

Litsa Psarafi

ECATI'S SMILE

(Original title: To hamogelo tis Ekatis)

SUMMARY WITH EXTRACTS

A jewel connects ancient Greece of the 6th century B.C. with the Byzantine period, the 19th century and present time and describes the feelings, the adventures in love and the fate of four heroines: Theano, daughter of king Polycratis, Theoniki, a nun in a Byzantine convent, Areti, a rich girl of the 19th century and Teti, a girl of today.

The Year 522 B.C.

The wife of Polycrates, the king of the island of Samos, brings a daughter, Theano, into the world. That night, the three Fates stand over the infant's cradle and determine her destiny. The girl grows up under the care of her wet-nurse, Theokleia. Theano sees her father rarely, in between campaigns and the wars with neighbouring cities. But her mother, sickened by Polycrates' all-night carousing with the island's concubines, artists and attractive youths, withdraws to the Temple of Hera and devotes herself to the worship of the goddess. Life in the royal palace does not fulfil Theano. Often, when her lessons end and her tutors leave, she puts a scarf over her head so as not to be recognised and goes down to the port. The colourful crowds, the boats arriving from throughout the Mediterranean and unloading their valuable cargoes - hides, perfumes, spices - the shouts of the sailors and the noise all please Theano. At other times, she goes to Pythagoras' school, the Imikyklío (The Semi-Circle) and watches the philosopher teach. The words of the great and learned man make his students' hearts sing. The world's order and harmony, one God – creator, unseen and conceivable – the transient body and immortal soul are all novel ideas which fascinate Theano.

And then there is Rhoikos, the young son of the famous sculptor Theodoros, with whom Theano is in love. On the few occasions the princess is able to meet him, she dresses as a boy and goes to the workshop where the young artist labours. And Rhoikos works night and day in his workshop. He is hurrying to finish a precious necklace

which he will give to his love, Theano. The important feast day for Hera is approaching. Theano has been promised by her priestess mother that this year she will have the great honour of taking part in the procession and bearing Hera's sceptre.

Extract pp. 46-55.

By the time Theano reached her apartments, darkness had begun to fall. She was surprised to see that Theokleia had yet to light the lamps. Her room was cool and tidy, as she had left it. The bed was laid with the softest Persian rugs and the floor with lamb skins whiter than snow. And yet, there was something in the room, as though an invisible presence hovered in the air. Theokleia came in noiselessly, bringing a lit lamp. And that was when Theano saw the sun shining on her bed...

"The necklace..." she whispered.

She fell to her knees in front of the bed and gazed on it with wide and insatiable eyes. It was so beautiful she did not dare touch it.

Theokleia raised the lamp to shine its light on the necklace and they saw what Rhoiko's hands had wrought with the gold. There was Hera below the willow tree where she was born, and next to her was Aphrodite as she rose from the waves. There was Phaeton with his chariot rising to the sky and Satyrs and Centaurs chasing fairies, Zeus kidnapping Europe and Apollo with his lyre. Enchanted, Theano stretched out her hand, touched one of the gold charms hanging from the links: the shell and the star, the clam and the dolphin, the leaf and the pomegranate, the sea-horse and the cicada. None were any bigger than a grape...

Tears flowed from Theano's eyes and Theokleia showed her emotion as her hands trembled; a little more and the oil would spill out of the lamp. In so many years in the palace, she had never laid eyes on such a fine piece of jewellery. Polycrates hid his in a safe made of cedar wood. His friend Amassis sent him bracelets, rings and buckles decorated with gems every so often. But they were all heavy and crudely-made, as though shaped by rough hands. But Rhoikos' necklace...

It was as though you could hear Apollo's lyre, see the fear in the eyes of Europe as Zeus seized her, and feel the power of the horses dragging Phaeton's chariot. Only divinely gifted hands could have wrought such joy, such power, such fear.

"When did Rhoikos bring the necklace?" Theano said. "Why did he not wait to give it to me himself, as he wanted? Ah, Theokleia... I wanted to feel his hands trembling again around my neck, to hear his heart beating above mine, to kiss his fingers..."

A shadow detached itself from the corner. Rhoikos showed himself, tall and handsome, and somewhat awkward after hearing Theanos's outpouring of emotion.

"You frightened me!" cried Theano and she grabbed Theokleia as her knees buckled.

When her initial surprise had passed, she approached him and tried to find the words she wanted.

"The necklace...I have never seen a more beautiful piece of jewellery... And it is mine.. Today is the happiest day of my life... I don't know what to say, how to show you my joy..."

"You don't have to say anything, my love. Just let me put it on you," Rhoikos said.

Theokelia placed the lamps in the corner of the wall and quietly left the room. The two of them were left looking into one another's eyes and then their shadows melted to the wall, Rhoikos's tall and willowy, Theano's slim and ethereal, embracing as tightly as cypress trees when the wind blows and knits their branches together.

Before their branches burst into fire, Theokleia returned to the room. "It is time for you to go, the guard will change in a little while and I will have trouble trying to get you out," she said to the young man. The elderly nanny gently pulled Rhoikos by his chiton.

