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Natalie Bakopoulos

Fresco, Byzantine

GREECE, 1970-71

THEY HAD COME of age in such places, those island prisons—during the Nazi occupation, during the civil war, throughout the fifties, and now—and now some were growing old there. “We were wondering about you,” many said when Mihalis arrived. “About how long you’d be spared.”

He had evaded detainment during this junta’s earlier years, but then, after an outburst at the ridiculous propaganda reels run at the movie house, Mihalis was arrested. After twenty-one days of detainment (and beatings, and torture) on Bouboulinas Street, he was sent to an island prison. “How auspicious,” he had said to the officer who had come to collect him. “I’ve spent time on several, but the detention center of L—I haven’t yet seen.”

Once there he found many artists and writers and the rank-and-file of the Left and Center, many he had known before and with whom he was now reunited. That was not surprising. Still, out of all the possible island detention centers, he had not anticipated to find his friend Vagelis, a cabdriver and painter from Halandri who had sometimes seemed more like a personal chauffeur to Mihalis’s

teenage nieces. Mihalis remembered when the officers had come to arrest him.

“But we already have here some more-famous poets,” Vagelis said when they found one another, and the two men embraced.

Vagelis had been there awhile. But even had Mihalis not known this, the look of him gave it away. Mihalis waited for Vagelis to ask of news from Athens, from Halandri. When he didn’t, Mihalis mentioned that he had seen Vagelis’s wife just a month before, walking home from the girls’ school where she taught. Vagelis scanned the room where they ate, distracted. Finally, his gaze settled on a skinny girl, no older, it seemed, than Mihalis’s nieces, now university students. Later, Mihalis would learn her name was Nefeli. She sat alone, sketching, the long drape of her hair, black with hints of red, covering most of her face. If lice were a problem at this camp, she didn’t seem to be afflicted.

“She’s well, I hope?” Vagelis asked. He drew his spoon to his mouth but didn’t take a bite. He glanced again over at the girl.

“Who’s that?” Mihalis asked.

Vagelis, distracted, took a bite, moved his soup bowl aside, and lit a cigarette. “What?” he asked.

They slept in barracks left over from the Italians. Some days, they were allowed to swim and walk on the shore; other days they were not. They rarely knew what was allowed because it seemed to change from hour to hour. Sometimes they ate fish, sometimes only broth. Things were inconsistent; how they were fed depended on who was in charge from day to day. They talked about food often. Sometimes, when they lay at night, some in cots, some in double bunks, the room would be quiet, until someone would cry out: “Roast beef!” And another would answer: “Galaktoboureko!” And another “Spanikopita!” and they would continue like that, shouting out favorite foods, until they’d fall asleep. Sometimes, they called out names of women: “Irimi!” “Melina!” “Sophia Loren!”

Yet they were better off there, they knew, than on some of the

other islands, and surely better off than in previous times of exile: this Mihalis knew firsthand. But this didn't make it unobjectionable, and it certainly didn't make it morally excusable, so many people exiled simply for having a voice. It was still absurd. It was like paying someone one cent per day for his labors and then arguing that at least he was receiving that lousy cent. Or a man claiming he only beats his wife occasionally, on Sundays and holidays.

When it rained for stretches at a time, everything grew moldy and damp. The drinking water was sometimes brackish. Mihalis, though always a little thirsty, felt he would never be dry. He wrote poems he did not finish, a whole notebook of unrefined work. They'd surely take it from him if and when he was released.

When they were not working, cleaning the camp, doing laundry, or preparing their meals, the detainees busied themselves taking walks or studying the flora of the island. Some read or wrote or sketched. Many, even if they had not arrived as artists, would leave at least as craftsmen: they created things from delicate worry beads to nice sitting chairs to tables they could gather around. Something from nothing, something in nothing.

