

## **THE THIRD ACOLYTE READER**

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*Bob Henderson will be familiar to many readers as the author of "Attic Adolescent" (1983), a collection of boy-love short stories and one novella set in modern Greece. Actor, script-writer and novelist, he moved from his native Australia to Athens over a decade ago. His short stories have appeared in many collections. He is the creator of Spiros, the gay Greek private eye who solved a grizzly slaying on the slopes of the Acropolis in "Hard Core Murder" (1985). In this tale we meet again Vassili from "Attic Adolescent" and Angelos, the boy artist with whom David was just starting a romance in the story of that name in "The Second Acolyte Reader."*

# Afters

## Bob Henderson

I am lying on the bed listening to Angelos splashing away in the bathroom.

He is humming with his mouth open: a happy promising sound.

Soon he will be lying beside me giving me the benefit of his beauty and energy.

As his fifteenth birthday approaches.

Outside, November is unfriendly: cold, grey, blustery, wet. But the shutters are down and the central heating is on.

Angelos comes here regularly on Sunday afternoons. Nurturing the friendship which began with our chance collision last summer. Later learning more about each other. Sorting out our basket into pebbles and jewels.

Meeting his parents and clearing away the obstacles. Carefully. Winning their trust.

I take an interest in his deepest concern: his art. Nobody else does as yet. Though I have been working on Mum and Dad. This takes time. Angelos' talent delights and impresses me. While to them it is only an amusing novelty.

I believe that I shall win them over. Angelos has begun to believe in my determination.

In the beginning I suppose it'll be a compromise: Angelos will go to engineering school to please his father. And begin his artistic training part time. This would indeed make entrance into the School of Fine Arts somewhat easier.

In time, I am confident that his talent will sweep all else away in favour of his true vocation.

Angelos is patient and philosophical. But knows how to work.

Meantime he continues to draw. Experiments with pastels and watercolours. Occasionally brings me his work to judge. Only the best

pieces.

Sometimes he sketches me, before and after our love-making.

Leaving me these treasured mementos.

Now that it is winter our passion is more orderly. On the other hand we care for each other more. And when we lust for each other we know how to deal with it.

The fact is we are well suited temperamentally. A great piece of luck in life's endless muddle of meetings.

To achieve our Sunday satisfaction Angelos makes a long journey by two buses.

Guess what.

This story is not about Angelos.

Though its subject concerns us both.

As I wait for the shower to stop running I am thinking about Vassili. My old sweetheart. *Sweet*, I used to call him, in our loving days. Years. Possessed and nourished by his sweetness. Years of succour and inspiration. And minor disasters with bikes, police, parents. I have in fact been thinking about Vassili on and off since he called me up this morning.

I wasn't expecting his call. I never am. Surprise was always part of his charm.

The conversation was brief and ostensibly practical. But we both understood its purpose: to make peace after the nth in a series of squabbles.

I had understood in the way of ex-Iovers what was wrong. We just cannot get rid of each other. We loved and struggled and spilt our juice for two glorious unforgettable years. Though older and separate now we seem to keep finding *ways*.

Vassili is twenty years old. He is not my lover now and not about to be.

Though his continuing presence in my life is what is distracting me. From the lovely business at hand.

Vassili now is always difficult to separate from us-then.

I don't know if he was the love of my life. Time passes, people change. And what's around the corner is a constant source of hope.

Nonetheless I ought to say that Vassili and I simply *threshed* into each other's physical, mental and emotional selves. It was intense and beautiful and life-giving.

We hurt each other but always made up quickly. And went on to better things. Some of these hurts were so particular that I wonder whether the wounds will ever heal. There is a certain flicker in Vassili's eyes which catches me during our brief encounters.

I also wonder if he realizes how hard it was to give him up. When he decided that this was what he wanted, or must be done.

We never discussed it.

There is a time to surrender.

.....

Beginnings are usually exciting. And middles can be wonderful.

