TWICE THE INNOCENT

Athens, May 2011. In the midst of the financial crisis, a young journalist is assigned to write a story about the children of Greek political refugees, who were born in Tashkent, in faraway Uzbekistan, and repatriated alongside their parents after 1974, when the latter were finally permitted to return to Greece. The 27-year-old reporter knows next to nothing about the Greek civil war, and nothing at all about the fortunes of the tens of thousands of Greek communists who, following their defeat, found themselves stranded in Central Asia, in what was at the time a Soviet democracy, denounced and forgotten by their motherland. There are too many unanswered questions for these children, born and raised in a city, and a country, not of their choosing, yet one in which they were educated, formed their first friendships, fell in love for the first time, always with a single dream, a single purpose in mind: to join their parents in their future return voyage to Greece. Which country do they think of as home? Where do they feel they belong: the country they grew up in or the country their parents left behind? And what did they find waiting for them, when they were finally able to make that journey and settle in the motherland, in Greece?

58-year old Veronica K. will receive the young journalist's first phone call one bright May morning while preparing breakfast for her bedridden father, an elderly World War II Partisan veteran. Veronica came to Greece from Tashkent in 1989, shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union, accompanying her demanding, authoritarian father, with whom she's always shared an extremely co-dependent relationship. She was already 36 years old: young enough to start a new life, not young enough to forget about her old one. Young enough to leave her own birthplace behind, not young enough to easily adapt to her father's. Boarding the train that will take her from Tashkent to Moscow, and from there to Greece, listening to its engine chugging, a sound that rips into her, filling her with panic and dread, she will mentally wrap herself in a cocoon, freezing her emotions, putting away her old life, shielding herself from the passage of time, the tyranny of memory, and her guilt over the dissolution of her relationship with the love of her life, Iosif B. The journalist's phone call, her insistence that they meet, that Veronica talk to her about her life, then and now, 22 years after her arrival in Athens, will provoke an unexpected reaction from Veronica, one that will progress quickly from agitation to panic and finally to anger. 'What does she want from me?' she'll wonder after the first phone call, which will be shortly followed by a second, then a third, always with the same infuriating insistence that she break her silence. 'I entered my cocoon to survive, to save myself from remembering. If I start remembering now…'

In between the journalist's phone calls, Veronica continues in the same daily routine that has defined the past three years, since the death of her beloved stepmother, her father's second wife, the Russian Masha: taking care of her sick but still demanding father, cooking for him, bathing him, dressing him, helping him out of bed and into the easy chair next to it, where he spends most of his day. So afraid is she that something may happen to him that she long ago ceased leaving the house unless absolutely necessary. This 90-year-old man, once upon a time a legend in the eyes of his comrades, a university-educated bourgeois who gave it all up to join the Greek Resistance and went on to fight in the civil war, is for his only daughter her sole link between her first and second lives. Particularly her second life, since she had never found a sense of belonging in Greece, where she was never able to find a job worthy of her education at the Tashkent Polytechnic and her significant work experience working for GASPROEKT, the Soviet Public Works Company in

Uzbekistan. The only job she was able to find was as the 'Russian' office girl for a travel agency, a job she soon quit, unable to endure the daily insults and humiliations heaped upon her. Throughout the last 22 years, the sole time she thought her qualifications and experience would be recognised was during the early days of her stay in Athens, when she was interviewed by a manager of a Greek public corporation, only to realize that the price for getting hired would be to spend a couple of hours with him in a cheap, out-of-the-way motel. For Veronica, who in her first home had been raised to value the importance of work, and had embraced the idea that not working, being supported by others, was an affront to human dignity, these frustrations and disappointments proved to be the defining moments of her life in Greece, alongside the fact that her heavy accent would result, whenever she dared addressed anyone, in the painful question 'You're a foreigner, aren't you?'