A few boys from the village sometimes hung around the barbed wire fence that enclosed them, at first to observe, like curious anthropologists, and then to provoke. But soon the prisoners had become used to them, and they to the prisoners, and sometimes, for a fee, they'd bring chocolate or cigarettes or just provide amusing conversation. One boy's father was a guard, a less severe one who seemed as unsympathetic to the regime as they were. He had not asked for this, his look seemed to say; he was only doing his job. But that was why, of course, fanatical regimes prevailed. Too many people doing their jobs, not wanting to make a scene.

Though they ate their meals together, the men and women were lodged separately. The women's sleeping quarters were a short walk away, separated by a paltry, unimposing fence. Near the back of

the camp, someone had slashed a hole through it, and they passed through as nonchalantly as if ducking beneath a low corpse of shrubs on a path. The guards seemed not to notice, or if they did, not to care. Perhaps they, too, conveniently used this entrance.

During the day, when they were not working, Vagelis and Nefeli were suspiciously absent, a detail that most of their fellow prisoners seemed to take as matter-of-fact. The two seemed to always appear for their mess duties together. Sometimes, at night, Mihalis heard Vagelis rise from his bed when the guard had disappeared for a moment to relieve himself. Once, Mihalis woke uncharacteristically early to find Nefeli sneaking from their barracks, like a child at scout camp, barefoot. On the top of her delicate, tanned feet were splatters of paint: crimson and gold, like the marks of the stigmata. "Hi," she said. And then she shrugged, as if to say, How much more can they do to me? Plenty, Mihalis thought. She was young, this was her first prison, and Mihalis hoped she would not have to learn the things he already knew.

One day, Mihalis and Vagelis sat inside their barracks, beneath blankets. Outside fell a cold, miserable rain. Vagelis said, "When I get out, I'm going to live. I'm going to screw every woman I see. Eighteen-year-olds, fifty-year-olds, it doesn't matter. I'll pick them all up in my cab." Vagelis stretched his arms over his head and wiggled his fingers.

This was all audacity, for show. Vagelis had always been faithful to his marriage, as far as Mihalis knew. But Mihalis didn't mention Vagelis's wife; rather, he asked about Nefeli.

Vagelis dropped his elbows down to the table abruptly. "What about her?" he asked.

"You're very covert, but our quarters are small," said Mihalis.

"Has it been so long since you've been with a woman that you can't recognize the act? It's something else entirely."

"You've got a creature like that sneaking into your tiny cot, and you're telling me you're not having sex?"

Vagelis smirked. But then his face changed; he grew quiet. "You

don't think there could be something between a man and a woman besides sex?" he asked.

"Yes, of course there can," Mihalis said. "But in addition to sex." Vagelis drew his legs to his chest and set his chin on his knees, rocking back and forth, the same way Mihalis knew Nefeli sat when alone, staring out at the water. "I came here with a good marriage, you know."

"And I came with a devastated one," Mihalis said. It was true. His wife, Irini, wrote him countless letters, some of which he actually received. Through these letters, they began to communicate again, like yearning, adventurous teenagers. "These separations are doing wonders for it."

Vagelis managed a smile, though absentminded. "Come on," he said, unfolding himself. "Let's go for a walk. I'll show you something."

Mihalis dressed in the raincoat Irini had sent, and he gave Vagelis a heavy sweater. Along with the letters, Irini sent packages filled with supplies: two wool blankets, soap and toothpaste and cigarettes and tins of fish, sleeves of crackers. Even a set of flannel pajamas, for which the other prisoners mocked him but of which Mihalis knew they were jealous. In this cold, dreary spell, Mihalis was happy to have all of it.

Vagelis held above them an almost-broken umbrella that threatened to snap down, and Mihalis then recalled a day when they were much younger men, ambling around Athens. A downpour had begun, and they ducked onto a parked bus, jumping off just as it was about to leave and dashing onto another, all the while maintaining their conversation. Two middle-aged men had glared at them, and Vagelis and Mihalis had laughed.

Now, they themselves were middle-aged, and they walked, their hands held behind their backs, through the wet, fragrant pines, the thick shrubs of eucalyptus, until they came upon an old husk of a church, the outside visibly neglected, overgrown with weeds.

