.

And he had, it must be said, gone to the police and taken out the ownership papers legally. Good for him.

The bag of spare parts was stowed in my bathroom. The little machine received farewell pats on the saddle, and the kids were away – to lessons, and meals.

Leaving behind them a reverberating gong of fate.

Me with this strange pile of metal in the hall.

I didn't think too much about it. I was just happy for Vassili. When something brings him joy, lighting up that innocent smile, then I receive joy commensurate.

And could not escape a small echo of our broken partnership, the summer before.

Dear Vassili. I prayed, let it work out for him.

The next day he came back, all eager, with a fistful of borrowed tools, and we carried the bike outside, wheeled it into a quiet side-street. There he went to work removing things, adding others, adjusting, pausing to stare and think. I offered to leave him alone, but he wanted me there to watch. Just as he had when he was learning to ride the moped. He didn't want any help or advice. Just solidarity.

I sat back against a wall and watched my sweetheart, playing with his potent new toy. The longer I gazed, the worse it looked. I was afraid that it would fall apart before my eyes. Unconvinced of the effectiveness of Vassili's toils.

Still, he got it started, and soon roared steadily if noisily off. Leaving me with a bag of spares. I went back inside, wondering.

Sadly for Vassili, the idyll was short-lived. A few days after, some helpful neighbor informed his mother that he was riding around on a motorcycle, and the game was up. He surrendered without a struggle. To harsh parental discipline. The bike was confiscated, locked away, at some distant garage.

True to his nature, Vassili never mentioned to his parents that I had housed the bike in the beginning, nor that I had ever known about it. His mother later mentioned it to me, as proof of her son's irresponsibility.

Some of his friends were inclined to mock, behind his back.

It seemed that he had been tricked into giving more than the advertised price, and certainly far more than the bike's value. Taken advantage of, in his eagerness. By some older kid who had probably been just as naive in his time.

One of Vassili's best mates attempted to draw mockery from me on the subject. Thinking to curry favor. Appalled, I rebuked him, in no uncertain terms.

At home alone that night, in an access of empathy for my venturesome beloved boy, I wept a little, Poor Vassili. Lost his bike. Again.

We continued to talk about the Z50, for his sake. But it remained out of sight, under lock and key.

AS THE SUN BEGAN TO SINK, turning Juliana's balcony into a casket of vermillion, Tony and I finally began to discuss his illness.

"Tell me, love," I prodded, "did you know it was going to happen like that?"

"How do you mean, David?"

"Well... did you want to – did you *will* yourself into a coma?"

"You're joking, of course."

"No. Just trying to understand. And maybe, borrowing some of old Roukis' ideas. The quack."

"I agree. A quack."

"So nothing was... self-induced?"

"Listen. One minute I was with you guys at the airport. Next minute I woke up in bed in the clinic."

"And in between?"

"You tell me."

I recalled the hospital visits.

"You were very beautiful."

"Thank you," Tony blushed.

"No, but it was something special. You had this strange, transcendent glow about you."

"Is that right? God."

"You must have dreamed, at least. Do you remember anything like that?"

"No, unfortunately. Nothing. Roukis asked me the same thing."

"Naturally. But... well, you were very peaceful and happy, wherever you were."

A glint appeared in Tony's eyes.

"Yeah. Yeah, you know, I half-remember that. Peace. Happiness, of some new kind. Calm and content. But, I don't really remember. No more than that."

"What about before?" I persisted. "What were you contemplating? I know you were drunk..."

"Not so very."

"I've wondered about that. But, look. Was your mind pushing you in any... strange directions, let's say on the way to the airport?"

Tony considered a long time. Frowning.

"I remember feeling very low, very depressed. I didn't want to leave Greece. I wanted to be with Alexandros. By the time I got to the airport, I was feeling just tired, I'd sobered up, and my head was clear. But I wasn't paying much attention to you or Chris or Juliana. I was focusing on Alexandros. My heart and mind were full of him, and I hurt a lot.

"When I collected my passport I was in a sort of daze of mental suffering. It was like a great throbbing ball of love had swollen inside my head."

Tony hung his head, recalling.

I waited.

"That's all," he said, simply.