It was precisely this question, asked casually by a taxi driver long ago, that had resulted in Veronica, later that night, having a dream which was not too far removed from the realities of her childhood in Tashkent: She's at school. She's eight, maybe. Her long black hair is worn in two thick braids, her arms are crossed on the dark, rickety desk. All her attention is focused on her teacher, a tall, thickset Russian woman with her blonde hair caught in a bun, dressed in an austere grey suit, as austere as the teacher is strict. What is she teaching them? Russian. The blackboard is covered in verbs and conjugations. Suddenly the teacher stops writing on the blackboard, turns to Veronica and asks: 'Veronica, tell the class, where is home for you?' Her voice is sweet to begin with, but soon turns intense, grave: 'Veronica, tell us, where is home for you?' Veronica is troubled, just like her eight-year-old self is troubled, crossing and recrossing her arms on her desk. Everyone is watching her, her classmates, her strict teacher, even, somehow, that taxi driver, when in the timid voice of an eight-year-old she replies: 'I don't know'. In the dream, this is immediately followed by her teacher's emphatic answer: 'Home is the language your thoughts speak'. Veronica wakes up crying, still hearing the echo of the eight-year-old student's sobs punctuating her admission that she 'thinks in Russian'.

And yet, despite her hesitation, despite her fear that the cocoon that has protected her all these years is about to burst, Veronica will, much to her surprise, hear herself agree to meet the journalist during that third phone call, even suggesting a time and a place: 'Titania', a well-known hotel in central Athens, near Omonoia Square. The journalist is herself surprised by this development, and puzzled by Veronica's suggestion of the hotel as a meeting place. She is accustomed to conducting interviews and business meetings in the many cafés of Athens, and unaware of the fact that in Veronica's first home everything from job interviews to trysts took place in the cafés of the city's great hotels. She also doesn't know Veronica's history with the particular hotel, how once, before her father's illness and her stepmother's death, she'd briefly found herself sitting in the hotel's huge lobby. She had no particular reason to be there, had found herself glancing in as she was walking past the hotel's glass doors, and almost as if under the spell of some strange familiarity, had taken a seat at the hotel's café, ordering a cup of aromatic tea like the ones she used to have in her former home. This was the time when Athens was living the dream of hosting the Olympics, when the city centre sparkled, buildings were renovated, streets cleaned, pavements repaired, when all anyone could talk about was the city's brand new Metro service. It was the time when the eyes of the world where on Greece, full of admiration, when foreign investors flocked the streets of Athens and you couldn't throw a stone in the city without it landing in the midst of one international business meeting or another. Just like the one that was taking place in

the Titania's conference hall while Veronica was sitting at the lobby. Present in this meeting between a number of Greek and American businessmen is the man who left his mark on Veronica's first, lost life: Iosif B., a Bukhari Jew born and raised in Tashkent, educated at the Polytechnic, where he met Veronica. The two fell in love, a love that turned from the desperately romantic love of youth – built around, and expressed through, their shared love of the great Russian poets, Pushkin, Yesenin, and Brodsky – to a lifelong bond and commitment which was nevertheless to be met with one insurmountable obstacle: Veronica's father, and his desire to return to Greece. For Veronica to marry a foreigner would mean the end of the dream of return to the motherland; so this could never be. In fact, it was precisely an event related with Veronica's father all those years ago that convinced Iosif not to return to the Soviet Union once he found himself in New York in order to attend an international scientific conference, during the time of the perestroika, in which Iosif believed passionately. In his new home, the former soviet citizen and culturally Russian Iosif transformed himself into a successful American businessman, though fragments of his former life continued to haunt him, in the form of Russian songs and literature, the Russian language itself. And of course, in the form of his love for Veronica, to whom he wrote three letters, pleading with her to leave her father behind and join him in New York. But those letters never reached her, and she became convinced that Iosif abandoned her, only to discover the truth near the end of the novel, after the death of her father.

