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BY

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Just after noon on June 16th, 1986, my reward for a year of good grades and being through with elementary school arrived in the mail. The sheer size of the package, though it was mostly stuffed with Styrofoam peanuts, signaled that my attention to grades, my constant adherence to the rules and assignments, had paid off. My closest (and only) friend, Crystal, had longed for a new Huffy bike—a red number with a white basket—but she'd pulled a "C" in English and a "C+" in Social Studies. Secretly, I was a little glad, since she'd knocked my choice of gifts, claiming that it was one of the three times in the whole year when I could get whatever I wanted, and I shouldn't waste it on more "schooly stuff." There's your "C" in English. Anyway, I scored a much coveted plastic, kelly green file box with the words "Illustrated Wildlife Treasury" on the front and my first set of 20 glossy cards, a different animal on each. I set right out to filing them alphabetically, aardwolf to zorille, though later, as more cards arrived, I arranged them by zoological classification. This was easier than it sounds since there was a legend on the front of each card, a black outline that indicated which phylum each creature was a member of. A silhouetted snake or udders made all the difference between reptilia and mammalia.

Later that day, the five members of my family rode in two cars up the balmy New Jersey Turnpike to JFK to pick up the newest arrivals from

Greece. Normally, I'm terrible with dates, but it was my brother's seventh birthday, and Mike was particularly sore at it being overshadowed both by my package ("Not fair!") and our trip ("Totally not fair!"), a fit that had earned him shotgun. My father and *yia-yia*, his mother, led the way up the Turnpike in his new-smelling Buick—a car he'd bought himself as a Valentine's gift for my mother four months earlier—and I sat in the back of my mom's beat-up Ford, alternating between learning that the hippopotamus kills more people than lions in Africa and kicking Mike's seat periodically. The acoustics of our Ford's backfiring resonated over both sides of the Verrazano, echoing between Brooklyn and Staten Island, and we sat idle and stifled in air-conditionless traffic, windows up, dense plumes of exhaust circling us.

I was certain I'd recognize them, though I'd only seen pictures that were old enough to have peeled at their edges, pictures that showed the boys, Nick and George, standing on a dirt road, hand-in-hand, squinting into the sun. Picking them out was tough work at the International gate, as everyone around—the hugging, shrieking crowd—had dark hair, a tan, and sputtered out loud, rolling sentences in a variety of foreign tongues, their meshing making them indistinguishable from one another. But when my father jumped up and nearly knocked a woman over with his embrace, I knew who my family was. His sister, Helena, was a rougher version of him, squarer and more angular, and she flashed a smoker's smile at us, her canine teeth prominent and pointed, all of them yellowed as tea. And though I knew I should, I couldn't return the gesture. I stared wide-eyed at her and the two creatures behind her, brothers who had spent sixteen claustrophobic hours likely tormenting each other and passengers alike. They were exchanging punches in the shoulder, their misbehavior ignored in the shadow of a reunion seventeen years in the making. The older boy, Nick, wore a black tee shirt with a flag of Greece on it, and the red, imitation-leather jacket Michael Jackson had made so popular through his "Thriller" video. He was missing one of his front teeth. George stood behind

him, his cheeks puffed like a harvesting chipmunk's, his mouth surrounded by a sticky blue goo as if a lollipop had gotten the better of his coordination. Neither of them spoke English. Helena walked over to me with a slight limp, bent at the waist, her face inches from mine, and said, "*Yassou*." I said hello back, and the second I spoke, she embraced me roughly and shifted her weight from side to side. She smelled both of mothballs and meatballs.

The Greeks, to my relief, piled into the Buick while their luggage filled both trunks and stacked up in our backseat, cocooning me to a small fort that prevented much conversation. I must have dozed off because I awoke first to my mother's horn, then to her cursing. I tunneled my head through the baggage to get a glimpse of what was happening, and she laid on the horn again and flashed her high beams.

"*Son of a bitch.* Can't they see that sign said Connecticut?"