Endings brief. Or prolonged and painful.

But afters?

.....

....Angelos has turned the water off. I can hear him toweling his body.

My slip flung into a corner, I stretch trembling in the darkness, with a lusty bone waving in the warm air.

A moment of panic seizes me. What if I should think of Vassili while I hold this golden angel in my arms? He will notice something surely. Instinctively.

I ask him to light me a cigarette.

He complies, enjoying the ritual though disapproving of the habit.

I am stalling. My spirit is heavy. Why must I think of Vassili *now*? It is our less than weekly *chance*.

"You will burn yourself, David," he murmurs reproachfully. Lifting the stub from my fingers and extinguishing it in the ashtray.

I should take his words for warning.....

.....Vassili. Called back from Sounion at the beginning of July; final coaching for his end-of-year tests at the language school. Fifteen years old, at the peak of his beauty and freedom.

We had both succumbed to summer's onslaught by then. But answered the call to duty. Compensated for the prospect of three hours' labour by seeing each other again and exchanging news.

Our collaboration was nearing an end. After the summer break I would help prepare him for his important English language exams in December.

We hadn't discussed how or if our relationship would survive after that.

The room was stifling. There was a canvas blind drawn to the balcony rail.

Vassili slid in, familiar in a black T-shirt and green cotton trousers. His long thick hair brushed and gleaming. Wearing the inimitable smile.

He slouched into a chair and drew it close to me.

I could feel his reluctance to. Study; his impatience to be out of the city again. To be with his mates in the beach house which was temporarily theirs. I sympathized and said so. But we were agreed to the task despite its irksomeness. Three hours was nothing after all. We had shared years.

So we sweated together in the midday heat.

Our humour improved as the sun began to slide. We found satisfaction in ticking off the items on the list.

Meantime stirring each other physically.

His thighs finding mine. Our legs tangling in their old sexy way.

He smelt of summer - sweat and salt. And a whiff of sperm. Perhaps only the tight crotch of the army pants he loved and had soiled so often.

He was turning me on as I led him through the verbs.

Pulling out his T-shirt and waving it in front of his flat brown belly.

Vassili soon made me aware of his erection. I unzipped him and eased the fat bird out of its hot sticky nest. Pulled down his slip. Held and squeezed him under the table. I smelt his sex even as I felt it.

His pelvis began to thrust forward as I stroked his swollen knob with my fingertips.

Wondering about his days at Sounion. With four lively mates. I asked, teasing him as I stroked, but learnt nothing: Vassili ever reticent about new adventures. Still I could easily imagine the night games. Horny teenagers in an empty house. Nude bathing. Boasting. Blankets blessing naked young limbs.

“Come on,” I murmured drowsy with the heat. Mama had not emerged this time with coffee.

Like a railway signal at the throw of a switch he swung his knees toward me, opened them wide and lay back against his chair.

I bent to refresh us both.

Let my tongue drool as it wandered over his cock. First drop of juice squeezed out before I began.

My fingers sunk into the heat to fondle his balls. “You’re very hard today, Sweet.”

“Yes,” he grunted impatiently.

“And your balls are like lemons - they must be full of spunk.”

“Yeah.”

“When did you last blow your juice?”

“I dunno,” he whispered. His glazed onyx eyes sliding away. I began to masturbate him gently;

We heard a door open and close. Running water. Someone was awake and close by.

“Please David,” he murmured. “Finish it now.”

I gripped him harder and began to beat fast.

Again a door closed nearby. More a slam.

Vassili sat up worried in his chair. Forgetting the angry purple crown bumping against his belly.

I decided not to chance it. We'd dared the fates too many times.

With difficulty I pushed his cock back inside his slip. The knob refused to stay in. I sat back waiting for him to subside.

Two drops of thick white spunk spurted on to his trousers.

I whisked them away with my finger, licking it after. Rubbed at his trousers with a tissue.