The moon had climbed to its zenith in the sky, its waning face peeking out of the trees one minute and hiding behind the leaves the next.

Theokleia went ahead and struck up a conversation with the guard, distracting him. Rhoikos nimbly climbed the wall and lost himself in the darkness.

The tenth day of the month of Ekatomveon, the eve of Hera's feast day, was a holiday. The farmers stayed away from their fields, the fishermen lolled around on their boats, the soldiers polished their swords and shields, the housewives prepared food for the feast and the courtiers and nobles spent the day trying on new chitons, hairdos and the jewellery they would wear. Even schools were shut that day. The small children would run to the banks of the Imbrassos to cut branches of wicker and the maids bathed and washed their hair.

When the 11th day dawned, the entire island appeared to be on foot. The people were already gathered the length of the Sacred Way, awaiting the procession. First came the young men and women. The day of the feast was important for everybody. The boldest would take aside the girls, begin new love affairs, plan weddings and make matches. Even the most timid had something to do. Sidelong glances, smiles, hints, promises - who knew? Maybe next year they would all be at the head of the procession, where the newlyweds always were.

It seemed that everybody was happy because their faces shone as the procession moved along the Sacred Way. The newlyweds walked at the head, wearing wreaths of rose petals on their heads. They still looked deep into one another's eyes - the petals had not yet withered with the dullness of daily routine.

The hearts of the maidens beat happily and their hands, carrying the baskets full of the goddess's sacred objects, trembled with emotion as the eyes of the crowd looked upon them, sly and lascivious. Only the innocent Tyrinna walked calmly, the eyes of the crowd not touching her. Her only concern was the goddess's holy peacock, which she carried in her arms. Sitting upon a silver half-moon, the bird would occasionally shake out its wings, distressed by the crowd. It was a desecration for its feet to touch the road - only in the area of the temple could it move - and Tyrinna trembled with fear lest it escape from her hands.

The priests following had every reason to be happy. The statue of Hera on its throne may have been a burden on their shoulders making them perspire, but the offerings and plentiful and wealthy gifts of the devout this year - oil, wine and honey, pulses and nuts - meant they would have a carefree and relaxing winter.

Also satisfied was the Goddess Hera. The crowd knelt with respect and worship before her. She wore her feastday chiton and her veil fell as far as her feet. And behind her followed the happiest and most fortunate maiden in the procession, Theano...

Theokleia had woken before dawn to help Theano dress and put on the necklace. The first rays of sunlight neither shone nor glowed as brilliantly as the necklace around her neck. The touch of the necklace upon her skin continued to arouse in her a tremor of inexpressible satisfaction. She followed the goddess' train holding the holy sceptre and was certain that the crowd's admiration was not for Hera, but for

her. She knew that Rhoikos was somewhere in the crowd, she felt his eyes penetrating through the crowd, making her bloom as though her body were covered with daisies.

Further back were the children. They held high the branches of wicker, sang, laughed and shouted. Two days far from the rod of their teachers and the eyes of their parents was a gift truly sent down from the gods.

For the warriors, too, with their swords and heavy armour, marching with a slow and sure step, faces calm and smiling, the feast day was a welcome pause between the two wars.

Women made up the greater part of the crowd. They walked modestly and whispered Hera's name with respect. The goddess always helped girls find a husband and later, when it was time to give birth, it was Hera's name again that they shouted for help.

Only the sheep coming last was jittery and unhappy. It may have known that in the middle of the procession, the marchers would stop and a priest would cut its throat, a sacrifice to the goddess Hera.

Maybe that was why it dug its heels into the cobblestones and bleated with despair...

Only the priest and Hera's statue entered the sanctum of the temple. The maids placed the baskets at the vestibule and sighed with relief. Then they left, hurrying to meet their parents and brothers and sisters and join in the festivities and feasting which had already begun at the Imbrassos. Only Theano was left to place the sceptre in the goddess's hands. She walked piously up the steps of the pedestal and then froze. Her hands stopped, suspended in mid-air, her legs remained rooted to the spot, and her eyes widened with fright at the sight of the goddess' face. Hera was furious. She was no longer the benevolent goddess of a short while ago looking complacently upon her devout followers. She trembled with fury, her bracelets rattled on her arms, the veil had fallen from her head, and it seemed that she was about to fall from the throne.

Theano felt a light whisper, like the swish of the leaves of the poplar tree when the southerly wind blew, and immediately the pedestal and entire temple moved as one. From the bowels of the earth came a prolonged groan. The priests, recovering from their initial fright and confusion, starting pleading with Enceladus, the god of earthquakes, to stop his deep breaths but when they noticed that the face of the goddess was distorted with anger, they fell to their knees and

pleaded for mercy. Only the priestess realised that the cause of the misfortune was Theano and the necklace she wore.

The goddess was violently agitated as soon as she noticed the beautiful necklace, her divine soul flooded with jealousy and indignation. Such an insult was unheard of and unacceptable. No woman had ever dared surpass the goddess in beauty and radiance. And Theano glowed....

The priestess, trying to avert the worst, took her daughter quickly away from the pedestal; she would find a way later to appease the furious goddess. But she had to explain to Theano, who was deathly pale and shivering in her arms.

