

from *Sophrosyne* by Marianne Apostolides

Because I looked at you in the open space. Not the image in the mirror, but you: your body. Sophrosyne. Your long hair, your hips and back. Because your muscles were strong. Two columns of muscle curving toward the spine. And your shoulders, rounded, where I'd placed my palm while you told me a story. That story of you as a girl and your voice, that vibration, your hand like a wave that moved the sea. Because you were strong like your father, you said. You, your father, and he was strong from his walks on the mountain. Those long walks, philosophical contemplations which served his wandering disposition. Because I inherited your father's body, you said.

And you turned toward me, your child alone on the couch. You turned, slow, though you timed it just right so your skirt swirled around your thighs. And the inner lining flashed with gold.

"Okay, Aleksandros," you said. "It's time for bed." And you looked at me, your little boy. Small, with a book on his lap. And I looked at you, my mother. Sophrosyne in costume, the dancer. "Are you ready, my love?" And you reached toward me and led me to my tiny room. Because that night, like every night, you tucked me in bed. Vigorous, meticulous, because that's how I liked it. How I asked, at the beginning, when I was little. Four or five years old, I guess. Because that's when you first started leaving me, at night, to go to work. And you stretched the sheets around my body. And you tucked them tight like a silk cocoon.

"I'll be home at the usual time," you repeated.

And then you ensured that I had my 'provisions': three books, one glass of water, and the phone placed on the nightstand beside me, emergency numbers written in

indelible ink. And you sat at the edge of my bed, in your costume, and you placed your hand on my chest. Because you leaned forward to kiss me, always. Always, before you left me. Because this was our ritual: you on my bed, and me, and your kiss, and your hand was on my chest as I breathed. And your eyes were always closed.

“I love you, Aleksandros. More than life, I love you.”

And then you stood to go. To lock the door, to go to work, to leave me alone in our tiny apartment.

“Me too,” I said. Always. Because this was our ritual. “Me too,” I would say, but only after the door clicked shut.

And I wonder whether you ever imagined me there. Alone in the bed, your little boy while you were at work. A boy who gripped his book and tried, so hard, to focus on that made-up world. To focus, hard, so it took me in. The words surrounding, becoming a forest, a darkness that held me. Protected me in its wild nature, because this I could understand. If I focused my mind, if I felt my full imagination, I could try to understand the world inside the book. Because you needed me to be strong. And I could, mama: I could be strong, for you, your little boy alone in bed, gripping the book in my hands.

And I wonder: did you imagine me there? In bed, alone, while you were at work? Because I imagined you.

I love you, Aleksandros. More than life itself.

And it’s getting late. The sky has turned a deep blue, like a fresh bruise, and the trees are fully black. An inky black, and hundreds of branches are dark against the bruised and beautiful sky. Because I think about that now. About you, and us, and those moments, and why. And your body on the precipice, and mine on the ground. And your breath, your voice, and the taste in my mouth. Because I think I’ve found it. Just now, just here, as I lie in the dirt: I think I’ve named my question. And I wish I could tell you.

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