

I'm sitting on the blue carpet and I'm looking at her. An ordinary little girl. A little girl like any other. Like all those little girls playing in parks and playgrounds, watched by quiet mothers.

I wonder when she will turn into that wild thing again today.

From my position by the door I'm only a step away from Melia. My chest feels as if it were under the weight of an invisible stone. Perhaps it's the rain. It's been beating mournfully on the windowpanes relentlessly all morning.

I want to talk to her again. I want to tell her about the swings, the ducks in the pond, the chrysanthemums. I want to reach out to her. But I can't. I know she'll scream again if I do. I know she won't reach back to me.

Some people say it's a bad idea to keep hope alive when there's no realistic case for hope. They may be right, after all. But where does this leave me? What have I been doing all this time? Was it stupid of me to try to do things beyond my reach? Was it a mistake to love this strange little girl?

If I meant to turn my career into ashes and dust I couldn't choose a better way. I might as well burn down all my diplomas, so lovingly framed and hung above my desk by Theophilos himself, even though he pretends to snub such things as framed diplomas.

I stand up, the invisible stone still heavy on my chest. Add to that an invisible noose around my throat constricting my breath. I open the door. I slip out quickly, shutting it behind me, carefully, as if I still believe, foolish girl that I am, that she knows I'm about to burst out crying and I don't want to scare her.

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She stands up. I'm frightened. She'll come and touch me again. But no. She goes to the door. She opens it. She leaves. She doesn't say *I'll come back*. She doesn't say *Bye bye Melia*, as she does every time. And now I'm more frightened.

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It's not raining today. The sun is shining. The children in the school playground are playing, and we are playing too, Melia and I. This is our own game, a game made up of my words and her silence.

Yesterday I almost told her I wouldn't be coming back. I almost told her I was tired of her. And then I went home in the evening. And Theophilos asked me how the little girl was doing. And then it wasn't raining any more. And everything was so soft, so tender, so warm when I lay in his arms...

Let some people say that it's wrong to hope when there is no solid case for hope. Perhaps I should believe them, perhaps I should give up; but not before I'm too old and too tired of all those things I will have done, or won't have done, in my life. And my life is only just beginning!

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Eva tells me about the ducks in the pond again. I've never seen ducks in a pond before. I've never seen that flower with the long yellow leaves either. It's called - it's got a hard name ...

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Eva is a doctor. Is Eva really a doctor? Then how come she doesn't know I can't see anything in THEN? Because THEN is dark. And things that break with a noise around you. And voices. And hands that hurt you...

I don't want to know flowers are pretty. I don't want to see ducks swimming. Because when all is beautiful and bright, THEY touch you. THEN comes back. I don't want THEN to come back ever again! I only want to be with Elpida and

Nicolas. No one hurts me there. No one reaches out their hands and takes me, *mine!*

I stand still. I don't want to be seen. I don't want to be heard. I want to be forgotten! Like when I throw my plate off the table. I don't want Melia at the table. Melia must be nowhere.

Letta knows. That's why she never touches me if she doesn't have to. She wants me to sit quietly by the window. She wants me to eat off of my plate, but sometimes I'm very hungry and I forget.

Yes, it was really better before *she* began her stories about ducks and swings and flowers. *She*. Eva. That's her name. Eva. Even if I was really deaf I would know. She's told me so many times! 'My name is Eva. ... My name is Eva ... My name is Eva.'

I don't care what her name is. As long as she stays away from me. There, next to Elpida. Even though she has beautiful long dark hair and blue eyes. Because she keeps telling me about duck ponds and flowers. And I've never *ever* seen ducks in a pond. Because now she reaches out to me again. Her hand. I want to scream. But then she'll go away again. Perhaps she won't be coming back ever again.

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I talk to her of swings, of ducks in the pond, of chrysanthemums.

'If you let me hold your hand, I'll take you there. We'll go out for a walk together.'

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'Melia!'

I reach out to her. I don't expect her to reach back out to me. I know she won't. But I am still young. I've got plenty of time ahead of me to keep on trying.

I stretch out my hand a little further towards her. I'm wearing my ring, the one Theophilos and I bought from that student in my year, his ex, who makes all that

weird jewellery. It gleams when a ray of sun falls on the stone, a strange red-brownish gem. Perhaps this will attract Melia's attention; children are interested in such things.

Melia is perfectly still. I go nearer. And nearer. I almost don't realise how far I've moved away from my usual position next to Elpida. My outstretched hand moves nearer and nearer, it almost touches Melia's, who's holding her blonde doll with the dishevelled hair in that hand. Her little hand is still, icy. My eyes look directly into hers. Her eyes don't move, but now she isn't looking out of the window. She's looking at me.

And then she screams again.

Very slowly I take my hand off her. If I could only stop Letta from barging in! But I can hear her coming, and I can't stop her now - not in an institution run by Leonidas Vlassiadis.

I raise my voice a little, to be heard over the child's screams, over Letta's strict, professional voice shouting 'Silence!'

'Pity,' I say. 'We would be going for a walk. But Melia doesn't want to.'

For the first time, Letta looks at me as if I were about to be admitted in the institution as one of her patients. I find it very difficult to keep a straight face.

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She tricked me! That's what just happened. That Eva! She tricks me! It's been days now. I can't even tell one day apart from the other. I can't even tell when THEN is coming back. Because she touches me and I don't realise. She touches me and I don't hurt. She tricks me. Now THEN comes upon me suddenly. I don't know when THEN is coming back again and I'm scared. I'm more and more scared.

Yes, it's all her fault. That Eva's fault! She tricked me! She tricks me!

Now she is standing in front of me. She puts out her hand again. I look at her hand, at that strange ring, and I feel that THEN won't be coming so soon today. Who knows? Perhaps it will take a long time to come. Perhaps I'll have time to see that

flower with the long yellow leaves, it's called ... It's got a hard name. It's called ... chrys ... chrys ... chrysanthemum!

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'Well, Melia, do you want to go to the duck pond today?'

I look at her for a minute before touching her. She stands in the same old frozen position next to the window. Her doll is trapped between her chest and left hand, as usual. What is her right hand doing? I see it moving slowly, hesitantly... I've never seen her hold her doll with both hands before.

No, this is not for the doll. It is not for the doll, Eva, but you must be very calm, very professional, very controlled. Do not speak, Eva, do not say a word! Not a sound more than the usual sounds she hears from you. Don't show her how happy you are or you'll destroy everything in a split second. For God's sake, Eva! Later! You have all the time in the world to be happy later. There will be time to laugh, time to cry. Later! And for heaven's sake, Eva, don't just stand there like a statue. It's finally happening, can't you see it, Eva? She's reaching out her hand to you!!!