Outside the door we could hear Mum and Dad conversing. The hard-on remained. Another viscous grey white drop bubbled on his knob.

Suddenly heedless of the danger I tore his slip down again and swallowed him whole.

He was coming before my lips had covered his crown. His anus opening and closing on my finger as he spurted. Repeatedly and abundantly.

We sat back and gazed at each other.

What a blow, we were thinking.

Then I helped him zip up. That took some time and care. Vassili is extra sensitive after orgasm.

“Let's take some pix, Sweet. To mark the end of the year.” He responded willingly, tugging at his troublesome tonk. Hoping to disguise its lingering hardness. As I pushed him out onto the balcony.

Dusk had fallen. We raised the awning and Vassili posed. I took two shots.

Then we went to collect my moped from the police station where it was temporarily impounded.

By the time we got it started we were hot and weary.

There was a melancholy settling upon us. We made our farewells short.

That evening Vassili returned to the freedom of Sounion and his mates. A week later he moved with his family to their seaside cottage where they stayed for the summer.



I missed my boy at first but was soon very busy adapting a film for dubbing.

Then one day late in July I collected a package of photographs which included the two of Vassili. I pushed the others aside and gazed at his image. Wondering how I had managed to forget him for so long.

There he was, hands on hips, slim, brown and horny as hell.

His green trousers streaked with sperm. Shadows gathering about his dusky beauty giving a glimmer of his sweetness as a lover. The erection is very obvious, looking a bit like a coke bottle stuffed into his strides. Balls bulging beside. While his eyes plead ignorance.

I had one enlarged and framed and put it on the hall table.

Where it still stands, drawing many eyes and various comments over the years.

This photograph caused me to start writing about him in his absence.

With a sense of fatality: they say that to write about love is to kill it.

On our last day together, having rescued the moped and said goodbye, Vassili had looked me straight in the eye, thanking me for the years. Without speaking. He knew we had lived some- thing special. While feeling summer drawing him away to unknown adventures.

And during that summer, while I amused myself with superficial pleasures, some deep uncheckable chill in me knew that it was ended.

Even so the shock of our next meeting was keen.

I had been looking forward to seeing him again and hearing his news. This was our September ritual.

A new boy awaited me.

I'd got used to him being taller in September but now - he seemed angular and gawky. He'd lost that compact solidity which had so graced him. His hair was tortured into a disco brush. His eyes opaque as he opened the door.

If I'd caught hints during summer, he was sending bulletins now.

His purple lips which I'd learned to kiss with infinite passion were drawn into a hard line. Broken briefly to emit staccato greetings.

Which were clearly warnings.

I got the message.

Stomping on my inner hurt I adopted a manner even more off-handed than his.

We sat down at the table and I began a cold preamble concerning his upcoming exams.

Vassili became silent as I rattled off dates, procedures and obligations. I was avoiding his eyes. Couldn't have been more impersonal. (How does one manage this treachery?) Much as I yearned to coax him back to intimacy, some instinct prevented me. I had to make it easier for him. Since he had made a choice, I must honour it.

I left him early to ponder the details of his task. At the door momentarily it was too much for him and he reached out to detain me.

I kissed him fearfully on the cheek. And turned quickly to descend the stairs before I should cave in.

Later to groan aloud in misery for an ending anticipated but not absorbed.

Lessons began, frequent and formal. Vassili could have passed the First Certificate standing on his head. But his erratic behaviour made me nervous. I pressed and nagged at him. He responded with further provocation.

All this while we continued to inhale our sacred subtext.

As a student he was lazy, careless, impertinent and well nigh intolerable.

Two years before, in not dissimilar circumstances, we had danced a drawn-out mating ritual. Circling, advancing, retreating. Now we found ourselves performing the same ceremony in reverse. And with far less confidence.

We had no guidance at all.

These were the unavoidable intricate steps of the dance of disentanglement.

At times I caught a flicker of doubt in those disingenuous eyes.