Veronica will not stay long at the hotel's lobby. Tasting her tea will bring memories of her lost life flooding through her head, images of the 'Uzbekistan' hotel in Tashkent, where, unbeknownst to her father, she would meet with Iosif over two cups of strong, aromatic tea. Veronica, too upset to stay, will hurriedly pay for her tea and head for the exit. At the same moment, the businessmen meeting on the mezzanine will decide to take a break and head down to the lobby. Iosif will be shocked to recognize the woman rushing past him towards the door. Frozen to the spot, he won't have time to run after her before a familiar voice snaps him out of his reverie. It belongs to his American wife, who is accompanying him on his trip.

This first visit to the hotel will be the reason Veronica suggests that Titania as a venue for her meeting with the young journalist. Besides, she knows very little of Athens, despite having lived in it for 22 years. On the day of the meeting, Veronica will experience great confusion. During the previous evening, her father, in the midst of an unexpected fit so bad Veronica was convinced he would die before the night was over, deliriously begged her forgiveness, while refusing to explain what for, calling her 'twice the innocent', a phrase she's been unable to make any sense of. Full of guilt, Veronica will debate whether she should meet the journalist, feeling that to do so would represent some kind of betrayal, that if anything were to happen to her father while she was gone, she'd never be able to forgive herself. But what's the reason for this unhealthy co-dependency? Behind it lies a secret that Veronica will be unaware of until after her father's passing.

As we've seen, Veronica's father was a young Athenian bourgeois, a holder of a law degree from the University of Athens, who served as an officer in the Greek army and fought in the Albanian front during WWII. During the German occupation of Greece, he took part in the Greek resistance, joining ELAS (the Greek People's Liberation Army) as an officer. During the Greek civil war that followed liberation he joined the DSE (the Democratic Army of Greece, ie. the communist side). Just like many thousands of DSE soldiers, following the communists' defeat he found himself in Tashkent on Stalin's orders. There he fell in love with a much younger woman,

brought to Tashkent through personal misfortune, not because of her ideology or politics. The young, orphaned girl, impressed by his status and his knowledge, feeling safe by his side, will agree to marry him though she doesn't love him back. But he will soon prove to be a domineering, oppressive, pathologically jealous man, and not even the birth of Veronica will make him easier to live with. The young wife and mother will eventually fall in love with another man, a Russian, whom she will follow to Moscow, abandoning her husband and her then four-year-old daughter. Veronica's father will not hesitate to lie to his daughter, telling her her mother is dead. He will refuse to allow his estranged wife to ever see their child again, and on the two occasions when she will attempt to do so, he will react violently. For Veronica, the memories of her beautiful and kind mother will soon fade, and all she'll be left with will be blurred, fragmented images of a happy childhood, of her mother's attempts to see her, of her father's loud, stringent voice telling her 'your mother is dead, Veronica. Do you understand? She's dead'. She will learn to live with the trauma of this sudden, unexplained loss – she will always wonder about her mother's supposed demise – but she will never get over it. Her father will raise her on his own, refusing any outside help, dedicating himself to her upbringing, making her the centre of his existence. Despite his cruelty, he is himself a deeply tragic figure, whose life has been defined by a series of defeats and losses: Being on the losing side of the civil war, losing the home for which he'd fought, the motherland he defended and which nevertheless disowned him, losing the woman he loved. No wonder he feels all he has left is his daughter, though the result of his devotion to her will be for Veronica to grow up with no will of her own, an obedient child dependent on her father for everything, the father for whom she feels both awe and gratitude. The only other thing Veronica's father has held on to is the dream of one day returning home. He will not tolerate anything that opposes this dream. Not even his daughter falling in love.