"Don't tell me. You're taking me to church?" Mihalis asked.

Vagelis opened the front door, a large, creaky wooden gate, and motioned to Mihalis to follow him.

There were only a few rows of wooden pews; the rest, Mihalis realized, had been torn out and now served as the seating for their mess hall. Vagelis seemed impatient. "Well?" he asked. He pointed at the frescoes that covered the walls and, so far, some of the barrel-vaulted ceiling. It was a work in progress; Mihalis smelled the dizzying smell of paint.

And it was truly spectacular. One image melted into the next, as if a continuous Byzantine dream: Saint Nicholas, and around him small, crude, brightly rendered scenes of his miracles; the Raising of Lazarus; Saint Peter with his staff and a scroll tied up not with a simple string but with an oversize red ribbon tied into a bow. It brought to mind the bright red bows Mihalis's sister would tie in his nieces' hair when they had been little, and how once they had come home sobbing, saying the teacher had taken them away. A symbol of Communism. He remembered the way his sister had put her hands in the air, calling the accusation ridiculous and the offense completely unintentional. But beneath her incredulity he had detected an insolent smile. The girls, from then on, demanded only white adornments for their hair.

Neither Mihalis nor Vagelis were religious men. But Mihalis found the image in the center, what appeared to be the Dormition of the Theotokos, to be stunningly moving. The Virgin lay atop a bier, and the faces of those who surrounded her, apostles, bishops, angels, were distorted with grief, and the emotion present in each figure's face was far unlike that of more traditional iconography. Some even appeared to be shouting. Where one would expect a Christ at the top of the image, holding the Virgin's spirit, there was only empty, blue space, like a cloudless spring sky. Mihalis could not tell if the omission was a statement or simply a matter of being incomplete.

Then, in the corner, Mihalis noticed a ladder and a scaffold, and above it, Nefeli. She was painting the sky a deep blue, a continuation of the previous image, and up there she seemed even more diminutive.

tive. She sat up and brushed her hair back with her forearm. Usually, she looked at Vagelis in a way that made Mihalís sick with envy. But this time her face didn't brighten.

"Why did you bring him?" she asked.

"You hate the rain," said Vagelis. "I assumed you'd be inside, sleeping."

Mihalís looked around. He felt as if he had somehow intruded upon a tender, intimate act. "You did this?" Mihalís asked.

"The two of us, together," said Vagelis. He stepped back toward the door and surveyed the scene. "All of it."

For two days following, a torrent of rain kept them all inside; most huddled in their beds with their thin, worn blankets. Vagelis, who for two nights had not seen Nefelí, was insufferably restless. He cheated at card games, not to win, but so they would be over quickly and he could return to his pacing. He looked out the window to see if she were coming up the path that linked their two quarters. "Why don't you just go find her?" Aleko, a young artist, asked. "Maybe she's waiting for you."

Vagelis muttered something and flopped down on his bed, sulking.

Mihalís felt embarrassed at how much he had become fixated with Vagelis and Nefelí, but he couldn't help but wonder if they had fought because Vagelis had brought Mihalís to see the paintings.

Because so many of the prisoners were artists or writers, they often discussed matters of craft and style and substance. They had long stretches of time for such conversations, which seemed to continue and evolve through the days.

"It seems futile," one of them said, a young novelist. "To write. During all this."

"Everything will be censored," Aleko said. And, as an afterthought, he added: "I asked my wife to send nude photographs of

herself but then worried they'd Magic Marker out the important places." They had only been married two months before his arrest; he had been here now for ten.

"Idiot," Mihalís said. "The guards would keep them for themselves."

"She wouldn't have sent them anyway," another man said. "She's probably screwing the gardener."

Aleko shrugged. Later that afternoon, he finished a nude painting of his wife in a dense, overgrown garden, with thick black bands covering her privates.