"My daughter, it was reckless of you to wear such a necklace and present yourself to the goddess. But it is my fault. I should have warned you that the gods punish mortals when they provoke them. Take the necklace off and when Hera's anger has abated, go up and offer it to the goddess."

"Why, mother, should I offer it to Hera? Rhoikos made it for me and only me. He worked on it day and night. While he hammered the gold, his thoughts were of me, it was my neck he encircled with his hands before he started... Is it not unfair for me to give it to Hera?"

"Theano, you are young and do not know... The gods always take what they want and Hera desired your necklace."

"But Hera is always bedecked with jewellery. Each year they offer her the most beautiful and expensive jewellery. The safes in the temple's depositary are spilling over with jewellery. Why should I give her my necklace? No mother, I will not be parted from my treasure. I will wear Rhoiko's necklace until I die."

The wind carried Theano's voice to the ears of the goddess.

"Silly mortal," laughed Hera to herself maliciously.

A few days later, a strange event occurs to upset the routine of the House of Polycrates. A goat gives birth to a kid with three horns. The soothsayers believe this to be a bad omen and advise the king against the campaign he is planning against the neighbouring Sardes of Ionia. Theano also advises her father against the campaign. Every night, she has a terrifying and ominous dream. But neither the advice of the soothsayers, nor the tears and pleas of Theano can stop Polycrates. His ships set sail one morning for Ionia. In the palace, worry and fear reign. Theano's only joy is her meetings and talks with

her mother, the priestess.

After much wavering, Theano agrees to meet Rhoiko outside the city, at Fytos's cave. Meanwhile, the goddess Hera has been scheming on Mount Olympus. With a myriad ploys, she deceives Chrysaora, the keeper of lightning, and takes his keys.

Theano is wearing her best chiton and Rhoiko's necklace around her neck. She reaches the cave before him. She has not seen the anxious crowd running down to the port. The royal boat has entered the port with the sails at half-mast. Polycrates is not with them. His tortured body has been hanging for days on a cross on the mountain of Mycale... just as Theano had seen in her dream.

Extract pp. 68-69.

The rain caught Rhoikos mid-way. First he heard the din of the wind through the branches of the trees and at the same instant the skies - clear until a minute ago - filled with dark and ashy clouds coming down from the mountain as though they were being chased. The trees started to sway and beat and the first drops of rain, big at the beginning, splashed onto the soil. Then the skies opened up immediately and the clouds emptied all the rain they were carrying onto the earth.

Rhoikos was not worried. He had seen summer storms before and soon the sky would be clear again. Soaked to the bone, he continued his way up the mountain. He could see the cave's opening and above it the oak tree being whipped about by the wind.

The rain intensified, the path had become a raging river and further on the swollen gully in the ravine groaned as it dragged stones and branches on its way.

Shortly before Rhoikos arrived at the cave, he stopped to catch his breath. A weak light was coming from the opening. Theano had arrived before him and was waiting.

He quickened his step and at that moment the lightning struck...

The oak tree shuddered violently, the entire mountain moved, the entire outcrop moved, dislodging the rocks and, with the tree, falling upon the cave, sealing its entrance. The fallen tree was engulfed in flames, thousands of sparks jumped from the leaves and its branches.

The oak tree burned in front of Rhoikos, but he could not see it. The

flash of the lightning had blinded him. Kneeling, helpless, he listened to the rustling of the branches and smelt the smoke of the burning leaves.

"Theeeeannnooo!" he called.

But Theano could no longer hear him...

Hera heard him high up on Olympus and she hastened to return the keys to Chrysaora. As soon as the tempest ended, the moon came out, slowly, timidly, into the sky...

The Year 1042 A.D.

The Byzantine Empire. Theoniki, the abbess at the Convent of the Virgin Mary on Samos, is breathing her last. Lying on her bed she looks back on her life. Child of an impoverished farming family, she was obliged to begin working at the convent when she was 15. She helps cook, she cleans, and tends the flock of goats. She likes, at times, to wander around the ruins of the ancient temple of Hera and, at others, to run down to the nearby beach. One day, a ship from Constantinople arrives. It brings an exiled dignitary, Constantine, the commander of the Anatolian Army. The abbess gives him a room in the convent and Theoniki takes him food from the convent's kitchen. The attractive man with the gentlemanly air charms the young novice. And Constantine, in turn, is not entirely unmoved. Theoniki's innocence, beauty and youth touch him deeply. When he is not working around the convent – painting, building, repairing – he locks himself in his room and paints an icon of the Virgin Mary. He gives the Virgin Theoniki's features and when he finishes it, places it in the church in the convent.

Extract pp. 87-91.

My dear brother Ioannis,

When you read this letter I am sure that you will wonder and ask whether you know this person writing to you.

And yet, yes, it is your brother whom you know well, since we grew up together, together we left our home in search of wealth and adventure, and later, together again, we rose to the highest positions

in the empire, defeating our enemies and living in the lap of luxury in the Sacred Palace. But first we had to experience abasement and exile before I could see the holy light.