So it's only natural that on the afternoon of 15 May 2011, Veronica is panicking and feeling guilty for having left her father in the care of a neighbour, telling her she'll only be away 'for an hour or so'. Getting off the metro at Panepistimio station, from where she'll walk to the Titania for her five o'clock meeting with the journalist, she is surprised to see a huge crowd gathered outside the University while the metro loudspeakers are announcing that 'by order of the police, Panepistimio and Syntagma stations will close to the public in a few minutes'. Veronica doesn't know that she arranged her meeting on the day of a planned demonstration and march against the 'Memorandum' the Greek government is about to ratify. Veronica, heading down Panepistimiou Street in the direction of Omonoia Square and the Titania, is walking past a movie theatre when she is stunned to see a huge poster by its doors, advertising a retrospective of the films of her favourite director, the Russian Nikita Mikhalkov. The sight seems to throw time out of joint for Veronica. Images from her lost life come flooding back, seemingly erasing the present. She's not in Athens, but in Tashkent, not alone but with Iosif. They're heading to the Panaramni movie theatre to watch Mikhalkov's new movie, 'An unfinished piece for mechanical piano'. Sitting in the darkness inside the theatre, Iosif will take her hand in his. They're in love. They're happy. They'll never miss another Mikhalkov movie, nor any movie by Iosif's favourite director, Andrei Tarkovsky.

It's almost five o' clock, and the journalist, 27-year-old Danai Z., is waiting in the Titania's lobby. She's worried, not only because she had to fight hard to convince Veronica to meet her, but because in the meantime she's become deeply interested in her story, and the notion of her possibly not showing up is hard to contemplate. Researching the story, Danai has been introduced to an unfamiliar and strange world,

belonging as she does to a generation for whom the civil war and its aftermath remain terra incognita. Despite this, she accepted the assignment offered by her editor-in-chief, for she is both extremely conscientious and unwilling to say no, so early in her career. Danai belongs to a generation of Greeks who hold multiple academic degrees, while a number of them have studied abroad. Danai herself studied for her postgraduate degree in England, returning to Greece three years previously, being both unable to put up with the English weather, as she jokes, and determined to use her hard-won knowledge to offer something back to her country. Unfortunately for her, she returned home just as the financial crisis hit Greece, and as a result Danai, despite working long hours for one of the oldest and most popular newspapers in Greece, hasn't been paid in six months and is aware of rumours suggesting the newspaper is about to fold. Her mother, always the realist, is already blaming her for leaving England to return to a bankrupt Greece, and has been, for the past several weeks, putting pressure on her to emigrate again, to find what her mother is convinced will be a better life somewhere else. Interviewing the now middle-aged children of the former political refugees, Danai will be left speechless. The events that, according to them, defined the early years of their stay in their parents' motherland range from the outrageous to the frankly unbelievable. These people seem to have landed in Greece from some other planet. Unless Greece is the other planet. And of course, none of them can or will answer her central question: 'What does home mean to you?' Or 'Where is home for you?' And what about Veronica? What kind of questions should she pose to this woman who, as far as Danai has been able to find out, was abandoned by her mother and raised by her father on his own? And what if she doesn't show up? Finally, at ten past five, the Titania's glass doors open and Veronica enters in a rush, late for having spent several minutes rooted to the spot outside the movie theatre. She walks up to Danai, whom she recognizes because the latter is holding up a copy of the newspaper she works for, as had been agreed. But what is it that will, less than half an hour later, make Veronica jump up, looking terrified, mumble 'I'm sorry' and 'I've got to go, I've got to go' and take off in a hurry? People say life is full of strange coincidences, and they're not wrong. The novel, which makes its own claims on life, puts forth its own coincidences, ones that both advance plots and disrupt the lives of its characters, just like in the case of Veronica. So what strange coincidence has upset her so? Just like during her previous visit to the Titania, while she sat at the lobby, another business meeting was taking place on the hotel's mezzanine, between Greek and American businessmen, with the former working hard to persuade the latter to invest in the country despite the financial crisis and collapsing economy, and the latter, as would be expected, being particularly hesitant to agree to do so. In their midst is once again Iosif B., who's visiting Greece for the second time in seven years. His motive? Not so much the dubious opportunity to invest in his great love's motherland, but rather the knowledge that the meeting would be held in the Titania, the place that has been haunting him all these years. The scene that took place seven years before is repeated in reverse: Iosif and two other men are heading for the lobby, but this time it will be Veronica who will see him, this vision of a ghost come to drag her back to hell. Without hesitating for a second, she will grab her bag, mumble her apology to the journalist and vanish out the hotel's doors before Iosif has a chance to spot her. The May sun burns in the sky, everything is bright and to Veronica seems to be signalling some kind of revelation she must run away from, a visitation from her old life, here to judge her. Walking fast through the angry streets of Athens, she's shoving her way past the raging crowd. Near Syntagma Square someone will shout something at her, but she won't hear, she's not there anymore, she's back in the lost