The next day, the rain continued, heavy and unyielding like some sort of biblical plague. Rivulets of water formed throughout the camp, tiny rivers going nowhere. The roof of the barracks began to leak, and the men busied themselves finding containers to catch the rain so the dirt floor would not be muddied. One of the more sympathetic guards arrived with coffee and cigarettes (for a fee, of course), something they hadn't had in days.

That afternoon, they talked of the rumor that had been suspended over them like a dead animal hung up to bleed. There it was: whoever signed papers of allegiance to the regime would be released.

"Never," said Vagelis. "I won't do it." Others agreed with him, though a few looked sheepish.

"Your intentions are less noble," Mihalís said. "Am I wrong?"

Mihalís proposed that Vagelis was in no hurry to leave, that his stubbornness was not a matter of political conviction but one of simple emotion instead. That the make-believe life he'd created here suited him, that he liked being able to run around with a beautiful woman and throw paint around and believe in artistic transcendence and the Platonic ideal and not drive his cab around Athens. "Meanwhile," Mihalís continued, "your wife is at home, worried, broke. Alone."

And then Vagelis punched him, square under his eye. Mihalís was knocked out cold.

When he came to, he saw Vagelis's face hovering over him, closely checking both his eyes and studying his cheek. Vagelis then put on his shoes and walked out into the downpour with his broken umbrella. Mihalis drew his hand to his throbbing face. He noticed Vagelis was wearing his raincoat. "Bastard."

When Vagelis returned, not long after, Mihalis was ready to punch him back. But Vagelis was sopping wet, visibly distressed: to hit him now would be like socking a child. "The women are gone," Vagelis said. "They've moved their camp." He was panting, as if he had been running.

"To where?" Aleko asked.

"The guard said he didn't know. More men are arriving today, and they needed the room."

"Maybe they've been released," Mihalis said.

"Or the guards want the women to themselves," Aleko added.

"No," Vagelis said. Mihalis wasn't sure to whose comment, his or Aleko's, Vagelis had been responding.

"Maybe they've all signed loyalty oaths," another man said.

No one responded to this, all of them lost in their own verdicts. In quieter tones, one-to-one conversations, they talked of the women, how there had been rumors of their planning an intricate, mass escape, or some sort of insurrection. Perhaps, they thought, this was why they were isolated, and if so another testament to the powers-that-be bizarre ways of reasoning. It was like throwing a match at a gas tank. Everyone knew that men left alone destroy themselves, and women alone flourish.

"Maybe their escape plan simply involved the loyalty oaths," Mihalis said, though he didn't believe it.

They were introspective awhile, thinking about women. Some of them dozed off. In the corner of the room, near the stove that blazed to seemingly no effect, Vagelis slowly peeled off his wet clothes, carefully hanging Mihalis's coat to dry. In his underwear, he crawled beneath his blanket.

Mihalis woke to Aleko's gravelly voice: "Mihalis had a point, Vagelis. What he said earlier, about Nefeli. What is it, exactly, that you're doing?"

Vagelis said nothing, though he exhaled intently, as if he had been holding his breath. Mihalis knew he was, in spite of himself, thinking of Nefeli, wondering why she hadn't somehow come to tell him what had happened. Mihalis was wondering the same.

"I would sign something," Aleko said. "They're only words on a page."

"Only words on a page?" Mihalis blurted. "That's everything." But what he'd do to be back home with his own wife, to wander through Athens, to drink coffee at Zonar's, to sit on his terrace and look out over the lemon trees. But he knew this was a dangerous way of thinking. I'll get out when I get out, he told himself. This can't last forever.

The next morning, the rain had subsided to a measly drizzle, and Vagelis asked Mihalis to walk to the church with him. This was evidently his apology for the deep blue shiner beneath Mihalis's left eye. Mihalis shrugged and went along. After all, they had been friends for years.

On the way, Vagelis narrated to him the details of the paintings' creation—how they collaborated, the way Nefeli was allowed, with a guard, to go into the village and send for paint; the way another guard, a closeted artist whose father did not approve, had secured the scaffold and the paintbrushes in exchange for being allowed to add a few touches while pretending to keep an eye on them.

