XII

The Visitor

I opened the door immediately. The bear-like figure now tilted its head back, lifted its chin, and removed the yellow hood in a ridiculous, self-important gesture. Then it squealed, hysterically:

"My little, fluffy, porcelain doll!" I was embraced aggresively. "Ou, how you've growwwn! Let me look at you. Not so fluffy anymore. Phew—bit smelly—but hormonal, hormonal—am I right?" She winked. "Runs in the family."

I was rapidly absorbing the person in front of me. It was my aunt Dolly who nobody had heard of in the last ten years. She looked much less like how I remembered her. A kind of prune-stuffed, diabetic version of Elizabeth Taylor. She was shorter now, with a thick set of grey-black hair, a blotchy face, a small nose with large pores, and fleshy lips which were blue at the corners. Clearly, she was not in good health. I felt relief in a way, surpassed by an instinct to run. I could not deal with another sensationalist right now—like two lionfish swimming into one another.

"Where's your mother? She hiding upstairs?"

"She's out shopping."

"And the boys?"

"On a school trip."

"That's nice, that's nice." She brushed past me, sprouting her mud drips all over the hallway. Her two bags dropped with a thud, exhaling a damp, woolly, old-fabric breath.

"Nice to see you. Have you—" I paused as she widened her eyes, daring me to continue "—have you come to stay?"

"Yes, why? Aren't I welcome?"

"No, of course—of course! Just that we haven't seen you in a decade." I turned and started towards the kitchen, cursing inside.

"Oh well, you know me—hate to impose."

"Yes, yes. Some tea?" I said, opening the cupboards. "We've got jasmine, mint, raspberry?"

"Cyanide?"

"Huh?"

She laughed a loud, sparkly, evil stepmother laugh. "I'll have some champagne, thank you," and she sat down at the dining table.

There is nothing like the crazed, paralyzed rage toward an uninvited guest. You must act against your every instinct. Most people have the small civility to warn you, call ahead, give you the chance to concoct some excuse. But not Dolly. She moved through the world with the entitled freedom of some fat queen. I was wondering why, out of all the God-given days, she had surfaced at this moment. She had probably run out of money.

I had seen her a handful of times in my childhood—enough to remember the type. She was the sort of person who could walk into a room and make you want to hide behind the furniture. There was a kind of uncontained bigness about her—like tentacles wrapping around you—which wasn't always charmless. She had been a great, big-eyed beauty, though she'd evolved into something rather large over the years which better matched her personality. Her name was indeed very misleading. It should have been Gertrude. She had a taste for drama and couture which I admired in her. I never understood how she afforded her exquisite clothes. She dressed like some retired French

medium who'd married a mobster out East. Turbans, oversized earrings, chunky gold bracelets, oversized pants.

Her relationship with my mother had been a long-standing war. Basically, eighteen years in close quarters convinced them both to leave the country. Dolly had gone off to Greece to dance, and my mother married in New York, and they didn't speak to each other for a very long time. At times, my mother was convinced she was dead. With a touching show of regret, she'd beg the Lord to track her down. And the Lord would answer and Dolly would call for Christmas or Easter, which oddly enough, would cure all of my mother's regrets and restore her usual disdain.

For years she existed in my mind as a sort of drifting ectoplasm, a kind of exotic spirit animal of family lore. I only met her in the flesh when my grandmother died. At the funeral, there was an awful, whispered dispute between her and my mother about their inheritence. They were standing on opposite sides of the casket, and Dolly, trying to speak over my mother, leaned her weight on top of it. The table underneath was fragile, so it snapped, so that whatever was in there nearly fell out. I thought my head might burst from trying to contain myself as my mother made the whole thing worse by moaning in a frail way: "OH GOOD GOD, WHAT IS THIS, WHAT IS THIS GOD?!" And then the coffin was lowered to the ground, with my mother paler than the corpse and Dolly muttering something in a corner. And that was my first image of her.

After that my mother renounced her side of the inheritance and gave Dolly everything. She went back to Greece—a somewhat rich woman—and since then I only saw her twice.

"So—" I said, handing her the flute and sitting down at the table "—to what do we owe the occasion?"

"What do you mean? I am your *aunt,* you know. Your mother might have hidden you from me, but we *are* family."

I smiled unpersuasively. "Of course. Blood's thicker than water, right?"

"I wholeheartedly agree." She gulped three big gulps of champagne. "Have you, um, got anything to eat? I'm ravenous. Long journey."

"Of course!" I said, smiling. "Sorry—I didn't realise you were hungry." I rose and fetched the pot of Bolognese from the fridge. I jabbed at it with a fork, turned on the hob, fought an urge to spit in it, and watched it simmer.

"Anyway, tell me about you, my little angel. You look perfectly sordid."