The miracle began as soon as I got into the boat, leaving Constantinople behind, and came face to face with myself. The loneliness of the trip, the bracing sea air and the calm of the waves appeared to wipe away everything on me that was unclean and impure. My mind and heart calmed, and when I reached the place of my exile, I was a man reborn. Samos is beautiful, like the embrace of a woman. Blessed by God, full of trees, water, olive trees and vineyards, nowhere else is the sea so blue.

Even before we landed, I was greeted by the smells reminding me of bygone years...the aroma of resin and the willow... The entire island swims in colour and fragrance, the dream of each shipwrecked and persecuted man.

I work all day, you would not believe it. I build walls, chop wood, fix the roof and pull out weeds.

I dress simply and humbly. In Patmos, when the boat stopped, I gave the bishop of the island all my finery - the gold-embroidered vests, the silk cloaks and diamond-set clasps. I bought painter's equipment, parchment and paints.

Remember, Ioannis? The icons I painted which Old Man Agapitos liked so much that he said God had blessed my hands. He wanted me to stay in his workshop to illustrate manuscripts, calendars, scenes from the Bible, icons of the saints. But I preferred the life of Constantinople, wealth and glory....

It's been years since I picked up a brush. I believe that God's help and the passion of my heart will guide my hands once again and I will be able to praise the glory of the Lord...

I live frugally; I eat barley bread and my tin plate always has hot soup and soaked beans in it and my wooden bowl is always full of refreshing water. Fancy... I, who sat at the royal table together with the emperor, the patriarch and the rulers, eating bread kneaded of flour sifted through silk.

Wealth, pleasures, the celebrations at the Hippodrome, the orgies, the drunken revels, the women and the pleasures of the brothels of Constantinople are a distant memory...

So long as young Theoniki, the sun in my life, is blessed...

How can I describe her to you, my brother? I can not find the words, I must borrow them from the poets and the bards, to remember the

words of King Solomon...

I have known many women in my time, you know Ioannis, and after a fleeting satisfaction nothing was ever left in my heart expect for loneliness and disappointment. Theoniki is the light of the dawn as my life sets. I find myself at the eve of my life but in my chest beats the heart of a twenty-year-old youth.

I first noticed her the day she brought my food from the convent, a bashful and scared girl. Her shining dark eyes sent out such sparks they shattered my heart into a thousand pieces. In a few days it was August and the heat was unbearable. Often, at midday, I sought a little shade near the beach.

I don't know, Ioannis, how many years God wishes me to live, but even if I live to be a 100 years old I will never forget the day I saw her rising from the waves.

Was this a real woman, a creation of fleeting fantasy or a mermaid from the sea? As she moved, pearls of water dripped off her and diamond beads tumbled down her body, glistening like the blade of a knife. She lay on her back and the wind immediately calmed, the fragrant sighs of nature ceased. My veins of my forty years, wasted on profligacy and nights carousing, continued to beat, strong and demanding....

Only a few steps separated us, but I could not move from my position. I watched her with ecstasy, an invisible veil of purity and innocence protecting her and keeping every threat of sly voluptuousness or dark lechery far from her.

Since that day, I have seen the fairy of my thoughts wandering every day amidst the trees and bushes and enjoying the embrace of nature, because she is, too, a creation of God, beautiful, clasped close in embrace. The drops of resin reek and make the bees dizzy, the cypresses reach up with their arms to worship the Lord, the ferns and birds turn from the shade and the song of the water and seek the solace of the sun, and the butterflies hastily leave their breath on the flowers of the wicker tree.

I, too, praise the Lord who thought me worthy to taste his gifts: wealth and poverty, power and humility, passion and serenity... I am glad for the miracle of each new day and feel as though I was born the day before yesterday.

Accept, my brother, the love I send you and I will pray for your health and happiness.

Your humble servant

Constantine.

And then one day:

Extract pp. 92-96.

I would take the flock of kids out to pasture around the convent to see Constantine from afar, at times rebuilding walls that had collapsed and at others cutting wood for the fire...

I would let the kids graze with Mavro nearby to guard them. One day I noticed Phoebus' beard was wet, the drops glistening on his hairs. I wondered... There was no water nearby, the water-trough was in the courtyard of the convent. Phoebus returned with his goatee wet the next day as well and when the goats went to the trough for water, the billy goat did not bother. Who knows where he had received his refreshment?

I lay in wait for him on the third day and as soon as he drifted from the herd, took after him. I clambered up rocks and got tangled in mastic trees and holly-oaks, until we reached the foot of Sarantapihou.

Suddenly Phoebus disappeared from before my eyes, as though the earth had opened up and swallowed him.

I was terrified... All the stories I had heard about dragons and goblins started to dance wildly in my mind. I was certain that Phoebus had been grabbed by fairies, or even by Gellouda, the fear and terror of every child.

I clutched my lucky charm, said all the prayers I knew and waited for my heart to stop beating wildly. And then I noticed that the weeds around the boulders had been trampled on. I knelt down and with trembling hands separated them. I saw a hole gaping in front of me. Curiosity conquered me and my final fears.

At first my eyes, accustomed to the light of the midday sun, were unable to see anything in the darkness. I could hear only Phoebus snorting happily, beads of water dripping from above, the air smelt moist and moldy. Slowly I began to make out where I was. I was inside a cave. Water had formed a pool on the ground, and each time drops fell from the roof, the pool's surface broke into a thousand

pieces.