Inside, the two men sat in a pew, looking up at the unfinished ceiling. "I'm going to stay here a bit," Vagelis said. A few purple flowers, which grew all over the island, were scattered on the pew ahead. Mihalis recalled having seen one tucked behind Nefeli's ear once, an embellishment both ironic and sincere.

"Don't wait for her too long," Mihalis said as he left, and Vagelis agreed. But when he wasn't back for hours, Mihalis assumed she had

shown up, from wherever she was now being held. When Vagelis returned later that day, though, bleary-eyed and glowering, Mihalis knew he hadn't had any luck.

"Send her a message," Mihalis said. "Those young boys by the barbed wire. They'd be happy to deliver a declaration of love."

"Make it dirty, so it's worth their while," Aleko added. He was the youngest, and most in touch with the minds of preadolescent boys.

"We don't know if the women are even on this island," Vagelis said. "For all we know they've been moved to Yiaros, or Syros, or back to Athens. It's nothing to joke about."

"Those boys will know. And of course they know Nefeli. She's the loveliest of the women," Mihalis said. He paused, grinned, and looked right at Vagelis. "And much closer to their age."

Vagelis lunged at Mihalis again, but this time Aleko stopped him.

The boys knew nothing of the women's whereabouts, but they liked the challenge of a puzzle. Two smaller boys were anxious to deliver the message, but the oldest one, too pale for the Dodecanese islands, even for winter, wanted payment for their services. He must have spent most of his time indoors, scheming.

Vagelis asked Aleko to draw some naked pictures, no black bands over the privates. Later, when the boys returned, he presented them. "We can give you nude ladies."

The younger boys examined the first picture with intense concentration. "These are drawings!" the oldest boy said. "We want real pictures."

Aleko, insulted, told the boys his drawings were more accurate than what their imaginations could ever conjure, and this seemed to appease them.

"Check by the old church in the evening," said Vagelis.

"We haven't seen her there," the oldest boy said, knowingly. Of course the boys would have known about the paintings, Mihalis thought, but the admission had still surprised him. Vagelis didn't seem fazed.

The boys set off.

A new rule came after the transfer of the women: they were not allowed to leave the immediate confines of the camp. They could not walk through the dense path to the church, not even with an accompanying guard. Many of the guards they had come to trust, those guards who seemed just as unsympathetic to the regime as they were, were being replaced. A new batch of freshly cut, surly ones was now arriving.

The boys didn't return that night, but they did come back the next, excited and energetic. The oldest boy's eyes were wild, like an enraged horse.

Vagelis ran to the fence. "Talk to me."

"The frescoes in the church," the oldest said, out of breath. "They've transformed!"

"It's God!" said another. Mihalis noticed the large cross that hung around his neck, too big for his small body.

"It's magic!" said the youngest. His name was Niko, and his father was the one guard left whom they liked. "And one of them has your face," he said to Vagelis. "I'll be back with my father. He'll take you there." He turned and ran off.

As promised, Niko and his father returned an hour later. "I can accompany you," his father said. "I've obtained permission."

The boys were right. The frescoes had been transformed, some subtly, others in huge and glaring ways, and the tone had gone from mostly pious sobriety to unbridled drunkenness. Some of the faces looked more ecstatic than grief stricken. But the Virgin was now faceless, her features painted over to a blank slate, and instead of a blue robe covering her head, her hair fell down to the ground in thick, dark ropes.

The figure above her indeed had the face of Vagelis, the eyes exaggeratedly wide-set, the thick hair, an impish smirk. Another image bore the hairline, the large nose, and the unruly eyebrows of Mihalis.

Some of the men in the painting were now women, modern-looking Greek women, many of them fellow prisoners. Some drank from large wine jugs; others threw their heads back, laughing. It was almost bacchanalian.

"Nefeli," Vagelis said.

Aleko, the most talented artist among them, was impressed. "Or divine intervention, like the boys say?"