While most of him was growing out of me.

The process was irritating and exhausting. But I had to soldier on.

After a month or two it became a little easier. I was grateful and blessed Time for its blessing.

Soon I could honestly say I was no longer hurting. Perhaps, I reflected hopefully, the dance was almost done.

However one afternoon not long before the examination, he was particularly obstructive. Taking every opportunity to interrupt, question, disagree and demand repeats.

Inevitably my nerves snapped and the explosion followed.

“Fuck you, Vassili!” I shouted.

I had tried my best for him. “That's it. I've had enough!”

My protest could be heard all over the house. In minutes I had collected my things and headed for the door.

Surprised but not disturbed, Vassili followed me. Did I want to come back and do the work now?

I did not.

Though I'd already recognized the replay, which left me feeling strangely detached. Almost amused. The last time I had stomped out it had led to tears, resolutions and the beginning of a wonderful adventure. This time the adventure was ending.

Was it the last step in the dance? Not quite.

Of course my defection was forestalled. Mother stood beside me while I kicked the starter. The engine cold and stubborn. She was all apology and understanding.

I held nothing back in vituperation. Why should I sit down with such a barbarian? I would not.

She nodded agreement. Mentioned the next lesson. Undertook to correct things.

I promised nothing and roared off with the first whiff of freedom in my nostrils. At the same time laughing aloud at the patterns. The rituals.

Needless to say we were back at it bent over the books in a few days. Apologies superfluous.

As a matter of fact a rather beautiful period followed during which Vassili gave himself into my hands, academically speaking. We worked hard and well together.

When his oral came up he went to the interview alone, confident and cheerful. Later in the day he reported to me on the phone: he'd liked the chap. And he'd enjoyed the conversation.

I heaved a sigh of relief and waited for the writtens. These too he faced stoically and emerged with encouraging remarks.

The pressure lifted and with it the obligation. A few informal lessons for sentiment's sake and we were done.

Just before Christmas at our last conversation session he gave me a beautiful gift. He'd chosen it himself and it was richly evocative of our past.

The same day we enjoyed a brief revival of sexual relations. Mama out shopping. The house to ourselves. The atmosphere tender and benign.

This was a second Christmas present and something more. We were surprised when it happened. Neither of us having planned or even wanted it, before the event.

It almost started by itself. Sex taking over and defeating us both. Laughing at our recent resolutions.

It was also weirdly like a first encounter: full of fire, curiosity and greed.

At the same time familiar welcome relief. One last glad reunion for our hungry bodies. And we knew it was the last.

Stranger still, the sex was probably the most complete we ever had. We did nothing we hadn't tried before. But we did everything.

As if after to remember well.

It wasn't nostalgic - sheer lightning lust. Under this flowed a current of sadness but we did not feel it until later, at parting.

I fondled his cock and he fondled mine. Difficult to say who started

or who got hard first but soon we both were. Two lusty bones straining for action.

I unzipped him and pulled out the proof but his finger was pressing down on my zip long before I'd sprung him.

We spent a long time stroking and squeezing each other. Swaying and bumping our heads together.

I sat on the edge of the bed to suck him. Slowly at first. Savouring his gamy flavour as if for the first time. While he grew bigger in my mouth.

He had pulled down his jeans and slip before my tongue sought his balls. To lick and swallow and spit out new grown pubes.

When I paused to moisten my lips Vassili took the chance to kneel and suck me. He'd never sucked my cock much, not minding but not getting a real taste for it either. I never came in his mouth. He didn't want that.

And on this Christmas night I remembered that we had not fucked together many times. More out of circumstance than decision. Through it had been very good. After that first careful time.

I'd always loved Vassili's bum and made no secret of it. His buns were perfect: full and firm. His passage accommodating. He had thrilled and gasped, shouted sometimes, taking the sperm.

Now he turned and I rubbed my horn against him. Pressing at last into his dark division.

