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Marlena's Mustache

So far, Marlena's days had been pale and uneventful, no different at all from an existence generally devoid of color or incident. The men in Thessaloniki barely glanced at her; yet she sometimes saw herself as almost pretty, although a mustache that she only seldom had removed cast a half-moon shadow on the lower half of her face. She usually liked the prickly feeling when she stroked the skin with her finger, lost in thought, hair piled atop her head, at home, eating by herself. Always just eating: feta, feta crumbs in every variation, feta wrapped in puff pastry, crumbled over watermelon, feta with souvlaki and gyros, melted on moussaka, on eggplant, or just simply feta in thick slices from the refrigerator, broken into small pieces with her fingers and stuffed into her mouth. Sometimes she imagined that she lived in a large, smooth feta cheese. Then she suddenly didn't like the prickly feeling on her upper lip anymore; it turned into disgust, making her look even a bit more like a misunderstood artist with a twirly mustache.

Marlena, whose intellect at best let her think in clichés or read, beneath the olive tree behind the house at dusk (when else?), the love poems of the ancient poet Sappho, whose fragmentary lines she barely understood but that echoed miraculously within her—*and these towels of scented purple Mnasis has sent to thee from Phocaea*—Marlena's birthday was today. Thirty-three. Timidly, she admitted this number that was so much more than a number, standing there before her like an abandoned coffee cup with a few drowned dreams floating sadly inside. Today something finally needs to happen, she thought brusquely on her way to the office.

She enjoyed her morning walk; now, too, in the fall. At 7:30, Thessaloniki—this city of furrowed farms, the city of the Argonauts and the honey sacrifice, as her history teacher once explained to her, whatever he meant by it—lay there darkly and Marlena's sweater felt clammy from the mist, unpleasantly damp, also because of her wet armpits. She had to get another deodorant. Which one had Zoula recommended? Yes, that's right, one of those nice organic ones from Korres that you could buy in the pharmacy next to Besas the dentist on Tsimiski Street. She was just passing by the convent wall, actually just a simple low brick wall with a decorative iron gate. Was Angelos already there? Angelos: that was the name she had given to the tall monk with the especially dark beard. Sometimes she saw him in the mornings when he fed the peacocks. With a sweeping gesture, he tossed seeds from a tin pail swinging from his arm. In the stillness, you could hear the scratching sounds of his fingernails on the tin and the crackling steps of the large birds. Marlena slowed her step and sidled with feline slowness past the gate,

hoping that Angelos would cast his glance at her profile from behind his thick locks. Her father had called her face Hellenic; her good father, Christodoulos Paroklos, who had awkwardly danced the *sirtáki* in the living room with his chin thrust forward, and, because he had closed his eyes—that's how Anthony Quinn had done it, child, the only Greek who had ever won an Oscar—bumped into the dining table. Indeed, Marlena's nose protruded, sharp and Greek, from her profile, and her dark curls framed, cap-like, her olive-yellow features of which her eyes, however, were a bit too deep in their sockets for her taste.

On some days, the monk looked up briefly, perplexed by her deliberately slow step. And smiled. Or did she imagine that? Surely not. Early this morning, however, the cloister's front courtyard was as good as empty. There were a few scattered seeds here and there; she was too late. Instead, a couple walked towards her. Giggling about something, they stumbled arm-in-arm into a building entryway. The woman, whose cooing laughter didn't seem rehearsed, wore a corset-like black dress; she had heavy, swinging hair, powdery perfume—Marlena loved the word powdery. She called the vague impressions that reflected her longing powdery: sleekness and dryness, vastness and brightness. It was a longing that father had never understood and that counteracted her occasional subtleties with cognitive weakness and platitudes. Leave the contradictions be, child, he had always exclaimed when he was at his rope's end or when what he had seen or heard escaped his already meager analytical powers. And then he pounded the table with the palm of his hand.

The man who pulled the powder woman into the entryway looked like the singer Vasilis Konstandinidis, mocking, new, in smooth clothes. What was it like to sit with such a man over wine and produce from the refrigerator cocktail nibbles, which Marlena knew from the recipe columns of women's magazines and that she always imagined as fluorescently soft; to hear the tinkling of expensive china when she served scampi, smoked trout, and Swedish cranberry dip? The soft balm of the moment observed as if by a thief—balm, her father the Cretan olive picker's favorite word—clashed with Marlena's sour deodorant smell that rose from her always damp armpits, smelled even now in the fresh morning air; she even *felt* the smell of ironed sweat.

The other, cheesy smell of Zoula's bougatsa shook her from her daydreams. No, bougatsa, that greasy stuff, was not something she could allow herself now. But perhaps a coffee. Black coffee, of course, aids digestion. And even better, she was on the path to a new, better life and at the end of this path, she would not only dissolve the eternal clumps of feta cheese in her stomach but Angelos would wait for her in black, front-buttoned silk pyjamas. Black—she couldn't imagine him in any other color. At most,

royal blue; against this rich peacock hue his pale naked skin would stand out like an opal.