"You're an atheist," said Mihalis.

"What's that got to do with it?" he asked.

"If it's indeed Nefeli," Aleko asked, "how is she still allowed here? She must have some relationship with a guard."

Both Aleko and Mihalis could see this thought alone was maddening to Vagelis, the idea of her and a young guard coming here, to their—hers and Vagelis's—space, in the night.

"She's communicating with me," Vagelis said. "About the loyalty oaths. Whether to sign one."

"Well?" Mihalis asked. "Does she want you to?"

"That I haven't figured out." He climbed atop the ladder, grabbed a brush, and to the image of Mihalis painted beneath the left eye a sizable bruise.

That night, Mihalis watched Vagelis rise from his bed and peer out the small window, looking for the guard. The old one, who got up frequently to use the bathroom and did not seem to care about Vagelis's moonlit couplings, had been relieved of night duties, and two younger, more fanatical ones took his place. There was never a moment without close watch, and although daytime they were able to convince some guards to bend the rules, during the night they were draconian. Nights, after all, were the time of escapes.

But the next morning the sun was shining and the air was drenched with warm and wet. Spring was coming, and everyone's spirits lifted slightly. The guards allowed them to walk back and forth on the shore, a meager fifty-meter distance, but it was something. Niko's father and another guard accompanied them back to the

church. "One last time," they said. On the way, Mihalis tried to coax from them the women's whereabouts, but they claimed ignorance.

Inside the church, the frescoes had begun to resemble modernist painting more than intricate, Byzantine icons. The image of Mihalis now wore dark sunglasses, the blue of his bruise only a hint. The Virgin's face had been recast as that of Nefeli: the large forehead, sharp cheekbones, and golden eyes were unmistakable.

And this: every one of the figures had one limb covered in a glaring white plaster cast. And in the top corner, Nefeli had painted herself up on a scaffold, her arms stretched above her head and her hands pressed firmly down, as if she were hanging the entire fresco, or holding up the sky.

Now, Vagelis suddenly wanted out. He wanted to sign a loyalty oath, and he wanted to somehow communicate to Nefeli that she should, too. In fact, he was convinced that the plaster casts on the figures meant just this: I surrender.

And then what? Mihalis wanted to know. "Then you'll go back to Athens and live happily ever after? Is that what will happen?" He did not know why he felt so angry.

For the next two weeks, the guards received strict orders not to let the prisoners leave the camp for any circumstances: no walks on the shore, no walks to the village, no walks to look at the frescoes. The whereabouts of the women were still unknown, and the village boys were kept far away from the barbed wire fence. They were, once again, cut off from everything.

One warm evening, Aleko and Vagelis played chess outdoors, in what they sardonically called their courtyard, a little area beside the barracks where they had some tables and chairs and rocks to sit on. Mihalis lay on the ground nearby, feeling the late-day sun on his face, dozing. He was startled by the crack of the loudspeaker.

A guard, in a typical self-important tone, announced that a batch of new prisoners was arriving from another island, and that some of

the current residents would be released. The boat was already waiting at the port, he said, and when their names were called, they should immediately assemble their things. Over the shoddy intercom, papers crackled and shuffled, and the men immediately stood up and began to scramble around.

Vagelis stood up from the table so quickly he jostled the chessboard. The small wooden pawns scattered.

The first two whose names were called disappeared into the barracks immediately to pack their bags.

Another prisoner threw some pebbles in their direction. "Cunts," he called out after them.

"They've signed something?" Mihalis asked.

"They haven't said anything," said Vagelis.

The names were called slowly and erratically; sometimes two in a row; other times one, a three-minute pause, and then another. They were listed in no particular order. In itself it was a kind of torture, such lack of rhythm.

Then, they heard Vagelis's name, loud and clear.

"I knew it!" Mihalis said. "What are you scheming now?"

"I haven't signed a thing," he said. He, in fact, looked distraught. Mihalis saw him as the man that he was: forlorn, emotionally devastated, and utterly exhausted.