SOMETIME THAT WINTER, VASSILI began to take the moped again. It happened by chance, on an impulse. One night he lent me a bicycle spanner to tighten a loose nut. The job took half a minute. We stood there on the footpath, looking at the beast. The shiny beast that we had chosen together one cold, rainy night in the past.

Vassili fingered the throttle wistfully.

"Go on!" I said suddenly. "Take it! Go for a ride. I'll wait for you round the corner."

He hesitated for about one-tenth of a second, then hopped on the saddle, whispering thanks. And roared away.

It was dark. Nobody was watching. And his parents were out.

He was gone longer than I expected, but not long enough for me to get worried. Wheeled into the curb, flushed with excitement.

"Oh, David! It's fantastic! It really *goes*."

"Had you forgotten?" I laughed.

"No. It's better now, I think."

"Yes, it is, Sweet. It's been run in, serviced and tuned. Do you like it?"

"Yes. It's *very* good."

A pleasure to hear him say so. He'd been pressing me for months to buy something bigger, with more guts. I wasn't in a hurry.

I enjoyed the little moped.

"Vassili," I murmured, as I kissed him goodnight in the shadows, "Take the moped whenever you like. You know I really bought it for you. Just promise to be careful."

"O.K., David. Thanks. Bye!"

So began a second period of joyful sharing. Sometimes he would come to my place to pick up the

machine, other times I would leave it for him near his house, out of sight of his parents. Occasionally, I watched him. He rode it well. And he enjoyed himself.

Meanwhile, he continued to give me signed pencil drawings of bikes he thought I should buy. With encouraging messages inscribed below, complete with spelling errors.

Also, that winter, he started to take an interest in girls. Briefly alarming me. But natural enough, at his age, among his gang of peers. In order to fight down my incipient jealousy, I mentioned girls to him as often as possible. Teased him. Provoked.

He was painfully shy on the subject, and wouldn't say much.

Until he was convinced of my interest. Then he would volunteer a word or two, from time to time. Blushing crimson, if I ventured to say a name I had heard from one of his friends.

Parties and discos became the core of his social life. He didn't want to talk about girls, not to me, but was glad that I recognized and accepted this side of him.

Our own sex-life continued unaffected. And, as winter closed in, developed in a very exciting fashion. Often blinding me with passion and sensuality. Until, after, Vassili would restore me with a few cool moments of companionship and trust.

It was a beautiful winter, full of small surprises.

The weather provided a constant struggle: apart from rain, and freezing temperatures, it snowed six times in February, quite heavily, for Athens.

Dressing up for the cold was a daily chore. Getting about the city was unpleasant, hazardous, often impossible.

One felt continually worn down by a process of cruel attrition.

And amidst all this, joy, succor, warmth, inspiration: Vassili.

Forever surprising me, with his body, with his sweet spirit.

Twice, in one gray, tumbled week, when I was feeling fed up with various obligations, and the difficult conditions, Vassili restored me to faith. Simply by being himself.

One windy afternoon, dark clouds dangling from the sky, I got on the moped with great reluctance and set off towards some loveless labor. Prickling with pique and pale resentments. Forcing myself on, my long woolen muffler choking all protest.

Until, rounding a familiar corner, I looked up and suddenly he was there. I almost knocked him down.

Smiling a greeting, in his boy-blue wrappings. Leaning on my shoulder. Sinking into me. Fondling the clutch. A few moments, a few intimate words.

While I thought, we are *made* of affection, we two.

Both in a hurry, late for appointments.

We broke away, and rushed off to our separate duties. Mutually invigorated, and cheered.

Later in the same week. One icy Friday evening. Friday a day I resented, because I never saw Vassili, such were our programs.

Lost late in the demon traffic. Me on the little beast, almost swallowed up by the sprawling snakes of cars. Doggedly crawling home to television tedium.

And suddenly, the miracle again. I heard my name called. Took no notice, in this steaming jungle of impatience. Heard my name again and, turning, saw him standing on the grassy verge, waving frantically, delighted to discover me in this unwonted place.

I made a U-turn and pulled in beside him. We exchanged glad greetings. Vassili on his way to a disco party, with a pal. I teased him about his girls, and he cuffed me lightly, caressing. Sharing me, but cannily, with his mate. Leaning on me, as I tore off helmet and goggles to see and be seen. Shaking out my hair, as he cuddled me. Sensing, in that moment of intimacy, with the temperature below zero, that he

could have *come* there and then for sheer gladness. And may have.