Kneeling, Phoebus lapped at the water, and when he was sated, left the cave, raising a cloud of dust.

And I was left alone, with the taste of danger and the charms of the magical causing the hairs on the spine of my back to stand upright as though drops of water were falling on me.

In the next instant however the shivers on my back turned to panic in my mind as I saw the sun shining from the shallow depths of the pool. Sun inside a dark cave?

And yet, its rays changed form with the slightest movement of the water, as if it were dancing.

All my nightmares and forgotten childish fears returned and kept me trapped in front of the strange sight. I wanted to escape from the spellbinding light and the threats of the inhospitable cave but neither my own will nor the power of prayer could break the spell which kept my feet glued to the earth.

Only contact with the very object of my fear could exorcise the evil. Filled with excitement, I leant to touch the exquisite glow of the deep, certain that my hand would touch only the silence of the water. But the object that my fingers touched was hard, heavy and cold. In my hand I held a golden ornament. Was it a belt for the waist, a necklace or a royal crown?

Confused, I tried to remember where I had seen a similar object. Salome....the picture on the left wall of the church... Salome dancing before the stunned Herod and in one corner "the head of John the Baptist on a plate". Salome barefoot, with naked arms and gold jewellery at her neck, as she had been drawn by the monk Ilarion. Whose could the gold ornament be? Who had worn it? Queen, princess or a goddess of the woods? I made as though to throw it back into the water, the golden treasure that did not belong to me. But my hands would not obey. I hid it in my bosom and its coldness reached deep into my heart and burned me.

That day the kids grazed alone in the enclosure. I sealed myself in my cell and gloated over my discovery.

"Holy Mother of God, my sins are many and have made me ill in body and soul... I seek refuge in you, the hope of the hopeless, and beseech your help..."

The very next day, it was hard to recognise myself. I thought of going

to confession, cutting my hair and wearing the nun's habit so as to protect myself from demons and temptations. My sins multiplied by the day: vanity, slyness, unheard-of desires of the flesh and sinful dreams both day and night.

I had to return the piece to where I had found it, to soothe my soul, to repent for my shame and atone. Each night, before I fell asleep, I would say "tomorrow, without fail, I will throw it into the depths of the lake". And the next day would find me with its touch fresh on my cheeks, touching the necklace with greedy hands, the necklace still warm from the heat of my body and damp with the tears and sighs of the night.

And I kept saying tomorrow and tomorrow but the golden spell become stronger by the day until I surrendered. I started to wear it around my neck. I resembled Salome in the Bible; I even tried to emulate her provocative stance before Herod. And from a humble and joyless sparrow, I became a fancy peacock. Neither the sermons of Father Agapitos about humility and abstinence nor the innocence and purity of the other nuns could curb my passion. I tasted the forbidden fruit of my vanity every day while waves of fear and pleasure wracked my body....

At midday when the abbess and the nuns sought the shade of their cells, I ran outside the convent to see my reflection in the water of the trough and to see an unfamiliar and new face with the light of love making it beautiful - my face.

As summer draws to a close, a boat with Arab pirates lands on the coast. The crew ransacks the convent and kill all the sheep. They break down the door with axes and start taking sacks of pulses, oil and cheese to their vessel. They enter the church and grab the icons, the offerings, the chalice cup and the golden necklace which Theoniki has dedicated to the icon of the Virgin Mother. The pirates lock up the nuns and, as they leave, set fire to the place.

Constantine sees the smoke from afar and is just in time to open the door and save the nuns. He fights hand to hand with the pirates, but is overpowered and killed by the pirates' blows. The pirates leave with their booty. As they reach the open seas, a tempest blows up. In the morning, the fishermen find broken rigging, torn sails and fragments of oars on the beach. And the icon of the Virgin Mary,

undamaged, being lapped by the waves....

The Year 1808 A.D.

A few years before the Greek Revolution against the Turks. Yiakoumis, son of Captain Christodoulos, dives into the sea to dislodge the anchor which has become stuck in the rocks.

Extract pp. 114-116.

Yiakoumis stripped to his underclothes. He balanced on the prow of the "Evangelistria", took a deep breath, jumped and, with arms raised in front, dived like a knife into the water. The water closed over him, only a few frothy bubbles whirled for a little and then disappeared. The transparent water shimmered, the rocks came into view, with the anchor lodged between them. Gallant hands tugged at it firmly and on the second pull it came loose, along with the rock. The sea filled with fragments, sand and seaweed.

Slowly, the sand and the fragments of rock settled, the water cleared, the deep once again shimmered. Half hidden in the sand glinted a strange thing – was it a shell or a starfish? The young man touched it with an sure hand, and drew it out of the sandy depths. A golden necklace....He looked at it stupefied. He had heard stories and tales about robbers and pirates who landed on the islands and destroyed the life of the people. Surely some pirate ship had been battered against the rocks and the stones of the Petronissi and the stolen treasures scattered into the sea.