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The only other Greek families I knew were from the school where I took biweekly classes in language and religion at the St. Thomas Orthodox Church, though it was really an indoctrination into Greek nationalism. According to my soft-back, typo-riddled textbook, Greece had won every war it fought and was solely responsible for art, philosophy, and civilization's basic existence. Aesop and mythology were presented as straightforward facts, and some variation of *E Ellada einai to lambroto ethnos ton cosmos* ran through every chapter. This was the singular lesson we were to take away: *Greece is the most glorious nation in the world.* But as the other kids I took classes with all lived in the wealthy area near the church (and we lived in a distant WASPy suburb where I desperately reminded people I was half Irish), I never actually saw any of them outside of class. My knowledge was based solely on what happened in my family, and I was pretty sure that once a Greek made the labored trek to America, you never knew how long he'd stay. My *yia-yia*, terrified, left her dirt-road village and boarded her first airplane to visit her only son. She left behind her two grown daughters and their children as well as the duty, the

weighted responsibility, of going without food so that her children might eat. When she made it to our home, though the visit was only supposed to last five weeks, she stayed for five years. Helena and her sons were supposed to spend the summer—just about two months—and after three weeks of living with them, I couldn't wait for August and prayed their stay didn't become permanent, too. Mike moved into my room with me, Helena bunked with my *yia-yia* in the basement, and the cousins hijacked my brother's room. And though I wanted my own space back, displacement wasn't the worst of it. My summer, my last summer before the frightening ordeal that was sure to be 6th grade, my last summer scavenging through the woods with Crystal in search of creepy-crawlies, had been claimed by Greece, and I could feel the blue and white flag protruding from the center of my forehead, waving at everyone who passed by.

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"I don't think you should come over," I said. I meant it.

"C'mon. My mom told me to get out and play. What are you doing?" Crystal's mom never let her stay inside if the sun was shining, and by the beginning of July, Jersey was all sun.

"I gotta hang out with my cousins." I had done my best to make sure they hadn't met yet. Pitiful excuses. The dentist. A family trip to Gettysburg (why would Greeks go to Gettysburg?). Once I told her I'd gotten grounded for stealing change for penny candy. A fake kleptomaniac's impulse. That one actually impressed her.

"Well, I'm comin'. Got nowhere else to go. Maybe they can help dig for bugs or something." She sounded bright, her voice draped in the light that appeared in it every time she had an idea that made less work for her.

The new summer rule in my house was, "go play with your cousins." That was it, every day. The adults—who didn't seem to work during that time—lounged around the kitchen table and cooked, laughed, smoked, and drank Greek coffee after which my grandmother would read the markings in the cups for fortunes. But what no one else seemed to see—not even my prognosticating

yia-yia—was that my cousins were bad. Not just weird, as I'd originally feared, but rotten in the way that boys who curse and grab their private parts are. Boys who make you feel ashamed without your understanding why. George alone was docile enough, but when he paired with Nick, who was rotten all by himself, they morphed into something that hunted in packs or prides, like orcas or hyenas. They teased and taunted in Greek, circled, never relenting, even after tears and pleadings, and then moved in for the kill, whatever their kill of choice might be on that given day. Regularly, they'd team together and hover close by, pointing at me while whispering and laughing. They'd kidnap Barbie dolls for a day or two, only to put them back where they found them, decapitated or dismembered. They'd whoop and holler while pointing at my chest or crotch, pinching my ass as they ran circles around me. But when faced with their mother or my father, they oozed angelic charm, false as a nun on a stripper's pole. They both made me want a locked bathroom and a hot shower.

Crystal's family seemed as peculiar as mine when I first met her, and perhaps that's why our friendship sparked. While I had to deal with a father who ate fish eyes and had a gold tooth, hers had pork rinds by the case stowed away in the basement—a junk food bomb shelter—and would remove his teeth to suck on the fried, BBQ-flavored flesh bits while he listened to "All My Exes Live In Texas." My house had religious icons all over it—ruddy, earth-toned saints like Basil the Great and Athanasios peering, judging, staring hard from every room and hallway—while Crystal's mother showed everyone who came in her picture of a tree with Jesus' face in it. Though I could never see it, I smiled at her every time she stopped me to show me her dendrite savior again. My *yia-yia* was the kind of woman neighborhood children mythologized and feared; she lived permanently in black, her black hair pulled tightly back in a bun, and her face was framed with black glasses, breadbox shoes supporting her stout frame. Truth be told, she looked a bit like a man. Then again, Crystal's mom had a moustache.