Off to their disco then, and I home to the central heating.

We love surprises, Vassili and I.

Also in February, the English rock band UFO visited Greece. Not an enormous attraction, but interesting. There was a lot of publicity, and the kids were talking, passing records around.

I asked Vassili if he wanted to go. He was a little cagy. Interested in the concert, but already committed to going with a bunch of boys and girls. Which was fine. He was only embarrassed about fitting me into this group. I relieved him of his misapprehension, and dropped the subject.

A week later, he asked me shyly if I was going to the concert. I said yes, to encourage him. But it seemed the kids' plans had fallen through. The tickets were expensive. Once again incidents had occurred in Thessaloniki, and parents worried. Some young girls would not want to go.

Another thing, passed on to me with malicious glee by his brother – Vassili had broken with his first steady girl-friend. Thus dissolving a friendly foursome with his best mate.

A subdued Vassili that evening. Disappointed, possibly disillusioned. I said nothing, but felt for him.

Chatting on the phone during the week, he again asked if I was going to the concert. I said I didn't know.

At the first performance in Athens there had been further battles between police and fans.

I began to feel the nudge. Gentle, since he had turned me down before.

He was broke. His social life a steady drain on his resources these days.

And out of grace with his parents over some misdemeanor.

At the age where he could not accept my paying for his ticket.

I gave it some thought, yielded to persuasion. Buying two tickets for the third and final concert. Telling Vassili I got them free, from an inside acquaintance. He probably didn't believe this, but managed to save face.

"David," he said, controlling his excitement, "I won't tell my parents I'm going to a concert, O.K.?"

Understood.

On the Sunday afternoon he came to my place early, and we took a taxi. Remembering the difficulty of finding seats at the Steppenwolf concert. We talked about this earlier event, on the way. Reminiscing. It seemed ages past. When he had been so much younger, and we were almost strangers.

When we reached the stadium it was so early that the doors were closed and only a handful of kids were waiting. With about as many police. The streets were deserted.

It was a quiet scene, as we waited in the cold. Vassili hates to wait, but didn't complain. We made conversation, aware of the absence of excitement, the small number of fans who arrived during the next half-hour. The police were jovial, chatting with the kids. It was all wrong. Couldn't have been in a lower key.

When they opened the doors, we moved without haste into the empty courts, and chose seats at leisure. The place never filled up. It was the third night, and UFO's popularity had been almost exhausted.

"Oh. Not many people, David."

Vassili was disappointed. It made a difference to him, and he was right. The crowd was too relaxed for a rock concert.

UFO put on a good show, nothing special. The audience was appreciative, but never caught fire. There was no atmosphere, no thrill to it.

We filed out at the finish, deadened by anticlimax.

"Not very good," Vassili kept saying. Almost blaming me.

I had, anyway, enjoyed his intimacy in the smoke-filled darkness. Holding him close to me.

Caressing him.

But it was a let-down, after so much anticipation, and apprehension. No hint of violence at any stage.

To overcome the flatness we felt, both wishing that we hadn't come, we became more affectionate. Fondling each other boldly in the back seat of the taxi. Counting on the elderly driver not to notice our bared erections.

We didn't linger together that night. Parted, with a sense of error.

I walked home, sadly, What a bitter contrast to our first rock concert, two years before! Not just the music, but *us*, I thought. We are coming to an end, perhaps. A full stop.

Our lessons, however, continued weekly. As did our sex.

Which became more and more satisfying. Building up to a climax of eroticism as spring came, and summer approached.

I have praised Vassili enough, perhaps. But can honestly say that every month his beauty increased. Surprising me again and again. So that it was always a thrill to greet him, after a short absence; of even a week.

Some of his prettiness passed, with the death of winter. Compensating, his body developed apace. Lean, hard, agile. His skin, perfection. And stunningly handsome, in a way I could never have predicted. A real eye-catcher.

He would break many hearts, I feared.

DURING ONE OF MY CHATS with Tony at Juliana's place, I raised the question of seduction.

Rather halfheartedly. I shouldn't have done, normally. But after Tony's experience – police, prison, newspapers – I was shaken up. The shock of this first brush with social reality had stirred all kinds of moribund guilt. Publicity changes everything. For a while.