It was wild and sweet. We were strangers, yet we were old friends.

The mixture was tantalising. Became almost unbearably exquisite.

Inevitably I made it last longer than ever before.

As he murmured not to finish yet. Not to come fast.

He had another climax first. Belting his buttocks against me. Blowing all over the desk and staying stiff until I filled him.

And so our lessons came to an end. Despite Mama's protests, Vassili refused to resume them in the new year. Feeling that he was right, I did not attempt to change his mind.

But we were far from finished with each other.

During the months of cramming there had been many pleasurable moments: digressions fueled by common interests. In particular, bikes.

I was still riding the moped that we originally shared. But hankered for something bigger. Vassili encouraged this hankering. Regardless of mood he was always ready with advice and information.

In January an unexpected cheque gave me the wherewithal. I rang Vassili and demanded assistance.

He sprang into action, having first ascertained the exact sum I had at my disposal. Then began the old game of comparisons, searching for bargains.

Finally we decided to try the bike market at Monastiraki.

Vassili was more excited than I was. I could only observe that despite our new relationship - whatever that was - we were doing the same things together with the same enthusiasm.

When I first saw him that Sunday morning pacing about the square in his tailored jeans and white sweatshirt, his hair lustrously clean and orderly - perhaps to placate me - I paused for some moments to take him in.

So handsome. Sixteen now, he no longer belonged to me.

I moved to greet him, taking his restlessness for boredom. Finding in his first smile that it had only been impatience.

We piled onto a bus, our remarks overlapping. Stood at the back window staring out behind as the neighbourhood receded. As if we were reviewing the past.

I didn't take his hand, kiss his hair or touch his arm as I would have a few months before.

But we enjoyed the ride and the conversation. Each anxious to establish the basics. Each reassured to find agreement.

The memory of a more dangerous venture when we had bought the moped was inevitably with us. We discussed this holy day tentatively at first. Then with humour and philosophy.

That was *so* long ago.

For the new bike I wanted to put the papers in Vassili's name; and he agreed. The pretext was my alien status and the consequent bureaucracy. The real reason was that I wanted to give him something. A tangible mark of the deep gratitude I felt for all he had given and shared with me.

This was pretty well understood. Vassili knew I valued him.

A cold bright Sunday morning. High walls and surrounding factories screened out the wind. At street level where orange trees grew through the footpaths and gave along with the grassy verges a gloss of winter green, all was sunshine and gaiety.

Rows of motorcycles, all sizes, makes and colours, polished and placed to maximum advantage. They were all second hand machines but capable of impressing with the right preparation.

We spilled out of the bus and plunged anxiously into the crowd. Feeling that we were late.

And began to search. Sometimes separately but mostly together. Exchanging soft exclamations at the sight of beauties we could not afford. Not above scrutinizing wonderful beasts beyond our wildest dreams. Barely pretending a buying interest. This was all part of the game.

Schoolyard humour, matey and innocent. With many a casual touch or grasp of a stranger's hand.

A macho scene. Leather and denim. Boisterous bargaining.

Sexy smiles and subtle ancient gestures all given away free.

Men and boys and bikes happily packed together.

A few cops lounging benevolently on the sidelines. Bikies themselves. Superior with their fat cream B.M.W.s.

I must have been the only person there over forty. As I dashed about after this stunning sixteen-year-old.

Who used to be my lover.

And don't think he wasn't noticed.

There were guys in that crowd who would've fucked him from there

to Sounion. And back. Only none of them got the chance. No more cock for Vassili. They would woo him in vain. He might flirt at bit. But he was not to be had.

I'd absorbed this message by the time I left. Maybe it was meant for me anyway.

Vassili's eyes were increasingly drawn by a bike which did not interest me: a trimmed down souped up black MB5 claiming 75cc. I sensed his interest but he was there to do me a service and felt serious and responsible.

I was there to find him a new distraction. To extend his experience outside of sex.