And then Mihalis was called. The two men regarded each other but said nothing.

The same man who had thrown the stones called out to Mihalis: "You've barely been here six months!"

Mihalis thought about his wife, his bed, the clean sheets, he thought about what he would eat, the things he would drink, the poems he would finish. Vagelis sat back down and put his head in his hands. Aleko stood up and touched both men's shoulders. "Good luck," he told them. Mihalis watched him walk across the yard.

Aleko joined some of the younger prisoners who, still full of the bravado of young men, sat at the other end of the yard, sharing one

cigarette. The young, they stayed close together—because their spirits had not yet been broken, they were treated the most brutally. From the looks on their faces, they knew they would not be among the lucky.

Inside, Mihalis gathered his things, spread them on his cot, and began to pack. Some whose names had not been called looked on in envy. To these men it did not matter who had or hadn't signed anything—they were traitors just by their fortune. The one of course who rattled Mihalis most was Aleko, who even imparted good wishes, his face so open and sincere. He himself would not have been so generous. He too would have thrown stones.

Vagelis came inside and opened his small duffel bag.

"She might be on the boat, too," Mihalis said. He removed a sweater, a blanket, and a few cigarettes from his bag and placed them on Aleko's bunk.

Vagelis sat down on his bed and put his head between his hands. "This is a good thing," he said, his voice muffled. "Of course it is."

As they boarded, their bodies massed up against one another and spilled onto the narrow staircases and up to the ship's various decks. There were already other prisoners from other islands aboard, strewn like garbage on the benches and floor. Vagelis strained to find Nefeli.

"I wonder if the women are here," said another man, giving voice to Vagelis's thoughts.

Some women did mill around, though whether they had come from other islands or were from their camp was unclear. As they ascended one stairway, though, Vagelis exclaimed. He recognized one of the women from their camp. He tried to get her attention, but she didn't see him. Still, for the first time that day, his face relaxed a bit.

Mihalis followed Vagelis around the ship: the middle deck, back to the top, the middle again.

"Let's try the top one more time," Vagelis said. "We'll get the warmth of the sun."

"Maybe she's not here," Mihalis said. The boat was getting crowded, and Mihalis wanted to make sure he'd have a decent place to sit.

Vagelis said he was certain she was.

Mihalis snapped. "When, exactly, do you plan on resuming your real life?"

Vagelis listened but said nothing.

Mihalis continued. "When we get off the boat? The first time you sleep with your wife?"

"Who are you to say what's real?" Vagelis asked. His face twisted in anger. "You've lived your entire life in some sort of ideological bubble."

"I'm the idealist?"

"Who communicates with his wife only through the romance of letters? And your false sense of importance—you were actually upset you hadn't been arrested sooner. It was a blow to your ego."

"That's preposterous."

Vagelis dropped his bag to the ground, as if he had forgotten he was carrying it. He kicked it along the floor to an open bench, and he used his jacket sleeve to wipe away the grimy water before he laid his head on his small, dirty rucksack. Mihalis lay on the other side, feet to feet with Vagelis. They had taken these boats coming and going from places of detainment; they had taken them to the islands for holiday. But the former had long ago tainted the latter, and lying on those long, white benches would never be anything but gloomy and disquieting. If they used discrete boats to transport prisoners, he couldn't tell the difference. A boat ride to or from an island would always feel a certain way.

Then, Vagelis sat back up. He brushed himself off, stood up, and walked away. He left his bag on the bench.

"Don't blame me if someone takes your seat," Mihalis said.

"Fuck you," said Vagelis.

And as Vagelis turned around, there stood Nefeli. Though they barely touched one another, their reunion was both tender and bit-

tersweet. There had been a great intimacy in their separation. From his bench Mihalis was able to watch them. They sometimes seemed to be talking, but mostly they were quiet. Later, when the wind picked up and the waters grew turbulent, Mihalis watched as Vagelis kept his hand on Nefeli's back while she vomited over the edge.