He didn't think that it was an interesting question.

"Well, there's no need for *you* to get scared, just because I spent a few days in jail."

"I know, Tony. I'm not scared."

AT THE BEGINNING OF SUMMER, I had to make a trip to Istanbul, to cover a series of exhibitions mounted by the Council of Europe. For some art mag. I was away six days.

Before I left I asked Vassili to look after the moped for me. Partly because there'd been a lot of thefts locally. But mainly to give Vassili some freedom and fun. To give him something without strings.

He rode off happily, almost as if he was doing me a favor. Promising safe harbor for the blue beast.

First day back, my phone rang all day, reminding me I had friends, and obligations that wouldn't go away. In the middle of all these calls was one from Vassili.

"David, where are you? I call you every day. I am Vassili."

"I know who you are, stupid. How are you, Sweet?"

"O.K. How are you?"

"O.K. Listen, I told you I was going away."

"Yes. But I thought only a *little* while."

I hadn't explained my trip to him.

"Oh, have you missed me?"

I began to hear the anxiety in his voice.

"David. Look. I have a problem with the moped."

"Oh-oh. What is it this time, Sweet?"

Some minor damage, no doubt.

"The police catch me."

"Oh, *shit!*"

"Yes, I'm sorry."

"Not your fault. I guess you were unlucky. What did they say?"

"They took the moped, and my I.D. card."

"Oh, *shit!*"

"Listen. I think it's all right. They said you must go and show them the papers, and get it back."

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"O.K. We'll go tomorrow."

"What time tomorrow can you, please, David?" he pressed, unlike him. Giving me the measure of his concern.

"Well, I've got a job in the morning. Say, four o'clock. I'll meet you at the old church. O.K.?"

"Four o'clock. O.K."

Poor Vassili. My thoughts began to center selfishly on my own position. What questions I might be asked, and what punishment I might face for giving him the moped. Without telling his parents. And who was I, anyway? What was my interest in the boy? My anxiety grew in response to Vassili's.

Next day, on my way to our rendezvous, I bumped into his mother. She waylaid me, frantically.

"Mr. David! Did you hear what has happened to us?" My heart sank. "The police called my husband, and say that they will charge Vassili with theft, of a moped! Vassili says it's yours. Why don't you go and explain to them?"

"I'm going now," I replied, hanging my head involuntarily. "Vassili will meet me first."

"He didn't tell us. He tells us nothing. His father is *very* upset. Vassili has given him so many problems. And last night, he had to go to the police station with Vassili to make excuses!"

She wasn't hostile so much as distraught. At the notion of the police, in connection with her family, her name. I could not look at her. It was very embarrassing.

"Mr. David, *please* don't give the bike to Vassili. He is very young yet," she pleaded.

I promised, reassured her, begged forgiveness.

And hurried off to meet Vassili.

Who met me as of old, his shy smile breaking though the fatigue in his face. I could imagine what he had endured from parents, and police. Poor kid. I wanted to take him in my arms.

"I'm sorry, David," he muttered.

"I am sorry," I insisted, mortified. "It's my fault."

In the blazing midday sun we made our silent way towards the police station.

Where, to my relief, I retrieved the moped without formality. Not a question asked. And Vassili had his I.D. card again.

We got out of that place as quickly as dignity allowed.

Unlucky, my sweetheart. If I had not been away in Turkey, we could have fixed the thing up in minutes, and his parents would never have known. As it was....

The final blow was that I couldn't start the moped. Nor could Vassili. Kicking and striving, as the sun beat down on an empty street.

One young cop watched us cynically, as he leaned against the wall, smoking. He made a remark or two. But was no help.

"Come on, Sweet," I gasped. "Let's get away from here, before we attract attention."

We pushed the beast around the corner, and a couple of blocks away. Tried again. No luck. Checked

the spark plug, fuel line, cleaned the carburettor, finally, I told him to roll it down the hill and try to clutch-start.

The sweat poured off us.

As he rolled away.

I walked after him, watching him disappear into the distance. Rolling, kicking, stopping.

Then he got it started, wheeled round and sped back to me in triumph.

"You're a genius!" I cried. "Thanks, Sweet."

I hopped on the back and he took me down to our meeting place.