I could only indulge him. There was nothing else left to do.

At my urging he enquired about the price.

I didn't much care for the type who leaned against the wall behind the MB. Nor for the way he approached Vassili. Nodding and smiling suavely. Then whispering at length in his ear.

The asking price was more than I had. I told Vassili to take the bike for a spin.

They roared off toward the industrial suburbs, Vassili hunched behind this stranger. The exhaust popping and barking insolently.

They were away much longer than I thought reasonable.

When they returned Vassili was at the bars, flushed with experience.

He dismounted to consult me against the shaded wall. Affecting cool.

But I'd seen his exhilaration before the wheels stopped turning. It was good to see that in his eyes again.

"How was it, Sweet?"

He hesitated long enough to look around and be sure of privacy.

"Listen, David. It really goes!"

The ultimate praise.

What a ride it must have been. I have never asked but the bastard must have really flown over the bitumen. Showing off all the tricks -



his and the bike's.

Nonetheless I knew that Vassili had a shrewd eye. And a mind of his own.

“Is it sound though? Will it last?” I tried to sound cautious though I knew we'd already bought it.

Vassili dutifully echoed my caution.

“He could have hidden a lot of things. To sell it.”

“Patched it up with chewing gum?”

“Yeah.”

“Why don't you check, Sweet.”

He went at it with a will. Kneeling beside the machine. Frowning. Fingering various parts in turn. Sprawling on the grass to lie half concealed for what seemed an hour.

All this was for me.

The owner however was visibly impressed. Though he couldn't make out our relationship.

Vassili emerged sighing. Wiping oil from his hands and face. Made a few sad observations.

The guy admitted everything. Went further and pointed out hidden weaknesses.

Crouching side by side they were in harmony. As they waited out the electric minutes of exchange.

Suddenly my wad was accepted. Vassili got up back again, hugging his victor-victim, and they wheeled off to the police station to fix the papers.

I took a taxi home in a halcyon daze. Walked the last three blocks reminiscing and resolving.

To find a grinning Vassili waiting at my door. Proudly astride the new steed. Our black beast.

No kisses to seal the deal. No celebratory sex.

But some agreement was necessary.

As Vassili bounded down the steps into my apartment I marveled at the grace with which he accepted the partnership. Knowing why I'd put up the cash.

He was not taking advantage. He wanted to find me a good bike and he had; to help me with the papers and he had. And he knew I wasn't trying to buy him back. He would share the MB but strictly on my conditions.

To prove himself a worthy partner.

We sat in opposite comers of the room spreading our legs like men amongst men. Discussing locks, chains, fuel; turns and times of use. I was so pleased with the way our excursion had turned out that I was willing to surrender the bike to Vassili's exclusive use. He would never have agreed to this. Though he did in fact ride, test, tune and grow passionately fond of the bike in the month that followed.

While I dallied. Filled the tank when he wasn't looking. Bought spark plugs. I was content. And Vassili was very happy.

I saw a lot of him that year. He got used to being in my place - something he'd never managed when we were lovers. And we talked more, on a new basis, less intimate.

Every time he took the bike out - usually at night - I stood at the window watching him go and prayed for his safety. Also for his freedom and fun. I never went to bed until he checked in. Our partnership was a secret and remained so.

We had minor quarrels about helmets, cops and speed.

Again I noted that - sex aside - we continued to do the same things we'd always done.

The first jolt came in March when Vassili called me up late one night to tell me the result of his English language exam. I was all ready to congratulate him.

But he had failed.

This was impossible. He was joking. Knowing how to play on my reflexes.

Somewhat belatedly I laughed and demanded the details of his

success.

He'd *failed*.

I didn't believe him until he had repeated it several times. His voice sinking, weakening each time.

It was awful

I held my breath. What could I say? I was lost in the fact. So was he - who cared no more about exams than I did. But suffered from my surprise.