But Yiakoumis had no time to consider this. The air in his lungs was rising, and there was only just enough for him to reach the surface. His hands shook as he tried to hid the gold necklace in his underclothes and to secure it with the cord. He broke through the froth of the water's surface, out of breath, with his hair dripping silver strands. He draped himself onto the deck and lay face down to dry and for his heart to stop beating so wildly. He had the gold necklace next to his skin and his mind on Areti...

Areti is the only daughter of the proestos, the powerful leader of the Greek community during Ottoman rule, and young Yiakoumis yearns for her and wants to marry her. Areti's feelings for the young seaman are also hard to hide. Yiakoumis decides to ask for her hand in marriage.

Extract pp. 131-136.

"Shall we sell it, my son, the gold?" Captain Christodoulos said that night. "The foreigners who come to our island will buy it. They're barmy, wandering around the fallen marble, reading the etchings and buying ancient figurines, lamps, pitchers, bowls, golden money, any old thing buried in our fields. The necklace would fetch a fine piastre to help us pay off the fishing boat and escape the clutches of the overlord..."

"The necklace is not for sale, father....Areti will wear it when she becomes my bride..."

"I fear Hatzimanolaki, Yiakoumi...Did you hear what he told Kyra Foteini to tell us? He is ruthless, he will get his people to ruin you."

"We are not yet done with the proestos," Yiakoumis said. "'The wolf works best alone'. I will go and ask for Areti's hand, father. Tomorrow. Tomorrow, I will knock on Hatzimanolakis's door."

But it was no easy thing to knock on the door of the proestos. Day by day things worsened, the pot was simmering, it would not be too long before the rage and hatred fanned by centuries of slavery and oppression boiled over. The serfs were awakening. The French Revolution had fanned the passions and hopes of the enslaved. The merchants and the captains who travelled to the free world brought the new ideas back to the island. The old families, the aristocrats and the notables, were being toppled and their power was quickly passing into the hands of the people. The first clashes had already begun. Entire villages would rise up in protest, seeking their rights. There were deaths and torture, girls despoiled, families taking the road for other parts, fortunes lost. And when the sultan sent a new military commander who was more just and diplomatic to the island, tempers cooled. The fire however continued to simmer below the pot, and everybody waited for the great explosion.

It was for this reason, Hatzimanolakis took care not to walk alone in deserted areas. He even avoided going to his fields and only the

major feast-days could convince him to cross the threshold of the church. When the liturgy was over, he would take a walk to the village cafe. People's conversations ceased as if cut by a knife; with one look, however, he could tell whose temper was up. He would smoke his narghile and slowly the serfs would open up, tell him their woes, demanding justice.

Before tempers could rise, Hatzimanolakis would pay the café-owner, and, haughty and erect, would go off for his cognac with the military governor. He would take his coffee with the Aga and share his worries and fears of the times over some loukoumia (Turkish delights).

The proestos continued to fear the hatred he saw in the eyes of his fellow villagers. He called in the workmen and had them put up more bars on the windows of his lodgings, and when darkness came, he pulled up the ladder.

When the sun fell and the day cooled, Yiakoumis bathed and put on his good clothes, and shoes. Then he opened the trunk, took a cloth from his mother's dowry, folded the necklace within it and went and knocked boldly on the door of Hatzimanolakis.

He had not warned the proestos, as was the custom, because he feared the dignitary might get his men to throw hot oil on him from the roof of the house as he appeared.

Yiasemo, the maid, answered the door and stood goggle-eyed at his audacity. Yiakoumis set her aside and went up the ladder.

The proesto's family was gathered in the sitting room: Kyra Vgena, Areti, her grandmother Margio. Hatzimanolakis sat bolt upright as though he had seen an enraged viper.

"How dare you, you cur, to cross my threshold. Out of here, before I call my men to handcuff you."

"Don't get upset, Kyr Hatzimanolakis, I have not come to cause trouble. I love your daughter and want her for my wife. Give us your blessing and I give you my promise that Areti will live well with me."

"You rascal, what love and stuff and nonsense! Areti's wealth is what you have your eye on, you don't fool me. I wouldn't give you my daughter, even if you were the last man on earth. Now get out of here."

The proestos' moustache and beard were trembling, the whites of his eyes had reddened and if Kyra Vgena had not held him back he would have fallen upon Yiakoumis.

The young man remained collected in the face of the proestos' anger,

not blinking an eyelash although his heart hammered away in his chest.

"Your daughter may be wealthy, but I am not a beggar. You can see so from the present I have brought her."

And Yiakoumis unrolled the towel. Everybody drew in their breath. Kyra Vgena's eyes glazed full of greed, her upper lip dripped with sweat and had she not been in fear of her husband, she would have stretched out a greedy hand towards the necklace.

The old Margio continued, unconcerned, to knit white socks, not moving an inch from her seat. Next to her, Areti was too afraid to even lift her eyes from the cushion she was embroidering. Each time she made as if to rise and leave the room, her grandmother whispered to her and gave her a kind but firm look and Areti's heart returned to its place.

Even Yiasemo, who was eavesdropping behind the door, could not help herself and stuck her head around the door to see.

Only the proestos continued to be an untamed beast. One look was enough to estimate the value of the necklace, and this only enraged him further.