Tired and sad in the broiling heat, I savored our last minutes together with the blue beast.

"I'm sorry," he said again.

"Look, Sweet, I feel bad about this," I mumbled. "I didn't mean to give you problems with your parents. I just wanted to give you some fun. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I understand, David."

Final handshakes.

Farewell.

"Thanks, David," he said, turning away.

"I thank you," I said.

Desolate.

TONY AND ALEXANDROS ARE BOTH IN England, now. At the summer school. From Tony's letters, I gather that Alexandros loves it there. Moves are afoot to enroll him as a boarder, for the autumn. Alexandros' parents now know that Tony is employed at the school. This fact appears not to disturb them.

Before leaving Greece, Tony spent several hours with Michalis, under the guise of resuming lessons. Their conversations were fruitful, and an understanding was reached.

Or so Tony led us, cheerfully, to believe. And Juliana and I accepted. For the time.

Later, I wondered.

Reflecting that it is not always the man who suffers, in these affairs.

I had always been curious about Michalis – his motives, reactions.

Even about his appearance.

It seemed a good time to satisfy this curiosity.

While making a polite telephone inquiry about Michalis' health, I asked Dr. Roukis whether a visit from me would be suitable, or even helpful. The doctor was delighted, encouraging my idea with that intensity which always made me feel that I was under clinical observation.

THE BOY WHO RECEIVED ME at the door surprised me in several ways.

First, his appearance: at thirteen, Michalis was so tall and heavily built that he could easily have passed for fifteen or sixteen. His over-sized head was not handsome, though the eyes showed intelligence and cunning. And he was running to fat. Thick, unsensual lips gave his face a sulky expression.

I wondered at Tony's ever having fallen for him. Well, boys can change a lot in three years, as we know.

I was also unready for his look of healthy normalcy. Not even the trace of a pallor to suggest recent illness. Indeed, he was sunburned, and energetic to the point of aggressiveness, as soon showed up in word and gesture.

Apart from this, there was his manner toward me. I'm used to Greek boys, and know how conceited and impertinent they can be. But I suppose I expected Michalis to be nervous, at least. A little chastened

by experience, if not abashed by my presence.

Nothing of the sort.

He ushered me into the living-room like a lord of the manor, managing to express both condescension and boredom in his first words:

"I suppose you want coffee or something."

Before I could say that I wanted nothing, he had shouted raucously to his mother, in some distant room, and then slumped indolently across a settee. Conserving energy, for the moment.

I took a chair. Almost immediately his mother entered and set down a tray with coffee and cakes.

Michalis fell upon the cakes as his mother withdrew. I left the coffee untouched, wondering whether his ugly display of face-stuffing was for my benefit, or his normal habit.

"Well, I must say you are looking fit and well," I began, faintly. "And so tall."

"I am well," he agreed, flatly.

Did he mean to be rude, or did he simply wonder why I was there?

"Michalis, perhaps you don't quite understand who I am..."

"I know who you are," he retorted. "My father told me all about you!"

This gave me pause.

I almost looked around for spy holes.

"So. I suppose you're back at school, now?"

"No!" he exhaled softly. "I don't have to. My father sent a letter."

"You must be bored. What do you do with yourself?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No," I feigned innocently, "tell me."

He sank down into the cushions.

"I read. I listen to the stereo. I watch television..."

And *eat*, I added, mentally.

Suddenly, he sat up brightly.

"I have tennis lessons four times a week!"

"That's nice. You are lucky."

"More than you know!" he insinuated.

I let it go.

"Michalis," I attempted to shake him, "are you going to miss Tony much?"

"Who?" he replied coolly.

"Come on. You can tell me. I'm sympathetic."

"Who asked for your sympathy? I didn't invite you here," he said, stiff with superiority.

A foreigner, and not even in his social class.

Still, I was determined not to be put off by any proud attempt at bluffing.

"You did care a lot about Tony, though, didn't you?"

He shrugged, a small glint in his eye betraying some half-forgotten emotion.

"I was just a kid, then. He started it. It wasn't fair, if you think. I didn't know what I was doing. He took advantage of me."

"Who told you that?" I wondered, drily.

He blushed at the obvious answer.

"Listen," he bellowed, throwing one arm out in front of him belligerently, "all that was years ago! I haven't exactly seen a lot of him lately. And now he's gone. Good riddance."