It was a shame that the fat Zoula wasn't there today—even fatter than I am, Marlana rejoiced inwardly whenever she saw the small doughy woman. She so would have liked to have told her about her date for this evening, her birthday date, and to divine the softly sighing envy behind the thick-framed glasses of the bougatsa baker. Marlana left the bakery and walked along the still-empty Tsimiski street. In the shining display windows, her complexion reflected back yellow next to the beige of her clothes. Anxious, she slowed down her pace. She should have skipped the detour; she couldn't afford anything here. Hectically, she crossed Paleon-Patron-Germanou Street, turned into the Egnatia Street and walked, stimulated by the coffee, with little hopping movements towards the university building.

When she went through the swinging doors of the administrative section and turned into the hallway, carpeted in mustard-green, where her office was, she was overcome with boredom like a winter afternoon alone at home. No, stop, over there at the coffemaker was Nikos Pitzianis. Nikos, the too-thin civil servant with the receding hairline and the long nostrils from which obtrusive drops of water hung in the winter, that's how big they were. But today, on the morning of her birthday, she observed his not very large frame with an expectant pounding in her chest and his long legs with the knobby knees suddenly had something keenly attractive. Yesterday, after the afternoon meeting, he had asked her with some shy hemming and hawing whether she might not go out with him tomorrow. Naturally, he didn't know that it was her birthday; she didn't go around talking about her age. So she was even happier to accept the invitation. Tomorrow, then; well, he can hardly wait, she rejoiced inwardly. What would it be like to kiss him, she wondered while biting into her bougatsa. Maybe his nose would leave a wet print on her cheek. She gleefully puckered her lips. She had seen a friend do this every time she discovered a man who interested her, forming a pout like a carp and tautening her chest and back with a clumsy jerk.

The morning passed uneventfully. Marlana registered a few new students, copied the dean's expense claims, instructed a pimply assistant to get books from the library. At lunch, she met her colleague Kallisti in the cafeteria. She listened to the moaning of the younger, thinner, and, for her complexion, too-blond secretary over her mushy peas and feta, her endless whining about her affair with the vice rector, the threatening messages from his wife at her work mail address, her jealous husband with the saggy pants, good God, why on earth no belt, the butt crack, everyone laughed at him... Marlana's mind began to wander,

far from the green plastic table, the yellowed trays, Kallistis' dramatic face, to Angelos' peacock pyjamas.... Well, tonight would surpass her fantasies. After work, she descended the steps to the museum of ancient art. The sun was low over the water and the ocean lay calmly as a shiny shard. It was almost as warm as in August. How she loved the summer, the chirping of crickets, the heat, the beach, it all reminded her of the ancient stories of the Greeks, of conquests, wars, and battles. Stories that she had learned about as a child, chapter-by-chapter of *The Odyssey*, at her father's urging. Christodoulos had given her the thick, red-bound book even though he knew the contents only as sententious quotes from state TV. At every layer of society, it was a matter of good form to have read *The Odyssey*. People were proud of Homer like they were proud of the Acropolis, Zeus, and feta cheese. But almost nobody made it to the end. When Marlena got to the part about the Cyclops, she stopped from fear and did not want to pick up the book again, but her father had forced her to keep reading. In the museum, she remained standing, as always, in front of the golden wreath with blossoms of gold leaf so finely woven that the most delicately growing flowers in nature must seem artless in comparison. Who wore it? In the bright aspect of the wreath, there was the hint of a crystalline laugh—the metaphor, which was daring for Marlena, momentarily confused her—and the quick, auspicious loosening of heavy hair. *Like a quince ... a dark hyacinth stain on the ground.*

She turned quickly and left. Outside, she strolled along the harbor promenade and bought herself an ice cream that ran down her arm to her elbow in sticky, orange drips. Suddenly, she felt nauseous from the sweet flavor and her getup, the sugary-orange rivulets on her skin clashed with the beige of her rolled-up jacket sleeves, reminded her that she must wax her mustache before her rendezvous. Marlena again smelled her armpit sweat, mixed with detergent. Like a badly dressed little boy who smells like his mother, she thought contemptuously; she threw the ice cream in the nearest trashcan and hectically hailed a taxi, but none stopped. A small, old woman with a screaming red shopping bag stood at the edge of the street in front of her. Her senile clothes were the same color as the trashcan in which the orange ice cream continued to melt and the look that the old lady gave Marlena seemed like a gall-colored, evil omen. She stood bending over like a hawk, with thorny bushels of hair in her ears. Finally, a taxi stopped, Marlena pushed in front, flung the door open, and plopped down heavily in the back seat.