It was just that we'd started this way - lessons, language, communication. Had fought and been reconciled this way. Discovered love and passion this way.

“Oh Vassili. What did Mum say?”

“Like you. She say, Oh Vassili.”

I imagined it. The shame and indignation. Vassili failing once more to satisfy demands.

I hurt far my lost lover. Could have knelt and banged my head on the floor.

“Vassili I am sorry.”

“It doesn't matter.”

“It is my fault.”

“No. Me.”

Our desperation was mounting. We strove to get over it. This unforeseen obstacle to anew and fragile friendship.

“Jesus. Another teacher. Who loved you less.”

“Come on now.” My emotional reaction was disturbing him.

“A woman perhaps.”

Vassili laughed.

“David,” he murmured.

Neither of us had anything more to say. But we couldn't hang up. We held the receivers against our ears and endured minutes of silence.

He rallied first.

“How is MB?” he demanded. “Fine. Waiting for you.”

“Our black beast,” he growled.

“Yeah.”

“Did I choose good?”

“You sure did, Sweet.”

“Did we buy right, David?” A note of failing confidence.

“We bought best, sweet.”

“Maybe I come tomorrow.”

“I remained depressed about the exam though we didn't refer to it again. I felt guilty, never doubting it was my fault. Vassili's mother blamed him entirely. Lessons would resume in the future. Vassili would do it again.

To date these things have not occurred. Vassili refuses pleasantly but firmly.

Nowadays his English is fluent, after years of chatting up tourist girls. He used to ask me to help him answer their letters. Now he manages by himself.

He continued to come and go. Sharing our bike and conversations about nothing personal.

What is it that we are, Vassili and I? After so many years. Friends? Ex lovers? The words don't seem sufficient.

Vassili is not gay. I expect he will marry and lead a fairly conventional life. He will still have secrets and guard them jealously. Some of them will be our secrets. Which won't affect his happiness.

The Black Beast changed hands between us many times. The summer after its purchase I couldn't pay for some repairs so I sold the

machine to Vassili. He had anticipated this and rejoiced.

Before the end of the year he was pining for an island holiday and needed cash. He sold it back to me.

In the end of *that* year, thieves began to visit me by night, stripping the MB of various parts. I gave it back to Vassili. Still his for the present and it never went so well. Can it last? Has become a joke between us.

The second jolt to our new found harmony was more pleasant: Vassili passed his university entrance exams with high distinction. No mean feat in cruelly competitive Greece.

He surprised everybody. Having remained the free spirit, street boy bkie and night owl until a month before the exams. Then he shut himself in his room and gave instructions about meals. A belated effort which turned into his triumph.

His parents were speechless. Began to look at him in a new way.

I was immensely pleased. And remembered with satisfaction a day in the distant past when I had told his father that one day Vassili would surprise them all. Dad had scoffed, enjoying the joke.

Vassili had the last laugh.

He is a loyal friend. Never fails to help me with a bike when I ask him. Sentimental at birthdays and Christmas. As I am about the little moped, which I can never sell.

But Vassili is twenty years old and we are no longer lovers ...

I find that Angelos has gone to sleep. Perhaps having sensed my obdurate nostalgia. Or perhaps simply grateful to snooze on a Sunday afternoon. A luxury I seldom permit him.

He has turned on his side. Head resting silkily under my chin. Back curved against my chest. His torso gently swells and subsides. Long golden lashes lie unflickering upon his cheekbones.

I am filled with remorse at neglecting him.

In a moment I shall wake him up. As tenderly, I hope, as he has let me day-dream. Then we shall make love as always. Exciting each other. Indulging each other. Giving and taking. Angelos increasingly inventive. While I am simply grateful and blind in my passion. Finding a longed-for paradise lost. While wondering at the fresh miracle of his young body barely tried.

.....Vassili and I go on. Will it last? Has become my private joke.

He is no longer fifteen. We are not lovers.

But I am laughing.