My *yia-yia* was, indeed, strange, and though she didn't adapt to American life entirely, I never really had to worry about her. She occupied her time reading the Bible or watching television that upset her as she didn't understand that the actors who got injured or died were faking it. When she did move, typically to the kitchen to get some chicken baking or potatoes peeled, she hobbled on crutches. But no one ever came into my house; there was no need for it. I didn't have a pool or video game console. The pantry had no Doritos or soda, and kids just don't go to houses that serve *taramasalada* and *dolmades* after school, homes that feature Greek radio blasting instead of cartoons. The last time Crystal was there—inside the house itself—was the previous summer. We'd wandered to the basement after an exhausting bike race in search of popsicles, but when we opened the industrial-sized freezer, a perk my father had brought home from one of his many diner jobs, a full, intact goat head stared back at us. Later, Crystal accused me of trying to scare her on purpose, though I'd argued, pleaded my way back into that friendship that had I known, I wouldn't have screamed just as loud as she did. But now, almost a year later, everything Greek was coming out, spreading like a virus or spider veins throughout the neighborhood—the neighborhood that I'd soon be riding a bus through, searching for a seat, a friend, anyone who had not learned of my Greek weirdness.

One day, when my mother came home from her shift at the diner, she found the kitchen sink overflowing with suds and the tree in the front yard draped with large, white, women's panties and brassieres—a sea of cotton, lingerie lanterns drying in the breeze for the neighbors to snicker and point at. Another time, Helena went for a walk through our neighborhood and began cooking when she returned—an activity that almost never ceased during her stay. Later that night, when she served dinner, a vegetable dish called *horta*, it turned out to be brimming with ingredients she'd found scattered throughout the woods, roadsides, and overgrown fields. *Horti*culture. Weed and grass stew.

As I waited for Crystal, I filed my new cards, the next set of twenty critters I'd never heard of before. The angwantibo, an equatorial African caterpillar hunter, and the kookaburra, a bird that bids the sun goodnight by sounding hysterical laughter, were my latest favorites. It was the first time in my life that trips to the mailbox had become something other than a chore, a walk my parents didn't feel like taking. I had never gotten mail other than birthday cards, but now, at least on Fridays, I was a real resident, a person of importance. I filed away my anole and Siberian tiger, and paused to read the back of the barnacle card. Its catchphrase was "Just one home for a lifetime." I wondered what the Greek word for this was.

Crystal scratched at the screen of my bedroom window, and when I moved the curtain aside, I saw her perched on her bike, her long, brown hair reflecting the sun, one hand over her eyes to shield her from it as she tried to peer in to the darkness of my room. She had long ceased knocking on the front door, and the sight of someone not related to me, the sight of my only real friend, made me genuinely happy. I tried to escape without my cousins, rushing past the laughing adults, making no eye contact, but just as I opened the front door and felt the July heat attack the coolness of my skin, my father said, "Take your cousins with you." Not a request, no "please," just a command. I turned to look at them, their bodies splayed out on the couch like melted plastic, a pair of protozoa or jellyfish. My aunt spoke to them in Greek, and together we went out front. My brother was lucky enough to be napping.

"So whatcha wanna do?" Crystal always spoke first, and she spoke often. If the art of conversation had been left up to me, we'd have spent most days staring or reading. She eyed my circling cousins, probably because they hooted and yawped as they threw small sticks and handfuls of earth at one another, but she didn't look entirely fazed. Her family was large—twenty-two first cousins—so she was no stranger to the antics of ten- and thirteen-year old boys.

George," I pointed. The boys stood there, quiet for a second, then began chasing each other around the yard again. I hoped they'd amuse one another long enough for me and her to disappear into the woods.

"Wanna go down to the creek and look for that monster again?" she asked. Weeks earlier, we'd discovered a creature, we were sure, that had never been photographed by man.

I lowered my voice to a whisper. "Maybe we could ditch them," nodding at the boys, a conspiratorial move they picked up on like bees or dogs sensing fear.

Nick eyed me and, in a taunting singsong that indicated the opposite, said, "*Oh, then tha halasoume tin parea sas.*" Don't worry. We won't spoil your party.