When she got home, it was still hot and the crickets chirped into the dusky apartment. Happily, Marlena made herself a small gin and lime—soon, soon she would lie in Nikos' arms, and... She turned away from her thoughts, giggling. But what

should she wear? Quietly, humming along with Haris Alexios' song "Witch," she shimmied out of her grey-beige pants and scrutinized the red seam marks on her thighs. What did it matter? She picked a pink babydoll. Beneath the polyester, you could slightly see her underwear. Who cared, it would be dark soon anyway.

In the Kitchen Bar harbor restaurant, she just managed to get the last table for two. The waitress had simply replied with a smiling no to her assured query about a reservation under the name "Nikos Flores." Now she sat wedged between four noisy young men—typically Greek with their loud banter, their pudgy bellies beneath their tight shirts and ashen faces—and a couple that expectantly toasted one another with champagne, laughing drily and furtively. The woman's rosy cheeks, her perfectly waxed eyebrows, the glittering diamond on her finger stung Marlena.

At least she sat where she had a view of the ocean. Nikos would sit across from her. The best thing for those who love is to sit across from one another, so it says in Homer, or something like that. The night's light took the olive tinge from Marlena's complexion and made her eyes twinkle. Full of anticipation, she ordered a cocktail—there was Negroni in the menu, it sounded chic—and she settled herself into the thick pillows of the bench. Niko was already 10 minutes late. Well, at least she could greet him slightly tipsy. She nibbled on a cracker and glanced at the couple's dishes next to her: shiny black mussels, sardines, reddish scampi—she would also order that.

By now, a half hour had passed. Where could Nikos be? He must not be able to find a parking spot. After 45 minutes, Marlena became restless. She would have liked to fill the time with the elegant gesture of smoking a cigarette but she was afraid that the cigarette, in combination with the shadow around her mouth, could seem unfeminine. There! In the distance, a delicate male figure approached the restaurant. Well, finally. Yet as he got closer, it became clear that "he" was a young woman in a baggy shirt. How degrading. With an angry snort, she thought about Nikos' stick legs, his thick nose with the huge nostrils. Tomorrow, she would meet him at work and have to pretend that nothing had happened, place yellow-spotted paper on his desk and watch how his foolish, frizzy-haired head bent over it and his claw-like hands slowly, endlessly slowly signed the bottom of the letters. She kicked back the cocktail and ordered a new one. After the fourth one, she grew dizzy and hungry. She had been sitting here for over two hours, the men next to her bellowed louder and louder, the couple had disappeared arm-in-arm and left the table to an older gentleman. Finally, he bent towards her

and, first, lewdly ogled her cleavage and then smiled stupidly at her nose: “Well, Mytia, wanna head out with me?” Time to go.

At home, Marlena ordered a pizza with loukanika from Dominos. The crust was thick with cheese and when she ate, some oil dripped onto her dress. Outside, on the long, narrow balcony, her laundry had been hanging to dry since this morning and from the darkness, the smell of soap wafted towards her on the breeze. The same soap her grandmother had used to do the laundry, her beloved grandmother whose garden she so missed. Clotheslines and tomato vines in the midday heat. Then, Marlena’s skin was always sticky from salt water. At noon, she had watched Baywatch in the shady living room, eaten cream torte with apricots while doing gymnastics so she would look like Pamela Anderson, at least around the legs. Yes, and in those summers she had actually felt a bit like that, relaxed, tan, and muscular.

Maybe he would still call. But who, actually? Nikos, Mr. Skinny Legs? Angelos? Yes, Angelos... He would fly in a flurry to her with his peacocks, break through the glass and carry her off like Dionysus once did with Ariadne, who had been abandoned on the Island of Naxos by Theseus. Marlena’s stomach hurt; she stood up and went into the bathroom to wash the cheese taste out of her mouth. In the wan neon light, her mirror image stared back at her, pale, with a shiny greasy mouth. Was she not also desirable like the laughing, fragrant woman this morning? Like the bride with the flower wreath of gold? Yes, of course ... no, no, a voice inside her screamed, you are ugly, fat, clumsy. A dry sob made its way through her throat, it sounded like a burp. And yet ... did she not also deserve a god that would save her from her unfortunate situation, from her unhappy twilight sleep? Her sobbing became a croaking and then a deep howl.

She sank onto the floor and pressed her forehead against the cool tiles. But tomorrow, when the sun rose again, right? Then everything would be different, everything new. Tomorrow... *a bridegroom will come, greater than Ares ... The eyes of his bride softer even than honey ...* Outside, night’s soundtrack passed by, glasses shattering somewhere, the sound of mopeds, women’s laughter, bellowing youth, dog-barking. She raised her head and let it crack onto the tiles with a jerk, tasted blood in her mouth that dripped from her nose. Her damn beak. Suddenly, the cellphone vibrated on the table. The ring-tone that Marlena assigned only to special contacts sounded shrilly.