"We don't want your gifts... If you brought the sky and stars, you would still not become my son-in-law. You can forget Areti, for your own good. Now go."

Yiakoumis left with the necklace tucked under his arm. And he did not see the proestos' smile, more ominous than the worst threat.

Within a week, the Turk money-lender asks the captain to pay back his loan. To avoid debtors' prison, the captain is forced to give him Yiakoumis' golden necklace. But then at the money-lender's house, disaster strikes. His pregnant wife loses the child, his body is suddenly covered in sores and a few days later his house burns down. As he is superstitious, he believes that the necklace is cursed. To lift the curse, he returns it to Captain Christodoulos.

Areti is a prisoner in her father's house. She pines, losing weight every day, neither doctor nor medicine can cure her. Yiakoumis decides to elope with her. With the help of the servant girl, he arranges to meet Areti and that same night kidnaps her and rides up the mountain to a village in which his aunt, Captain Christodoulos'

sister, lives. In a few days, their marriage ceremony is held and Areti wears the necklace that Yiakoumis has given her as a wedding present.

The hearts of the proestos and his wife soften when they learn that Areti is with child. Hostilities are forgotten, Areti and her newborn daughter and Yiakoumis return to the patriarchal home. Areti gives birth to three sons and two daughters.

The Greek Revolution has begun. Yiakoumis is killed in battle and Areti, a widow at the age of 29, brings up five children on her own. The years pass. Areti is now 99 years old. Shortly before she dies, she dictates her will, distributes her fortune to grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Her beloved necklace she bestows on her granddaughter Areti and she is in turn to give it to her granddaughter.

The Year 1995 A.D.

Fifteen-year-old Areti, nicknamed Teti, is lying injured in a hospital bed in Samos. Her grandmother, Areti, her younger sister Sophia and Areti's friend Asimina spend anxious hours at her bedside.

The four women, in the first person narrative, think, remember, observe, comment, worry, take decisions...

Summer 1995 and Samos is full of tourists. Teti lives with her grandmother and sister. Their parents are migrants working in Germany to save money to help their children study. The girls' lives are peaceful until the appearance of the young Telis, ambitious and sly, who convinces grandmother Areti to rent him her late husband's store to turn into a bar.

Telis has his eye on the lovely Teti as well as on the valuable necklace grandmother Areti guards.

Extract p. 177.

ARETI:

I just can not believe it. Why would Teti, my granddaughter, do this to me? Did she so covet that cursed "Ecati's smile"? And yet she never asked to wear it, she preferred the junk girls of today like to wear. I still remember that archaeologist asking me: 'Aren't you afraid Kyria

Areti, that such a treasure will be stolen?' None of us ever thought to have the necklace valued and neither did we think of the millions it was worth, although we certainly had need of them. My children crushed by long days of work.... It was a sacred and priceless keepsake and contained the history of generations. It had been consecrated by time and the passions of the women who wore it...It was the golden light which beautified the women of our family when they wore it, our charm, a magic and indissoluble link to the past. And what hasn't it heard all those years up there in the iconostasis with the saints: Bodies rejoicing in love, the cries of babies and laughs of children, cries of pain and agony...And at other times it had seen bent heads pleading for help and happy faces thanking and blessing its saintliness. It survived wars, occupiers and hard times. We went without, hungered, sold lires and gold, but the necklace nobody ever dared to touch.

Teti is carried away by Telis' way with words and starts dating him and travelling around the island on his motorbike. Her friend and schoolmate, Sotiris, she no longer wants to see. He withdraws inside himself and spends hours surfing the Internet.

Extract pp. 182-184.

ASIMINA:

I have to be going now...And if I stay, so what? Teti has yet to recover and it is impossible to talk to Kyra Areti. I tried once or twice to catch her in conversation, but she has taken it very badly and chokes on her tears. Ah, Kyra Areti, you too are to blame... You love Teti, I don't deny it, but you always were hard on her. You both argued in front of me so many times and I couldn't believe my ears. Ungrateful you called her, lazy and irresponsible, inept and insolent... And all because Teti had left her clothes strewn on the floor or forgotten to make her bed. And at other times Teti got carried away and was late coming home. And you yelled at her that you at 17 were the perfect housewife, respected your elders, had principles and aspirations, while young people today are rotten, and that is why the world is going to the dogs.... What's preferable, though, Kyria Areti, swimming in the sea at night or watching stupid television shows? It's

a thousand times better to walk along the beach than to watch mindless soap operas, preferable to have company and dance than live the loneliness of zapping the remote control. And as for the rottenness of the world, we know who handed it down to us. But who cares about our problems? Panic rules us so often when we see the hatred for anything different, insecurities brings us to our knees, the indifference of our neighbours terrifies us. We want to hold onto something, to find the strength and courage to go on, but we can not find that support anywhere.