"Thanks," I said turning to face her, so that my back was now against the stove. The small kitchenette opened directly into the dining room, with the table set close to the sliding doors.

"Are you ill?"

"I think." Before I had to explain the condition of me, I said quickly: "How's Greece?"

"Pff, don't start with that, please. Bloody Hell knows about Greece. It's as filthy and pathetic as a dying dog." She picked up her glass, found it empty and looked at me expectantly. I refilled it without comment.

"You were in Athens, right?" I said.

"For a time. You know, your first days of life were in my flat in Excarhia. Your mother would leave you with me and disappear, and I'd just . . . look at you for hours. You were so terribly curious, with those enormous eyes of yours, you'd stare at everything, mesmerized, and you never cried, oh no, you were such an odd little baby, just looked around, fascinated. I was scared to even touch you—this strange new living toy that kept wriggling and making little noises."

"I've never been to Athens."

"Well, you haven't missed much. Every Greek with half a brain has buggered off to London or Berlin. Those who stay are either too poor to leave, or too old to care. Stinking old place."

"I take it you don't like it too much," I said, switching the flame off. I tipped the pasta onto a plate and set it before her with exaggerated courtesy.

"Oh, thank you, thank you! I mean—" she said between enthusiastic gulps "—in the nineties you saw swedish supermodels everywhere. Topless, tanned to a roast. Mmm, this is really good. Delicious. Listen. Greece—Greece is lovelier as an idea. Imagined. Not seen. Nothing left to see. I mean, when I got there—" she said with her mouth full "—whole town smelled of oranges. Now you've got fish carts, souvlaki carts, baklava carts, damn carts are everywhere. They just can't stop eating and drinking! Maybe if they did, they'd have time to fix the bloody country. But listen to me talk, look at me—I've gotten as fat as a pork chop on Christmas!" She laughed a sudden, volcanic laugh—high-pitched, like an opera singer hitting a note, filling the room with an infectious sparkle. I started liking her a bit. "Thessaloniki's got more soul. I moved there for this fitness trainer. Muscles like melons, face like a baby. Used to train Ana Visi. You know Ana Visi? Well, she's a huge star there. Anyway, left me for an old hag in shipping."

"I'm so sorry."

She waved her hand cooly. "Best thing really. Met Andreas soon after. In Mykonos. Christ, you should've seen Mykonos then. Nothing like the Balkan themepark it's become. I mean, it was just so cosmpolitan! Full of artists living there since the seventies. People with original lives, you know. Have you been?"

"To Mykonos?" I nodded.

"My God, where has it all gone? All those mornings when they'd open the shutters and people would cheer like we'd just survived the end of the world? And then you blink, and suddenly your face is sliding off. But, you know, at least I lived a real life. Most people live like a washing machine. I can't think how your mother does it. It's a horrible view. Still amazes me that I resisted it—tempting for a woman, of course—but to be free from all those, all those invisible wounds one collects from years of compromise and inhibited crime? Ha! It's how people get cancer!"

"If you think my mother—"

"The problem with your mother's that, basically, she's got one huge broomstick up her cunt. It's what keeps her so put together like that."

I sipped slowly on my tea, letting the words hang, watching her grin unfurling, her fingers tracing the foot of the glass. She leaned back, kicked off a slipper, and drummed her nails on the table. Then she threw her head back, laughing wildly.

"Ah, she should've come with me to Mykonos. Oh, you should've seen it," she said, wiggling forward in her seat. "And Pierro! Ooo! Pierrou mou! Den tha se xehaso pote!" Another sparkling, infectious laugh. "There was this bar tucked away in an alley—you'd miss it if you didn't know about it. The most exquisite music. Jazz, old blues, Édith Piaf, tragic Greek ballads that people'd start hugging each other and sob like their mother had died. Complete strangers! And the owner was completely mad! Pierro, I mean—though God knows what his real name was. And he'd show up in these ridiculous costumes—he had all these little wigs and hats, you should've seen him—greeting people at the door as if they were foreign dignitaries or something! Ha! Had this huuuge crush on Jackie. Claimed he'd had an affair with her. And you know, he could've, I mean I wouldn't be surprised, in the eighties she was a regular on the island. And he was one of those men—I swear—

could corrupt even a nunnery. Yep. Yep," she said with a head shake. "Power of the P."

My eyebrows shot up, then she added:

"Personality, dear!" and laughed another one of her laughs, then sighed a long, nostalgic sigh, and for a moment I saw the innocence in her eyes which were red on the lashline and puffy. I was hypnotised. Suddenly, this strange, fat woman started looking much more beautiful.

"How do you know all these things?" I asked.

"I worked the bar."

"I thought you were a dancer."

"Left the Cabaret in Athens. Too tiring. And the money was shit."

"And what happened to And—"

"Andreas?"

"Mhm."

"Oh, that ended a long time ago."