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I'd spent so much time in the woods that, many years later, as a drunk and stoned sixteen-year-old, I could navigate them in the dark, even when chased by cops. At nine (almost ten!), my awareness of the landscapes' nuances was just as seasoned. Crystal and I led following, and we meandered through the trees, their sparseness for the first fifty yards providing partial views of the surrounding homes, though once the path forked and we moved to the right, it might as well have been the Black Forest. The trees, mostly tall, sharp-barked pines and deciduous maples, canopied our bodies, an umbrella of shelter, relief from the summer heat. As a two-hundred acre plot of undeveloped land, The Woods, which went by no other name, were rife with animals that had nowhere else to live in a suburb otherwise booming with industrial growth and construction. Squirrels, rabbits, frogs, salamanders, and insects were the most abundant creatures, and we took pride in finding as many as we could on any given trek.

Though she wasn't as invested in the "schooly stuff" as I was, Crystal's philosophy was empirical, so she liked anything tangible, anything that had real-world context. Much better than slideshows or books, she said. And even my book smarts that had long since deemed me too geeky to be one of the "cool"

kids appealed to her. She'd flip over logs and we'd study the breathing, pulsing microcosms beneath. While I loved the study of entomology, I never touched the bugs, but Crystal had no fear of picking up anything—a spider, a millipede. So while she handled the days' finds, I called out Latin names and classifications I'd long since memorized. The colorful and erratic flight of a *Danaus plexippus*, a Monarch butterfly, was enough to set us running and following, studying and singing, though never capturing or keeping. Mantises and stick bugs were the most coveted and rarely seen, and when I knew that stick bugs are actually called "phasmas" from the Greek word phantom and could grow up to twelve inches long, Crystal was pleased. Once, and only once, while sitting by the creek, a red fox—a *Vulpes vulpes*—approached for a drink of water, its pointed ears darkened at the tips, its tail so puffed, so much larger than its legs, that it looked accidental. It was less than ten feet from us. It may have been the only time Crystal had nothing to say.

The last time we'd seen the monster was a month earlier when we were fooling around by the cement drainage pipe that thrust a steady flow of cold water into the creek. It was the only portion of the snaking stream that was too deep to cross on foot without soaking to the waist, so a makeshift bridge had been erected—from the looks of it some time ago—out of misshapen wooden planks. We were dangling our torsos over the bridge's railing, peering down into the cavernous mouth of the pipe, when a set of gelatinous eyes blinked at us. It was as though we were looking at a close-up photograph, a purposefully microscoped object that was nearly impossible for our brains to process at first. It was blurry and distorted, a blob of malleable flesh with water streaming all around it. But as we stared, pointing at the amorphous monster, fantasizing about the dozens—the hundreds!—of undiscovered inhabitants dwelling in the drainpipe, it disappeared. It was our duty, as biologists of the woods, to find it again.

The monster wasn't there this time, so while Crystal and I threw stones into the rush of water and talked about how

crappy it was that my parents wouldn't let me go see *Stand by Me* with her because it was rated R, the boys wandered off out of sight but not sound. They were never out of sound, whether in my brother's room or the basement or the woods. They were the most audible pair I'd ever met, like twin lemurs who shrieked to announce their dominance.

"They're kinda weird, huh," Crystal noted. "Can you understand them?"

"Most of the time. Sometimes they talk too fast." I rebounded a rock off of a tree and into the stream, its ripples obscured by the current.

"When are they leaving?"

My thoughts exactly. "Three weeks."

"Oh, you find out what bus you're riding?" The switch from Erial Elementary to Charles W. Lewis Middle School was on both our minds. Our fifth grade teacher, Miss Mink (who was in love with Robert Redford), had done a fine job of scaring us before the school year was out. Lots of talk of how small we were going to be next to the eighth graders who we'd have to share buses and hallways with. Class changes. Locker rooms. Peer pressure. It was terrifying.

"42. You?"

"That sucks! I'm on 3."