I look at my sister and despair grips me. She started with such dreams and enthusiasm. She would open her window every day and look out at the ancient tower of Polycrates, and the remains of the walls and hear the sighs of the gods and predecessors whispering to her. She wanted to study and interpret the secrets contained in the ancient stones of our land. She studied all night, made sacrifices, and graduated in archaeology, as she wanted. Her dream was to find Polycrates' palace and discover statues and treasures. A midsummer night's dream...She edits texts at a publishing house and waits to be appointed to a state school teaching position next century. Principles and ideals appear to have come to an end. We see none before us, just war, hatred, corruption, scandals and a burning desire for wealth and power. The times when young people would have their revolutions and fight for dreams and aspirations have passed. Most of us fight for a job in the public sector, and will fall fighting bravely for a refrigerator, television, car, luxury home and bonds in ECU. And if a few lose their way and fall to the syringe, to drink and an easy life, who cares? Let us then dream on, fall in love, laugh, go wild, before the responsibilities and compromises begin.

Grandmother Areti remembers:

Extract pp. 186-189.

Lucky Pythagoras. You left us early and missed what came after. When you were alive and the girls were young our home was calm and beautiful. I had them under my wings, like a broody hen has her chicks. And I had you close by me to raise your voice and get mad when the little ones began to stray from home, to return late after

being with people we didn't know and doing what their heart desired. Like that time with the medal...

"What's wrong with it, grandfather? All the girls are wearing them, it's a fashion. They're being sold for nothing by the refugees from Russia."

You spent the whole night tossing and turning and sighing deeply.

"I'm thinking of those heroic fighters of the Red Army," you told me, "who bravely defended and brought Hitler's armies to their knees.

See, my wife, what our struggles have come to, our sacrifices, our medals? They're all for sale... What evil wind scattered the dreams

and aspirations of all of us? Why did the dream of a better world disappear? What do today's children know of Korce, Trebesiva,

Morava and Ivanovo, Leningrad and Kharkov, Sevastopol and Minsk?

Who knows in which battle that unknown Russian soldier won that medal and, when upheaval came to his homeland, was forced to sell

it...Why should young girls brazenly wear it today without shame or memory..."

Ah, Pythagoras, so many sleepless nights, so much anguish and so many hopes for these children and what did we accomplish? Our Teti

is in danger of being left a cripple...It's not enough that we raised our own children, we had to raise our grandchildren as well. A heavy

burden, Pythagoras, and I can't carry it by myself any longer.

Children should grow up close to their parents. .Money in the bank in Germany and cash in the pocket is all very well but enough is

enough.

Teti, still in a state of stupor, remembers the good times with Teli, his promises, the changes he brought to her life. She remembers how excited she was when she learned that the photographs Telis had taken of her had been accepted and that she was a candidate for the finals of the Miss Hellas beauty contest. Telis and Teti decide to run away to Athens together. As dawn breaks, they get on the bike to ride down to the port to catch the boat. A truck suddenly looms out of the darkness, they can not avoid hitting it and the motorbike slams into an electricity pylon.

Extract pp. 202-204.

TETI:

That night I couldn't sleep. I felt my head was ready to explode. How could I bear the winter without Telis? In October he would close the store and return to Athens and another endless winter in our small town would begin. Life a swamp, mould, a continual depression hovering in the air, everything closed, shops, hotels, cafes, deserted, only the dogs wandering around the deserted roads are a sign that there is still life in this deserted place. As is the noise from the dice and the counters in the café when the old men play backgammon. Why then should I have worried about leaving? I would escape the spite and gossip of our small community which had labelled me 'easy'. And yet the men, even the fathers of my fellow students, would undress me with their eyes when they met me, I felt infected by the lust and lechery which filled the air. The women were worse. I could never tell whether it was envy, hatred, or malice I saw in their expressions – or all three. I felt sick when I heard the stifled giggles and whispers: 'Look at the hussy... Her parents are away and so she goes from beach to bars...' I felt their eyes like knives in my back, tearing me apart. But I never felt the slightest guilt about my relationship with Teli and our 'comings and goings'.

It was the definitive moment. There was an unknown world waiting to be discovered, dreams to be chased. The decisions had been taken for me up till now; it was time for me to make my own decisions, far from the advice and threats of grandmother, the endless "musts" and "shouldn'ts" and guilt I had been burdened with for so many years. Time to cut loose and taste the ripe sweet berries, even if the thorns pricked my fingers. Time to do something bold, courageous and risky. If I won the Miss Hellas crown, then goodbye to boredom and poverty. I was already standing in front of the lens and the television cameras, wearing beautiful clothes on runways, I could see my face on the covers of magazines, I was recognised in the street, people adored my every step...

By morning I had decided. Telis, more down-to-earth, did the rest. As we parted, he carelessly threw it at me:

"Take 'Ecati's Smile' with you. You can wear it on the big night and you'll shine even more."

"No way...It's Granny's. She doesn't even want me to touch it."

"Silly, it's going to be yours one day anyway. What's the difference between today or tomorrow?" Telis insisted.

In the past few hours I had taken such brave decisions and courageous steps, that I did not think twice about opening the wooden box and putting 'Ecati's Smile' in my travel bag. And so, happy, bold and in love, I strode down to the steps, got on the bike and hugged Teli's back tight.

But now it is time to open my eyes and take another look at life in the face. The hospital bed was a stop on only one journey, full of bold dreams and plans. But dreams never end and tomorrow is another day.