"Why?"

"Well . . . mutual cruelty, as I like to call it." She set her fork down abruptly, her eyes scanning the room with a sort of poised, reflective look. "The truth is I just loved him too much. And he wasn't even a handsome man, you know. But he knew how to make a woman feel *seen*. Make her feel like she was Queen of Spain. And all I could see when I looked at him was myself, really."

"And what's wrong with that?"

"Well, the trouble was that he'd constructed this fantasy around you and it was bloody hard to live up to. And then you'd do something perfectly human like forget a bathing suit at the hotel, and this terrible row would start. Like sparring, but with kitchen pots."

"Sounds very passionate."

"Passionate? Oh yes, it was, but you can't make a living with passion. It's poisonous! There's cruelty in passion—the stripping away of all those threads of affection and communication, all those necessary comforts that bind a human being to another. All you want to do is use them, use them up, slurp em up like a French75! Even the last drop, suck the living life out of them until they're deflated, dehydrated, dead and good for nothing." I smiled. "And your heart becomes insensitive—and naturally, in time, you become a bit inhuman—it's inevitable, you gain a taste for devouring. You forget what real love feels like if you're not constantly shoving the living devil in and out, in and out of each other." Her features shifted through several unspoken thoughts. She frowned slightly, parted her lips to the side, then stretched her neck back and stroked it, before affirming conclusively: "Ah, I wish I would've followed my calling."

"What's that?"

"Become a whore."

"Oh."

"Not all whores are created equal. It takes a kind of discipline. Theatre, fashion, psychology. The money I'd have made. Heck, I could've married a billionaire. I was just so principled, so shy. But never mind my problems darling, how are you?"

With a kind of charged, disbelieving sigh I said: "I'm good, I'm good."

"University?"

"Architecture."

"Do you like it?"

"No."

"How come?"

"It's too material. Not real art."

"You'll like it when you start making money. Any idea when your mother is coming?"

"No, but she should be here any minute. Why?"

"Just have some business with her."

"Dolly," I said, finally mustering the courage. "Do you remember your first love?"

"My first love?" I nodded. "My first love—hmm—why do you ask?"

"Well, isn't our first love most important?"

"Don't know actually. I suppose it depends on the meaning we give it."

"What good is love without a meaning?"

"Eh, people love what they're equipped to. Most just love a pretty face. Or a pretty cock. Ha!"

I felt that treacherous little red tide climbing in my cheeks. She pressed her lips together, eyes squeezing in thought: "My first love—" and she thought for a while, before opening them wide with light: "Oh! But of course! Of course! Why it was ol' Tibi!"

"Tibi?! Tibi as in . . . grandma's con-cu-bine?" My grandaprents had split when my mother and aunt were sixteen.

"Mhm."

"I don't understand."

"Oh, yes. Oh, what a sweet old man he was. He used to bring me icecream from the corner shop. Every day. Hoist me on his knee as I'd eat it. Who else can say they ate icecream everyday back then? No one. It was a luxury. Raspberry ripple, I remember, with those pink little veins melting over the cone." She made cute little flowing gestures with her fingers. "He really loved me, you know. My parents of course had no real interest in me. They were too preocuppied with your mother. Your mother absorbed all available sunlight. I mean, Christ, they named her after a queen, and me after some fucking rag doll. Ha! I think they hardly even saw me. But uncle Tibi saw me. And I—well I suppose I—the thing is I don't think any other man has looked at me, or even touched me the way he did. No, no, no—not like that. Gosh, why do people have to sexualise everything? It was all so pure and childish, barely barely touching, like the swoosh of a breeze, and he only did it when it was very very dark, like he wasn't even there. And we used to talk for hours, you know, about everything—birds, clouds, puberty—as if we were the same age. And I could only think of him for a very long time, even before I met Andreas, I couldn't get him out my mind. Then, one day, I came home and he was gone. Your grandmother was sitting in her room, crying, with a picture on her lap, and when she saw me, she slammed the door in my face. She was very angry."

"Have you spoken to a psychologist about this?" I asked, extremely concerned.

"About what?! About the only soul who ever showed me a scrap of gentleness? Don't be silly. Light shines in odd places."

For a second, she looked like she was drifting elsewhere, smiling with an openness that his memory seemed to awaken. No doubt, she was under a kind of self-preserving spell. She had probably spun it around herself to shield her from a dangerous truth. There are truths you don't come back from. The mind, with its genius for survival, finds ways to protect you from them. I was thinking all of this, not without compassion, when my phone began shivering in my pocket.

"What about you?" said my aunt. "Met your first love, little doll?"