We lived four streets apart and had walked to school together for four years, but there were enough preteens in my neighborhood to require half a dozen buses for the middle school. I had that movie image of a tiny, awkward girl stepping onto a bus for the first time, knowing no one, the chatter and liveliness silencing as everyone turned to stare and slide over to block any potential seats. Crystal was my reserve, my foolproof plan. Who would sit with the girl who lived in the house with the weird people? Who lived in *that* house.

"That's okay," she continued, never letting the reflective silence set in for too long. "I'm sure we'll have classes together. Hey, where'd the weirdoes go?"

She was right. Even though we hadn't seen them for some time, it was quiet except for the streaming water slapping the rocks and sticks that defined its perimeter. We both looked around, the water smacking beneath us, and in the distance heard the rising of a voice, the

crescendo in a symphony, the pounding of gorilla fists.

"*Na pethanis, kargioli!*" I pictured *Lord of the Flies*, an isolated leader covered in war paint. A move to the unholy.

"What was that? What did he say?" Crystal's eyes widened, and even though she spoke not a lick of Greek, she felt the weight of that cry in her gut and stood at attention, an alarm sounding to, beating against, her instinctual phobias.

I hesitated, only for a moment, the words ringing through the woods and my body, resonating, surely carrying over and through the history of the trees and all the creatures that inhabited the land.

"Run," I whispered. I still couldn't see my cousins, though I could hear their shoes rattling against the ground, the leaves and grass and flowers trampled beneath their approaching gait. I wanted to be a daddy longlegs, to abandon my leg, to leave it shaking and detached from my body as a distraction while I escaped.

Crystal stared at me.

"I'm serious. Run!" I said louder.

At full throttle, at Olympic speed, we plowed through the land, jumping fallen branches and large rocks as we sought the safety of public view, of civilized society. The words echoed in my head as the boys chased us through the woods, running, shouting no specifics. Just shouting.

Na pethanis. A command. A declarative statement. Die. *Kargioli.* I had no definition for it; it simply wasn't in my lexicon, but I knew it was bad. I'd heard it used only once when my father fought with a man outside of the church, red-faced and yelling something about politics or the economy. I remember hearing Ronald Reagan's name. I'd later learn it means motherfucker. Die, motherfucker.

Crystal and I pressed on, not relaxing until our feet made contact with my front lawn, taking solace in knowing there were parents indoors, the lawn itself was home base. Gasping for air, we surveyed the mouth of the woods and saw nothing. Nick and George were nowhere in sight.

"Seriously," Crystal wheezed, "what did he yell?" We were both bent at the waist,

our hands firmly clutching our knees as our heads heaved with want of oxygen. She took out her inhaler and sucked in deeply.

"I'm not sure," I huffed. I couldn't tell her. I just couldn't. Her family's brand of American weird had enabled our friendship to exist, but this kind of Greek would end it all. Hers were quirky. Mine were dangerous.

We were sitting under the lone tree in my yard when the boys emerged, smiling. Nick nonchalantly asked where we'd gone. I told him he was crazy and to leave us alone. He continued smiling, partially toothless and broad, his chin jutting out, his brother standing in his shadow.

"Didn't mean to scare you," he said in Greek, still smiling. An outright lie.

Crystal stared back and forth between us, her posture erect and defensive.

Really, he insisted. *Let's make up.*

"*Filoi,*" he asked as he extended his hand, still smiling. *Friends*?

I knew it had to be a trick. It always is, in every movie with a scene featuring a bully, with a cafeteria of teenagers. Maybe I was just too pessimistic, but Nick had given me no reason to trust him in his stay with us. He might as well have had red-striped markings or a stinger protruding from his tailbone.

Crystal whispered, "What's going on? What's he saying?"

"He said he's sorry and wants to be friends. Didn't mean to scare us."

She answered in a grunt. "Uh-uh."

I agreed. Uh-uh.

Nick watched us discuss his proposition, his wide smile still affixed. I looked back at him and shook my head from side to side.

"*Ohi,*" I said. Just one word: no. We were most certainly not friends.

He shrugged, as if it were no big deal, and really, it wasn't. In three more weeks he'd be back in Greece, surrounded either by equally mean-spirited friends or bullying his lack of them. But for now, he was in America, a land of no consequence.