The trip was long; they stopped at other islands, sometimes for minutes, other times for hours, and more tired and mangy-looking men and women boarded, looking hopeful and exhausted and proud. Mihalis fell asleep, and when he woke, he didn't see Nefeli, though Vagelis stood nearby, staring out at the horizon. How bizarre that the outline of a mass of land, a rocky island, a narrow shore, could fill one with both dread and hope.

When night came, the weather calmed. They lay across benches, or on the ground.

Mihalis, unable to sleep, looked out at the blue-black of the night sea, the frothy white of waves, illuminated by the ship's light. If we could film the workings of our minds, he thought, they would look like this.

They arrived at the port at dawn, the same port where tourists set sail for islands for holidays of drinking and screwing, and the brow-beaten, skinny, and sickly prisoners materialized back into their own lives. Families milled about anxiously, craning their necks to see.

Mihalis noticed the way Vagelis and Nefeli debarked, temporarily united, looking out together at everything else. Vagelis leaned in and whispered something into her ear, and Nefeli's long face lifted, just for a moment.

If someone had seen the two of them then, Vagelis and Nefeli, they would have been given away. But then they moved farther apart from one another so as to not cause suspicion. Only minutes later, Vagelis greeted his wife. Mihalis hoped that someone, a husband, a boyfriend, a sister, her father, had come for Nefeli.

Nefeli brushed past Mihalis. Up close like this, the closest he had ever stood to her, he noticed she was older than she had appeared; he

could tell by the crinkles around her eyes. Her eyes were light, amber colored, and almost disarming, unexpected against the black of her hair, as if they had been taken from another's face and planted there by mistake, or afterthought.

She clutched her sketchbook close to her body and dragged her bag behind her, the curtain of dark hair covering her face. He watched her disappear into the crowd. What had Vagelis said to her, in her ear? What quick, swift words? It drove Mihalis mad to think of it.

He recalled that first day he had seen her, that day in the mess hall. She had left her drawings on the table, and he had sifted through them when no one was looking. They were of long-faced, limp-haired women, almost featureless—cartoony, sad caricatures of herself. And this: they were without hands, or feet, or mouths.

Mihalis saw his own wife approaching, lovely in a beige trench coat and red blouse, her hair tied back in a patterned scarf. His niece and sister followed closely behind her, the confusion of early morning still on their faces. Everyone looked so clean and Technicolored. Irini kissed his lips, and Mihalis was taken aback by the taste of her lipstick, so soapy, perfumed. Mihalis's hair had grown unruly, and when she tried to run her fingers through it, they became ensnared.

Mihalis turned back to Vagelis, whose wife was glued to his side. He lifted his hands and shoulders slightly, a gesture of defeat he didn't want anyone else to see.

Once, back in Athens, on a warm April day three weeks after their release, Mihalis and Vagelis were walking together when they saw Nefeli leaving the police station. They had to report weekly and were headed to do just that. Nefeli stepped out the door hesitantly, blinking into the blazing noon. Vagelis hid behind a kiosk and watched her, pretending to look at newspaper headlines. Mihalis bought some tobacco, and when Nefeli was out of sight, they continued to the station. Mihalis went to mention something, but then he thought better of it. There was nothing, really, to say.

Like he did each week, Mihalis signed in first and then recorded the time. He handed Vagelis the pen, but Vagelis was too preoccupied by the sign-in book. There was Nefeli's name and the time, 12:05, signed in only ten minutes before. He took the pen, he set it down, he ran his hands through his hair. He thought he had evaded her, but here she was again. Mihalis waited patiently. Was he looking, there, for some sort of signal? Some articulation of affection in her small, neat script?

The police officer on duty, bored and disaffected, sat behind the desk, his feet propped atop it. He sighed loudly. Vagelis picked the pen back up and painstakingly wrote his name in large, uncharacteristically legible letters. He stopped before he recorded the time, looking again at her name. Mihalis looked at his friend and thought of the church and all those broken images, their emptiness peeling to no one, like the clamor of wooden bells.