I let out some frail, unshaped sound. For a few seconds I did not move, nor breathe. Then, with great caution—how one might pick up a grenade—I removed the phone from my pocket. There was such an unbearable anticipation in the moment that I wished to live inside it forever. I couldn't bear to look at the screen. The thought of seeing any name instead of his would terminate me. Then, with a sort of self-commanding will, I forced myself to look. And there it was—the loveliest number in the known universe—a mirrored pattern of 3's and

4's glowing on the screen like a message in the stars. A relief so pure and physical swept through me that I thought I might orgasm. In a crazed sort of trance, I got up and began clearing the table, wiping breadcrumbs—the urge to move and do something was unbearable—only that there weren't any breadcrumbs, because of course there was no bread.

"Though I doubt you'll love anybody in your life the way you did your parents. At least, I'd certainly hope not!" She sipped the last champagne. "Otherwise, you're doomed."

Her tone carried an allusive humor that produced in me a sort of instant self-consciousness, so that I quickly cleared the plates and sat back down.

"M—my parents?," I said.

She nodded sadly, theatrically. "Such blind devotion. Breaks my heart even to remember it. Oh, you were such a painfully sweet thing."

"What are you on about?" I said, annoyed.

"You don't remember? Oh, you had this adorable little ritual you did when Maia and I would come visit. You'd always get dressed up in the dresses we bought you and ask: *Dolly, do you think my mummy and daddy would like this?* Gosh, you were fascinated with them, you'd dream of them holding you, running towards their car in the sunlight. You had this dream on and on for a while, and you'd describe it as if you were in heaven and they were waiting for you. And you'd ask me to tell you stories of them—hell, you used to *pray* to them! Your grandmother had those pictures of them on the wall—they looked like dictators, it was so funny—and every time you'd hear a plane in the sky you'd look at them and say: *Airplane, airplane, take me on a flight today, take me to my mum and dad, because I want to meet them.* Oh, you were a heartbreakingly sweet thing."

As she spoke, the space around me was folding inward on itself, tumbling neatly towards the center, until it swallowed its corners like an origami swan, becoming a small, dark pocket of memory. And now I was standing in another room, with a pink-quilted bed, a Victorian cabinet, and red persians covering the floorboards.

It was the room of my babyhood. The back part of my grandparents' house, where my parents left me when they left for New York. I could picture it so clearly now, as if it was right there in front of me. Again, that strange shift of perception, as if the particles in the air had very subtly rearranged themselves. I had almost fogotten O and his message. I was just about to ask what stories I wanted to hear about my parents, but just then the door flew open with such force that I jumped in my chair and screamed, and my aunt, rising, exclaimed full of pomp, as if she'd been waiting for this moment all night:

"BEGONE, DEVIL!"

"What are you on about?" my mother's voice said.

"Oh. It's you."

"Of course it's me. Who else could it be?!"

Her arms were looped with grocery bags, shopping bags, chemist bags—a sort of Michelin man image—and she carried them into the kitchen. I rushed to help her. My aunt moved toward her chiar but remained standing in a new sort of official position, resting her hand on its back. My mother washed her hands, opened the fridge, poured herself a glass of water and drank it. Then, after a satisfied breath, turned toward her sister with an awful, superior calm I had never seen in her before. She did not look overly surprised to see her.

"Well, I see you've eaten all your money. Quite literally, in fact. I suppose that's why you're here."

"Nice to see you too."

"What do you want? I don't imagine you're here to see me."

"What do you know about our mother?"

My mother gave a sort of sigh of irritation. "What do you mean?", she said while organising the fridge. "Obviously, no more than you do. Not unless she's risen from the grave and decided to start a coffee shop or something."

While they spoke, I busied myself with the bags, setting out kiwis and pineapples and a small mountain of oranges.

"I've been dreaming about her. She's haunting me."

"Well at least there's some conscience left in you to haunt."

"Do you know if she did magic?"

"What?" I said, dropping the pineapple.

"Helen, be careful." Then toward my aunt: "You've gone completely dotty now, haven't you?"

"I've been thinking . . ." said my aunt, now pacing around the chair.

"Helen, give your aunt and I some privacy, will you?"

"She had the vocation for it. She read the books, she dealt the cards, coffee reading—everything."

"And?! So did everybody else back then," said my mother. "It was a distraction, a hobby, a way to kill time!"

"Dolly, what are you saying?" I jammed the oranges into the basket and went and sat at the table, eyes big as quarters.

"Helen, please!"

"You must know something, Regina. You were close."

"I don't know anything! We weren't close! What are you talking about?!"

"Tell me, Regina. I know you know."

"Are you off your meds?!"

"You must know. You must!"

"Know what, Dolly?!" I said, exasperated, waiting.

"She was a witch, wasn't she?!"

"What?!" I shouted.

"You've *got* to be kidding me!"

"She was, wasn't she?!"

"Oh, for the love of God!"

"She was a witch! Ha! I knew it! She was a witch! She was a witch! I knew it!"