"Okay," he said. But I didn't believe for one second that anything was okay. He wasn't

the kind of kid who'd let that one off like that. His brother, George, still by his side, turned his back to us so he faced the street, and Nick followed with the same movement. I thought of *Ohi* Day, a holiday I'd learned about and celebrated that was spawned from Greece's refusal to allow axis forces to enter and occupy their land. Greek politicians had supposedly answered the Italians' war ultimatum with a single word: *ohi.* No. Pure defiance in the face of potential danger. And now my cousins' backs signaled the same. He'd said okay, but what he'd meant was no. What he'd meant was war.

Crystal, still entirely perplexed by the events occurring before her, leaned into my shoulder and asked, "What are they doing?"

I didn't know how to answer that. I wasn't sure, though it soon became apparent.

Spinning on his heels, much like Michael Jackson (two of the only words he knew in English), Nick let out another sound I'd never heard before—a morphed bird call and primitive bellow—and threw the product of his experience in the woods at us. A dead squirrel with blood leaking out of its head smacked me in the face, and in a motion of unthinking reaction, I batted it off of me and onto a screaming Crystal. As my hand touched it I could feel the warmth of its body, the coarseness of its fur. My focus shifted from the boys to Crystal, to my only friend who I'd just helped smack in the face with a dead, bloody squirrel. In that moment, all of my efforts to distance myself from the Greeks disappeared; I had accidentally joined my cousins' team. Before that, they were just the jerks who'd been in my house for a while, but after the squirrel, they exemplified what was wrong with me—a girl who'd exposed her best friend to a decapitated goat head, who'd now smacked her with a dead squirrel. Crystal's eyes were watery with tears, and she began simultaneously shrieking, wheezing, and spitting violently at the ground. Blood had gotten in her mouth. I looked down at my hand and saw a fat, red smear across my palm. I swiped my forehead with the back of my wrist and found my face had blood on it, too,

I watched Crystal's fit, I began a torrent of cried apologies, a flood of *sorrysorrysorrysorrysorry* for my betrayal that I couldn't get out fast enough. She continued spitting and wheezing, half gagging at the thought of the squirrel blood thickening in her mouth, on her tongue, and then looked directly into my eyes and spat on my sneakers. She grabbed her bike and tore up the street. The boys congratulated one another with a series of American high-fives.

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For the first time since they'd been with us, there were consequences for my cousins' behavior. My mother was disgusted. My *yia-yia* dragged the boys into the living room by their ears, one in each hand, no crutches necessary, and began yelling so loud and fast that I understood not a word of it. Helena was mortified by her children's behavior, actions that she explained away by citing the absence of their father, the disciplinarian. She was so embarrassed that she went for a long walk, a reaction my mother still recounts with disbelief. And though my father followed tradition and didn't punish another man's children, he removed his belt to threaten them and then called their father. When Pete, who worked for the airline they'd flown in on, answered the call at midnight Greek time, I could hear his anger through the receiver. He immediately recalled his family and cut their trip short by almost three weeks.

Crystal never spoke to me after the incident, and I couldn't blame her. When we'd pass one another in the halls of Charles W. Lewis, she'd avert her eyes or take a sharp turn, even if it meant going in the opposite direction of her class. They'd separated the 6th graders by intelligence, a design that always seemed somewhat fascist to me in retrospect, but as a result, Crystal was in none of my classes, and I was thankful that there was no in-class contact to deal with, no problem in our last names coming so close alphabetically that she'd have no choice but to stare at the back of my head, myself surely feeling the dirty looks. I found myself at the front of the bus, sharing a seat with a new girl named Kristy who had blossomed prematurely

but had raging adolescence pre-
vented her from reaping the
benefits of such development.
We didn't speak for almost
a month, but when we did, I
discovered that she essentially
had no family, and I envied her
that. After school, on most days,
I'd still retreat to the woods,
usually by myself, though some-
times with my brother, in search
of the monster. I wouldn't see
another one until a Friday the
following March when it came
shrink-wrapped on a card, the
word "bullfrog" printed in a
bold block at the top. I stared at
it incredulously for some time,
then quietly filed it between the
nearly extinct buffalo and the
camel spider that screams and
runs to safety after it attacks,
envious that Crystal might
spend the rest of her life believ-
ing that monsters really live in
drainpipes.