world of her first life, she doesn't belong in this city, doesn't belong in this country she know almost nothing about, she hasn't truly lived in, hasn't fallen in love in, has no memories of, she belongs to that lost life defined by the man she just saw in the hotel's lobby. But why is Iosif in Athens? What does he want from her, after so many years without a single sign of life? It's the journalist, Veronica will decide, she brought him here, told him where I'd be, it was a trap, an attempt to crack her cocoon for good, to make her abandon her father, but she can't abandon him, without him she's all alone in this country, all alone in her father's birthplace, which isn't her own. Time passes slowly, the first shadows make their appearance, and Veronica is still wondering amongst the crowds, image after image of her own life playing in her mind's eye, she doesn't realize how long she's been away from the house until someone nudges her and says 'go away, lady, can't you see what's going on, go home'. Veronica will snap out of her reverie and realize it's almost evening. She'll have to run home, since public transportation in the city centre has been suspended. Outside her house, an ambulance is waiting.

After 48 hours in intensive care, her father passes away. Veronica will blame only herself for his death. If I hadn't been late, he wouldn't have died, she'll keep telling herself. If I hadn't seen Iosif, I wouldn't have been late. If I hadn't agreed to meet with the journalist, if I hadn't suggested the Titania, I wouldn't have seen Iosif… if… if… if. During her father's funeral, Veronica will feel ill and pass out. Appearing amongst the people gathered around her to offer their sympathies and make sure she's alright will be the journalist, who will hand her a letter. Furious at the journalist, Veronica will rip it up without reading it on the taxi ride back to her now empty house. But this letter contains a secret that the journalist had uncovered, one that Veronica will never find out about, though readers will, by the novel's close. Still, it won't be long before Veronica, mourning and racked with guilt, trying to evoke the warmth of her father's presence, will sit at his desk and without giving the matter much thought start rifling through its drawers, the drawers that her father would allow no one but himself to open. What she discovers will overturn everything she believed about him until that point, paint his 'legendary' deeds in a completely different light and, above all, make her realize that both her lives have been based on a series of lies and deceptions. A pack of letters, a number of photographs will be the evidence that will reveal her father's intentions, the betrayals that effective ruined both her lives.

Dawn will find Veronica, still in her soiled black dress, sitting at her father's desk, letters and photographs spread out before her. What will she do? How will she react? Will she be able to put every awful thing she's learned behind her, or will she be crushed by it for good? Will she be able, even at 58, to start a new, third life, this time her own, to turn her father's home into her own? The novel will not answer this question, hinting however at a kind of difficult optimism, allowing the reader the freedom to make up his/her own mind.

The novel's epilogue will take place three months later, in an AEGEAN airplane flying from Athens to London, ex-journalist and now unemployed Danai being one of its passengers, traveling to England to seek a better life for herself. The newspaper she worked for folded as she was wrapping up her story on the children of those Greek political refugees and their difficult lives in their idealized motherland. All that's left of the story is a series of tape recordings and some notes. Danai is thinking about Veronica and the secret she uncovered. She's smiling, certain that at least thanks to the letter she handed to her at her father's funeral, Veronica finally knows the truth, and has a chance at happiness. As the plane is leaving Greece behind,

Danai Z. asks herself the question she'd addressed to all her interviewees: 'What does home mean to you?' Before she's able to answer her own question, the plane, no longer flying over Greek soil, will enter a region of dark cloudy sky ahead. Unthinkingly, Danai will lower the shade over the window through which until that moment the sun had been casting its bright light on the airplane's interior. The sun of the home she's leaving behind.