"O.K. Good for you, kid. But Tony told me you tried to start things up again. I know Tony's no liar.

Are you?"

We stared at each other, eye to eye, for a long challenging moment.

"O.K.," he shrugged again, assuming a casual drawl. "So I had a bit of a go. It was nothing serious. I was just bored, that's all. And now you can believe what you like."

"Nothing better to do," I encouraged.

"Right. Not like now. When I *have* better things to do."

"Pity," I offered, lightly, "that your mother caught you, in a moment of boredom, like."

"Was that *my* fault? I've told the stupid bitch – always knock first!"

Mother-abuse, of course, is standard for Greek boys, of the type he was embodying. I would have been less impressed if he'd betrayed a tremor of doubt. As it was, he sat there: big, loud, and absolutely sure of himself.

"Well, *I'm* not blaming you for anything, Michalis, believe me. Only one thing I can't understand. I don't know if you feel like explaining?"

Curiosity got the better of him.

"What?" he muttered.

"Seeing you were so bored and indifferent and all that, what made you swallow those pills?"

He froze. Face blank.

Finally leaned towards me, confidential. He was tall enough, confident enough to bring it off.

"Listen. I only took a few. My mother went off the deep end. But everyone knows she's neurotic. Ask my father."

"What were you trying to do?" I grinned, conspiratorially.

"What do you think, man? There was this hell of a bloody *row!* The cops in, and everything. And I knew that Tony was no fool. I wasn't going to sit in any courtroom, I can tell you. Nobody was going to dump any blame on *me*, understand?!"

I did. Even without the bared teeth and the bulging lips.

"So much for 'Sex Victim In Coma'," I sighed.

Michalis giggled.

"I must have been 'out' for about five minutes, at the most."

Rather longer, as I had heard it, but what difference did it make?

"Tony's been through a pretty rough time, you know," I blurted out. And finally pressed, "Have you?"

"Nah. Tony had it coming. You know, you foreign pederasts ought to be more careful. If you want to live in Greece."

There was a decidedly sharp edge to this remark.

Part him, part me.

As he had intended, I was impressed.

The best remark I'd heard a kid make in years.

I started to gather myself for departure.

Michalis had one thing more.

"You know what I said about tennis lessons?"

"Yes?"

"It's my teacher."

"Oh, yes?"

"He's fantastic!"

"Good."

"He's Greek."

"Yes."

"Name of Costas."

"Like him?"

"I love him!"

Causing me to pause at the doorway.

"Do you?" I asked, more gently.

"He's so handsome. So sexy. And his cock's much bigger than Tony's!"

"Oh... good."

I stumbled toward the front door.

The boy lurched after me.

"I mean, Tony... he was O.K. For a while. But you know, these North Americans. He was so naive! And crass. I had to ignore all that."

I took Michalis' hand in a quick, firm grip, wished him good luck, and farewell.

Before he closed the door, hovering over me like some over-cultivated laboratory culture, he murmured,

"Will you come again?... No, you won't, will you?"

And shut the door. Hard.

I trotted off, breathing deeply, shaking my head.

How much had I learned?

I was not sure that the tennis coach even existed.

But easily could.

And the rest?

How could I tell what was just an act put on for an unwanted stranger – and what was truth?

I knew too much of Greeks, and boys, to take Michalis at his word.

And yet, meeting this boy in any other circumstances, I would have been in no doubt: I did not like him.

Whether this was fair in the event was a question I would not pursue.

Only, it would be a little easier now, to think of Tony and Alexandros.

VASSILI IS AWAY AT HIS summer place, with his family. Until September.

I missed him a great deal, at first, but am adjusting.

Staying busy. Getting plenty of sun and sea.

I don't know what will happen in September. Whether we shall continue. Or not.

He will return a different person.

And find me a different person.

Is it possible, though, that we are finished, entirely?

The day before he left, he called in on me, and Tony was there.

Vassili and Tony got on well together. No flirting, just friendliness. Interest and understanding.

I enjoyed watching them together.

After Tony had gone, I told Vassili the whole story. All about Michalis, prison, the coma.

Vassili took it in, his jewel-dark eyes still, receptive.

At the end of the story he thought for a second, and commented,

"Like the dog."

Remembering.

